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*Prayer and Thought in Monastic Tradition: Essays in Honour of Benedicta Ward*


Twenty-two essays pay tribute to a life of scholarship. They show the breadth of Sr Benedicta Ward’s own academic interests by means of brief tastes of a world not (as might be supposed) now vanished but still alive and inhabited by such as Sr Benedicta herself. There is no place in this volume for encouraging sentimentalism or romanticism in the reader’s understanding of the religious life. Instead the focus upon the lived reality of prayer, and intellectual engagement with that lived reality, is gradually revealed through a series of individual themes and persons. The essays vary widely in subject-matter: one sits rather uncomfortably within the whole, despite its self-justificatory footnote (Ralph Waller’s essay on John Wesley and William Law); while the final one, by Dominic Mattos, provides the emotional glue for all the rest. It proved helpful to have read that first before tackling the others; and it was also good that a photograph was included, to help the imaginations of readers who have never met Benedicta Ward herself.

Four sections stood out in terms of their particularly (to my mind) engaging subject-matter and readable style. First, Henry Mayr-Harting’s essay on praying the psalter, with its subtitle, ‘What was supposed to be going on in the mind of the monks?’ This chimed with my interest in the bodily effects of repeated prayer and the relationship between focus and mind-slip which seems to be an innate characteristic of what may, in such a context, be called the art of prayer. Through the thinkers of the time, Mayr-Harting shows the importance of ethical disposition and intention relative to the dominant visible characteristic of corporate monastic prayer as a ‘work.’ The understanding of psalmody as a way of fighting (as the old hymn has it) ‘on the Lord’s side’ may not be much to the fore in modern secular Christian worship (i.e. outside the cloister); but it was a pre-eminent theme in the lives of the desert fathers, who retired to the bleakest and most inhospitable environments they could reach, whether in the Egyptian desert or the northernmost climes of Britain and elsewhere, to do battle with demons and fulfil their scriptural calling (Ephesians 6.12).

The second stand-out essay was Fr Henry Wansborough’s about S. Boniface, challenging the view that he he was ‘difficult, prickly, tactless and rigorist’ (p. 121). It is a tribute to a life of intense missionary endeavour tied to scholarly brilliance which again has few imitators in the twenty-first century churches. The third essay which especially evoked that inspiration embedded in all good scholarly writing was Gordon Mursell’s on S. Peter Damian, in particular
because through it I became aware of the existence of a book on a subject relevant to almost all secular parish clergy, though not perhaps their religious brothers and sisters. It is called in Latin, Liber qui appellatur Dominus vobiscum; in English it may be rendered ‘The book of The Lord be with you.’ It is an examination of the question of whether one praying alone ought to use the versicle ‘The Lord be with you’; and it does not neglect the equally tricky question of whether to speak the response, ‘And with thy spirit.’ Trivial as such a theme may sound, it reaches to the heart of the mystery of prayer as an action either individual or corporate, and, by its precision of thought and analysis, would surely (if attended to) put an end to the prayers of so-called intercession which are often no more than biddings addressed to a congregation, or reflections on the part of one speaking, which have in fact abandoned the idea of prayer as a conversation, in general, and of intercessory prayer, in particular, as an act of moving to stand between God and his people and speak to the former on the latter’s behalf.

The fourth essay which attracted my particular interest did so because it was about the art of translation. Sr Benedicta’s skill as a translator of Latin is well-known. Perhaps most familiar and widely appreciated is her Penguin edition of the prayers and meditations of S. Anselm. But here the theme taken by Paul Savage was not so much a reflection on the value, nature and gift of translation in itself as a privileged insight, shared with the reader, into the working practices and scholarly principles of Sr Benedicta through their joint translating of Conrad of Eberbach’s Exordium magnum cisterciense. When I talked to another mediaevalist, Christopher Brooke (former Dixie Professor of ecclesiastical history in the University of Cambridge), about the difficulties inherent in translating Augustine, and listened in turn to how he had gone about translating the letters of John of Salisbury, we found common ground in struggling to choose between ‘academic’ and ‘literary’ translation, and in disliking such eisegetical translations as give the reader more precision, more information, than the Latin can justify. The collaborative method described in this essay was of particular interest given that translation is usually so solitary an occupation: though another example of collaborative translation, the Authorised Version of the Bible, might suggest that the effort would be worth making more often.

The portions of the book which I have highlighted here are a personal selection: other readers will be interested more by different sections. But the quality of the essays as a whole is a mark of the innate attractiveness of the theme, and of the talent of the contributors—who are, in turn, paying tribute to an inspirational scholar. There are minor grumbles to be acknowledged in the poor quality of Oxford University Press’s copy-editing (here a quotation in Latin with English in the middle of it; there an incorrect Scripture reference).