

BOOK REVIEWS

GERALD CATTARO

Fordham University

THEOLOGICAL LITERACY FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

RODNEY PETERSEN, ED., WM. B. EERDMANS, 2002.

Reviewed by Jeffrey Gros, FSC

The Church in the United States has been concerned in recent years about religious illiteracy among our people, especially the young. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the *General Directory on Catechesis*, and the forthcoming *National Directory on Catechesis* are all designed to assist in this challenge. To develop a generation of religiously literate Catholics will require the theological literacy of the administrators and teachers in our schools and parishes. Religious literacy is a question that is addressed in our American context as an ecumenical project because all of our fellow Christians face the same challenges in a common culture. Likewise, ecumenical literacy, at least for Catholics, is an essential element of religious literacy.

This series of articles is an important contribution to the discussion on theological and religious literacy, both from within a Church perspective and as Christians communicate with the world and culture in which they live. This volume brings together essays by 21 authors, most associated with the Boston Theological Institute, the consortium that brings together the Christian institutions of higher learning in that area. Among the authors are David Tracy; Raymond Helmick, SJ; Elisabeth Shüssler Fiorenza; Francis Clooney, SJ; John MacInnis; Brian McDermott, SJ; Thomas Groome; and a host of prominent Orthodox and Protestant authors.

The volume includes five sections: how to talk about theology itself; institutions' role in transmitting and reflecting on the faith; Scriptural interpretation and biblical literacy; communicating the faith in contemporary culture; and the role of seminaries and universities in formation. A wide range of disciplines is represented from history and theology to catechesis and communications.

There are many helpful insights in the diversity of essays, but several points become clear as one covers the whole. First of all, the modern pluralistic cultural and religious context make it impossible to presume a common

religious culture, whether in the parish or in the school. Second, the communications environment makes a new assessment of what counts as literacy, and even theology, a significant challenge. Third, literacy is more than the accumulation of content, but also includes openness to the commitments and communities that bear the religious content. Theological education, like catechesis, concerns not merely ideas about religion; it is also a formative discipline that includes touching hearts.

Religious literacy, in the present context, entails religious "fluency," that is, the ability to communicate meaning as well as conceptual formulations. One's faith is not merely an insider's language for church folk. In our pluralistic culture, one is challenged to find ways to make faith intelligible and relevant to a wider audience than fellow believers. Even among fellow believers, religious symbols and ideas can bear different meanings.

In the promotion of Catholic religious literacy, the whole of the Christian community is taken into the purview. As one of the authors notes:

It seems to me that no clergyperson or church leader [catechist or administrator], at least, is "literate" who does not have some basic sense of the strengths and visions of the Christian faith and life as it is displayed in various major strands of the church. (Heim, p. 64)

Promoting appreciation for and knowledge of the Christian faith is a perennial evangelization task of the Church, inculturated in new ways in each new generation and environment. This volume is helpful for those who want to reflect more deeply on the challenges, prospects, and resources for enhancing theological literacy and attending to the task of building religious literacy among the faithful. Parish council members may find some helpful ideas contained in these pages, especially when planning ecumenical worship, joint service projects, or common engagements. The classroom educator, however, will find these essays somewhat theoretical and distanced from practice.

Brother Jeffrey Gros, FSC, is associate director, Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Copyright of *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry & Practice* is the property of Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry & Practice and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.