

belief that the ultimate course of events will in the end prove hospitable to, and vindicate, the efforts of moral life and action” (42), something that modernity no longer provides. Third, we have lost the “unity of the agency that connects us with them and discover ourselves to be not merely creatures of moods and stimuli (though we cannot stop being that) but continuously responsible agents” (73).

To each of these, he argues in the second set of three chapters, Christianity offers a uniquely clear and compelling answer, a word of good news that can restore the foundations of moral experience. First, the Christian concept of creation (richer and more definite than that of “nature,” although O’Donovan is not hostile to talk of “natural law” with appropriate qualifications) offers us a recovery of the objective moral shape of the world we inhabit. Second, the biblical concept of law, he argues in perhaps the book’s most intriguing chapter, gives morality shape within history; the law of God arises out of God’s own activity in history, and human law is the attempt to give order to concrete cultural experiences. Finally, the freedom bestowed by the Spirit offers a redemption, a “justification” of human agency, that “we shall indeed, by his doing, come to be agents who are effective in doing some good” (128).

Alongside this powerful overarching argument for the retrieval of a distinctively Christian ethics are scattered innumerable delightful asides: insights about the corrosive effects of “rights” language, profound reflections on the nature of human free will in relation to divine agency, and much more. Readers will find this a book that repays long reflection and frequent re-reading, an essential resource for any churchman or Christian educator’s bookshelf.

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Aidan Nichols, *Apologia: A Memoir*. Herefordshire, Eng.: Gracewing, 2023. ISBN 978-0852447239, 164 pp., pbk \$19.95.

Aidan Nichols is one of the great stars of Roman Catholic theology of the last thirty years. His new *Apologia: A Memoir* is at once a courageous protest against the heresies of the current pontiff and an encouragement to reformed catholic Anglicans.

Fr. Nichols (a Dominican priest) is nothing if not prolific, having authored forty-six books before this autobiography. He has written separate books on

Catholic greats—Aquinas, Newman (in both his Anglican and Roman periods), four on Balthasar, Congar, and Ratzinger—and several on Eastern Orthodoxy and their thinkers such as Maximus. Other books of note are on Vatican II, Sigrid Unset, and the Virgin Mary (apparently his bestseller).

Nichols notes in *Apologia* that his two “principal inspirations” have been Thomas and Balthasar (30). The latter’s devotion to aesthetics has drawn and inspired Nichols, and this is at the heart of his theology generally. His first book, *The Art of God Incarnate* (1980), pointed out that the second commandment on images was about idolatrous images (Exod 20:5) rather than images *per se*, and was interpreted that way by synagogue designers of Jesus’ day who filled their creations with artistic images.

This first book set the tone for his later sacramental approach to Christian theology, “seeing the cosmos, Christ, and the life of the Church as—in qualitatively differing ways—presentations of the divine in concrete experience” (46). His brief systematics, *Chalice of God* (2012), fleshes this vision out. He argues that the mystery of revelation is in both creation and salvation, and that this twofold revelation “epiphanizes.” In other words, his is a theology that highlights beauty, the third great transcendental, and demonstrates the *manifestation* of beauty in both natural and special revelation. All the world shows the beauty of the Triune God for those with eyes to see, and those eyes are shown more and more of God’s beauty by his saving acts in history.

The beauty of God has haunted Nichols ever since at age 13 he was taken to a Russian Orthodox church in Geneva where he saw someone make a profound bow before an icon of Christ and his mother, plant a kiss, and light a candle. Ever since then he has seen beauty as a divinely appointed pointer to the profundity of the mystery of being in two forms of greatness. The first is the cosmic magnitude of the created universe, and the second is the supernatural magnitude of the kingdom of heaven.

Nichols suggests that Dostevsky’s Myshkin was right to say that beauty will save the world, but that this needs Christological and trinitarian explication. And that it is understood by what he calls two principles of order. A philosophical order that is “robustly metaphysical, deployed aesthetically and making crucial use of the concepts of being, cosmos, history, form and person” (97). In that sense, the world is a “beautiful receptacle for the gift of the divine life” (97). The theological principle of order is an “outpouring of plenitude” by the self-emptying of the Trinity in Jesus Christ by whom the redeemed are given both reconciliation and deification (97). Hence the metaphor for his systematics, the filled chalice.

In this theological aesthetics, lesser mysteries communicate greater mysteries. The beauty of nature points to the beauty of the Trinity and its history of redemption.

Nichols took a degree in history at Oxford, where perhaps he learned the difference between good and bad uses of history. Commenting on the use of historical criticism in biblical studies, he notes wryly that “more and more was known about less and less” and “risked losing the big picture” (30). His preferred method, which he laid out in *Lovely, Like Jerusalem* (2007), was to “see the Old Testament through the lens of the New, and the two together via the Fathers” (30–31). The Anglican method, we would observe.

Which is not surprising, for throughout this memoir Nichols shows deep appreciation for the catholic Anglican tradition. His *The Panther and the Hind: A Theological History of Anglicanism* (1992) was a favorite for my seminary students. *Catholics of the Anglican Patrimony* (2012) illustrates his lifelong penchant for collecting the jewels from catholic Anglicanism and recommending their repatriation into a catholicity unimpaired by Christian disunity. For decades he has been promoting an Anglican church “united but not absorbed” (81).

In Anglicanism, he avers, there are potential resources for “the fuller excavation of the *Paradosis*, the Great Tradition” (145). Nichols is distantly related to E. L. Mascall, the great twentieth-century Anglican philosophical theologian, and speaks of him with enormous admiration. If Mascall’s *Christian Theology and Natural Science* had been more widely known, he guesses, it might have “dented the confidence” of the New Atheists (41).

“Aidan” is the religious name Nichols took at his Dominican vows, inspired by St. Aidan of Lindisfarne whom he calls “one of the glories of the Anglo-Saxon, or Anglo-Celtic, Church” (36).

Nichols praises the Oxford Movement for its theology of God encountering the whole person, uniting heart and imagination and intellect.

Joseph Epstein reminds us in his new autobiography¹ that the best memoirs are the painfully honest ones. Nichols tells the story of his mother dying when he was a boy, his elderly father refusing to recognize his teenaged son in his will, and then being orphaned shortly after. He is honest enough to admit he has had thoughts of revenge and theft.

Nichols is also clear and courageous on the Church’s most current crises. The sex-abuse crisis, he charges, is “mostly no such thing,” but a youth-abuse

¹ Joseph Epstein, *Never Say You've Had a Lucky Life: Especially If You've Had a Lucky Life* (Free Press, 2024).

crisis of “overwhelmingly homosexual predation” (18). Homosexual inclination is a “dislocation of powers attendant on the Fall” (32). Prominent Catholic bishops have lately protested against the classic descriptor “disorder,” but Nichols insists this is the right word for it. It is our “anthropological datum” (33).

Were the Church ever to bless same-sex unions, Nichols presciently declared a year ago in this book, it would “lose diachronic credibility” (33). He asserts that what is at stake is huge—the “basic structure of Christian morality and its accompanying spirituality” that proclaims human marriage as the “prime sacramental analogue between Christ and the Church” (107).

Like a biblical prophet—and a good shepherd who warns the flock against wolves—Nichols details the moral and theological heresies that he sees perpetrated by the current pope. The 2016 apostolic exhortation *Amoris laetitia*—whose ghostwriter Nichols reveals as Cardinal Fernandez of *Fiducia Supplicans* fame—unsettled the moral magisterium “and the wider precedent tradition of the Church” (104) because it challenged previously-settled Catholic understanding of access to the sacraments by divorced and remarried persons.

The 2019 Abu Dhabi declaration suggesting the equality of world religions was a “*prima facie* contradiction of the Great Commission” (104). The Pachamama “débâcle” of the 2019 Amazon Synod, where the pope participated in “quasi-idolatrous” acts in the Vatican gardens, was a “paganizing distortion” of the gospel (112). The pope’s “*motu proprio*” seeking to eliminate the Latin Mass was a “mistake”: Benedict XVI was “wise” to encourage it (144–145). The 2018 revision of the Catholic Catechism on the death penalty “reverses the clear position of Scripture and Tradition” (146). Francis’ use of “reception theory” to promote his synods on synodality is dangerous: it risks “anarchic theological pluralism” by postponing “doctrinal resolution to an ever-receding future” (60).

Nichols goes further: “A God of surprises is one thing” but “a God of reversals is something else altogether” (47). While true development of doctrine is laid out beautifully in John Paul II’s *Veritatis splendor*, Francis’ abuse of development will “undermine Tradition” (63). This papacy seems “more interested in positioning itself as a player in global politics than in the careful stewardship of a distinctive doctrinal tradition” (94). The “Rock of Peter” is becoming “a morass of shifting sand” (103).

And in perhaps the most striking warning, this pope “realizes many of the fears of those who in 1870 opposed as inopportune the decree on infallibility” (141).

Nichols felt obliged to voice these registers of heresy, in the hopes of deterring further error and warning the faithful. He signed two letters

submitted to him by email after the 2019 Abu Dhabi Declaration, one addressed to the College of Cardinals and the second—an open letter that was, to his dismay, widely publicized—to the College of Bishops. Neither were challenges to the Church’s hierarchy but appeals, per canon law, “to the good of the Church” (102).

Censure and cancellation followed. Nichols was rebuked by a Dominican official for sowing seeds of division among the faithful and “exiled” to Jamaica where he served as university chaplain. Then after being invited to a California abbey to help train and teach at a Norbertine abbey and church, he was told by the Orange County bishop he could not preach or celebrate Mass publicly, hear confessions or teach theology to the abbey’s seminarians.

Nichols discovered that “Newman’s experience of ecclesiastical suspicion has also been [his] own” (x).

I was struck by Nichols’ humility. We all know theologians who are full of themselves. But Nichols says he avoids calling himself a theologian because “the Greek Church only recognizes three” (ix). Besides, he adds, “theologians and priests have as their aim holiness, not celebrity” (ix). And any comparison of his work with that of Newman or de Lubac or Balthasar “would be laughable” (ix).

Humble people typically are humorous, and a dry wit is sprinkled throughout this short but meaty work. Referring to liturgical changes intended to improve, Nichols recalls Teresa’s plea, “From foolish devotions may God deliver us!” (73). Describing his term as vice-regent at Oxford Blackfriars, he calls his indentured service to the academic bureaucracy “a particular Purgatory” (93).

Readers of this journal will be interested in what Nichols says about priesthood that pertain to reformed catholic Anglican leaders. First, the central task of priesthood is offering the eucharistic sacrifice. Second, the Church is now in a mess, but if priests “articulate the Church’s real message clearly and with conviction,” the center “will shift in the right direction.” This “will take courage, but it is essential, since ‘morals makyth man’”² (149).

Third, the Church has invisible depths, and we must discover and present the essential *supernaturality* of the Church’s faith. Fourth, there is no assured peace here below, not even in the Church which his novice master called “this great Purgatory on earth” (132).

My criticisms are twofold. First, Nichols is ambiguous on Balthasar’s “possible soteriological implications of the Descent” (93). If he means Balthasar’s “hopeful” universalism where we have the supposed mandate to hope for the

² The motto of two colleges at Oxford

salvation of all, Jesus has already made clear that all will not be saved. Why hope for what Jesus insisted will not happen?

Perhaps Nichols is not subtly recommending Balthasar's version of universalism. But I wish he had been clearer on that.

Second, this excellent book needs an index.

In sum, however, this book is like a warm spring wind after an icy winter. It is balm to the theological soul, including all catholic Anglican souls.

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Alex Fogleman, *Knowledge, Faith, and Early Christian Initiation*. Cambridge University Press, 2023. ISBN: 978-1009377393, xiv+256 pp., hbk \$97, also Kindle.

As an educator and parish priest, studies of catechetical theories and curricula account for a sizable portion of my personal library. Recently, though, I have been glad to make room for Alex Fogleman's *Knowledge, Faith, and Early Christian Initiation*. Viewing the seminal patristic era of Christian catechesis through the lens of epistemology, Fogleman draws out from nascent catechetical traditions their underlying assumptions concerning the relationship between faith and reason, belief and practice. In doing so, he advances the study of how catechesis expands what one knows about God so as to deepen how one experiences communion with him.

From the outset, Fogleman acknowledges the practical tension between pre-baptismal instruction (as per Tertullian) and post-baptismal mystagogy (as per Ambrose) as to which is the proper content of catechesis. Even so, he makes use of Benjamin Edsall's notion of the "peri-baptismal" to account for catechesis as an educative process that both anticipates the reception of the baptismal gift and unfolds the directive implications of that gift to order the Christian's new life. This paradigm helpfully avoids an overly-constrained scope for catechesis: admitting the diversity of practices from the late-second to the mid-fifth centuries, and grounding in history the observable need for Christians continually to revisit and remember what they once learned and received.

Fogleman then narrows the main body of his work to examine representative figures from catechetical movements of (broadly) Northern Italy and Northern Africa. Specifically, he begins with Irenaeus of Lyons and his emblematic "Rule of Truth" before moving abroad to Tertullian of Carthage and his refinement of