

Theology in Practice: A Beginner's Guide to the Spiritual Life. By Roch A. Kereszty and Denis Farkasfalvy, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2023. 274 pps.

In *Theology in Practice: A Beginner's Guide to the Spiritual Life*, the authors (both recently deceased priests from Our Lady of Dallas Cistercian Abbey in Irving, TX) deliver on the promise of the subtitle, offering a kind of introductory overview of Catholic “spiritual theology,” described as the place where “theology meets the Christian life” (p. 10). In their view, this kind of theology deals with all of God’s revelation – and thus all the topics covered in the various branches of theology – in relation to “the human believer, in whom all these mysteries of faith become spirit and life” (p. 11).

It is their aim, then, to show how theology, in its many subdisciplines and themes, applies to spiritual life and growth, with chapters on (1) the Triune God, (2) conversion, (3) following Christ, (4) church (tradition, community, communion of saints, theology of the world, action & contemplation), (5) conscience, (6) virtues, (7) Sacraments, (8) prayer and religious experience, (9) vocations, and (10) spiritual growth through the stages of life. In addressing such a broad overview of topics in theology, the book is not intended to offer detailed coverage of them, but rather to lead the reader to grasp their spiritual significance and to offer some guidance on each, particularly regarding personal growth. Thus, for example, the chapter on the “Triune God” emphasizes how the three divine Persons relate to *us*; the chapter on Christ is on believers’ *following* of Christ; the chapter on sacraments focuses on “what is closely connected with the birth, growth, and restoration of spiritual life” (p. 138); and so on.

For sources, the authors cite primarily the Bible but also the works by Origen, St. Augustine, St. Benedict, and St. Bernard, as well as Vatican II documents and the works of some more recent theologians. The book is sober in tone, without apologetic or polemic, and – as can be discerned from the list of sources and from the themes of the chapters – is classically Catholic in approach. There are just a few places where a distinction is pointed out between Protestant and Catholic theology (e.g., regarding whether one can be certain of one’s salvation, p. 112), with the Catholic position being the one followed. However, the authors are also willing occasionally to critique elements of historical Catholic theology – for example, stating that “the history of the church has certainly known many forms of exaggerated bodily mortification and many statements about the lowliness of the body” (p. 31). Overall, however, they regard it as essential for Catholics seeking spiritual growth to remain rooted in the richness of the church’s theological heritage. Still, the authors caution that the spiritual life is not merely a matter of looking up classic answers to today’s spiritual questions; rather, recourse to the tradition should be accompanied by attention to the milieu in which one lives. Thus, for example, they state that theologians “must remain in close touch with the primary sources of faith” while also discovering “ever anew the concrete requirements of holiness” for their own society and culture (p. 32). While a few references to current circumstances are mentioned, considerations of societal or cultural particularities remain largely at the theoretical level, allowing for a more long-range perspective; this should allow the book to have a longer shelf life than those emphasizing responses to the latest trends.

In their treatment of the wide range of topics covered, the authors offer many helpful insights. Space does not allow for a summary, but we can mention just a sampling of highlights: their description of Christian asceticism as conformation to Christ (pp. 30-32, 48-49); their discussion of the communitarian nature of spiritual life (pp. 60-68); some concrete recommendations for those undergoing a crisis of faith (pp. 103-104); a helpful distinction between spiritual guidance and spiritual direction (p. 168); and some possible reasons for prayers going unanswered (p. 195).

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Being a “Beginner’s Guide,” the book is intended for “untrained readers” (p. 11); as such, it is written in an accessible style, devoid of theological jargon. Indeed, overall, the work is aimed not directly at professional theologians but at those faithful who seek to find deeper connections between their faith and their own appropriation of that faith. Nevertheless, professional ministers such as those working in adult faith formation or in spiritual direction, as well as those forming students for such ministries (and the students themselves), may want to be familiar with the book as a potential resource for those they aim to serve. They may also find it fruitful for their own spiritual reflection. Both in its extensive recourse to scripture and tradition, and in the many insights it offers, this mature work will serve as a reliable and relevant guide for helping Christians put their faith into practice in the world.

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