

BOOK REVIEWS

Matthew Levering, *Dying and the Virtues*

(Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2018), pp. xi + 348. \$45.00.

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Death presents us with a choice: we may allow ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be enfolded by the everlasting arms; or we may rage, futilely, against the dying of the light. Matthew Levering's studied treatment weighs this choice carefully.

He traces a path that begins with fear of annihilation and sense of unfulfilled desires, the need to look back with penitence and gratitude and the need to look forward to a future even if it does not contain oneself. He then ponders why suffering and death exist at all, either in creation or in the time since Christ's resurrection. A rather esoteric chapter considers sacramental preparation for death, before a final one considers whether heaven is like, or unlike, our present existence.

It seems Levering is so at home with Aquinas that each chapter reads like an extended quaestio from the *Summa*. He tends to offer around three texts, one of which is secular and often flawed, another of which is Christian and more helpful, and a third which largely resolves the tension between the first two; followed by a conclusion that ticks off the remaining unresolved issues, as Aquinas likes to do. Like Aquinas, this results in a volume saturated with quotations, drawn from the great and the morbid, some profound, others much less so. It leaves the reader pining for a stronger editorial voice – eager for a lecture rather than a panoply of seminar texts. And that's just the main volume – the endnotes are significantly longer than the book itself, and often more vigorous. This is exemplary and elegant scholarship, but the result is a measured treatment of an unmeasurable subject.

Levering's commitment to attach one virtue to each chapter gives the book a pastoral subtext that makes it less about theology – who God is and what God has done – than ethics – how humankind responds. The extensive use of atheist and agnostic treatments of death makes sense in this context. But Levering's account of the virtues does not have great depth, and some of the virtues (surrender, solidarity), while appropriate, aren't obviously virtues. Levering has a surer hand on theology than on ethics, and I would rather have read a book whose first half addressed how Christ's life, death and resurrection has transformed death (on which Levering is excellent) and whose second half considered what then might make a good death, given our understandable terror and dismay (to which Levering returns frequently, but never delivers a definitive answer).

That said, Levering litters the book with absorbing insights and compelling judgments, most of them in the form of quotations, which together lead the reader to trust his wisdom and cherish his direction. His account of the pathos of Susan Sontag's fight for life is perfect: 'she thought herself unhappy ... and wanted to live, unhappy, for as long as she possibly could', he says, quoting Sontag's son (p. 30).

Citing Francis de Sales, Levering gives us this invitation: 'Jesus himself is lovingly and mercifully begging us to share in his love, now and forever, as are the saints. They are experiencing everlasting happiness, joy, and peace; why do we not choose to join them?' (p. 43). Considering St Macrina, Levering tellingly points out that her dignity resides not primarily in her achievements and human relationships, but in her participation in the Church's prayerful praise, joyful thanksgiving, and humble works of mercy.

In the most exhilarating passage of the book, Levering rather belatedly introduces the practice of baptism, showing how Aquinas conjoins the crossing of the Red Sea (washing away sin) with crossing the Jordan (opening the gate of eternal life). As Joseph Ratzinger puts it, 'The whole process of dying is, if we accept it in faith, the realization of our being baptized' (p. 133). Participation in Christ's death and resurrection is thus the meaning and the hope of dying. This is the central claim of the book: Levering gently and unerringly dismantles all alternative explanation and counsel. Distancing himself from the 'continuity' assumptions of Plato, the Quran and N. T. Wright (a rare triad indeed), Levering compellingly concludes that the key scriptural texts 'point to mysterious eternal participation in the divine life, a real communion with infinite tripersonal life' (p. 162).

Levering is engagingly sober about the prospect of a good death, other than that which is really a synonym for a good life. But his judicious arguments and inspiring, yet understated, conclusion, make one wish for one further chapter: on the unique witness of one who goes forth with solidarity and surrender into the loving hands of God.

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William C. Gaventa, *Disability and Spirituality: Recovering Wholeness*

(Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018), pp. xix + 338. \$39.95.

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In *Disability and Spirituality: Recovering Wholeness* William C. Gaventa distills a lifetime of work in care institutions and churches to foster better ways of meeting people with intellectual disabilities and their families. Gaventa's passion is to support people with disabilities and their families while pressing service organisations to address spirituality and to take more seriously the supporting roles faith communities might play.

His book offers a bumper crop of models and procedures to help pastoral carers and care professionals sensitively to engage with people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families throughout the life-course. General points are regularly but judiciously offered to show creative and insightful examples of how care professionals might go beyond 'care provision to customers' to achieve more human professional services. Religious communities in which everyone's gifts are taken with full seriousness are also depicted in marvellously fine-grained detail. Gaventa's central