

Gems of the Catholic canon

Rachelle Linner | Feb. 4, 2008

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The German writer Ida Goerres uses the lovely phrase "book providence" to describe the way "certain books come into our lives at certain times for some God-given purpose." Most people can recognize this in their own experience as readers

, whether in the chance conversation that leads to a previously unknown author or a serendipitous discovery made while browsing in a bookstore or library. Donald Brophy's *One Hundred Great Catholic Books* (BlueBridge, 222 pages, \$16) will surely mediate book providence for countless readers. Mr. Brophy, for many years an editor for Paulist Press, reminds us that great Catholic books are "your friends and companions on the journey." He advises, "Treasure them, hold them close."

The criteria for inclusion in the book, Mr. Brophy writes, was a work's "interest to general readers ... books that people today can actually "read." There was some effort made to show the wide range of Catholic writing without loading the volume down with moral or systematic theology." A variety of genres are represented, including poetry, fiction, apologetics, biography, memoirs, history, theology and, most prominently, spirituality. All the books on Mr. Brophy's list are currently available in print or online, and he includes an afterward of 50 more books he recommends and a helpful appendix with publication and translation information.

One Hundred Great Catholic Books is arranged chronologically, beginning with Sayings and Stories of the Desert Fathers (c. 325) and ending with Paul Elie's superb 2003 study of Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day, Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy, *The Life You Save May Be Your Own*. It is a suitable work with which to conclude because, as Mr. Elie observes, "Certain books, certain writers, reach us at the center of ourselves, and we come to them in fear and trembling, in hope and expectation -- reading so as to change, and perhaps save, our lives."

As one would expect, the classics are here -- *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, *The Interior Castle* by St. Teresa of Avila, *Introduction to the Devout Life* by St. Francis de Sales and the mystical treatise of St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night*. In addition to succinct descriptions of these and other great works, Mr. Brophy introduces or reminds us of books and authors we might not think of as Catholic books.

The Montessori Method, Mr. Brophy notes, is a pedagogical approach that "depended heavily on [Maria Montessori's] own incarnational instincts that grew out of her religious faith." Walter Miller, the author of the minor classic, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, was an "airman during World War II and took part in the bombing of Monte Cassino Monastery in Italy -- an event that had a profound effect on him. He became a Catholic two years after the war." When *Black Elk Speaks* ("the memories of a Christian looking back to his non-Christian days") was published in 1932, Black Elk's "Jesuit mentors were appalled, since he spoke of his Native American religion with great reverence." It was republished in 1971 when "a new generation of missionaries ... was able to appreciate the book, encouraged by a new and popular respect for the spiritual riches of indigenous

religions.?

One Hundred Great Catholic Books is a fine resource for self-study or a parish reading group. ?There is no claim being made that these are the one hundred ?best? books or the one hundred ?most important? Catholic books.? Mr. Brophy?s summaries provide a ?historical context, give a short digest of their contents, and suggest what the experience of reading these books -- some of them quite old -- is like for a contemporary reader.? That is a lot to ask of two pages of text. Sometimes he achieves his purpose in tightly organized and lucid explanations of history and theology, but there are many instances where his pallid endorsement of a book leads one to wonder why it was included in the first place.

?If you think [Evelyn] Waugh lays this on a little thick,? he writes about Brideshead Revisted, ?you are not alone. ... But in the end Waugh?s world is so complete and compelling that you might just accept it -- pious phrases, snobbery, and all.? The Geography of Faith, a 1971 conversation between Jesuit Fr. Daniel Berrigan and Robert Coles has parts ?that are dated, with frequent reference to the Black Panthers, the Weathermen, and school integration in the South, all of which dominated the news in those days.? Christian Zen, by Jesuit Fr. William Johnston, ?is not a great book in the sense that it explores Zen or Christian asceticism in a deep way. It is short and serves more as an introduction than a definitive treatment.?

One finishes One Hundred Great Catholic Books with sadness, knowing that Catholics today, riven by ideological division, do not often read the same books. Indeed, among the fine authors Mr. Brophy includes in his post-Vatican II section are many who are harshly critiqued by traditional Catholics. If, as Mr. Brophy suggests, great Catholic books ?tell you where you have come from, and where you are going,? then the lack of a common intellectual and spiritual formation will continue to sap Catholic vitality and ultimately can lead us to squander our intellectual heritage.

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