



Reviews

SACRIFICE AS GIFT. EUCHARIST, GRACE AND CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER IN MAURICE DE LA TAILLE by Michon M. Matthiessen, *Catholic University of America Press*, Washington, DC, 2013, pp. xiii + 320, \$69.95 hbk

This thoroughly researched and carefully crafted book is a magisterial study of the somewhat unplaceable early twentieth-century French Jesuit theologian Maurice de la Taille (1872–1933). Is he to be regarded as an unusual sort of Neo-Scholastic writer who made copious use of the texts of the Fathers, both Eastern (Greek and Syriac) and Western, to support theses too original to be familiar in the Schools? Or should he be seen as an exceptional representative of the *nouvelle théologie* who retained an enormous respect not only for Aquinas but also for the conceptual idiom of the later Scholastics and chose to write largely in Latin (a very elegant Latin) rather than the vernacular? Between these two options it is not easy to choose.

What, however, is easy to say, in the light of Professor Matthiessen's work, is that de la Taille was an exemplary Catholic theologian, alert *both* to the challenge of systematic connexion-making and robust albeit doctrinally responsible speculation, *and* to the requirements of piety and edification among the members of the household of faith. As de la Taille considered Eucharistic theology in its relation to Christology, soteriology, the doctrine of the other sacraments (notably baptism), and the grace that flows from the Saviour and his sacrifice, the dots were well and truly joined up into lines, and the lines themselves were made to make a satisfying contour for anyone seeking to grasp the fundamental shape of salvation and its outcome in christian living.

This book was sorely needed. If reasonably well informed readers have come across de la Taille's name at all, it is probably only in connexion with the poetry and critical essays of the Anglo-Welsh artist and writer David Jones, whose view of sacramentality and the (controverted) question of the relation between the Last Supper of Jesus and his Paschal Mystery (his death, resurrection and ascension) the French theologian largely inspired. Actually, that is not a bad place from which to start. In Jones's generation it could be taken for granted, in a way no longer possible, that the phrase 'the Eucharist' denoted above all the Sacrifice of the Mass. De la Taille is supremely a theologian of Eucharistic sacrifice. That is owed not just to his thesis that in the acts of the Supper and the acceptable oblation on the Cross we are dealing with a single sacrificial deed of the Redeemer, such that the sacrament instituted on the night before he died is above all the renewal of his saving offering. It follows, as Matthiessen shows in scrupulous detail, from the inter-relation with the Mass, seen primarily as sacrifice – if a sacrifice whose issue is a banquet – with the mystic 'burial' of baptism and the purification (mortification) of desire all seriously Godward living entails for the initiated christian.

The need to trace out these links explains the structure of her book. After a biographical introduction, the author considers in turn de la Taille's concept of sacrifice and, more specifically, his understanding of the atonement as Christ's sacrifice and the Mass as the sacrifice of the Church, before moving on through a chapter on 'Eucharistic union and divinisation' to deal with his notion of the grace of Christ, for which, as in Byzantine theology, Uncreated Grace – God

in his self-gift – takes priority over created grace – grace as the enhancement of our human faculties. She has little difficulty in showing that de la Taille's ontology of divine action ('created actuation by Uncreated Act') – her next topic – fits splendidly with not only his theology of grace but also his Christology and indeed his doctrine of the Eucharist, for like St Cyril, by whose writings de la Taille was strongly influenced, Holy Communion is meant to entail our transformation by the Logos through his life-giving flesh: flesh which, in the hypostatic union, became his and which, through feasting on the Victim of the sacrifice, becomes ours. Her last three chapters describe de la Taille's interventions in the contemporary dispute over the modes of contemplative prayer, where notions of the 'cruciform purification of desire' drawn from the earlier sections of the book become newly pertinent, as they do likewise in her account of his theology of baptism, with which she concludes.

In the present church situation, the greatest merit of this book is undoubtedly its recovery of a full-blooded doctrine of Eucharistic sacrifice as not only 'latreutic' (a sacrifice of adoration), but also 'propitiatory' (a sacrifice expressive of sorrow and regret for all human rejection of the charity of God). Pointing out how de la Taille's strong preference for the language of Eucharistic oblation rather than immolation was guided by his wider theology of the God-world relation as mediated by Jesus Christ (destruction, *simply as such*, is never pleasing to the God thus revealed), she seeks to tread a path between the heterodox elimination of 'sacrifice' (in favour of 'gift'), in much modern Eucharistic theology – this, she rightly notes, is often the result of the influence of the contemporary philosopher of religion René Girard – and a simple return to the post-Tridentine rhetoric of immolation which she associates with enthusiasts for the older Latin Liturgy.

Though one of the testimonies printed by the publisher on the dust-jacket of this book speaks of its author's 'liturgical grounding', it is surprising that no mention whatsoever is made of the debilitating effect, for an 'oblationist' sensibility, of the liturgical revision introduced into the Western Catholic Church in the 1960s and '70s. Eucharistic celebration *versus populum* speaks primarily if not exclusively of a God who, in the Eucharistic elements, makes over to us the gift of his Son. It is only when people and priest are facing in the same direction as oblation is made to Another who is beyond them both, that the Mass appears as the sacrifice of the God-man to his Father to which sacrifice, by the indwelling Spirit in the Church, the faithful are conjoined. Good doctrinal catechesis can allay this difficulty. But only architectural change can remedy it.

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CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY IN THE EARLY CHURCH by Anthony Meredith SJ,
T & T Clark, Continuum, London, 2012, pp.173, £ 14.99, pbk

This book is a distillation of much thought, emanating from many years of teaching Patristics at Campion Hall, University of Oxford and Heythrop College, University of London. Fr Meredith has embarked upon charting afresh the marsh territory of a problem almost as old as christianity itself namely 'Can philosophy be Christian?' or, in Meredith's own wording: 'Faith and philosophy: Alliance or hostility?' The possibility of Christian philosophy was fiercely debated in the 1920s and the 1930s especially in France where it was categorically rejected by a leading intellectual historian such as Émile Bréhier and vigorously defended by Étienne Gilson who opened his Gifford Lectures on *The Spirit of Medieval*