



## Reviews

**THE CATHOLIC CHURCH: NATURE, REALITY AND MISSION** by Walter Kasper, *Bloomsbury T&T Clark*, London and New York, 2015, pp. xvii + 463, £35.00, pbk

The first 40 pages of this book – ‘My journey in and with the Church’ – outline the author’s intellectual autobiography. The rest, with a hundred pages of endnotes, reads like the lecture course on the nature of the Church that Cardinal Kasper would have delivered but for being transplanted from academic life (in 1989, aged 56), to run the fourth largest diocese in Germany. In this sense, as he says, the book adds ecclesiology to the two earlier books on Christology (*Jesus the Christ*, first English edition, 1976) and Trinitarian doctrine (*The God of Jesus Christ*, 1984), respectively, thus completing the trilogy on God, Christ and the Church which a professor of Christian doctrine, at least in a German Catholic university, would aspire to write.

Cardinal Kasper’s career has been more colourful than the autobiographical account records. Famously, in 1993, with a couple of episcopal colleagues, he went public in favour of welcoming to holy communion divorced remarried Catholics, in some circumstances. Notwithstanding this dissent from received thinking, he was brought to Rome in 1999 by Pope John Paul II as Secretary to the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. Then, in 2000 he endorsed criticisms of *Dominus Jesus*, the document produced by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith under Cardinal Ratzinger’s signature, which reaffirmed the view of the Church in communion with the Roman see as the only true Church: it was the negative style to which he objected, not the content (p. 29).

In 2006 Pope Benedict XVI promoted him to be President of the Christian Unity Council. Despite these ecumenical duties, Kasper withdrew from accompanying the Pope to Britain in 2010 after being quoted in a German magazine as saying: ‘When you land at Heathrow you think at times you have landed in a Third World country’; and that the United Kingdom is marked by ‘a new and aggressive atheism’. A spokesman for the Catholic Church in Britain insisted that his remarks were not the views of the Vatican or of the Church. Britain as a ‘Third World country’, his secretary explained, meant nothing more than ‘a description of the many different people that live in Britain at the moment’. By ‘aggressive atheism’ he meant people like Richard Dawkins, some of whom had, after all, talked about making a ‘citizen’s arrest’ of the Pope. According to his secretary again, the Cardinal decided not to come simply because gout made it difficult for him to walk.

Cardinal Kasper had already taken a major part in interchurch relations in Britain, at the conference held at Ushaw in January 2006 when ‘receptive ecumenism’ was launched. We may note in this journal that, back in 1997, Walter Kasper wrote a foreword to *Faces of the church: meditations on a mystery and its images*, the fine collection on ecclesiological matters by our lamented brother Geoffrey Preston OP, especially relating to symbolism.

The greater part of the book covers everything that would be expected in a course on ecclesiology. Copiously documented by references to biblical, patristic and conciliar sources, the simple thesis that runs through the book is that what the Creed affirms about the Church is set within what is said about the Holy

Spirit. That is to say, lectures *de ecclesia* should not focus only on the highly complicated historical and social institution, which of course the Catholic Church is; ecclesiology has to be presented throughout in the context of Pneumatology, and thus of the charismatic.

Just as fundamentally, the book is pervaded by the hopes for Christian unity that were raised by the Second Vatican Council. In connection with the Eastern Church, for example, the Cardinal recalls the lifting of the excommunications of 1054 on the penultimate day of the Council, declaring them to be 'erasureable from the memory of the Church' (p. 27). This was a 'prophetic act', so he avers, without (however) doing much to assess the implications: how 'wrong' the Church could turn out to have been, how such an 'error' could be erased from memory, and so on.

Some readers (like this one!) are likely to move rapidly through Kasper's admirably comprehensive and basically very conventional account of the nature of the Church in order to see how he deals with the notoriously 'sensitive' issues on the agenda. For example, as regards the famous rejection of '*est*' in favour of '*subsistit in*' in the final version of *Lumen gentium*, Kasper holds that the change 'annuls the strict identification of the Church with the Catholic Church': 'The Catholic Church is where Jesus Christ is present', quoting St Ignatius of Antioch. This does not relativize let alone withdraw the Catholic claim: 'It was to say that outside the Catholic Church there was not simply an ecclesiological vacuum' (p. 160).

As regards the ordination of women in the Catholic Church the Cardinal is firmly opposed: 'the most painful setback' ecumenically was the Anglican decision to ordain women as bishops (p. 29); with their sacramental understanding of ministry neither the Catholic Church nor the Orthodox could do so (p. 237); the discussion will go on, far greater ecclesial roles must be 'given' to women; but we have to stick to the 'biblical gender symbolism', however alien it becomes in our culture (p. 238).

Obviously the book contains much else that could give rise to debate. While the translation is never unintelligible, it often reads rather oddly: apart from some ugly misprints, such as Friedrich von Hügel (p. 206), and mistakes in the Latin ('*extram ecclesiam*' repeatedly), it has to be said that the syntax is wayward, for example with the definite article occasionally intruding ('the Opus Dei', 'the Catholic Action') while being just as unexpectedly absent ('Phanar'). Such blemishes do not mean that this is anything but the best book on Catholic doctrine of the Church currently available.

FERGUS KERR OP

**SPEAKING OF GOD IN THOMAS AQUINAS AND MEISTER ECKHART: BEYOND ANALOGY** by Anastasia Wendlinder, *Ashgate*, Farnham, 2014, pp. xi + 217, £60.00, hbk

In a culture of chatter, blogs and tweets it is both refreshing and challenging to encounter a studied examination of language, of how we speak about reality and about God. For far too many people what we say is about political power, an unbridled freedom of speech that has no control, no restraints. From violent racial riots to murderous fanaticism we see that our language about ultimate values, about absolute realities, can be explosive. What we say and how we say it, especially when speaking about God, is such a foreign concern to many modern readers. Sadly this excellent book by Anastasia Wendlinder will be dismissed by