

BOOKS FOR THE NEW EVANGELIZATION



Charity: The Place of the Poor in the Biblical Tradition

By Gary Anderson
Yale University Press, 2013
\$30.00.

Is charity to the poor a privileged means of access to God? In *Charity: The Place of the Poor in the Biblical Tradition*, Gary Anderson draws on relevant biblical and post-biblical literature to argue that the act of charity is just this—a direct contact with the person of Christ. Anderson’s whole book could be read as the unfolding of this statement: “It is in the concrete act of assisting a poor person that one meets Christ” (9).

The idea of charity as sacrament takes Anderson all the way from the detailed exegesis of ancient texts regarding charity to questions

of contemporary philosophy and theology—this last including the importance of good works, the validity of indulgences, and the existence of a treasury of merits. The progression of themes in *Charity* is not entirely sequential (there is, instead, a sense in which Anderson places his cards on the table at once, beginning with a rejection of a modern ideal of pure altruism in the moral life); nevertheless, his bold combination of themes requires Anderson to hold in tension both short- and long-range views of biblical charity as one reality.

The main divisions of Anderson's treatment of charity fall between two traditions: first he considers the scriptural sources for charity understood as a loan to God and secondly he looks at the examples of charity as a commodity that is both storable and transferable. Anderson gives close attention to several biblical figures and passages in order to suggest ultimately that, for the ancient Jew and early Christian alike, charity was understood as establishing a uniquely intimate relationship between the charitable person and God. For example, in chapter two of *Charity*, Anderson draws on the books of Tobit and Ben Sira to explain how charity to the poor is so closely identified with God's own work in the world that it is considered a service at the divine altar: "The giving of alms is not just a horizontal, this-worldly affair. When one treats the poor kindly, one finds oneself before the altar of God" (32).

This view of reality also allows Anderson to locate a wonderful continuity among the biblical narratives of charitable people who enjoy a particular claim on God's favor. Anderson points to heroes of faith such as Abraham, David, and Tobit, who enacted the ideals of prayer, sacrifice, and fasting in their own lives. For Anderson, these examples confirm that the practice of charity is the clearest

possible statement we can make as human persons about whom we understand God to be: almsgiving becomes for each of us a diagnostic of faith, much like the sacrifice of Isaac diagnosed the faith of Abraham (see 90–97).

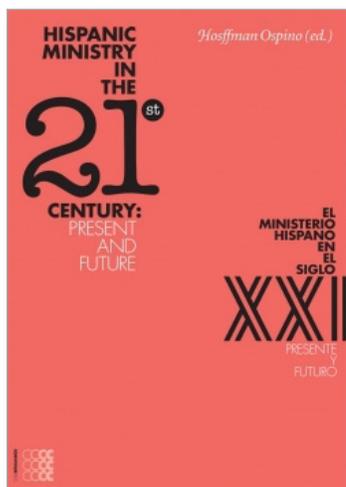
More broadly, however, Anderson's project in *Charity* is to show that the "deeply sacramental character [of charity]" (3) is not simply an exegetical nicety but is, rather, the key to a whole vision of reality that has characterized Judaism and Christianity from their origins. To say with the author of Proverbs, for example, that "almsgiving delivers from death" (Prov 10:2) is to make a two-fold statement about the cosmic order and the destiny of the human person within it. Not only has the God who is love placed us in the world in order to enact in us his own divine qualities, but this divinization is also accomplished, preeminently, through our concrete acts of charity. There is, then, a relationship between God and the human person that charity alone enacts. Charity is *sacramental* because it is also *divinizing*. This means that charity, as Anderson argues convincingly, is in a real sense rightfully self-interested: the human person who by nature seeks her own perfection finds this perfection not in an ideal of altruism but in concrete acts of charity extended to others in

imitation of Christ. It is truly better to give than to receive because in doing so one is conformed to God.

But what does this all mean for a contemporary reader? Anderson is aware that the fundamental premise of his book—that the act of charity makes God present to us—is far from the modern notion of charity as being simply "a sign of the underlying personal faith of the believer" (8). This is why Anderson's project is more than a rehearsal of ancient practices of charity; it is essentially a critique of modern habits of mind.

Arguably the most profound take-away from *Charity* is the invitation for us as readers to embrace the same rich understanding of charity that characterizes the biblical worldview. This means recognizing that charity is efficacious certainly, but it also means acknowledging that we ourselves do not make it so. Anderson gets the final word here: "The believer recognizes himself in a world that rewards charity because it was founded upon charity" (69).

*Review by Audree Heath, M.T.S. Candidate,
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Hispanic Ministry in the 21st Century: Present and Future

El Ministerio hispano en el siglo XXI: presente y futuro

By Hosffman Ospino (ed.)
Convivium Press, 2010
\$22.99.

“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.”
(1 Cor 12:12, RSV)

This past June, leaders in the Church, Catholic organizations, and Catholic higher education gathered at the 2014 National Symposium on Catholic Hispanic Ministry in Los Angeles to discuss pressing challenges facing Hispanic ministry today.¹ One fruit of this meeting—a published volume of essays covering topics such as immigration and post-immigrant youth, Catholic education, parish life, apostolic movements, and leadership development—will

be released in 2015. The essays will follow and complement the bilingual volume published after the 2009 symposium on Hispanic ministry held in Boston, which provides the subject of this review.

The forthcoming volume on Catholic Hispanic ministry in no way diminishes the relevance of *Hispanic Ministry in the 21st Century*, which carefully analyzes the tasks of Hispanic theologians and proposes strategies for pastoral action. Authored by participants in the 2009 symposium and drawn from reflections shared in working groups, each chapter treats a particular theme (e.g. Evangelization and Faith Formation, Youth and Young Adult Ministry, Liturgy and Spirituality, Social Justice, etc.) and models “*teología en conjunto*,” or a way of reflecting theologically in dialogue and drawing practical, pastoral conclusions through consensus.

Born from the collective experience of theologians and pastoral agents engaged in the task of edifying the U.S. Catholic Church, the essays in this volume share a distinctively ecclesial approach, not only in their frequent referencing of papal documents and pastoral letters of the USCCB, but also in their suggestions for concrete pastoral activities. Adopting the classic “see-judge-act” cycle of pastoral

discernment—to which Arturo Chávez adds “celebrate, evaluate, being, and believing” (161)—each chapter critically examines the present circumstances of various facets of Hispanic ministry and outlines specific goals for the future. The essays are attentive to historical memory and express appreciation for achievements of the past, even as they also convey a sense of urgency in mission for the present and future. This consistency in methodology, pastoral approach, and overall tone lends coherence to the collection of essays as a whole.

A number of questions echo throughout the chapters: what are the unique cultural contributions of Hispanics to the U.S. Catholic Church? What is the significance of a Hispanic sacramental imagination and what are its implications for liturgical worship and social justice? What are the particular needs of Hispanic youth, and how can the Church foster their gifts and lead them to an authentic encounter with Christ? How can the Church better address the specific catechetical and faith formation needs of a population with statistically low educational attainment? What can be done to train and equip leaders in Hispanic ministry at the local, regional, and national levels, and what structures will best support them?

The book addresses these concerns, acknowledging the complex (often harsh) experiences of a people familiar with pilgrimage and exile, whose histories of immigration and struggles in integration have nevertheless equipped them to be *“gente puente”*—builders of bridges—in the U.S. Catholic Church. *Hispanic Ministry in the 21st Century* not only contributes to ongoing conversations about Latino Catholicism in the United States, but also welcomes non-Hispanic newcomers to the conversation, inviting the support of all Catholics committed to fostering a robust Catholic Church in the United States.

In his essay “Hispanic Ministry and U.S. Catholicism,” Timothy Matovina quotes the U.S. Catholic Bishops’ document on Hispanic ministry, *Encuentro and Mission*: “[Hispanic] ministry must be seen as an integral part of the life and mission of the Church in this country. We must be relentless in seeking ways to promote and facilitate the full incorporation of Hispanic Catholics into the life of the Church and its mission’ (\$60)” (45). This idea of “full incorporation” does not imply assimilation for uniformity, but rather unity through integration, a dynamic in which Hispanic Catholics participate fully in “the life and mission of the

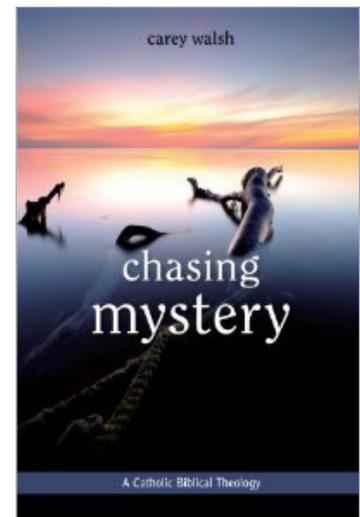
Church,” including in positions of leadership. Matovina argues that such statements by the U.S. bishops “avow that Hispanic ministry is not solely or even primarily about Hispanics, but about the Catholicity of the entire Church in the United States” (45).

While there are admittedly stumbling blocks along the way, the vision of incorporation fixes its sight on the Church as the Body of Christ, a Body nourished by the Eucharist and striving for communion in mission. “Perhaps,” as Raúl Gomez Ruíz concludes, “Hispanic faith, already vibrant in this land before it became the United States of America, can now become a force to help enliven, transform, and complete the many and varied faces of the United States so that we give better credence to being the People of God, the Body of Christ” (152). Questions remain, and the conversation about Catholic Hispanic ministry continues, but in the meantime, we must acknowledge first and foremost that Hispanic ministry is everyone’s concern, because it is integral to the evangelizing mission of the Catholic Church in the United States.

Review by Esther Terry, M.T.S., Program Director of Camino, Institute for Church Life, University of Notre Dame

NOTES

1 This was a timely gathering, not only given the election of our Latin American Pope Francis, but also in light of the recent findings of the Pew Research Center showing that 47% of Catholics under the age of 40 are Hispanic, and the more specific findings of the “National Study of Catholic Parishes with Hispanic Ministry” (by Hosffman Ospino, published in 2014 by Boston College with support from CARA).



Chasing Mystery: A Catholic Biblical Theology

By Carey Walsh
Michael Glazier Books (published by The Liturgical Press), 2012
\$19.95.

When I read, I read pen in hand. That means that by the time I’ve finished with it, what started out as a book ends up as more of a dialogue between the text and my scholia in the margins. Looking over my copy of Carey Walsh’s *Chasing Mystery*, I find scholia

like “Well put!” “Nice.” and “Amen, sister!” My margins are seldom so charitable. This book is rich, thoughtful, and engaging.

In a parish context, a catechist may wish to share excerpts of *Chasing Mystery* with someone struggling to appreciate Scripture, for in places, Walsh has a wonderful way of leading her reader from a place of doubt and suspicion back to awe-filled, childlike wonder. But I would hesitate to place the book into a seeker’s hands for unguided reading—a qualification I will explain below.

The subtitle of the book, *A Catholic Biblical Theology*, is not intended to advertise the work as a systematic theological treatment of the Bible. (It is more of an exploration, interspersed with reflections on the proper way to encounter God in the pages of Scripture.) Rather, the subtitle alludes to a movement in biblical studies toward a more theological engagement with Scripture. Walsh herself is most closely aligned with school of canonical criticism, pioneered in the 1970s by her teacher, the late Brevard Childs. Canonical criticism was born of dissatisfaction with the historical-critical method that has dominated biblical studies for the past 150 years. Whereas the historical-critical method deconstructs the biblical text in

an attempt to unearth the real history beneath it—who actually composed the Pentateuch and when, what the “Historical Jesus” really had to say, and so on—canonical criticism is content to work with the text in the form in which it has been received. While it is aware of historical issues, it does not let exegesis turn into an “historical-critical puzzle” (20) that neglects the needs of modern believers “who are reading the ancient texts for some illumination into their own faith lives” (14).

Chasing Mystery is intelligent and well-written, sophisticated yet conversational. Walsh interacts with an eclectic mix of theologians and exegetes down through the ages, from St. Augustine to Karl Barth. Her broad acquaintance with contemporary theology is likewise apparent—she regularly has recourse to figures like David Tracy, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, and Elisabeth Johnson. And at several points, Walsh shows her familiarity with recent cultural trends. For example, in a section titled “The Numinous Mystery of the Divine,” she writes “You cannot tweet this stuff” (31). How refreshing! So much modern biblical scholarship behaves as though modernity didn’t exist.

In her first few chapters, Walsh gives a spot-on diagnosis of the

modern condition, explaining why it is that “vampires and wizards . . . are more culturally viable than divine presence” (1). She writes how secularism, empiricism, and the “turn to the subject” in philosophy have led moderns to prefer “spirituality” to “religion” (3) and satisfy their hunger for transcendence with “rock climbing, ecotourism, meditation, and the like” (28), rather than an encounter with the living God. It is this encounter that Walsh seeks to bring about: *Chasing Mystery* is her “challenge to glimpse God’s real presence” (11). To this end, she proposes a sacramental reading of the Bible—a “muscle reading” (41) that seeks God in his Scriptures and wrestles with him as he is revealed in mystery.

Unfortunately, when Walsh turns to the biblical text to apply her methodology, the results are disappointing. In chapter six, she writes of God as revealed in the whirlwind in Job 38 that, “The whirlwind God is an idol, almost a bully of one” (90) and calls him “unimpressive,” “all words,” and “narcissistically too full of his own presence” (88). Her rather shrill conclusion is as follows:

If God is no better than an insecure mortal, subject to the dares of others far less powerful, or defensive to the

point of overkill, or if God is merely divinized abstraction, namely, Omnipotence Unquestioned, then perhaps theology should heed Mrs. Job's counsel and "curse him and die." (90)

Then in her seventh chapter, she goes on to justify her rejection of Job's "whirlwind God" with a highly problematic theology of revelation:

Our minds can be way off about God. One of the symptoms of the Fall, that is, preferring our own will to God's, is that our versions of God suffer distortion. . . . The Bible, because it is written with human hands, has some of these human distortions in it. . . . The Bible is not God's self-portrait. It is a mixture of human imagination, situation, inspiration, and sources. (107)

But what really disappointed me wasn't any harshness of tone or theological imprecision. It was that Walsh's premature dismissal of "the whirlwind God" prevents her from appreciating the richness of Job's theology.

Gustavo Gutiérrez observes in his book *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent* that "the

themes that run through the Book of Job form a complex whole" (xviii). It is only by being attentive to this "whole" that an exegete discovers Job's irony, subtlety, and depth. Gutiérrez writes how various themes "cross and enrich each other, and finally converge to yield a correct way of talking about God" (94). It is necessary to balance the justness of Job's complaint with the sovereignty of God—when Walsh drops the latter at the former's expense, she ends up with a caricature of Job. Gutiérrez on the other hand, by holding the both poles of the paradox in creative tension, comes to a true appreciation of Job's theology: "The greatness of God is to be identified less with power than with freedom and gratuitous love—and with tenderness" (69). Scripture *is* God's self-portrait, but we recognize him in it only when we read with sensitivity.

Walsh concludes her seventh chapter with a delightfully incisive refutation of "New Atheism" in which she offers this review of Richard Dawkins' *God Delusion*: "If his tone weren't so churlish and adolescent, these words might qualify as hate speech" (117). Her last two chapters are a sustained reflection on "the choppy, furtive dance of divine presence and absence" (144) with particular

focus on the life of Christ.

In its first five chapters, *Chasing Mystery* issues a call to modernity to encounter God anew in his Scriptures and lays out a promising, even exciting, methodology for seeking him out. But in the second half of the book, when the methodology is put into practice with the book of Job, the results are disappointing. I wanted very much to give this book an unqualified endorsement. In its best passages, *Chasing Mystery* achieves gracefully what it sets out to do. So it is a shame that the book is marred by one highly problematic passage on Job. Nevertheless, there is much of value here to those seeking to read Scripture with fresh eyes.

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