

BECAUSE OF HER TESTIMONY: THE WORD IN FEMALE EXPERIENCE by Ann Thurston. *Gill & Macmillan*, 1995. 133pp, £8.99.

"The most wonderful aspect of Christianity — its very definition — is that it is an incarnate religion. It is about flesh and blood, it is involved in our earthiness; it is embodied"(p. 59).

Essentially this is a book about the bodily — and the female bodily at that — and so as one might imagine it is in many ways a very personal account. To be fair, Thurston makes it clear that this is no "cerebral theology" but (she believes) a much more real one, one which is born of everyday female experience — sexuality/giving birth, suffering, making bread, feeding and nurturing.

Does this exhaustively represent the experience of being female? Might not other female experiences also reveal the sacred? And surely to focus on those things which are so often seen as the source of female oppression — procreation and the kitchen — does little for the women she obviously cares so much about. No, says Thurston, arguing, in a paradoxical sense, that that which is the source of oppression might also be the source of liberation. (One needs only to look at the death and resurrection of Christ to see the weight of this argument).

The first part of the book takes each of these female experiences and, in dialogue with the Bible and Christian tradition, examines how they reveal the sacred.

A chapter on sexuality argues that the traditional Roman Catholic position, which holds together the unitive and procreative purposes of sex, does not bear out the lived experience of women and men but rather "mystifies" it. Whether we accept Thurston's conclusions on sexual morality or not, one thing that we cannot dispute is her premise that we are *essentially* body as well as soul.

This she develops in a later chapter arguing that in giving birth women "touch mystery", bodily aware that they are part of creation. She challenges the traditional understanding that Mary suffered no pain in childbirth, comparing it to the fallacy that Jesus did not actually suffer bodily pain on the cross. Thurston is surely right that by focusing on the spiritual and ignoring the bodily we limit the depths of the mystery not only of her holiness but also of the incarnation. Body and spirit are unitive.

In the second part of the book Thurston deals with how one might bear witness to the Word in female experience, focusing in particular on preaching and the ministry of women. She makes a pragmatic call for a radical transformation in the structures of the Church and its ministry. Thus in a refreshing way the issue of ordination shifts to the wider issue of ministry: it is no longer about gender but service. Moreover, she rejects the traditional dualistic anthropology of complementarity in which woman and man are polarised opposites, arguing that in such a model women are often subordinated and become defined by what they cannot do. Her alternative is an anthropology which is based on the mutuality

and reciprocity of woman and man.

Many reading this book will dismiss a theology so heavily grounded in her experiences as too subjective, peripheral, trivial. Whilst one must bear in mind the disclaimer to write a cerebral theology, she pays disproportionate attention to experience with the result that much good material is swamped. She is right that the tradition must be in dialogue with our experience if our theology is to be authentic, body and soul. But in a sense there is no theology that does not include experience to some degree (no matter how remote!).

If one is prepared to stomach embarrassing terminology (e.g. "malestream" for "mainstream", p. 2), cringeworthy phraseology (e.g. "let us name it and claim it;" "women are pregnant with hope" p. 117) and wade through superfluous material, there are many valuable insights in this book which are worth considering. Thurston has given us an important reminder of what it means to be human.

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Book Notes

Gerald A. McCool SJ, in *The Neo-Thomists* (Marquette University Press, 1994, \$20.00), offers a clear and concise guide to the interpretations of the writings of St Thomas Aquinas that dominated, even *constituted*, Catholic thought from the 1880s until the 1960s. All the familiar names are here. Tommaso Zigliara OP (1833-93), significantly a friend of the future Pope Leo XIII, stressed the Aristotelian elements in Aquinas and the argumentative rigour. Alberto Lepidi OP (1838-1925), on the other hand, insisted on the Augustinian and Platonic side. This difference of emphasis remains crucial. But the return to Aquinas, or the invention of neo-Thomism, was an element in a much larger struggle. Basically, as Modernism and the modern world advanced, the Catholic Church attempted to restore premodern, i.e. pre-Cartesian and pre-Kantian philosophy.

The decisive figure was Josef Kleutgen SJ (1811-1883), who was also immensely important in the drafting of the Vatican I decrees. In *Die Theologie der Vorzeit* (1853-70), he attacked Catholic theology of the modern age (*die Neuzeit*) for its submission to Cartesian/Kantian idealism, recommending a return to the Aristotelian realism of what would now be labelled 'premodernity' (*die Vorzeit*). He followed up with *Die Philosophie der Vorzeit* (1863-70). In effect, this return to premodern philosophy anticipated by a century some of the most fashionable movements in philosophy today, Continental and Anglo-American. (Kleutgen figures prominently in Alasdair MacIntyre's *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* and deserves a book.)

The form of Neo-Thomism later called transcendental Thomism originated with Pierre Rousselot SJ (1878-1915, killed in action) and