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Portrait in flesh and blood of a pioneer theologian

by Michelle Gonzalez

MONIKA K. HELLWIG: THE PEOPLE'S THEOLOGIAN

Edited by Dolores R. Leckey and Kathleen Dolphin

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Who is the person behind the text? This is a question that has plagued me since my undergraduate years at Georgetown University in Washington. Engaged by the words on printed, and more and more often virtual, pages, I often wonder about the flesh-and-blood person who typed or handwrote the phrases that enrapture my intellectual imagination. It is quite appropriate that this intellectual curiosity about the person behind the idea began at Georgetown, where Monika K. Hellwig (1929-2005) taught for almost 30 years.

While I never had the privilege of sitting in her classroom, I was well aware of Hellwig's presence in the theological studies department and on the U.S. Catholic intellectual landscape. With this book, *Monika K. Hellwig: The People's Theologian*, we are given a rare glimpse at the person behind the numerous books and articles that bear her name.

Her contribution cannot be limited to her publications. She was the first female faculty member in the theology department at Georgetown, the second female president of the Catholic Theological Society of America and later became the executive director of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities. She delivered the first Madaleva Lecture at St. Mary's College in Notre Dame, Ind., a series that has offered a groundbreaking contribution to Roman Catholic feminist scholarship throughout the years.

Hellwig's story cannot be reduced to her professional life. It is perhaps telling that this biography is a collection of essays by different authors who treat the many facets of Hellwig's person and theology. Her former mentor, Fr. Gerard Sloyan, provides the background to her formative years as a scholar at The

Catholic University of America in Washington. The chapter on her Georgetown years is written by the man who hired her, Jesuit Fr. William McFadden.

The flesh-and-blood Hellwig appears most vividly in perhaps one of the most poignant chapters in the book: Evelyn Haught's description of Hellwig as a mother whose own mother had relinquished her. As happened to many British children during World War II who were evacuated from the war zones, Hellwig was raised by adoptive parents in Scotland and England, sent there by her mother for safety's sake. Perhaps to kindle that overwhelming need to receive and provide a haven of love, Hellwig later adopted three biracial children. This chapter describing the joys and struggles of single motherhood is especially moving.

Hellwig is not only remembered for her compassion and scholarship, but also for her passionate teaching. Rosemary Carbine describes sitting in the classroom of a professor who pushed her to engage the Catholic faith in light of the pressing issues of the day. That Hellwig's impact on students at Georgetown went well beyond the classroom is caught in Lee Nelles Leonhardy's chapter on her contribution to Christian life communities at the university.

Jesuit Fr. John C. Haughey tackles Hellwig's intellectual contribution to Catholic theology, emphasizing the catholicity of her corpus and her very person. He describes her as a leader whose life exemplifies a holistic approach to pastoral, academic and practical Catholic life: Hellwig the active parishioner whose international fame never created a boundary between her and others in her church. The book is interwoven with excerpts from Hellwig's poetry, many previously unpublished.

Ultimately, Hellwig, through these pages, is still teaching: teaching us that our Christian commitment must infuse the totality of our lives. The book constantly affirms her faith, her brilliance, her compassion and her humility, a rare combination that was a gift to all whose lives she touched and those she continues to impact through her intellectual and spiritual legacy.

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