

BOOK REVIEW

Resting on the Heart of Christ: The Vocation and Spirituality of the Seminary Theologian. By Deacon James Keating, PhD. Omaha, NE: IPF Publications, 2009. 208 pp. \$15.95. ISBN 798-0-9800455-6-7.

More than fifty years have passed since the publication of Hans Urs von Balthasar's important essay, "Theology and Sanctity", in which he spelled out a program for the renewal of theology. At the center of this renewal is the re-integration of theology and spirituality. If theology and spirituality are allowed to interpenetrate and mutually determine each other, theological method will be enhanced and theological content enriched. What this renewal requires of the theologian, moreover, is that one lay aside the mindset of a neutral and uninvolved inquirer. The theologian must be one whose inner disposition is complete openness and surrender to the God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ. This approach to theology demands a contemplative orientation – what Balthasar referred to as "prayed theology."

In the decades following this seminal essay, other theologians have concurred that theology is rooted in an encounter with God and ought to be practiced in a manner that remains transparent to its spiritual matrix. Pope Benedict XVI is among them. When still a Cardinal and Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, he reminded the academy that a strictly scientific and critical approach to theology is insufficient. "It must be complemented by the theology of the saints, which is theology from experience. All real progress in theological understanding has its origin in the eye of love and its faculty of beholding" (*Behold the Pierced One*, 27).

Deacon James Keating takes up this cause in his book, *Resting on the Heart of Christ: The Vocation and Spirituality of the Seminary Theologian*. He is conscious that, in calling for the re-integration of formation in holiness with the work of theology, he is voicing nothing new. Yet his book still makes a unique contribution inasmuch as it is addressed to a particular audience – the seminary theologian – who is entrusted with a distinctive mission. What distinguishes the vocation of the seminary theologian is that it is deeply intertwined with the spiritual formation of future priests. As the U.S. bishops make clear in the *Program of Priestly Formation*, "spiritual formation...stands at the heart of seminary life and is the center around which all other aspects of formation are integrated." Hence seminary theology is directed to "developing the seminarian's relationship and communion with God and his ability to communicate God's truth and love to others" (#115). From this vantage point, Deacon Keating sees the seminary (in contrast to the university) as providing a

context genuinely hospitable to a spiritual, contemplative approach to theological method. His candid and mostly negative assessments of the current state of university theology – he views it as “torn from its moorings in faith, in communion with God, having become merely a course of studies in history, politics, and sociology” (45) – are prelude to an earnest summons to seminary theologians that they be “the first of a new generation of mystic thinkers, drawing intellectual acumen from personal participation in the Paschal Mystery” (36).

The book begins with an Introduction to its central aims: to lead the seminary theologian to prayerful consideration of two closely related truths. First, “the true nature of theological work...is to yield holiness in the practitioner” (26). Second, the resultant growth in holiness expands the theologian’s capacity to provide spiritual guidance to seminarians, guidance that is integral to the mission of seminary education. In light of these aims, Deacon Keating describes his book as belonging to the genre of “spiritual reading” (25). It presents a series of reflections and meditations on various themes designed to bring the seminary professor to a deeper appropriation of the spiritual dimension of his or her vocation. The book as a whole is meant to inspire and assist the seminary theologian to approach study and research, writing and teaching, in a way that makes room for and is born of intimacy with God. Inasmuch as this intimacy heals and purifies the theologian’s thoughts and affections, it primes him or her *as theologian* to be an effective spiritual formator. According to Keating, the more the theologian surrenders to the transformative power of God’s self-revelation in Christ, the more illuminating and credible will be his or her exposition of it. Moreover, an exposition that is drawn from this transformative encounter bears greater potential to evoke the engagement of the seminarian in “a mystical-pastoral theology” (27). Precisely *this* theology is best suited to enable future priests “to draw their parishioners into that same encounter” (29).

Throughout the book, Deacon Keating makes concrete suggestions as to how theology can function as “an agent of conversion...and sanctification” (50). His proposals are shaped by his conviction that “spiritual growth can be developed and encouraged in the *actual practices* of attending to theological *content*” (28, original emphasis). The seminary theologian who has personal experience of this is disposed to “teach in such a way that the desire for holiness in each seminarian is ignited from within the very intelligibility of theology” (131). Among the book’s merits is its recognition that, since theology is to be transformative, then theology as taught in the classroom may move the seminarian to prayer, adoration, contrition, or pastoral desire. If this happens, discursive knowledge “will not be lost to a praying student but only driven

deeper and possessed in a more integrated and dynamic way” (81). Consequently, Keating recommends that the seminary professor adjust his teaching method by: “1) leaving room for prayerful encounters as prompted by the Spirit, 2) allowing for periods of silent receptivity to truth, and 3) forming questions that guide seminarians to appropriate their vocation as servants of lay holiness” (74). Another virtue of the book is that it eliminates the tendency to segregate the discipline of theological study, contemplative intimacy with God, and pastoral zeal for God’s people into separate airtight compartments. Seminary theology is to engender and rightly order pastoral charity in the praying heart of the seminarian.

Resting on the Heart of Christ is an inspiring and thought-provoking read. I recommend that it be taken and pondered on retreat, whether by an individual or a group of seminary theologians. The book can serve as a springboard for further discussion and practical application of its profound and realistic vision.

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