

Dennis D. Cali, ed. *Faith and the Media: Reflections by Christian Communicators*. New York: Paulist Press, 2010. 112 pages. \$9.95.

I have had the interesting assignment for the last several years of reviewing books about media and pop culture. The overwhelming majority of the media books were written by those outside the media under scrutiny, authors doing analyses from various religious perspectives, some more popular in nature, some more academic. These are largely worthwhile efforts, providing insights and points of view that may go well beyond those of the media producers themselves envisioned. This is not a complaint and is certainly in keeping with the notion that any medium or cultural artifact contains a “surplus of meaning” and furthermore is susceptible to external analysis. *Faith and the Media* is a welcome exception to this pattern, however. It is a smart collection of essays by those of faith from *within* the media, two academics, the editor and one other, are all engaged in media work as writers, journalists, and cinema production. The essays come as a result of a spring 2006 conference for Catholic communicators held at Mount Saint Mary’s University in Emmitsburg, Maryland.

The seven chapters, each with a set of questions at the end, are divided into two parts, the first setting out important principles of faith that are or should be operative in our communication efforts. Chapter 1, by editor Cali, examines key documents on communication issued by the Catholic Church over the last several decades. The Vatican documents are positive, hopeful documents that stake out a positive role for producers and consumers. Cali identifies four principles that are evident in the documents: “cultivation of virtue, centrality of the person, unity as moral imperative, and promotion of human progress” (9). Chapter 2 by Michele Zanzucchi reports on the work of NetOne, “an international forum of media professionals, professors, students, experts, and novices...” (19). They operate under the guidance of three principles: the Trinity as a model for human relationships (22), “Jesus on the cross as a model for [their] work in communication (25), and Mary at the foot of the cross as a model for [their] work.” (27). Chapter 3 is by Barbara Nicouragelosi, founder and director of Act One, an agency that mentors novice and veteran screenwriters and entertainment executives. The discussion on the role of beauty in our lives as a theological value was encouraging, talking about beauty as harmony, wholeness, and radiance (39). “Three things come to us from beauty. From harmony we feel love and community. From wholeness we feel rest and completeness. From radiance we feel satisfaction” (40). She also talks about the improper use of art, particularly in the church.

The second part concerns practices, observations from several media producers and one academic. Media executive Edward J. Murray speaks of the “vocation to mediate,” exploring both concepts, in particular as they relate to grace (51). Drew Christiansen, SJ, editor of *America*, writes of his experiences reporting on Christians living in the Middle East. Gary Fields, staff reporter for the *Wall Street Journal*, asks whether believing conflicts with his reporting. “My work commits me to write the stories that interest wealthy readers. But my faith draws me to write about poverty” (71). The final chapter is entitled “Christian Approaches to Communication Scholarship and Pedagogy,” by Janie Harden Fritz. She explores two dimensions of scholarship and teaching: alongside and underneath. While it is informative, it is not as compelling as the previous chapters.

In all the chapters, theological reflection is more than a thin veneer, an afterthought, or an obligatory Post-it note. The writers clearly struggle with the faith issues that confront them in their various jobs. I hope there are lots more of these people out there. For all the criticism and

allegations directed at media people, I found this to be a hopeful book. It was encouraging to read media professionals making decisions on the basis of core theology, not on profit, popularity, or audience appeal.

The book will obviously have a greater appeal to those operating under the aegis of the Catholic Church, as parishioners, students, clergy, or faculty. Yet it also instructive about how church people of any stripe can engage the culture using the media of the moment in hopeful, positive ways to reflect and shape faith.

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