

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

indeed has been most open to abuse (p. 72), "Contemporary Considerations" and "Benedict's Ladder of Humility Re-considered." Consideration of this "center" will serve to catch the method and tenor of the book as a whole.

Swan draws on psychological insights and theories of faith development, specifically those of Robert Kegan, and suggests that the ladder Benedict uses to describe the journey toward humility is better described as a helix, and considers the basic problem addressed—and corrected—by this concept, namely, the sense of self and the relationship to power. Drawing on Vogüé and Kardong in her pondering of the First Step of Humility, she interprets "Fear of God" as pregnant with love, mindfulness grounded in awe, astonishment, and exultation in the Divine Presence (p. 86). By probing etymology and the Hebrew language she stresses Benedict's call to experience ourselves as constantly observed by God, a call to spiritual awakening, to awareness of finding our true selves.

At this point she touches on one of her basic thrusts—the self-knowledge encouraged and especially crucial for women whose identity can have been mis-presented by the RB, the Church, and society. Thus her consideration of the Second Step ("delight not in satisfying our desires out of love of our own way") specifically addresses the situation of women who "often behave in self-sacrificial ways because they believe they are less important, less valuable, less essential than men" (p. 89), suggesting that one needs to discover one's center and one's own authentic voice.

Self-denigration damages the inner journey and separates us from God. In Step Two she hears Benedict inviting followers to let go "of all that possesses us and hinders our ability to hear and respond to God"—attitudes, motives, emotional ties, and thoughts that have held us back from a deepened relationship with God and ourselves (p. 90). She suggests that knowing our desires is not necessarily "self-will." Instead, one should discern how one's own desires relate to God's will and thus "trust that the God who creates us with these passions and desires intends to fulfill them" (p. 91).

Swan's reconsideration of the Ladder interprets the twelve rungs specifically, informing the RB's often dour phrasing with luminous invitations to joyful growth and inner work. An instance of an interpretation illustrative both of her healthy re-viewing and her concern with aspects of the RB which have been unsuitable for women monastics occurs in her commentary on one of the

dourest passages of the Rule, the Seventh Step of Humility ("we believe. . . that we are lower and less honorable than all the rest, thus declaring . . . I am a worm . . ." [RB7:51-54] where Swan credits Benedict with developing a most affirmative *worm theology* (pp. 98-99), pointing out how deeply dependent our ecosystem is on worms who work with what is available and who turn what is "useless" into the soil that sustains life. "We can complain about what we must work with or we can resurrect our allotted 'garbage' into the sustenance of life. Flawed families, imperfect colleagues, fellow monastics with an abundance of foibles all become the realm of our worm-activity" (p. 98).

### Male and Female Alike Take Heed:

Although Swan directs attention to women, the two specific issues she addresses in a woman's journey toward humility are germane to anyone: the sense of self and the relationship to power (p. 74). Humility is about being really real, and thus deeply aware of the Wholly Otherness of God, a journey from that public persona we may have built up in our early adult years toward that true self made in the image and likeness of Christ (p. 72).

Many persons, male and female, are hampered by a false self. So when Swan writes that the journey toward humility is about discovering and accepting the person created in the Divine image, and therefore about embracing one's value and importance before God (p. 75), or that the journey requires that one first discover who she is as distinct from the person patriarchy told her she is, the teaching applies equally to both women and men.

Since her study is steeped in the concern, so basic to the RB, of learning to discern between false and true self, that quintessential Mertonian concern, it is surprising that Swan never mentions Thomas Merton at all, either in her text or in her suggestions for further study. But the omission might well be seen as evidence for his pervasive influence on contemporary spiritual writing, having formed and informed many of her major sources.

### The "Tool" of "Living *Lectio*":

In addition to the lens of religious feminism, Swan provides her reader with an additional "tool," one which requires the sort of intense dedication to a task implied by the term—"living *lectio*." She recognizes that the "stuff" of our lives—daily events, unsettling news, troubling texts—can serve, in fact do serve to commu-

nicate God's words to us. Swan continually concludes her reflections on aspects of the Rule by challenging her reader to ponder such "texts." For example, after considering Benedict's instructions on praying the psalms, she asks us to risk facing our own anger, pain, confusion and curses through them.

How do we let these psalm texts speak our own stories, unpacking our true feelings and the ways God might be present in the rawness of our lives? How might we risk exploring new images of God based on our honest feelings and God's possible responses to us? (p. 43).

### Conclusion:

Swan's consideration of the Rule would serve well as a study guide for groups trying to incorporate Benedictine teaching into their lives. Her copious questions are so intense and demanding that the support and input of fellow travelers would help to confront and wrestle with them. At times the text seems intended primarily for vowed monastics, as when she writes of the experience of her specific monastic community, or describes in intense paragraphs Benedict's "true monastic." Gradually, however, it becomes clear that this "true monastic" (who in fact is the goal toward whom we are all still journeying) is simply that person who longs for the kind of God-orientation, God-awareness, and God-relationship which is "merely" Christian. Laura Swan's volume can help us to engage Benedict's guidance in this undertaking.

Dewey Weiss Kramer

JOHNSON, Maxwell E., Compiler and Editor, *Benedictine Daily Prayer: A Short Breviary* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2005). ISBN 139780-8146-2833-1, pp. 2,266 with index (plus additional unpaginated end papers with prayers, etc). \$50.00 with simulated leather cover.

This book's title page implies the love which went into its conception and composition "...Edited by Maxwell E. Johnson, oblate at Saint John's Abbey and the monks of Saint John's Abbey." It is a beautiful book made primarily for persons who are either Benedictine Oblates or friends of Benedictine monasteries. Someone ought to do a similar project with Cistercians in mind.

This prayer book is designed to assist someone who is close to the Benedictine way of life to engage in daily prayer. It would,