

CASEY, Thomas G., *Humble and Awake: Coping with Our Comatose Culture* (Springfield, IL: Templegate Publishers, 2004), pp. 206. ISBN 0-87243-265-3 (paperback) \$12.95.

Irish Jesuit Fr. Thomas Casey brings a valuable perspective to North American readers of his compelling book: that of a "Westerner" not from the United States. Woven throughout the narrative is a profound awareness of the sex-abuse crisis in the Catholic Church, the events of September 11, 2001 and the conflict in Iraq, yet his "comatose culture" and our resultant comatose souls are not bound by nationality. This is a work of critical observation, of paradox, and of complex connections that remains rooted in hope. That hope is intimately tied to humility, an essential component of awakening.

The Latin word for humility, *humilitas*, derives from the root word for earth, *humus*, and Casey knows that humility is all about being grounded in our imperfect humanity. He succeeds in rescuing the word from a popular understanding of unworthiness and aligns it more with self-abnegation in service of the other, and also with abiding happiness. A counter-cultural and puzzling stance! To illuminate this paradox, Casey calls upon Mary the mother of Jesus, John the Baptist, apostles and saints, Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, John the Evangelist, the donkey of Passion Sunday, an eagle and the lowly earthworm. Each insight from these vastly different perspectives offers a glimpse of understanding. The author relies particularly on the Gospel of John for biblical references, and concludes that Jesus does not require perfection, but rather desires only our faithful connection, the branches to the vine. A realized humility can only be relational, embracing God, others, ultimately all of creation.

Any true recognition of humility must acknowledge our fundamental brokenness, and attempts to awaken are undermined in both obvious and subtle ways. The constant barrage of the media (with mostly bad news), "entertainers" like Jerry Springer, eager to comfort the masses with proof that others are in far more dire straits, and particularly our own fears can, and do, paralyze us. This is our comatose culture: a significant number of people unaware of the call to goodness and wholeness and in danger of slipping slowly past a point of potential response. Casey asserts that the very fact of our dissatisfaction with this "sorry state of affairs" is a sign that we are ready to awaken, ready to hear the call to wake up to life and beyond, to love and to loving service.

The chapter aptly titled "Signs of Wakefulness" is filled with wisdom and connections to prophets of past and present. First and foremost, wakefulness is about *being aware*, living each moment to the fullest in all life's circumstances. Jesus is clear throughout the gospels that we need not worry about the future. This is echoed today by Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh who counsels an attentiveness to the present he calls the "miracle of mindfulness." Wakefulness is about *searching*, about *admitting* we cannot do it on our own, about *letting go and letting God*; the kind of freeing surrender explained and modeled so well by Ignatius of Loyola. Wakefulness is about *gratitude*, about *knowing oneself honestly*, about *loving service* and not loveless domination, so strikingly portrayed during Jesus' time of temptation in the desert. Finally and closest to my heart, wakefulness is about *joy*, the joy that comes from and is so far beyond mere happiness. Each of these is necessary for an openly loving, humble yet astutely aware worldview that allows the "other" a place at the table, exemplified by the work of liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez and others.

Several pages are devoted to a treatise on prayer as a vital part of awareness. The author again calls upon diverse sources from the account of the Fall in Genesis to contemporary Jewish and secular writers, popular movies (particularly *The Matrix*), and Mary's journey to Elizabeth, all reaffirming that God meets us exactly where we are. The challenge here is to see prayer as complementary to loving service, in community as well as time apart.

Casey devotes an entire chapter at the end of the book to his thesis that we are in a "Holy Week" period of history, an archetypal pattern of unease and conflict that calls us to seek God's voice through the signs of the times, particularly through the least likely among us. The reader is prepared for this detailed summation by perhaps the most imaginative and insightful parts of the entire book: an earlier chapter comparing John and Judas and the gripping chapter entitled "The Face That Wakes Us Up." These three constitute a passionate retelling and analysis of the events leading up to, and including, Jesus' last week on earth, making this book supremely appropriate and desirable as Lenten reading. I cannot remember a time when I was so deeply moved—to prayer, to tangible grief not only for Jesus and the disciples, but for the state of the world, to contemplation and action—yet never losing sight of hope and the endless possibilities for grace.

Casey's use of diverse resources: philosophy, the wisdom of other faiths, secular history, contemporary media, Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, fairy tales, donkeys, eagles and worms offers a broad perspective, enlightening his theses with richness and depth of understanding. His willingness to be thus informed proves his own wakefulness and awareness of our global culture, and heightens the reader's everyday awareness of the myriad connections surrounding us—the signs of our own times.

Cathy Crosby

SWAN, Laura, *Engaging Benedict: What the Rule Can Teach Us Today* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 2005). pp. 192 with Glossary of Terms and Selected Bibliography. ISBN: 0-87061-232-8 (paperback). \$12.95.

Introduction:

Engaging Benedict is not an exhaustive commentary but rather a questioning dialogue with sections of the RB which can stir anger, that one can ignore rather than confront, or that touch upon some controversial current issues (p. 10). Swan relies on proven commentaries of foremost Benedictine scholars—Kardong, de Vogüé, Bockmann, Forman—for textual analyses, and her referencing them actually serves the secondary purpose of providing an overview of the critical literature and consensus. But she goes beyond their more focused spiritual dimension by drawing on leading contemporary writers in the social sciences, authorities in pastoral care, and in psychology.

A major thrust of Swan's examination is her questioning of the Rule as a woman monastic. She refers correctly to religious feminism as "an interpretive tool," a tool that can help us discover ways in which the Good News may have been inadvertently compromised. This is not a feminist statement but rather a contemporary reading through an important alternative lens. As such it challenges all readers.

Insights into Chapter Seven of the RB:

In ten chapters Swan considers the monastic tradition, Benedict's definition of the authentic monastic, prayer, obedience, the observance of Lent, hospitality, the prophetic dimension, and justice. The center of the volume, however, consists of two chapters devoted to humility, one of the aspects of the Rule that can be, and