

The three homilies on the Holy Week triduum are wonderfully rich and nourishing, in particular 'Holy Thursday: The Mystery of Unity': '... the mystery of unity, this is what the Eucharist (and hence Holy Thursday) is all about. You could say, of course, that this is what the entire Gospel, the whole of divine revelation, is all about ... the union with God and the unity of mankind are not meant to be two separate things. The ultimate unity of people is only to be found in God, and the real God is only to be found in unity between people' (p. 78).

I must say, though, that I simply cannot follow clearly enough his explanation of Transubstantiation in the Eucharist in terms of language and communication. More unpacking is needed. Nor do I find his all too simplified condemnation of capitalism and advocacy of the class struggle convincing as it stands, though what he says is always worth pondering over. But the seven final talks and sermons I find wholly admirable, especially those on the Immaculate Conception, Obedience, and On Being Dominican. Not only do they stimulate deep reflection in the reader; they also activate the springs of spiritual inspiration — revealing in an unmistakable way the rich synthesis of deeply personal philosophical and theological reflection with living spirituality that is the unique gift of Father Herbert McCabe to our confused world.

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HOLY WOMEN OF THE SYRIAN ORIENT introduced and translated by **Sebastian Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey**. *University of California Press, 1987*. Pp. x + 197. \$28

The area which lies along the Eastern Mediterranean sea and stretches inland into Persia includes places well-known today through the media as rife with violence and unrest. More than a thousand years ago in these parts, Syriac Christians, among the most fervent of the earliest Christian churches, were equally involved in violence, suffering repeatedly at the hands of rival political conquerors. The atmosphere of tension issuing in physical suffering, whether through the imposed pains of torture or the voluntary agonies of asceticism, provide a brilliant colour among the threads that went to make up the cloth of early Christianity.

In this book, the lives of fifteen women, famous in the Orient for their courage and single-minded love of God whether through death or through ascetic practices or both, are translated from Syriac, most of them for the first time. The stories were written down between the fourth and seventh centuries, and circulated most of all in monastic centres, where they were presented as icons of the truth of salvation through the Cross for the rebuke and encouragement of the readers and hearers. The first two stories, 'Maria, the Niece of Abraham of Qidun' and 'Pelagia of Antioch' are well-known in the Greek-speaking world and also in the West, but in their Syriac guise they speak with a new freshness. To the story of Mary is added the 'Lament of Mary', an alphabetic acrostic hymn of great beauty, composed in the fifth or sixth centuries and used sometimes during Lent. In the version of the Pelagia story, many details enhance the atmosphere of the East, with more colour, vigour, movement and emotion than in the more careful theologised Western accounts. Apart from these two ascetic women, the others were all the subject of tortures of the most degrading kind, in which they were steadfast in their faith until death. The details of their sufferings are graphic indeed; but before the reader becomes amazed to the point of disbelief it is as well to remember that the century which far exceeds all others in the extent and savagery of the use of torture is not the fourth but the twentieth. What the accounts of the deaths of Thekla, Anastasia, Febronia and Shirin convey is not the barbarity of their tortures but the steadfastness of their conviction of truth, which no physical discomfort could in any way change. These are texts written to emphasise the power of the Risen Christ over death, not, as with so many modern accounts of similar agonies, to stimulate curiosity about pain.

Were these accounts based on historical fact? There is no reason, in most cases, to suppose that there is not a central person and situation behind these stories. The literary genre of hagiography has of course taken over the texts, and they are presented in order to show how these people were conformed to Christ, how they became 'hagios', 'holy' in a Christian sense, not to reveal the details of their lives among their contemporaries. Much detail can be culled from these accounts about the life of the antique village or city, however, and as documents of social history they have great importance, provided they are not seen as written to convey such information.

The fact that all these stories have women as their central figures may appeal to the present-day interest in 'women's history' but it is not with this primarily in mind that the texts have been translated. In the excellent introduction, and in the shorter sections which present each text, the authors deal with the stories in their whole historical and theological context. One of the texts may have been written by a woman, the rest by men, but this lack of the desire to write down and analyse experience on the part of women, evident at other times and places, need not be evidence of their inferiority at all. What these stories show is people, in this case women, living out what they understood with all their being of the reality of the Cross of Christ and His Resurrection. Perhaps one could apply a phrase of Fr Jean Leclercq in describing the literary products of the thirteenth century, and use it of the articulate men of the fourth century who wrote of what had been lived: '(In the thirteenth century) minds were less cultivated than in earlier centuries, centuries so happy that no need to produce was felt; it was enough to be alive'. (*The Love of Learning and the Desire for God; a Study in Monastic Culture* (New York 1960, re-issued London 1978, p. 312)

This is a book full of excellent things, translated with accuracy and in a vivid style which matches the material. The book is beautifully produced, and well worth the rather high price at which it is at present offered.

BENEDICTA WARD SLG

A PASTORAL ART – SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE IN THE ENGLISH MYSTICS by Julia Gatta, Darton, Longman and Todd. Pp. x + 117. £3.95

Julia Gatta is spiritual director at Berkeley Divinity School at Yale, where she lectures on ascetical theology. The mystics whose teaching she discusses are Walter Hilton, Julian of Norwich and the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. 'All their searching', she succinctly explains, 'all their pastoral advice, moves towards a single goal: union with God', and she maintains: 'A slow and painstaking process, growth in the spirit depends in part upon our gradual appropriation of our common spiritual heritage'. Hilton's advice is given that 'it is the response that we make to our emotional situation that matters, and that remains our fundamental orientation for or against God'. It is well said that, for Julian, 'it is "ignorance of love" that keeps us in despair'. The account of *The Cloud of Unknowing* is admirably designed to win it new readers. These remarks will suffice, I hope, to suggest that the book contains many good things and is to be recommended. But it should be added that 'our common spiritual heritage' does not include, for this writer, belief in God's impassibility (which means that, although God's love for us—his 'concern', if anyone likes—is infinite, he does not experience human *feelings*), that there is talk here of God's 'self-emptying' in creation, the Incarnation and the sufferings of Jesus Christ, and that purgatory is referred to as what 'was thought' to prepare souls for heaven in 'mediaeval theology'.

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