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TEACHING SERVICE AND ALTERNATIVE TEACHER EDUCATION: NOTRE DAME'S ALLIANCE FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION.

MICHAEL PRESSLEY, ED., UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME PRESS, 2002.

Reviewed by Timothy S. Valentine, S.J.

In an age of soaring expenses and plummeting test scores, education schools have undertaken bold initiatives to meet the challenges facing American education. Teacher training programs have entered into partnerships with public schools, preparing individuals to instruct disadvantaged students and sharing the cost with the district. The result is a win-win-win situation: novice teachers receive a salary and a tuition-free Masters degree; the district relieves a critical teacher shortage; and the education school increases enrollment and tuition dollars.

Michael Pressley and his former colleagues at the University of Notre Dame diagnose an even more desperate situation facing American Catholic schools, particularly in the South. Urban religious schools that once served the children of Catholic immigrants now face a student population more diverse than ever. The number of religious who once made education in sacred and secular subjects viable has fallen drastically, while secular education programs are ill suited for training Catholic school teachers. Moreover, Notre Dame did away with its own education department in the 1970s, a decision that proved to be providential.

The Notre Dame staff was reluctant to imitate alternative teacher education programs such as Teach For America, which drew criticism for its lack of professional training. Instead, it adopted the partnership model, customizing it to fit the exigencies of Catholic schools. Such a project could only come about in an atmosphere wherein teachers understand their role as a vocation, not a job. The result is Notre Dame's Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE). Through the inspiration of Catholic educators like Sr. Lourdes Sheehan, RSM; the patronage of Fr. Theodore Hesburgh, president emeritus, and a host of benefactors; donated services from the University of Portland faculty; testimonials by Cardinals Law and O'Connor; seed money from Notre Dame's current president, Fr. Edward Malloy; the leadership of two Holy Cross priests, Fr. Tim Scully and Fr. Sean McGraw—and the guidance of the Holy Spirit—ACE has experienced a seemingly miraculous expansion. In academic year 2001-2002, the program was responsible for 159 novice teachers serving 14 states, 25 dioceses, 146 schools, and 10,000

students, on both primary and secondary levels, and in both urban and rural neighborhoods.

Pressley traces the development of ACE in *Teaching Service and Alternative Teacher Education*. Because ACE blends national standards for teacher training with the Catholic tradition of service, it has become a model for similar efforts at other Catholic universities, including Providence College, Seton Hall, and Loyola Marymount.

The three pillars of ACE are “professional education, community, and spiritual life” (p. 17). The authors take great pride in the fact that “ACERs” are drawn not from education majors, but from majors in one of the liberal arts. Having mastered an academic discipline, participants acquire the requisite knowledge, skills, and dispositions for beginning teachers from ACE’s “standards-based, performance-assessed system” (p. 153). Courses taught on campus in the summer, as well as onsite and online through the school year (p. 87), focus on educational psychology and child development, content-area pedagogy, student teaching, and the portfolio experience, (i.e., a compilation of materials showing how ACERs have fulfilled performance standards).

The second pillar, community life, meets a number of needs, including the material sustenance of ACERs, personal support, and, ultimately, a greater openness to God’s will. The structure of community life, from division of chores to communal prayer and recreation, is deliberately loose, so that persuasion and encouragement might make rigid rules unnecessary. Ultimately, ACE houses are called to be Christian communities rooted in faith, hope, and love and centered on prayer and the Eucharist.

Finally, the authors insist that “spirituality is the central pillar of ACE” (p. 186), for it makes possible a prayerful encounter with “Christ Teacher” (p. 188). A series of retreats, liturgies, and missioning ceremonies mark the progress of ACERs, who are meant to embody a spirit of enthusiasm and service. As a guest retreat master puts it, they are “to turn their lives increasingly into lives of self-gift” (p. 203).

It is difficult to argue with success. The authors are rightly proud of the 90% retention rate among ACERs—the highest of any program of its kind—and they point to the happy problem of demand for personnel exceeding supply. Moreover, one can hardly find fault with ACE’s gender-balanced, minority represented pool of participants.

Nevertheless, the book, repetitive in many respects, is short on details that could make the ACE paradigm more intelligible. The authors never explain why Notre Dame closed its education department, nor how the program addresses faculty concerns over the subjectivity of portfolios, which Catholic educational sociologist James Coleman has called into question.

Each of the pillars raises more questions than it answers. For instance, ACE adopts a performance-based system over a content-based alternative. After all, the authors figure, ACERs major in a content area during their

undergraduate years, and therefore “(know) the content they (are) going to be teaching” (p. 109). That a high school physics teacher with a master’s degree has no more than two graduate courses devoted to *teaching* physics is disturbing. Moreover, philosophy of education, itself once a “pillar” of education schools, is subsumed (“integrated”) into other courses. Lastly, the content of Catholic faith is telescoped into two 1-credit workshops because it would be too “daunting” to teach the entire 900-page *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. The designers of ACE are well advised to substitute 9 of the 12 credits reserved for student teaching with courses that systematically address content area, educational philosophy, and, yes, the *Catechism*.

Furthermore, the volume’s description of ACE community life fails to illustrate the mechanisms that make Christian community possible, let alone healthy. The authors do not spell out the consequences that flow from, say, disruptive behavior, refusal to pitch in, unexplained absences, or, more seriously, sexual relationships among members of a coed community. For that matter, no one appears to be in charge of practical affairs, as when the oil burner malfunctions, or when a community member takes ill.

The curiously named “twelve steps” of ACE spirituality also give one pause. By concentrating exclusively on special liturgies, retreats, and prayer services—all of them conducted outside the community home—the authors diminish the importance of prayer, both personal and collective, in the daily life of individual Christian communities. Indeed, the 25% rate of Mass attendance among ACERs during summer session belies the breathtaking earlier claim that ACERs somehow “mirror” the lives of vowed religious.

Teacher training programs—both Catholic and secular—do well to recall the ancient rivalry that pitted the sophists, who favored performance, technique, and style, against the philosophers, who loved, well, *truth*. What is called for is a bit less Gorgias and a bit more Socrates.

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