

## Book Reviews

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*Fr John O'Leary enjoys a wide-ranging compilation of essays from one of the nation's foremost moral philosophers; Ryan Day on the critical relevance of the dreams of St John Bosco and Kit Dollard appreciates a tour around the cloisters at Pluscarden Abbey.*

### **Faithful Reason: Essays Catholic and philosophical**

by John Haldane, Routledge, 288pp

"Faithful Reason" is a fine testimony to Haldane's ability to write in an attractive style with clarity and confidence. This volume gathers together twenty previously published essays by the Director of the Centre for Ethics, Philosophy and Public Affairs at the University of St Andrews. The wide range of topics discussed exemplifies the philosopher's vocation to let nothing escape his penetrating, intellectual gaze. The collection's diversity is unified by the author's commitment to the objectivity of truth. Each article elucidates the intrinsic intelligibility of the world and humanity's place within it by means of an "Analytical Thomism" informed by, and facilitating understanding of, the Catholic faith.

The essays are grouped together under five headings: Catholicism and Philosophy; Faith and Reason; Ethics and Philosophy; Education and Spirituality; Beauty and Contemplation. In the first part, after an appreciation of St Thomas Aquinas' abiding value and suggestions as to how his synthesis could be further developed by the insights of analytical thought, Haldane offers a critique of Alisdair McIntyre's contribution to the Thomist revival. Haldane welcomes McIntyre's contribution but suspects him of relativism. An incisive commentary on John Paul II's encyclical *Fides et Ratio* follows. The call to recover the sapiential dimension of philosophy is correctly identified as the document's most valuable contribution. "Critical Orthodoxy," the first essay of Part II, gives a sound account of what it means to be Roman Catholic, arguing that those who transgress the logical limits of doctrinal development ought to be recognised as dissenters. The assertion that "one must combine theological orthodoxy with a critical social outlook" (p. 56) sums up well the relationship between right thinking and just action. "Infallibility, Authority and Faith" is a superb exploration of infallibility from a philosophical perspective, proving it to be a logically coherent concept, justifiable both epistemologically and metaphysically. The chapter on the Assumption is equally robust. "Incarnational Anthropology" is not an easy read. Nevertheless perseverance will yield rewards. I am still pondering, however, the statement that: "Creatureliness is not of the essence of humanity." (p. 83) I will have to read the article by H. McCabe to which Haldane refers. A survey of Medieval and Renaissance ethics introduces the third part. "Natural law and Ethical pluralism" is most helpful, particularly with regard to matters concerning

life and death issues and human sexuality. That natural law and practical politics may not always go hand in hand (cf p. 150) could provoke questioning in the reader's mind. A chapter on Veritatis Splendor recommends the encyclical as a model for a new phase in religious ethics, interweaving scripture, reason and tradition to produce an authoritative theology of the right and good. The essay following powerfully exposes why liberal individualism must be rejected by anyone committed to Catholic social teaching. "Religious Toleration," if read attentively, will be acknowledged as proposing a prudential case for not tolerating intolerance. "Education and Spirituality" is for everyone concerned about education. Strongly influenced by the common sense views of G. K. Chesterton, Haldane offers refreshingly sane ideas about education, and not least the identity of Catholic schools whose primary function is to "transmit Catholic truths and Catholic values." (p. 220) The collection ends with a consideration of Beauty and Contemplation. The informed and informative essay on Medieval and Renaissance aesthetics highlights the shift from beauty as manifestation of reality to the aesthetic as experience of the beautiful. Next comes a fascinating account of how buildings convey meaning. This is then complimented by an article exploring how philosophical aesthetics can contribute to thinking about the natural environment by placing human experience at the centre. Yet this is not to contradict Aquinas' insight that something is beautiful not because we like it, rather we like it because it is beautiful. The final chapter entitled De Consolatione Philosophiae reasserts the goal of philosophy as the attainment of wisdom - and to delight in it! Haldane, reworking Boethius, sees philosophy as a mode of thinking of the nature of things which is contemplative without transcending the realm of numerically, distinct empirical forms; a kind of spiritual enlightenment consisting in experiencing the real for what it is and being consoled by it. Some minor criticisms of the collection. Perhaps the use of "cum," as in historical-cum-sociological, is too frequent. There is repetition of material, especially in Part Four. One essay on education, first published in 1988, was a little dated in some of its comments. Readers of Faith magazine may be most attracted by the contents of Parts I and II. However, a leisurely, reflective reading of all the essays will offer stimulation for a more fruitful exercise of faithful reason.

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### **Forty Dreams of St John Bosco**

compiled and edited by Fr J Bacchiarello, 224pp, TAN Books, available through  
St Austin, Press

As a young Catholic living in an age noticeably lacking 'fire and brimstone preaching,' it is easy to forget some of the traditional and core values underpinning a healthy practice of the faith. This book however simple and

sometimes repetitive, gives a fascinating insight into the values that accompany sainthood, while reminding us of the necessity of a daily prayer life, regular confession and adoration of the Eucharist. If the description above had been written on the back cover I doubt that I, along with many other young Catholics, would eagerly open and devour. However St John – his life dedicated to youth, cannot fail to touch anyone who reads this book and takes note of the teachings within its pages, a message of great value and inspiration that can be practically carried into ones life. The Forty Dreams of St John Bosco is exactly that; forty of the Saint's more interesting and profound dreams presented as small individual chapters of only a few pages each, often with an introduction explaining the context to the dream or with biographical information on St John. Commencing at the age of nine and continuing for sixty years, St John Bosco experienced remarkable vision-like dreams, which were so lively and vivid that he would often awaken exhausted the next morning. Indeed the description 'dream' is a rather lacking one in this case as they often merged with reality and revealed events later to be borne true, often with various guides to lead him through the experiences which were completely interactive. So vivid at times they could leave him physically affected, on one occasion having touched the walls of hell in a dream he woke with his hand stinging and the skin peeling. The dreams were recorded by St John in his memoirs often at the request of the Pope and were eagerly anticipated by the priests and boys at the oratory to whom we must be indebted in recording them. Nicknamed by his peers at an early age 'the dreamer,' St John was wary of this special grace and not always welcomed it. However he learned to use the prophetic messages contained within them practically in his ministry with the youth, evidently fruitful with the Salesian order blossoming from his works. Constantly knowing the state of 'his boys' souls through the visions he used the symbolism contained within them to warn of impurity, disobedience, gluttony, and pride as well as the danger of flirting with temptations; 'God forgives, but nature punishes! Habits of impurity will always have bad consequences.' St John would predict the deaths of those at the oratory, converse with our Lord and Holy Mother and be shown symbolic scenes regarding the future of his order and the wider Church often involving bloody battles and even demonic monsters. For readers of the messages today the lessons within are no less advantageous than in St John's time, while the mysterious nature of the dreams and their fulfilments hold your interest throughout. The colourful nature of the stories, the sense of divine mystery sustained and the evident character of St John make this a book well worth buying; one which needn't be read in one sitting but will be of lasting value and interest.

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**Pluscarden Abbey –**

A Guide by a monk of Pluscarden Abbey, Heritage House Group Ltd, 73pp

It is always interesting to learn how Christian communities make a living. St Benedict in his Rule for communities was most adamant that they should be places of prayer and work 'Idleness is the enemy of the soul. Therefore all the community must be occupied in prayer and work...' (RB Chap 48) Today this is reflected in the wide variety of work from the large North American monasteries (300 plus monks) with their publishing, universities and colleges to the smaller European houses with bee keeping and tourism (Buckfast Abbey has 250,000 visitors each year) The community at Pluscarden Abbey near Elgin in Moray Scotland has produced an attractive booklet, which is part history, part spirituality and part guidebook. Only 74 pages long, it is beautifully illustrated with colour photographs and diagrams, all well laid out and most attractive to the eye and engaging to the mind. The photographs of the stained glass windows are especially appealing whilst some of the more 'atmospheric' pictures of monks practising calligraphy play on our hopes and expectations of life in the cloister. It is a handy size that can be carried around in a glove compartment of a car or fit into a bookcase at home.

The Abbey at Pluscarden is unique in Britain being the only medieval monastery still inhabited by monks and being used for its original purpose. Founded in 1230 by Alexander II, its site in a sheltered, south-facing glen against a background of forested hillside, adds to its beauty. The story of the Abbey is engagingly told through its early years to its dissolution in 1587 when it passed into a temporal lordship until 1948 when five monks returned to live the Benedictine life. In 1990 and 1994 guesthouses were opened for women and men and the community now numbers 28 under an Abbot.

For me the most important part of the booklet is the middle section, an explanation of the monastic vocation. In the world in which we live today, monastic communities are a sign and symbol against materialism, social disharmony and lack of peace. There is a spiritual restlessness abroad that is more noticeable than before and monasteries are in a unique position to respond to this searching. Pope Paul and the teachings of Vatican II, while approving the separation of the religious from the world, reminds us that 'the world and the church are realities to be faced' not to be run away from. So there is a real tension here. How, without compromising the original idea, are the needs of contemporary man to be met? Some communities minister actively to the needs of souls – through teaching, giving retreats, providing parish priests- while others feel drawn to further the church's evangelical mission from inside their enclosures. Pluscarden Abbey belongs to this second category and this position is well reflected in the booklet. However for me the disappointment was not having hospitality at the centre of this section of the booklet. In so many ways it is at the heart of St Benedict's Rule but it is also our common vocation as people of God. With Pluscarden encouraging visitors, through their website and this booklet, it is the most powerful charism that both religious and lay followers can

easily offer to today's searching world. Clearly here is a tension here between 'not unsettling the community' by 'guests who are never lacking in a monastery' and welcoming guests as Christ (RB Chap 53) and certainly there needs to be a balance but this hospitality is at the centre who we really are as Christians. This disappointment is again illustrated by the quotation from the RB 1980 translation of St Benedict's Prologue. I would have preferred Patrick Barry's more inclusive translation, which reads 'My words are addressed to you especially, whoever you may be...' St Benedict's Rule contains wisdom and relevance for today that can truly pierce our hearts, if only as children of God we can listen. The final section of the booklet acts as guidebook and does the job most effectively. The illustrations are superb and the descriptions of the various sites are precise without being patronising or fussy. Spattered throughout the text are references to poets, musicians, and patrons. George MacKay Brown the poet is a particular favourite. This is a good book that truly reflects a living Christian community – go and see for yourself.

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