

# BOOK REVIEWS

**Frank Fletcher (ed), *Falling in Love with God: Recognising the call of Christian love*. St Pauls 2010. ISBN 9781921472459.**

At a meeting today that I was a party to a NSW trade unionist was coming to grips with the fact that Christianity had played a part in the life of unionism. It was newish to him, and much of a relief for him. During the ramblings of the constructive conversations and exchanges he spoke of the age in which we live and that it militates against action in charity and care, with people labeled as 'bleeding hearts'. In his newfound Christian context he then corrected himself and made a pertinent remark that perhaps this is not such a derogatory comment for Christians. This book takes up that theme.

In many ways the chapters are a reappropriation and deepening of the spiritual impulse behind the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart into today's world and contemporary Christian and Catholic culture. It is a revived spirituality, and as such a renewed piety, all around an ancient biblical theme. Frank Fletcher perhaps names it most appropriately in his chapter, referring to it as 'heart spirituality'. It is hard to go past the impact of the phrase. The author, and indeed editor, places it within the context of mystery and poetry, a listening to the murmurs (a particular sounding of the heart). There is a kind of looking and seeing that derives its point of departure from the heart.

Another MSC stalwart Barry Brundell speaks of 'kindness' as an immediately recognizable feature of the members of the MSC

family, indeed 'love and kindness, humility and simplicity', characteristics of the good shepherd himself.

And so to the essays in particular. There are 12 short pieces in all, each readable in a manageable single session, though there is no need to do so. The first six, in the main by Frank Fletcher along with a lay woman Kerrie Hide and fellow MSC Anthony Arthur take up the theme of 'Discovering the Heart.' The second set invites us into 'Loving the World', with Frank accompanied by confreres Barry Brundell and Peter Malone, and married couple Brad and Jacinta Sinclair. The whole is introduced by Michael Fallon and closed succinctly in prayer before the Sacrament by Fabian Byers.

These are well read and respected authors and disciples of the ways of the heart, offering a sense of warmth, depth and understanding as they invite us further into the mysteries of the heart of the triune God. Parish groups, prayers cells, senior students and university students will find a contemporary sense of holiness and challenge.

—Gerard Moore

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(Order from your local religious book centre or direct from St Pauls Publications, 35 Meredith St, Strathfield 2135. To order by phone: 02 93943400. Or to order over the net <http://www.stpauls.com.au/product/3747>.)

**Neil Darragh (ed.), *A Thinker's guide to Sin: Talking about Wrongdoing Today*. Accent Publications, Auckland, 2010. <http://www.accentpublications.co.nz>**

The topic of sin has fallen under suspicion both in church and society in recent decades. For many it seems unduly negative and asso-

ciated with unhealthy guilt. In this fine collection of essays, however, 24 writers demonstrate that discussion about wrongdoing can be con-

structive and positive. As the editor, Neil Darragh writes, talking about sin is ‘about overcoming the obstacles to a more gracious future that transforms the limitations of the present.’

This is an eminently readable book, each essay being of very manageable length (generally 6-8 pages) and they can be read in any order. However Darragh’s introductory essay which sets the framework for the ensuing discussion is worth careful reading before embarking on the contributions from the other writers who come from a diverse range of church and professional backgrounds.

Within the constraints of a short review such as this it is impossible to detail the rich variety of this collection. Suffice to say that the discussion, far from being negative, is stimulating and wide-ranging.

Jenny McLaughlin, for example, observes that today’s teenagers are far more exposed to other faiths and values than were teenagers in previous generations. Drawing on her many years’ experience teaching adolescent girls in a Catholic school, she illustrates how they are unlikely to accept that an action is categorically right or wrong simply because of divine or church decree. They need to see the relevance of Catholic teachings in their lives and only then, delve into the nature and relevance of sin.

Glynn Cardy, an Anglican priest, lists some of the difficulties posed by traditional notions of sin. While the church speaks of God’s unconditional love and acceptance, its liturgy suggests a picture of God as a stern disciplinarian. The sin-language of the Church can also appear to function as a form of control whereby God is co-opted by a male-elite to keep in place minorities such as women, gays, and divorcees among others. Here traditional sin-talk has a political dimension that runs counter to the liberating message of the gos-

pel. Moreover, insofar as it is associated with the schema of redemption whereby Jesus’ death is seen as a sacrifice of atonement, traditional sin-talk is seen to inculcate an unduly negative view of human potential.

Elizabeth Julian’s examination of the way in which the figure of Mary Magdalene has been portrayed in Western tradition (identifying her, for example, with the ‘sinner’ who anointed Jesus’ feet in Luke 7) illustrates the long association of women and sin in church tradition. Diana Atkinson shows how this had been detrimental to women’s self-esteem and offers a forceful challenge to the church to confront the sinfulness of its institutional sexism, arguing that there continues to be a general reluctance by the Catholic hierarchy to deal with the issue of this injustice within the church.

To talk of sin raises the issue of guilt. Indeed, as Darragh observes, this may be said to be its intention. An important distinction must be made between enabling and disabling guilt, and Trish McBride’s provocative essay on forgiveness may be singled out for its advice to preachers and pastoral workers. Undoubtedly Jesus taught us to forgive. Yet, as McBride demonstrates, there are times when to exhort those who have been sinned against to forgive their abuser immediately can actually be harmful.

Several of the authors explore the root or underlying basis of personal wrongdoing. Chris Marshall for example, considers sin as ultimately a betrayal of trust and provides a fine reflection on the story of the Prodigal Son. For Stuart Sellar the story of the Rich Young Man shows sin to be a hardening of one’s heart, a refusal to listen.

This book is a timely and apposite addition to a series by this publisher on spirituality and theology. It is recommended reading.

—**Damian Wynn-Williams**

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