James T. Keane

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Next year will mark the twentieth anniversary of the launch of what has become Orbis Press's signature series: Modern Spiritual Masters. Over nearly two decades and through more than sixty volumes, this series has made available the thought of the holy women and men of the modern era. The diversity of these profiles, which include figures both within and outside of the Catholic Christian tradition, is striking. John Henry Newman, Sr. Thea Bowman, and Evelyn Underhill are included, but so are Thich Nhat Hanh, Simone Weil, and Mohandas Gandhi.

It will be a surprise to few that Fr. James Martin, S.J., has been chosen to join this roster; and yet his age at the time of this selection may indeed come as a surprise: Martin is fifty-six. Neither Orbis's decision nor Martin's age, however, prevent *James Martin: Essential Writings* from being a successful addition to the Modern Spiritual Masters series.

Credit for this goes to James T. Keane, whose multifaceted familiarity with Martin's work has allowed him not only to make wise choices regarding which essays and excerpts from Martin's already voluminous work to include, but also to provide an excellent introduction. While those few still unfamiliar with Martin's life and writings will certainly find Keane's introduction helpful, surprisingly, it is the already acquainted who will benefit most. And this is because Keane has provided the first of what will no doubt be many attempts to cut facets into the gem that is Martin's effort to make faith both public and faithful in an age of retrenchment and hot-takes.

By Keane's lights there are four such facets of Martin's work, and he uses these facets to organize the book into four corresponding sections: (1) writings that center on prayer and discernment, (2) discussions concerning how God can be found in the world, (3) writings that deal with justice and the perennial dilemma of suffering, and (4), Martin's reflections on those other spiritual masters: the saints. Each of these four sections is a facet through which the single desire that drives Martin can be seen: the desire to show that the life of faith is both beautiful and possible today.

The first of these facets contains selections of Martin's writings on the interior life of prayer and discernment. Here we are given a glimpse of the breadth of Martin's audience. Some of these essays are written for those on the edge, for doubters and seekers and others still coming to trust that they have actually had experiences of God. In these Martin emphasizes the importance of daily prayer and gives descriptions, from his own life and from others, of what it is like to be in contact with God. Other selections do an excellent job of clarifying

and deepening the spiritual life of believers by giving them the language to understand and express what the Holy Spirit may be doing within them. And still other essays will be helpful to those far-along the path of prayer—especially Martin's careful parsing of the difference between spiritual desolation, psychological depression, and everyday doubts. The selections found in this opening section thus serve not only as an excellent introduction to Martin's work, but to Ignatian spirituality as well.

The second facet of Martin's work consists of essays that, as Keane puts it, "point the reader toward the hidden or obscured treasures of daily life" (71–72). These are selections that seek to reveal the ways that an incarnate God is already active in the world. One of Martin's greatest gifts, his capacity to colloquialize, and thereby to make accessible, otherwise dry doctrine, is especially visible here. In one essay for example, titled "Don't Be a Jerk," Martin applies the famous Annotation 22 of the *Spiritual Exercises* to the problem of discourse (or rather, its absence) in social media. "The next time you're angry with someone," he concludes, "think of the Trinity gazing down on the person you're about to flame" (85). This is Martin at his best, helping us put traditional wisdom into contemporary practice.

The third section collects Martin's thoughts on suffering and on how seeing God in all things calls a Christian to be moved by compassion for those who suffer. The selections here range from a short prayer written in the wake of the Newtown massacre, to the painful shock Martin felt at being embarrassed to wear his Roman collar in public in the wake of the sexual abuse crisis, to his own struggles with chronic pain. In many of these it is Martin's willingness to share his own vulnerability, to tell of his need to have a fellow Jesuit spoon shards of ice into his mouth after a challenging surgery, that makes what he writes believable. It is in the sharing of such personal vulnerabilities that Martin transforms what might otherwise be narcissistic stories—mirrors—into windows through which we can see how God acts in our world.

The fourth and final facet Keane has cut collects Martin's reflections on the saints. Here we see that the lives of the saints make it clear that the path to holiness is not uniform, but personal; individualized. When it comes to the search for holiness, Martin insists that it is sanctity and particularity—uniqueness—which go hand in hand. "Most problems arise when we begin to believe that we have to be someone *else* to be holy," he writes, when we "use someone else's map to heaven" (197). Here he reminds his readers that we need not worry that proximity to God will turn us into automatons, instead we will become beautifully, differently, ourselves.

When united with the other facets of his work this insistence on the particularity of the universal call to holiness is another way in which this collection

reflects the multiple ways that Martin seeks to build a bridge back to faith, to make belief a little more believable, in this our secular age. Of course, as the reception of Martin's recent effort to build a bridge (this time between the LGBT community and the Catholic Church) has shown, this is not uncontroversial. Much of this controversy is stirred by something evident in the facets of Martin's work Keane has cut: his focus on human experience. From the perspective of social theory, Martin's work is a prime example of the tensions that Ignatian spirituality confronts in a secular age—an age lacking a master narrative, an age in which rival traditions disagree about what the good is, about what it means to be a human being, and about how (or whether) we ought to bind ourselves together in communities of practice.

To practice a public spirituality in such an age means, as Charles Taylor has shown, telling a story about why belief facilitates a more meaningful human life than does another story. "You will only convince me," writes Taylor, "by changing my reading of my moral experience, and in particular my reading of my life story, of the transitions I have lived through – or perhaps refused to live through." Martin's bet—the Ignatian bet—is that such convincing happens most readily by helping people pay more attention to the ordinary, and giving them the tools to narrate how an incarnate God can be seen acting nowhere else than there. It is the consequences of this bet, the bet that God is still incarnating God's self in an historically evolving set of human experiences, that lies at the root of the controversy surrounding Martin's work.

A collection of essays such as this, of course, cannot pay out on this bet. Nevertheless, this collection may be counted as an example of the characteristic Ignatian effort to demonstrate that God is seeking to be the narrator of our lives differently, even within our secular age.

As is the case with most efforts to collect an author's work, this collection can at times feel repetitive. And it suffers from that other major failing of survey-volumes: it is an overview of many topics rather than a deep dive into a particular one. Nevertheless, this multifaceted representation of Fr. James Martin's work is a worthy addition to the Modern Spiritual Masters series, and will prove helpful for seekers and dwellers alike.

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