



REVIEW

A Philosopher Looks at the Religious Life by Zena Hitz, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2023, pp. xxiv+150, £9.99, pbk

In the wake of his conversion, and probably some considerable professional overwork, Augustine took the opportunity provided by the *feriæ vindemiales* – the grape harvest holidays – to make for the country retreat of Cassiciacum. In his exhaustion and sickness, Augustine is open to the natural beauty around him on the estate. Peter Brown describes it as an openness to his surroundings which is rarely seen later in his work, noticing everything from the rhythm of water running in the boathouse to the clear skies of an Italian autumn. In his *Contra Academicos*, he writes even of the weather itself, which ‘was of such limpid clarity that nothing seemed to fit so perfectly the serenity that was to dawn in our minds’ (II, iv, 10). It is not surprise that in such an environment, and after the radical changes of his life, both of stepping back from professional academic work and his conversion experience, that Augustine and his band of friends turned to the question of the meaning and quality of the happy life. Discussion of the idea began on Augustine’s thirty-second birthday and lasted for three consecutive afternoons. The resulting treatise, *De beata vita*, was described by Augustine as the most religious of his works at Cassiciacum and the one which, at the end of his life as he wrote his *Retractiones*, found the greatest favour in the eyes of the aged bishop.

What brought Augustine to Cassiciacum was an experience of crisis, a crisis of career and also of health, but also a more profound experience of *krísis* – judgement – which placed all of Augustine’s previous achievements under the light of judgement, and found them to be lacking. This volume by Zena Hitz is an extraordinarily personal exploration of the phenomena of religious life precisely from this perspective of crisis. All conversion is personal, and this book lists different conversion stories from Augustine and Anthony of Egypt, through to Catherine de Hueck Doherty, the foundress of the Madonna House community of which Hitz herself was a member for some time. All of these conversions come with a rejection of a particular emptiness in secular life, and make a response which embraces some kind of value in the religious life: poverty, chastity, a greater intimacy with God in prayer, a commitment to neighbour, and the freedom which comes from abandonment to providence.


The strength of this book is that it is a personal account. The author comes with her own experience of discerning a vocation to religious life – both the joys and the pains – and reveals a little of her own story as she spent time at Madonna House, before her return to her life as an academic. It is also pleasantly refreshing to have an account of the religious life from someone who tried the vocation before leaving to return to secular life. So often discussions of religious life are from the point of view of those who have discerned a vocation to religious life and have then stayed, while accounts from those who have left Religious Life can often be tinged with a certain bitterness. Hitz’s approach, rooted in her own experience, offers a sense of what of the religious life broadly conceived could become part of the everyday experience of those living in the

secular world. With the shelves of bookstores creaking under the weight of lifestyle guides rooted in everything from Buddhism to Stoicism, something which roots the experience of religious life in the everyday experience of people can only be good, and makes clear to a secular audience that they can find the things they yearn for in the western tradition.

Equally refreshing are the examples the author draws on for the work. This is in part due to the number of different biographies which she offers: from St Josephine Bakhita, to the martyr monks of the Atlas Mountains made famous by the film *Of Gods and Men*, and Walter Ciszek SJ, the saintly Jesuit priest who spent most of his life ministering clandestinely in a Soviet labour camp in Siberia. But more than this, Hitz draws on an admirable amount of film and literature to frame not just the curiosities of our human condition, but also the possibilities which religious life can bring.

The author places the practices and experience of the religious life around feelings of dissatisfaction and fear which accompany the experience of the contingency of life. Given that nothing lasts, we have a desire to stretch for those things which last for ever, and can give some meaning to the passing and shadowy quality of human existence. All contemporary attempts to offer meaning have failed because they hide from the contingency of life. Religious life offers the answer to these feelings of dissatisfaction and fear because it embraces the contingency of life, and shows us that this dissatisfaction and fear is a desire for the goods which last.

The only frustration with this book is that it seems only to nudge towards an answer. Like St Augustine at Cassiciacum we have something approaching an answer, but it is not complete. A truly Christian understanding of the religious life for St Augustine would only reach its maturity after baptism with his monastic community at Thagaste, and his preaching on the life of grace as a bishop. The provisional quality of the response is acknowledged by Hitz at the end of the book, when she points out that much of this can only make sense within the context of the gift of faith, and a belief in eternal life; but more profoundly, acknowledging that there is contingency to our life, and that we cannot escape this reality of our life may provoke moments of crisis. However, this crisis will only be of any profit if we also see them as moments of *krí-sis* where we are open to the Lord's judgement. Only then can we truly embrace the contingency of life, and come to know the Lord, who reveals the true meaning of our contingent existence.

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