

Book Reviews

The Tenderness of God: Reclaiming Our Humanity. By Gillian T. W. Ahlgren. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017. xvii + 168 pages. \$29.00.
doi: 10.1017/hor.2018.102

As an academic and teacher Gillian Ahlgren has led students, over many years, on pilgrimage to Assisi, walking in the steps of Saints Francis and Clare. This book is a fruit of these journeys, gathering the material that Ahlgren has carefully developed to guide and enrich the student experience, together with a taste of her personal journal reflections from these trips. While the book has its origins in Assisi, it stands successfully on its own as an introduction and invitation to the particular gift and challenge of Franciscan spirituality.

Three voices shape the substance of Ahlgren's reflections. The two primary voices are the lives and words of Francis and Clare, as cofounders of the Franciscan movement. Historically the role of Clare has often been misunderstood and underestimated, so Ahlgren's approach here is refreshing. The third voice is that of Pope Francis, particularly via the encyclical *Joy of the Gospel* (*Evangelii Gaudium*), which resonates significantly with Franciscan thought. Ahlgren's particular focus on "tenderness" derives from this engagement: in the encyclical the pope calls for a "revolution of tenderness."

Tenderness is neither a particularly transparent nor a fashionable term. Ahlgren's exploration of this concept unfolds over the course of the book. "Tenderness" is one way of translating the Latin word *miser cordia*, better, Ahlgren rightly contends, than "mercy," a rather flat rendering of a historically and theologically much richer concept. She suggests that tenderness is best conceived as the antonym of hardness of heart (83). At the beginning of his "Testament," Francis describes his transformative encounter with the lepers that lived outside Assisi, where, surprisingly, he found himself showing "compassion and loving kindness (*miser cordia*) to them" (86). It was surprising because, like his fellow citizens, he had previously been repulsed by the sight of lepers. This unexpected encounter with love, with God, in the most despised outcasts of his day, determined not only the setting for Franciscan life (on the margins, among the poor, with the poor Christ), but also its

relational focus. It is this latter characteristic that Ahlgren draws out most helpfully in her book.

We are made for relationship, with God, with each other, and with all of creation. The quality or tenor of these relationships is Ahlgren's central concern, as they were for Francis and Clare. Just as God is tender with us, tenderness is the quality that most honors the humanity. (It enables us to see with God's eyes.) Tenderness is an inherently relational quality—it cannot exist without an “other.” With relationality at the center, Ahlgren is able to show how the lived theology of Francis and Clare (and indeed Pope Francis) holds together individual, social, and political concerns by offering a much needed corrective to the individualistic tendencies of much contemporary spirituality.

The book's six chapters correlate with the stages of pilgrimage undertaken by Ahlgren and her students. The central four chapters are structured around the key phases of the lives of Francis and Clare, and the final chapter draws out more thoroughly the way in which a theology of tenderness might help us engage with contemporary challenges such as poverty and environmental degradation.

There are many riches in the footnotes. Indeed I would have liked to have seen some of this material in the main text. For example, the observation that Giotto's fresco cycle does not include Francis' encounter with the leper is a vivid reminder of the complete exclusion of lepers from medieval society. Ahlgren asks, “Was Francis's plea that we stay faithful to Christ the leper so challenging that no one was willing to hear or heed it?” (35n5) Or to see it in a fresco?

As well as serving those who are exploring the Franciscan tradition, this book provides students in ministerial or other spiritual formation with much to ponder, discuss, and act on. Rather than inspiring a pilgrimage to Assisi it may equally inspire us to seek an encounter at the margins of our cities—with refugees living in detention or the residents of a dementia ward.

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Singleness and the Church: A New Theology of Single Life. By Jana Marguerite Bennett. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. x + 210 pages. \$29.95.

doi: 10.1017/hor.2018.89

Examining an impressive range of sources, Jana Bennett exposes how single adults are stigmatized, patronized, caricatured, and neglected by secular and theological voices across the ideological spectrum. Singles are characterized as lonely, self-centered, and indulging in uninhibited