

BOOK REVIEW

Dawn M. Nothwehr, *OSF, Franciscan Writings – Hope Amid Ecological Sin and Climate Emergency*. London, T & T Clark. 2023. pp. 336. Pbk. ISBN 9780567699145. £21.99.

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Humanity stands at a crossroads: do we make a sharp turn and travel in a new direction, or do we carry on straight ahead, knowing that before long the road heads over an already crumbling cliff? If we do decide to make that turn, how will we know which direction to follow? ‘Franciscan Writings’ by Dawn Nothwehr is such a map, drawing from early Franciscan sources of the thirteenth century, up to the famous papal encyclical ‘*Laudato si*’ by Pope Francis. It is a book rich in detail. Part 1 looks at Biblical sources for hope in creation and covenant, from both Old and New Testaments. Part 2 looks to St Francis and St Clare as models of faith and sustainable living. Part 3 takes a more theological turn in the company of St Bonaventure and Bl. John Duns Scotus as they provide insights into the inter-woven themes of creation, Christ and the cosmos. Finally, Part 4 goes deeper into the scientific analysis of the current ecological crisis, asking what is ours to do in this generation, to save us from the worst effects of climate change and global heating.

Like all such books, there is a mixture of the carrot and stick. The stick is the increasingly loud outcry against the inactivity of governments and corporations in the face of incontrovertibly human-caused climate change. The carrot is the diminishing hope that we do actually have both the technology and the time to make a real difference to our collective future on this planet. The question is whether we will heed either of these pleas for action before it is too late.

Taking the Bible as a starting point is, of course, a good thing if the full resources of a change in mind and heart are to be sustainable. Religion motivates people – for good or for ill – and if the core values of the Christian religion are demonstrably seen to include the necessary care for creation encouraged by a loving Creator then maybe we will have the inner energy to see this process through. For Franciscans, it may be that our hour has come, our moment to encourage all people to see each other as brother and sister and all drawn together in the care and respect for ‘our sister, Mother Earth’, as Francis called her in his *Canticle of the Creatures*. Nothwehr gives the Franciscan scholars Bonaventure and Duns Scotus slightly

shorter chapters dedicated to their thought, perhaps necessarily so, as the modes of scholastic theology are strange to modern ears unused to Platonic metaphysics. Still, if nothing else, it serves to remember that according to the Franciscans, all creation emerges from, exists by, and returns to the everlasting being and self-diffusive goodness of God; and that each individual thing, each threatened species, is a delight to God in its own unrepeatable individuality. Then in Part 4, Nothwehr draws the picture of Francis embracing a leper to illustrate how we in our time must not flinch and turn away from the suffering of planet Earth, but must rather turn aside, embrace the sickness and the possible contagion and make ourselves vulnerable by relinquishing assets (often unlawfully gained) and habits of consumption that are clearly unsustainable. In this reckoning, three particular areas are highlighted: the impoverishment of water supplies and their use as economic commodities; the threat of food security and the loss of biodiversity; and the necessary move away from dependence on fossil fuels, not just incrementally but wholesale and permanently. The figures of disparity of wealth between developing and developed economies are repeated and undeniable, though that does not seem to stop our politicians from denying them!

If I have any complaint about this very worthy book, it is the slightly misleading title 'Franciscan Writings'. There are indeed short paragraphs from Franciscan sources in each section, but each amounts to only a few sentences expressing a single idea. This is by no means an anthology, which I half-expected on picking it up, and the quotations themselves are uniformly headed 'From the writings of ...' when many are actually writings 'about' rather than 'of' the saints. But whatever your knowledge of the Franciscan tradition, this book is well worth having and sharing with others. As a resource for further study, there is a plethora of suggestions. Many books and articles are quoted, some highlighted for further reading, and each section has a long list of suggestions for action, which left this particular reader with the sense that I have hardly begun to respond to this issue. But it is urgent – perhaps the most urgent matter of our times. Will there be any Franciscan Writings in another 800 years? Will there be any Franciscans left? If there are, then books like this will surely have become part of the new age now already begun.

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