

Item #68 (A Brief Review of Fr. David Vincent Meconi, S.J.'s *Christ Unfurled*, by Fr. James Swetnam, S.J.)

Fr. David Vincent Meconi, S.J. (D.Phil.Oxon.) is Associate Professor of Historical Theology as well as the Director of the Edmund Campion Catholic Studies Centre of Saint Louis University. He is also editor of *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* and the author of various books and articles, especially on St. Augustine of Hippo and on other subjects involving the early Church. The book under review has for its complete title *Christ Unfurled. The First 500 Years of Jesus's Life*, a title that gives a brilliant summary of the author's take on the early Catholic Church and on its subsequent existence as well. The book was published in 2021 by TAN Books (Gastonia, North Carolina) and has VII-234 pages.

Full disclosure: Fr. Meconi is a friend of the author of this review/website.

This typographically faultless, handsomely formatted book begins with “Church History and Christian Spirituality” on pp.1-26. M. integrates Christ with the Christian as the Head with his Body, a basic perspective that is emphasized throughout the book. The result is that the Catholic Christian as he/she reads the book is constantly aware that his/her spiritual life, that is, his or her very existence, is being discussed, and not simply facts that occurred long ago and far away. Along the way there are the manifestations of a widely read scholar. Take, for example, the quotation from G. K. Chesterton's “Why I am a Catholic” on p. 16: “History moves swiftly, but the Church is the only reality *‘that frees a man from the degrading slavery of being a child of his age,’* because her teachings are not artificial, and so never adapted to meet political popularities.” (Chesterton's words in italics.) As this reviewer read these words he thought how useful they would be if taken seriously by Church leaders just east of the Rhine.

In pp. 27-74 M. speaks of “Preludes and Persecutions (100-313)”. In this chapter the martyrs of the early Church are discussed in the context of their writings when present. Ignatius of Antioch's discussion of the unity involved in the Eucharist and its relevance for the unity of the Church is linked to this citation from his *Letter to the Philadelphians*: “But make no mistake, my brothers; the adherents of a schismatic can never inherit the kingdom of God” (p. 44).

The title of pp. 75-120 is “Apology, Acceptance, and the Council of Nicaea (325)”

and in those page there is much discussion of the maneuvering leading up to the first ecumenical council of the Church, but much discussion of this maneuvering and the council itself is reserved for the following chapter for reasons that escaped this reviewer. In the chapter, amid many other things, in discussing Origen's great work *On First Principles*, M. sums up Origen's purpose with these words: "In these four books, he admits that he is trying to be faithful to the two great pillars of truth, Sacred Scripture and sacred tradition, the only sources for expounding true Christian doctrine" (p. 111). This reviewer hopes that those who live by the principle of "Sola Scriptura" have a chance to reflect on these words, and on the author who inspired them.

Next (pp. 121-158) comes "The Greek Fathers and the First Council of Constantinople (381)." The presentation of the "Greek Fathers" is truly illuminating. And especially illuminating is the statement of M. on p. 122: "It is precisely this unity [sc., of the Trinity] that provides the thesis of this book: made in the image of a Triune God (Gn. 1:26-27), the human person becomes truly him or herself only in union with the other." The reality of "Love" leaps into the mind on reading M.'s provocative words that suddenly bring his book into sharp focus.

For this reviewer pp. 159-197 ["Mary, Mother of the Church and Ephesus (431)"] was particularly inviting, both because of his thinking with regard to Mary as the Mother of the Church and because of his visit to the building on a high hill overlooking the ruins of Ephesus where legend has it that Mary and her adopted son John the Beloved Disciple lived before her Assumption into heaven. M. does not discuss the tradition about Mary and John on the hilltop overlooking Ephesus. The omission is odd, for this tradition is the reason the council fathers convened at Ephesus. And this reviewer's work on the Gospel of John has persuaded him of the plausibility of Jesus's "handing on the Spirit" to his mother in John's Gospel, and thus, with divine authority, replacing her role as "Daughter of Zion" with "Mother of the Church" (see Chapter 1 of Item #1, *John—An Interpretation*, on this website).

"Peter Speaks Through Leo at the Council of Chalcedon (451)" on pages 199-234 concludes the book. these pages contain an illuminating discussion of what M. calls

“foundationally important for any understanding of the Church” (p. 208). M. makes use of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §467, to convey the results of the council. The quotation is adroitly placed in the context of the controversy that was the occasion of the council and of Pope Leo the Great’s decisive role in providing the argument’s in solving it. Here M. voices his view that sums up well his book: “In striving to conform my thoughts and opinions to the mind of Christ’s Church as expressed in the fidelity of Sacred Tradition, I can begin to think and understand, to counsel and ultimately to love like Jesus himself” (pp. 228-229). This sentence could well serve as a guideline for the authorities officially responsible for the guidance of the Roman Catholic Church, and for those who advise them.

When this reviewer began reading M.’s book he expected something remarkable. But it is even more remarkable than he expected. And just how remarkable it is can best be conveyed by the final words of M.’s book: “This is the story of Jesus Christ and his Church. This is our story.” (**James Swetnam, S.J., April 21, 2021**)