

Reviews

SING A NEW SONG: THE CHRISTIAN VOCATION by Timothy Radcliffe OP *Dominican Publications, Dublin, 1999. Pp. 300, £9.99 pbk.*

It is not only Popes who write encyclicals but those whom Canon Law inelegantly calls Supreme Moderators of Institutes of Consecrated Life. As presumably every reader of this review is aware, Timothy Radcliffe is one such, being the present Master of the Dominican Order, and the most substantial portion of the book reproduced five of his circular letters to the Dominican family (32-188). The other pieces 'owe their genesis to very different occasions' (8) — being lectures or talks to various groups — but all of them were written and delivered since his election as Master in 1992.

It is good to have all this made available to a wider audience — Christian life is a unity after all — and what Timothy Radcliffe modestly calls the few coins in his beggar's box are emphatically worth rattling loud enough for others than Dominicans to hear. Shades of the late Cardinal's *Searching for God* perhaps? There is an energy, vivacity, intelligence and humour here that will certainly appeal, and of which Catholic writing in the English-speaking world is in need. An ability to be trenchant without stridency, and a deft and unapologetic use of quotation, both further enhance these pages.

This reviewer cannot judge from within the present Master's particular 'take' on the Dominican charism, but it is unquestionably timely to have such an upbeat presentation of the religious life as such. In this, arguably, consists the book's main value. 'The title...*Sing a New Song*, is intended to suggest the vitality of religious life today, as I have discovered travelling around the Order.' (7) 'Jurassic Park' (ch. 1) will pass, but the vowed life, sustained and expressed by community, remains. The author is insistent on the counter-culture quality of the vows, has valuable things to say on each of them and happily confirms this Benedictine's own pre-judice by envisaging religious communities as ecosystem, designed to assist the human and Christian flourishing of their members. 'Perhaps one could say that in religious life we live the mirror image of the crisis of the modern self'(225), that is, aspiring to community but still haunted by our individualistic conception of the self. The 'affective life', too, has been something of an obsession among contemporary religious, although probably most had never heard of it till joining a community! The twenty pages given to it (131-152) are excellent. There is a sense, at least, of moving beyond the 60s, and the fresher Christian values of Asia, Africa and Latin America blow freely through these pages. Above all, it is stressed, 'the value of being

religious is that it gives vivid expression to the destiny of every human being' (209).

The very humanism and humanity of such a remark of course suggests the book's wider appeal. Just as, over twenty years ago, Abbot Basil Hume's conferences on stability and perseverance found unexpected wider audiences, so may these pages on poverty and mission, the rosary and inculturation, freedom and responsibility. There are recurrent themes: 'our world is being reduced to a cultural desert through the triumph of consumerism' (77); the need to revalue words and language and not to give up on the search for meaning or on serious study; the need to appreciate again within the Church the place of debate, knowing with St. Thomas that there is no 'opponent' from whom one cannot learn some truth; the dangers of renascent fundamentalisms; the ubiquity of violence; the surpassing value of a witness such as that of the Cistercian monks of the Atlas Mountains or of the Dominican Bishop of Oran. Much more besides. On page 27 comes the fine remark: 'I have learnt [that is, from being Master] just a little more about what it means to celebrate the eucharist.' If that were the gift of this book to all who read it, it will not be wasted.

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ELEANOR OF PROVENCE: QUEENSHIP IN THIRTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND by Margaret Howell *Blackwells*, Oxford, 1998. Pp. xx + 349, £45.00 hbk.

'It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.' So writes Jane Austen in the opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice*. What is true of lesser mortals is definitely true of kings. At various points in the history of the nations which make up the British Isles the stability of the realm turned on the marriage or celibacy of Queens regnant. In this regard Mary, Queen of Scots, proved an imprudent suitor, whilst her cousin Elizabeth I was much more canny in her choice of state. Most people with an historical memory reinforced by recollections of *1066 and All That* would be able to name the Queens who have sat on the English throne, or in the case of Mary, the Scottish throne, but not many would be able to perform the same service for those kings' wives who have wielded considerable influence over the past 1000 years. Attempts have been made to turn the finely woven tapestry of European history over to reveal the underside of rough knots, tufts and running stitch which sustains the pattern presented to the viewer. In this regard, not simply chronological, political and administrative factors in the evolution of the nation's destiny are studied, but the wider ranging social, anthropological, ritual, personal and even gender-governed features of common life are exposed to view. In this way we are being reminded of the veiled but significant contribution of women in the unfolding of Western history.

Over the past decade a number of studies have been devoted to