

Review: Vintage McDonagh

Reviewed Work(s): Vulnerable to the Holy in faith, morality and art by Enda McDonagh

Review by: Kevin T. Kelly

Source: *The Furrow*, Vol. 56, No. 2 (Feb., 2005), pp. 114-118

Published by: The Furrow

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27665098>

Accessed: 10-05-2020 14:49 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

*The Furrow* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Furrow*

## Featured Review

– *Vintage McDonagh*

---

Kevin T. Kelly

This collection of essays is vintage Enda McDonagh.\*

Its breadth and profundity is reflected in its title, *Vulnerable to the Holy in faith, morality and art*. The opening chapter outlines a theme which will penetrate and reverberate throughout the whole book. In the ‘other’ we are vulnerable to the Holy, to the Mystery, to God’s self. In the on-going process of creation, God is bringing into being reality which is other than God’s self.

Human otherness and that of the rest of the natural world demands a recognition and respect which ultimately rest in its rootedness in God and God’s continuing creative activity, the divine letting be in which humans are invited and empowered to partake. This human letting be, in its accepting and enabling senses, renders each human vulnerable to the holy, to the immediate sacredness of every human being, including the self as other, and to the sacred character of the universe itself as created by, reflecting and even participating in the holiness of God (pp. 15-16).

Vulnerable also suggests risk, even for God. ‘God is not only letting be, but also letting go. This is the risk of creation for God, introducing into being other reality distinct from Godself’ (p. 19). The initial development of this theme in the opening chapter already hints at the mystical dimension which keeps coming through in a rich variety of ways in following sections dealing with down-to-earth human experience in faith, morality and art.

Part 2 explores being vulnerable to the holy in the community of faith. The writer’s pain is tangible in Chapter 2 as he describes the instinctive response of virtually all the bishops to the clerical abuse scandal in words such as ‘self-enclosing’, ‘isolationist’ and ‘excluding’. Such a defensive response renders it difficult for them to ‘hear and share the pain of the victims, their sense of near,

---

\**Vulnerable to the Holy in faith, morality and art*. Enda McDonagh. Dublin: Columba Press. Pp. 218. Price €12.99/£8.99.

---

Kevin T. Kelly is Emeritus Research Fellow in Moral Theology at Liverpool Hope University and Parish Priest at St Basil and All Saints, Hough Green Road, Widnes WA8 4SZ. Cheshire, England.

indeed real despair' (p. 25) – and through the pain of these victim-others to be vulnerable to the pain of God. This flows naturally into a look at the models of Church undergirding styles of Church governance. Pilgrim people and communion 'belong together as reinforcing, yet mutually correcting models' (p. 29). Letting be and letting go involve risk – a hallmark of the Divine. 'The lessons of history suggest a God of surprises. The greatest surprise of all was God's initiative in Jesus. At the heart of that surprise lies Calvary. The risks God undertook in creation and redemption are finally revealed here. The risks demanded of the believing community in response are deep and searching' (p. 33). McDonagh, like many others, including myself, is scandalized by the over-cautious line taken by the bishops in *One Bread, One Body* (1998), the first major inter-island Roman Catholic teaching document to follow the Good Friday Peace Agreement. Chapter 5 is a powerful and persuasive theological plea for Eucharistic sharing, based on the nature of the Eucharist and of our membership in the Body of Christ through our shared baptism. 'Shared membership in the Body of Christ is the basis of existing unity and the source of hope and challenge for future, fuller unity. It is difficult with this basis and this hope to refrain from inviting Christians to share the sacramental Body of Christ, to eat what they are, in Augustine's words' (p. 54). My own belief is that, in years to come, we will look back at our refusal of Eucharistic sharing and wonder how we could possibly have been so unchristian to our brothers and sisters in the Body of Christ!

Chapter 6 is a very warm and well-deserved tribute to *The Furrow* on its 50th Anniversary. Quite apart from its glowing words about *The Furrow*, it can also be read as a kind of aide-mémoire of what Vatican II should mean for the Church. I had to smile at the way McDonagh kept saying, '*The Furrow* of the future will ...', when it was very obvious that he was pin-pointing the future direction of the Church in Ireland if it is to be true to the spirit and shape of the Council.

Chapter 7 recounts McDonagh's soul-searching in the light of Phil Dunne's September 2003 article in *The Furrow* which he describes as 'one of the most moving and disturbing that journal ever published' (p. 73). Dunne feels compelled to stand outside the Church in the hope that by so doing she might contribute to the collapse of the current structures and so help the Church to re-birth. McDonagh is profoundly sympathetic to her position and her hopes for the Church. In explaining why he does not feel compelled to follow her example, he offers a very helpful analysis of the permanent and current sinfulness of the Church, looking at it in turn as a moral, sacramental and eschatological community.

## THE FURROW

Part 2 looks at how human persons are vulnerable to the holy in the field of morality, focusing on Friendship, Sexuality, Marriage and Risk in Chapters 8-9. Our otherness is the starting point for all our relationships, even with God. That is why justice is such an important virtue, even within any sexual relationship. To be vulnerable to God in the other we need to give him or her the respect due to them.

Justice in marriage love, beyond patriarchy or matriarchy, beyond sentimentality, neglect or violence, provides a profound opening to the transcendent as each encounters more fully the holy in the other ... In human relations, given that people remain at best half-strangers in the half-light, misunderstandings and worse are to be expected. Intimacy and estrangement are never far apart ... In the shared celebration of the joys and in the mutual forgiveness of the hurts, the sacrament of marriages realizes the healing and holy-making presence of the incarnate God (p. 93).

His analysis of friendship in Chapter 9 – and its application to marriage and also to discipleship and church community – is very valuable. I was taken by his description of friendship as a ‘communion of others’ (p. 97) and by his comment: ‘Friendship is a risky business. So is marriage ... They move people towards the great risk of God’ (pp. 105-106).

Chapter 10, entitled ‘Sorrowful mystery, joyful mystery’, is a very sensitive ‘semi-autobiographical account of one straight man’s journey in seeking at once to cherish, and at least partially to understand, something of the mystery of human sexuality through his encounters with the sorrows and joys of gay friends, acquaintances and clients’ (p. 117). Having been confronted in his pastoral experience as a theologian with ‘the mysteries of human loving, friendship and sexuality, particularly the great mystery of human sexual loving in its homosexual as well as its heterosexual forms’ (p. 112), he sees an urgent need for a more positive approach by the Church to homosexuality. ‘It would allow their joy in one another to spill over into the wider community. By revealing the mystery of human sexuality in another form, it could play a redemptive, healing role in a society which in many ways is sexually sick’ (pp. 116-117). As a moral theologian, I am in complete agreement with McDonagh on this. I long for the day when the Church is able to accept loving and faithful same-sex partnerships as a glorious mystery.

We are vulnerable to the Holy in a special way in those living with HIV/AIDS (Chapter 11). Stigmatization is virtually a form of blasphemy, a desecration of God’s image. So sustained and passionate has been McDonagh’s theological and pastoral writing on

HIV/AIDS, informed by his wide experience on the ground, this collection could hardly be called ‘vintage McDonagh’ without this chapter, brief though it be.

Chapter 12, a critical appraisal of Just War thinking and a brief consideration of alternatives to war, demonstrates another of McDonagh’s passions – his conviction that war is ‘the last of the great social barbarisms’ (p. 132) and his burning desire that the current century will see its final abolition.

Already familiar with McDonagh’s writings on most of the above themes, it was Part 4 on how we are vulnerable to the holy in art that moved me most profoundly. His meditation on the poetry of Gerald Manley Hopkins (mainly, but not exclusively, ‘The Wreck of the Deutschland’) in Chapters 13 and 14 are literary criticism of the highest order as well as bordering on the mystical. Vulnerable in this context means surrendering to the poem itself as an expression of the poet’s own transforming experience in composing it and thus the reader too being changed (converted) in the process. McDonagh suggests that this same insight illuminates ‘all human encounters with art-objects and natural objects, human persons and even with God’ (p.141). He captures the creative pain of the poet or artist in Auden’s phrase, ‘hurt into poetry’ (p. 143). He uses Eliot’s own words as part of his powerful conclusion to Chapter 14 – ‘So the centre of our human and Christian vocation, in person, poetry and politics is to: “Give beauty back, beauty, beauty, beauty, back to God beauty’s self and beauty’s giver”’ (p. 160).

A line from John F. Deane’s poem, ‘Manhandling the Deity’, the focus of Chapter 15, resonates with the current horrendous natural disaster around the Indian Ocean: ‘He created man in his own image / self-broken and incomplete’ (p. 166).

Chapter 16 pays homage to the contemplative serenity of both Seamus Heaney’s poem and Imogen Stuart’s haunting wood carving of the legend of St Kevin and the Blackbird and also of one of the late Tony O’Malley’s windhover/hawk paintings. These latter two masterpieces feature on the front and back covers of the book.

Part 5 closes the book with three short chapters, ‘The Risk of Priesthood’ (19), ‘Letter to Sarah’ (20) and ‘Grace before Seventy’ (21). While acknowledging that the word is rare in Church documents or theological writings, McDonagh insists that ‘risk’ is ‘an inherent quality of Christian discipleship’ and is ‘intrinsic to life itself’. Being vulnerable to the holy is a risky business, as he notes: ‘To fall into the hands of the living God and to do so knowingly and willingly can indeed be terrifying. Surrendering to love, absolute love, is fraught with risk.’ He also refers to great harm done by our failure to take risks in the

## THE FURROW

Church! 'The risks not taken by bishops, priests and religious, past and present, may prove to have more serious consequences for the survival of church and priesthood than many aspects of rampant Celtic tigritude' (p. 199).

Just one negative criticism. As is customary with such a collection, most, if not all, of the chapters have been published elsewhere. The publishers have done a great service to readers by bringing them together under one cover. However, it would have been helpful to know where each chapter first saw the light of day. McDonagh's theology is so thoroughly contextual, it is sad that we are rarely given the original context in which each chapter was published.

Even if the whole of this book is 'vintage McDonagh', the best wine is still kept to the last. Pages 197-200 are inspirational. I am going to make them required reading for all involved in the life of our parish. As far as possible, they would best be read out aloud in a group setting with the priest present as 'a disciple among the disciples' (p. 197). Why not have such a reading in place of the Sunday homily with the priest sitting among the congregation? McDonagh's 'grace' before his own 70th birthday is very much *Enda* the mystic. It is a beautiful chapter. I cannot resist ending this review with a long quotation from it which sums up the very heart of this book, as well offering a pen-portrait of the author himself and inviting the reader to join the celebration:

The least ones, the hungry and thirsty, the sick and homeless are the privileged brothers and sisters, most powerfully and immediately manifesting divine presence, divine call and human, holy communion. Central to community-communion is reception of the other(s), permitting them to enter one's house, one's mind, one's heart. It is to be inhabited by the others and to inhabit them in turn. The central Christian sacrament signifies that we are inhabited by Christ while we also inhabit him. But the Body of Christ comprises all the baptized, in principle all the redeemed, meaning my neighbour who is 'all mankind'. Being inhabited by an other comes at a cost. Host is also victim; there is sacrifice involved. Communion is truly transforming but at times crucifying. Cheap love and cheap grace have no part in Christian living. The host-victim is primarily, however, a celebratory figure and a partygiver. Rejoicing in and with the others beyond the inevitable sorrows is the name of the Christian game. The dance of the Trinity, as some early theologians imagined it, offers a striking insight into the joyful communion into which the God of Jesus Christ has invited humankind (pp. 215-216).