

Book Reviews

Baptism of Desire and Christian Salvation. By Anthony R. Lusvardi. Catholic University of America Press, 2024. x + 361 pages. \$85.00 hardcover, e-book.

The influential American Jesuit moralists John C. Ford and Gerald Kelly opened their 1958 book *Contemporary Moral Theology, Volume I* by emphasizing that moral theology, unlike ethics, studies humanity in the supernatural order, possessed of a supernatural destiny (3). This conviction that all moral theology has salvation as its primary concern is fundamental in explaining why a book concerning baptism, written sixty-six years later by another Jesuit, Fr. Anthony Lusvardi, deserves a review in this journal.

For those who posit that the sacramental life and the moral life have the same end of salvation, we see the necessity of complementarity and interaction between sacramental and moral theology. A few books stand out for illustrating the interplay, most notably Jana Bennett's *Water Is Thicker than Blood* and William Cavanaugh's *Torture and Eucharist*. Understanding and prioritizing the sacramental life in the work of moral theology can enrich and benefit scholarship immensely.

In the Church's view, baptism is necessary for salvation, and yet we note that many people—for a variety of reasons—do not receive this sacrament. Lusvardi traces the concept and doctrine of “baptism of desire” that arose in the early Church to posit there may be Christian salvation for those not validly baptized with the sacrament. The book proceeds chronologically, beginning with patristic precursors, continuing with the birth of the doctrine of baptism of desire in Ambrose of Milan, Augustine, and others in the patristic period, explaining how the medieval time period changed the debate around baptism of desire, and ending with early modernity and the long nineteenth century.

One of the strengths of Lusvardi's historical account is the insight it provides about how shifting historical contexts changed the way this concept might be employed. For example, the earlier customary practice of adult catechumens and adult baptism was different from the later circumstances when infant baptism was standard. Baptism of desire might be suggested as a possibility in either case, but the driving circumstances for developing the doctrine varied depending on the normative practices of the day. Thus Lusvardi's narrative not only

traces a particular doctrine, but also thereby provides an interesting window into the larger scope of Church history.

At 361 pages (and \$85), the book is unlikely to make it in the bag as a beach read, and the wealth of information could overwhelm undergraduate students and possibly also those who focus on moral, rather than historical or sacramental theology. For those who are not inclined to delve into the extensive historical detail provided by Lusvardi, the book could be used well as a reference for investigating how particular figures or time periods understood baptism of desire or even how the Church functioned during certain eras.

However, the ultimate chapter, especially the two sections entitled “Twentieth Century Turmoil” (279) and “The Rahnerian Turn and Vatican II” (303), stand out as particularly pertinent for moral theologians who want a larger context for the movements that shaped our present situation. Rahner’s theory of the “Anonymous Christian” likely contributed to, or at least represented, a change in Catholic moral theology where the field appears more akin to Christian ethics, which, as Ford and Kelly noted, concerns humanity in the natural—rather than supernatural—order. Lusvardi’s explanation and analysis of Rahner’s concept shows it is not a development of the doctrine of baptism of desire but the dismissal of baptism altogether (315). And if the sacramental life is unnecessary, the moral life follows suit. Lusvardi’s account and critique of Rahner seem key to thinking about the aim of moral theology today.

Finally, while not downplaying Lusvardi’s masterful historical account in the body of the book, the conclusion, “Water, Blood, and Desire,” deserves special mention. Lusvardi’s modesty in making claims about the likelihood of baptism of desire for salvation joins with his overarching insights, liturgical account, and delightful wit to make thirty pages that cannot be missed. Lusvardi makes a compelling case that baptism of desire likely does apply in some situations, such as the unbaptized infants who die in utero but whose parents intended baptism for them (happily, this is also quite pastoral). On the other hand, Lusvardi also circumscribes the concept so that it does not dissolve into something irrelevant, removed entirely from the sacrament. While many of us would like the satisfying thought that all people are saved, such an assertion—in addition to not being biblical or traditional—removes much, if not all, of the meaning from both sacramental and moral theology, as well as the significance of Christian life more generally.

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