



Reviews

LESSONS IN A ROSE-GARDEN: REVIVING THE DOCTRINAL ROSARY by Aidan Nichols OP, *Gracewing*, Leominster, 2012, pp. x + 330, £20, hbk

If it has at times been suggested that dogmatic theology and contemplative prayer are somehow antithetical, this work by Fr Aidan Nichols OP is a welcome riposte. Comprised of a series of theological reflections on the mysteries of the rosary – including the luminous mysteries recommended by Pope John Paul II in 2002 – the work is presented both as an exercise in intellectual investigation and as an invitation to prayer, reflecting a distinctively Dominican integration of rigorous theological reflection and traditional Catholic piety.

The rosary has traditionally been understood as a means of meditating on the mysteries of Christ's life, which are grouped thematically into collections of five joyful, luminous, sorrowful and glorious mysteries, through the eyes of his mother. Nichols's work demonstrates how frequent recitation of the rosary gives an overview of the entire mystery of salvation, drawing Christian doctrine into the rhythms of daily life, as a school of faith, hope and charity. Although modern historical scholarship has tended to downplay the role of the Dominican order in establishing the devotion in its current form, the rosary is nonetheless rightly regarded as a distinctively Dominican way of prayer: not only does it – as Nichols's work demonstrates – provide a school for doctrinal reflection, its form reflects a distinctively Dominican concern to engage the entire human person, involving body, emotions and intellect.

In *Lessons in a Rose-Garden*, Nichols presents the rosary as an authentically Christian theological pedagogy, and his work contributes to a broader movement to renew the practice of this most venerable of devotions in the midst of what Bl. John Paul II described as a 'certain crisis of the Rosary' precipitated by its 'undue devaluation'. Through its emphasis on the doctrinal content of the rosary, Nichols's work serves to dispel any notion that the rosary is more suited to the florid piety of unlettered medievals than to modern Christians. Indeed, the Christocentric character of the meditations implicitly defends the rosary against the often visceral suspicion that it reflects an uncontrolled (even embarrassingly excessive) Mariology, an issue that presents itself acutely to Catholics living in Protestant countries.

Perhaps the most notable feature of the book is the breadth of the theological and literary resources the author deploys within the texts. Theological insights are drawn from both Eastern and Western traditions, spanning the historical spectrum from ancient to modern, and are woven into a theological tapestry that couples a mediation of the venerable Christian tradition with the insights and poetic profundity of Christian liberal artists. Each meditation is introduced by a painting or icon, and the presence of themes drawn from both Byzantine and Anglican Catholic writers is particularly notable, reflecting the author's intellectual biography as a student of these traditions. These, however, are by no means the only traditions reflected in the text: it seems likely that *Lessons in a Rose-Garden* is one of very few books in which Karl Barth's theology of temporality is treated in relation to the Rosary (pp. 61–3), and signals are taken from, *inter alia*, the hymnography of Charles Wesley, the novels of Graham Greene, the works of

liberal political theorist John Rawls, the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, and the meditations of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Throughout, the use of these resources is marked by a sense of historical consciousness, and an implicit awareness of the difficulties in communicating classical Christian theology in a culture marked by modernity (see, for example, p. 26, p. 224).

The breadth of the author's resources, however, should not give the undue impression of eclecticism or syncretism: the theological meditations are thoroughly Thomistic, and the citations and allusions are not merely used as poetic garnish, but are rather integrated into the author's own thought, which has clearly developed over years of theological reflection and prayer (the Dominican *Constitutions* require friars to recite five decades of the rosary daily). The meditations – as the anecdotes and asides demonstrate – reflect a theological career lived in the intellectual and spiritual culture of the English Province of the Order of Preachers, many of the traditions of which were mediated to the author by the ministry of his late novice-master, Fr Geoffrey Preston OP, to whom the work is dedicated.

At times the meditations develop along theological lines not immediately suggested *in nuce* by the mysteries' titles. On occasions, these developments reflect the author's own idiosyncratic theological interests, which are evident both in the selection of resources and particularly in the sections on the Conversion of England (pp. 138–144) and monasticism (pp. 29–36), a fact acknowledged in the introduction. These developments, however, are never stilted nor entirely tangential, and serve not only to personalise the work, but also to situate the mysteries of the rosary within the broader theological nexus of salvation, and thus to make important connections between doctrine and the realities of Christian life and worship, particularly as experienced in the British Isles.

It would be regrettable if the book's length deterred readers: notwithstanding the depth of its theological content, the work does not have the density of a systematic theology, but is rather possessed of the ruminative and meditative quality of a retreat. The reader encounters the author, therefore, not primarily in an overtly didactic mode, but rather as pastor and guide. Indeed, whilst not principally catechetical insofar as it assumes a general theological competence and a willingness to persevere with the use of technical terminology, the book remains reasonably accessible to those without formal theological or philosophical training. Nonetheless, it seems likely that it will most readily appeal to those with some theological training – perhaps particularly to priests and religious – and will offer rejuvenating doctrinal waters for those whose practice of the rosary has stagnated with time.

OLIVER JAMES KEENAN OP

THOMAS AQUINAS ON GOD AND EVIL by Brian Davies OP, *Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2011, pp. xvi + 172, £19.99, pbk*

This book introduces Aquinas's thinking on God and evil. It begins with a brief account of the so-called 'problem of evil' as constructed in modern philosophy of religion and shows that, although Aquinas would not have accepted that there is such a problem, his thought can be read in relation to the questions it raises. Aquinas has relevant things to say about these questions but his thinking is not confined by them, and any fair reader is obliged to consider the broader context of his thinking about evil. In a closing chapter Davies evaluates Aquinas's thought but his primary aim is simply to explain what Aquinas's thinking on God and evil amounts to when taken as a whole.

A couple of chapters in, one begins to wonder whether this is another general summary of Aquinas's thought. Davies has already provided us with two very