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**Thomas Howard, *The Night is Far Spent*.
Review by Sarah Elizabeth Maple
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Thomas Howard, *The Night is Far Spent*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007. 355 pp. ISBN 978-158617-132-2.

A convert to Roman Catholicism, Thomas Howard takes us through the challenges and alterations of his conversion. Refreshing and delightful, *The Night is Far Spent* is a collection of thirty-one of his essays and papers given over some twenty years of his career.

With a broad range of topics, these essays selected by Vivian Dudro are divided into three over-arching categories. The first, titled ‘Things Literary and Literary Men’ concerns the decline and then revitalization of the art of story-telling in the early twentieth century with regard to the transcendent, particularly focusing on the legacies left by C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Dietrich von Hildebrand. The second is clustered under the title ‘Sacred Things’ and contains articles concerning the sacred nature of the cross, the sacraments, the saints, and orthodoxy. The third and last section is titled ‘Existing Things: Self, Society, God,’ and incorporates broader discussions of identity, gender, fatherhood, worship, and the arts.

Through the essays compiled in the first category, Howard explores the relationship between Christian truth and centuries of story-telling while drawing attention to the profound cultural crisis erupting in the early twentieth century. During this time, when the vision of man’s own identity and integrity became distorted, Howard explains this trying reality with vigor and ease, as if relating dear and amusing accounts of favorite family outings. As if indulging us in his own love of the Communion of Saints, Howard assures each man of his ability to live within this communion, retelling the lives’ of the saints with tangible details which relate them readily to our own.

A man in love with the Church and her history, his writing is very much like that of the Venerable Bede (a 7th-8th Century monk), whom he affectionately describes in his essay entitled ‘Beowulf and Company.’ Here, he says that for Bede, ‘as for any good Catholic, there is a very low threshold between the “historical” and the “miraculous”’ (19). Throughout this compendium of writings, Howard consistently

conveys the childlike thrill of discovering and keeping safe the precious revelation and mystery of faith.

Yet the ‘discourse, reason, truth, beauty, wholeness, integrity, harmony, solidity, and substantiality’ (27) which Howard claims had largely vanished from European and American society by the mid-twentieth century not only diminished the perceived dignity of man, but also promulgated a widespread retreat from understanding the Other (33). Addressing this in his essay ‘Of Towers and Wardrobes,’ Howard affirms the essential role of being educated in, and believing in, the mystery of a life which is beyond us. He also describes the revolutionary role which Tolkien played in countering this vast retreat, in his words, ‘Almost single-handedly, Tolkien reintroduced into Western imagination the figure of the hero—and of the saint’ (35).

How then, beyond the stories told by Tolkien and Lewis, do we continue to understand the reality that lies beyond us? Howard’s essays here transition into the category of ‘Sacred Things,’ and offer in particular the example of a man who while on earth believed and lived in an intimate relationship with a mystery of Otherness: Saint Joseph. In consideration of all of the many men and women recognized as saints -- e.g., preachers, writers, and healers—Saint Joseph is one whom we know close to nothing about, and who achieved a saintly life without extraordinary abilities. Yet, as Howard says, ‘No account of the mystery of our redemption is a true account that omits this figure’ (221-222). In obscurity he was witness and protector to our greatest mystery, the Incarnation; in his fidelity he is for us ‘the very icon of the faithful servant of God’ (224). The essays throughout the section ‘Sacred Things,’ like this one on ‘St Joseph,’ are offered by Howard as a re-education in the identity which man is meant to claim: an identity which is honorable, just, faithful, and saintly.

Within the third section of essays, ‘Existing Things: Self, Society and God,’ Howard describes how we might come to properly be ourselves -- man living for God -- by better understanding and reclaiming this identity in everyday life. Of particular interest is an essay on cultural expression and the arts, titled ‘Ballet and Gender,’ which gives an account of man and woman in their equal ‘grace, skill, intelligence, dignity, beauty, and prowess’ (292) and ‘magnificent reciprocity’ as displayed in the art of ballet. Howard offers this as an irreducible reality, and in conscious opposition to conceptions of gender endorsed by many moderns, insists upon the equality and reciprocity of men’s and women’s abilities, which nevertheless take on different, unequal forms. Through this meditation on our own sexual being, Howard reminds and re-educates us through his storytelling of how the mysterious dualities of

creation give glory to God. The acceptance of such profoundly engendered identity, which has become widely contested in an age of cultural crisis characterized by ‘fury, frustration, desperation, and sullenness’ (294), is at the core of what Howard contends is essential to a flourishing human existence: the acceptance of ourselves, the recognition of mystery that exists beyond us, and a striving towards these in all manners of fidelity and saintly obscurity.

In each narrative and essay, Howard gives us an illumination of some heavenly mystery or hallowed sacrament. With great ease and joy he relays the heaviness of our fallen condition, yet directs us as we seek to understand the thrilling depths and heights within man’s nature and the mystery beyond it. At the conclusion of each essay, one cannot help but feel slightly overwhelmed by these miraculous mysteries laid open by Howard. Simultaneously, the reader feels equipped with a genuine preparedness to come out of this darkness and honest weight of despair to put on the ‘armour of light’[1] in everyday life, in order to further protect and defend the mysteries of our Home: Heaven.

An English professor for thirty years, Thomas Howard is also the author of *Lead Kindly Light*, *Chance or the Dance*, and *Evangelical Is Not Enough*.

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Notes

- [1] ‘The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light.’ Rom 13:12, King James Bible.