

BOOK REVIEW

I Am With You Always: A Study of the History of Personal Devotion to Jesus Christ for Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Christians. By Father Benedict Groeschel. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010. 625 pp. \$37.95. ISBN 978-1-58617-257-2.

To say that Father Benedict Groeschel wears many hats is an understatement. In spite of age and ill-health, he seems to be everywhere and indefatigable. A much sought after speaker, retreat master, spiritual director, and counselor, he is a frequent guest on EWTN and author of more than thirty books, most of which are in the under two-hundred page category. *I Am With You Always* is a departure in this respect. A large, scholarly work that took ten years to complete, it is, perhaps, Father Benedict's *magnum opus*.

He defines his purpose in writing the book at the outset: "to assist the committed disciple of Christ toward a better appreciation of the meaning of Christ...to open the eyes of those who seek meaning amid the desperate turmoil of earthly existence" (p. 6).

He also intends the book to be a corrective to what he takes to be an overly rationalistic and humanistic approach to Christ and His meaning (p. 9). In this he seems to be very much in accord with Pope Benedict XVI's *Verbum Domini*. (See in particular the section in Part I entitled "The Interpretation of Sacred Scripture in the Church.")

Finally, it is Father Benedict's hope that his book might appeal to a broad spectrum of Christians, not Catholics only, but Orthodox and Protestants as well; and, indeed, it comes as something of a revelation just how much apparent antagonists have in common regarding devotion to Jesus. Who, for example, would expect to find a seventeenth century Puritan writing a sermon entitled, "The Heart of Christ in Heaven towards Sinners on Earth"? Nothing seems more quintessentially Catholic than devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, yet here is Thomas Goodwin (1600-1680) saying, "I shall now annex this discourse...which lays open the Heart of Christ, as now he is in heaven, sitting at God's right hand and interceding for us; how it is affected and graciously disposed towards sinners on earth that do come to him" (p. 214).

Father Benedict begins with the early Church and traces devotion to Jesus in its Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant manifestations right through the twentieth century, citing example after example of what he defines as "a powerful awareness of or longing for Christ's presence, accompanied by a trustful surrender to Him of our personal needs [to which] is joined a willingness to do His will and a sense of repentance for any previous failure to do so" (p. xiv).

The book contains several very helpful features, including thirteen pages of bibliographical material, an eight page index of persons cited in the text, and a large page format with wide margins on the extreme left and right as the book lies open before one. In these margins are brief, bold or italicized descriptions of the paragraphs they immediately border. Most of the margins being empty, there is ample space on each page to jot notes, summarize ideas, or mark asterisks or other indications of material deemed especially interesting or important.

Father Benedict is unfailingly fair in his assessment of those whose work he discusses. His affection for all who have loved Jesus is evident throughout. Catholics looking to understand better their Protestant brethren or to gain new insight into Orthodox spirituality will find plenty of help here. Nor is this hefty tome merely a recitation of dry facts and doctrines. Apart from the countless excerpts from the writings of most Christian traditions, there are numerous anecdotes to enliven the text. Here, for example, is a glimpse of an encounter between two Russian Orthodox priests in England, each representing a different branch of their faith, both forced to share one church edifice:

The man who would one day become the famous Archbishop Anthony Bloom—he was then simply Father Anthony—asked his counterpart, Father Vitali, how he saw him as a priest, to which Father Vitali responded: “I think you are an honest man, so I will be straight with you. If I wanted to be polite, I would say you are no priest. But as I want to be truthful, I will tell you what I think: you are a priest of Satan” (p. 514). See how these Christians love one another!

Fortunately Father Benedict is more understanding and charitable than Father Vitali, and it shows throughout the book. In the end he succeeds admirably in demonstrating the beauty, breadth, and depth of devotion to Jesus and its central place in the life of all genuine Christians. For those seeking information, *I Am with You Always* is an education. For those seeking inspiration, it will provide many hours of profitable spiritual reading. Certainly it would make a valuable addition to any priest’s library, those wide margins, one would hope, filling with notes, the fruit of prayerful and well-spent meditation.

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