Regis Martin


There are a number of things wrong with this book, notwithstanding the obvious eminence of its author, whose scholarly credentials would appear to be in very good order. Recognized as among the most influential of contemporary Catholic theologians, Professor John E. Thiel has been teaching Religious Studies at Fairfield University for nearly forty years and is past President of the Catholic Theological Society of America (2011–2012). The author of five earlier books, including a widely esteemed study, God, Evil, and Innocent Suffering: A Theological Reflection (Crossroad, 2002), his latest work, Icons of Hope, has been equally and enthusiastically praised in all the right progressive places (America and Commonweal, for instance, have given glowing reviews) for its bold and penetrating scholarship. Indeed, its 223 densely argued pages so impressed the Catholic Press Association of the U.S. and Canada, along with the Alpha Sigma Nu Honor Society of Jesuit Colleges and Universities, that its author received awards from both organizations when the book first appeared two years ago.

But it has got some real problems, not the least being the impenetrability of some of its prose. Granted, the objection is stylistic, but the fact that it is neither an easy, nor a pleasurable, read must surely count for something. Besides, who ever said writing about God needs to be boring? Should not the sublimity of the subject be matched by language every bit as lovely and luminous? Certainly Hans Urs von Balthasar is not dull; nor is his prose excessively difficult to parse. In fact, to quote Erasmo S. Leiva, who has translated a number of his books, “Everywhere in the extensive corpus of his writings we are accustomed to finding that happy union between beauty of expression and profundity of content that characterizes his theology.”

The same kudos apply to others of similar stature in modern Catholic theology—e.g., Henri de Lubac, Jean Danielou, Romano Guardini, Josef Ratzinger—all of whom combine formidable scholarship with a felicity of expression that arrests the attention. (Also, to be sure, an ardent and uncomplicated faith.) Not so, I'm afraid, is the case with Professor Thiel, nearly every page of whose book, with the exception of a dozen or so illustrations drawn from medieval and Renaissance art, which are richly stunning (and no doubt responsible for the $35 price tag), is heavy going. And, who knows, perhaps the very turgidity of the thing may suggest problems yet more intractable: for example, the thesis of whose validity he aims to persuade us.
So what is the argument of the book, and why should readers, particularly when Catholic, be on their guard against it? Here are two difficulties I have with it, which, while not exhaustive of its problems, nevertheless seem to me to be among the more salient. One, the collapse of a distinction crucial to the maintenance of the Church’s teaching, between being (logos) and doing (ethos). In other words, what will happen in heaven to the souls who dwell therein? They will look on the face of God, and the bliss of their communion with him, and all the blessed dead annealed in him, will go on forever. Grace having consummated the work of their sanctification, they are no longer required to be doing things pursuant to the life of glory, but rather to bask in the radiant and unending presence of God himself. “A condition of complete simplicity,” T. S. Eliot describes it in the final lines of his *Four Quartets*,

(Costing not less than everything.)
And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flame are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.

Ah, but for Thiel this can never be enough. “Rather than imagine a static heaven in which God is timelessly contemplated, it may be fruitful to imagine a heaven in which the blessed dead still have plenty of moral work to do as they negotiate the effects of sin in their lives and across history.” In short they too have been unresponsive to grace, along with all the other slackers; as a result of which they will be expected to continue the business of atonement even after the shades of death have ushered them into the arms of God.

What a strange notion this is. And never mind the implied affront to God that the experience of having to see his face forevermore should somehow seem “static.” (I cherish in this connection a line from one of Emily Dickinson’s letters, in which the poet reminds us that, “life is so startling it leaves but little occupation for anything else.” If that be true of life in this world, pray, how startling will things be on the other side? Surely there can be nothing “static” about the Beatific Vision!) But what nonsense is this about the blessed still having remedial work to do? One would have thought the whole point of dying in a state of grace is that one no longer needs to acquire any more of it. The raptures of the soul immersed in the life of God must not be confused with yet another expiatory stage pursuant to one’s perfection.
Finally, there is the contrast he draws (overdraws, actually) between an alleged Pauline universalism, in which the infusions of grace and mercy are such as to nullify divine judgment entirely (everyone is sort of washed-up on the shores of eternity in spite of the sea of sin in which they’d just been swimming), and the emphasis he places on Matthew (along with the other Synoptics), who seem so much more exacting in the demands Christ imposes. But this too is a horse that will not run. And should not run since it quite undermines the unity of Scripture.

Not recommended.

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