

THE COMMON THINGS: ESSAYS ON THOMISM AND EDUCATION
edited by Daniel McInerney *American Maritain Association, Indiana,*
1999. Pp. 281; £11.95 pbk.

This collection comprises twenty-two essays written by a range of American Catholic philosophers and represents an important contribution to the modern debate on education. It is prefaced with an excellent introduction by Benedict Ashley OP. There has certainly been a renewed interest within the American Catholic community concerning the rapid secularisation of Catholic education, particularly at post-secondary level, which many believe is erasing its *raison d'être*. This interest has been expressed in a number of published works which offer both criticism of the educational practices within many Catholic institutions together with a positive "alternative" viewpoint based upon the Church's rich intellectual tradition.

The focus of each essay is a critique of the various struggles to keep alive a distinct Catholic Higher Education system in America and this debate is conducted from a Thomist perspective. The essays are 'inspired by reflection upon the positive nature of Maritain's contributions to the philosophy of education.' Jacques Maritain (1882-1973) was a major philosopher who dealt specifically with the problem of education as a part of a general attempt to apply the ideas of St. Thomas to contemporary questions. As a disciple of Aquinas, Maritain put forward what might be called a Thomist philosophy of education in a number of short works and essays collected under the titles *Education at the Crossroads* (1943) and *The Education of Man* (1952). The present volume, edited by Daniel McInerney, who lectures in philosophy at the University of St. Thomas in Houston, Texas, is published by the American Maritain Association and, not surprisingly, draws heavily on Maritain's published education works. The book consequently has a more unified theme and more consistent viewpoint than Theodore M. Hesburgh's collection of diverse essays entitled *The Challenge and Promise of a Catholic University* (Notre Dame Press, 1994). Both books list the grave difficulties facing Catholic colleges in America today, but the great strength of McInerney's effort is that he has assembled a group of philosophers who contribute something very distinctive to the debate. However, it is significant that no professor of education has contributed to this collection, not even an educational philosopher. This surely must be seen as a major omission and may even suggest that the Thomist debate is not conducted within mainstream education departments. If true, then this would be a great pity and will obviously lessen the impact of the book. The debate about the purpose and shape of Catholic education requires greater involvement from those who are training the next generation of Catholic teachers.

Many of the authors offer their own critiques of contemporary theories of education and they are especially critical of utilitarian approaches to education. The essays seek to develop a "holistic"

approach, what St. Thomas called the 'interconnection of the virtues', and what modern educational discussion might call the 'formation of the person.' The authors explicitly seek the recovery of a distinctively Catholic higher education system, especially as they perceive that many Catholic colleges have distanced themselves from their *Catholic* foundations in order to qualify for State financial assistance. Robert McLaughlin, for example, asks 'Can something both academically and religiously worthwhile be salvaged?' and answers pessimistically: 'I am uncertain. But I hesitate to abandon the effort lest I help to ensure the very outcome I seek to avoid.' All the essays adopt the same general line and therefore attempt to be positive about what might be achieved with the right educational vision. Each contributor develops an argument that the goal of education is the achievement of a comprehensive and completed understanding and contrasts this with the modern American approach to education which is the development of skills and knowledge in order that each individual might pursue their own preferences, whatever they might be. Consequently, several of the essays join with Allan Bloom's trenchant critique of American higher education in his *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), but they advocate a Thomist vision of education.

This educational vision is firmly rooted in the thought of Aquinas, as chiefly interpreted by Maritain. It consists in an ideal which says that in order to educate a human being the educator must first have an idea of what they are aiming to do, of what education is. The education in virtue is what St. Thomas thinks education in its broadest sense means—it is about true learning and good living combined: truth and virtue. This collection helps us examine and re-examine what Catholic colleges ought to be about and what education is for. Each essay develops the theme that a good education is one that will prepare students adequately for systematic critical and self-critical debate between rival standpoints. None of the contributors limits education to colleges or schools, but they emphasise that it requires the co-operation of the family and local political community so that the 'interconnection of the virtues' can be habituated. The only major criticism of this text is the fact that it does not address primary or secondary education or the particular problems of a Catholic schooling seen from a Thomist perspective. For that, one might better turn to another recently co-authored work: *Earthen Vessels: The Thomistic Tradition in Education* (Gracewing, 1999) by Hugh Walters, James Arthur and Simon Gaine.

McInerney's volume of essays offers a stimulating, readable and intelligent alternative to most current debates on education. As McInerney says, 'In a rich variety of ways these essays...indicate something of the landscape among the road not taken by contemporary education'. This volume speaks with passion and purpose and displays and celebrates the vitality of what Catholic education can and ought to be about.

JAMES ARTHUR