

The Oxford Handbook of Catholic Theology

Lewis Ayres and Medi Ann Volpe, Editors. *The Oxford Handbook of Catholic Theology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. 962pp. \$145.00. Hardcover. ISBN 978-0-19-956627-3.

As the preface to the book notes, the purpose of the *Oxford Handbook of Catholic Theology* “is to provide a readable and dependable guide to the content of Catholic theology and to introduce the different schools and debates of modern Catholic theology against the broader background of Catholic tradition” (vii). The book, edited by Durham University scholars Lewis Ayers (Professor of Catholic and Historical Theology) and Medi Ann Volpe (Assistant Professor of Theology and Ethics), is an ambitious attempt to convey the breadth, depth, and nuance of 2,000 years of Catholic theology in one 962-page volume. Ayers and Volpe have succeeded in this task. They bring together essays from 56 contributors, seven of whom are women. Most are professors of philosophy or theology at institutions in the Americas (Canada and the United States), Europe (Belgium, Hungary, Rome, Switzerland, the UK), Nigeria, and Australia. This concentration of western scholars leads to a limitation noted by the editors regarding this volume’s focus, which is on the Latin Rite. Other perspectives are offered in a chapter covering the basics of Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, and chapters on African, Asian, and Latino Catholicism.

The front matter includes a table of contents listing each essay and author, notes on sources, and a list of abbreviations. Included are helpful lists of abbreviations used, bibliographical references for, and links to open access versions of sources including the works of St. Thomas Aquinas, conciliar documents, and papal documents (apostolic constitutions, bulls, encyclicals, exhortations, letters, and *motu proprio*). Most of the content chapters are between 15-20 pages and provide a scholarly understanding of the topic and its place in Catholic theology. Each chapter contains a robust bibliography, and many also list suggested further reading. In the back-matter, readers will find three indices: one for key terms and themes, one for people, and one for scripture.

This reference work is divided into two roughly equal parts: Part One, “Catholic Teaching” (pp. 5-456), focuses on doctrine and is divided into four sections covering “The Enterprise of Catholic Theology”; “God, the Creation, and the History of Salvation”; “The Sacramental Life”; and “Catholic Moral Theology.” Each of the 27 chapters in this section reflects great depth of scholarship as the authors weave in details from two thousand years of belief and changes in Catholic theology.

Part Two, “Modern Catholic Theology” (pp. 457-942), is divided into two sections that focus “on movements, key figures, and developments in modern Catholic theology” (vii). The 10 chapters of the first section, “Catholic Theology up to Vatican I,” cover some of the doctors of the church (St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, and St. Bonaventure), historical developments in doctrine, theology and the practice of the faith, and the Councils of Trent and Vatican I.

The 19 chapters in the second section, “Catholic Theology Since 1870,” reflect the “hard choices that had to be made” by the editors (viii). Topics include how Catholic theology has developed in Asia and Africa, Latin America, and parts of the Third World; developments in the understanding of the teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas; the contributions of specific theologians like Hans Urs von Balthasar and Martin Heidegger; the Second Vatican Council; developments within Catholicism like Feminist Theology, the Theology of the Body, New Ecclesial Movements; and the relationship between Catholicism and other traditions and religions.

Of the 56 chapters I have chosen to look closely at four and examine how each author approaches Catholic theology through the lens of his or her topic. I chose Scripture (the means through which Christians hear and interpret God's Word); prayer (how in its many forms prayer helps us to love and worship our God); life and death (how Catholic theology is addressed in all stages of life); and Catholicism and other religions (an essential topic if we are to honor the first two commandments, "You shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind...and...love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37-39, NRSV).

Matthew Levering's chapter on "The Scriptures and Their Interpretation" first examines scripture through *Dei verbum*, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation from Vatican II, and then attempts to "articulate why...there should still be a specifically Catholic way of interpreting the Scriptures," given that the goal of biblical interpretation is union with the living Lord (42, 46). *Dei Verbum* and the work of Catholic biblical scholars affirm that reading and interpreting Scripture in a theological and liturgical context is ongoing and happens in community for the sake of salvation.

Martin Laird, OSA, author of the chapter on "Prayer," places it within the call to holiness for all from the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church from Vatican II, *Lumen gentium*. Laird focuses on the art of contemplative prayer, the "perspective of contemplative rest in God that we see in the unity of all forms of prayer, whether personal, liturgical, or sacramental" (347). He draws from the lives and teachings of greats such as St. Augustine, St. Teresa of Avila, St. Ambrose of Milan, St. John of the Cross, and the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* to explore how prayer unites us with the Trinity in a mysterious and transforming journey that takes place with the communion of all believers.

Jana Bennett's chapter on "Life and Death" examines issues associated with the gift of life, from conception to death, and addresses tough questions "that make Catholic teaching on life and death issues seem...unrealistic and at times cruel or anti-human" (423). She covers Catholic teaching on abortion, contraception, Artificial Reproduction Techniques (ART), euthanasia, war, the death penalty, and animal rights, cautioning readers not to separate the Catholic vision of creation from social-justice issues. She concludes that the baptized are charged with being "willing to be present in real ways to those who suffer, and to campaign against injustices that prevent us from seeing and loving God's gift of life to us" (440).

The closing chapter, "Catholic Theology and Other Religions," written by Michael Barnes, SJ, examines interfaith dialogue and encounters, issues of justice, inculturation, and spirituality. A section on *Nostra aetate* speaks to difficulties in Jewish-Christian relations and emphasizes the call to "acknowledge, preserve, and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians" (932). Barnes emphasizes the importance of dialogue, whether interreligious and in service to mission. He urges the Church to remember that "others may already have been touched by God's Spirit in unknown ways," recognizing that the Spirit does indeed move in the world in ways not necessarily understood or constrained by humans (934). Religious pluralism, dialogue with people of other faiths about their religious texts, and the nature of discipleship are also covered. In the closing paragraph, I was especially charmed by Michael Barnes's reflection that "the Spirit is a God-given force that disrupts all attempts to force the Christian life, let alone understanding of God's ways, into neat and straightforward language" (941).

The chapters are challenging—not an easy read if one is not conversant with Catholic theology and the many texts and voices of the church from the early fathers to the present. Each paragraph is as layered and nuanced as is the Catholic tradition. There are no illustrations or block quotes to break up the hundreds of pages of text, nothing to provide rest for the eyes and the brain.

I recommend *The Oxford Handbook of Catholic Theology* for offering a thoughtful and scholarly snapshot of many issues pertaining to each topic. A handbook is defined as a concise reference book. Though nearly a thousand pages, this handbook is in its own way concise and offers a sophisticated path into the labyrinth of scholarship on Catholic theology. The many perspectives offered by the contributors provide a truly Catholic look at theology. Readers will find an engaged discussion of many aspects of what it means to be part of a faith that is never only personal or private, and which emphasizes relationship with the living body of the Church and the world through the Holy Spirit.

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