

Wisdom Ever Ancient, Ever New, Ever Beautiful

Review of
*Essential Monastic Wisdom:
 Writings on the Contemplative Life*
 Edited, Translated and Introduced by Hugh Feiss, OSB
 Foreword by Kathleen Norris
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Reviewed by **Augustine Jackson, OCSO**

In *Essential Monastic Wisdom* we see some of the fruits of the personal and communal monastic journey of Fr. Hugh Feiss, OSB, a Benedictine monk for some thirty-five years who resides at Ascension Priory, Jerome, Idaho. Just when you think that you can't handle one more computer glitch or that you might succumb to road rage, Feiss reorients us toward more timeless and enduring values, like simplicity, humility, patience and love. These are four of the eighteen topics presented in this superb anthology of monastic texts, each of which includes a solid introductory essay to the maxims that follow.

All Christian monks and nuns should possess an arsenal of essential monastic wisdom upon which they can feed in their sacred reading or "*lectio divina*." This sourcebook shows how such wisdom is relevant to those outside the cloister as well. By arranging the material as Feiss does in thematic and chronological order, he simplifies for us a vast body of monastic teachings or "words." Seeking a word from a spiritual father or mother is an ancient monastic practice; the very book jacket positions a monk outside a cell as if to wait and listen to a word from his elder. These powerful "words" in Feiss' book are delivered by the most prominent monastic teachers of the Christian centuries. Thus one must not approach this material as an exercise in speed-reading, but "ruminate" on it in classic monastic fashion.

When Feiss says, "Speech should arise from humility" and "be at the service of truth" (69), or "Discretion . . . is the pivotal monastic virtue" (66), he is relating something passed on by his monastic forbears. When Antony says, "our destruction is from our neighbor, and our life is also from our neighbor" (47) or Syncletica warns, "You should not . . . accept empty hearsay, lest you become a receptacle for other peoples' evils" (72), they stand at the beginning of the tradition and utter their words as archetypes or winds in the desert. When we read Antony's sayings, "Some have afflicted their bodies with asceticism, but they lack discernment, and so they are far from God" (115), and "wherever you live, do not leave it easily" (147), how this jars modern thought within our diet-

conscious and mobile culture. There are even countercultural political invectives administered by monks, such as (from the lips of a disciple of Pachomius): “if a person desires power, that person probably should not be given authority” (159), or, “there is no poison more dangerous . . . nor sword more deadly, than the lust to dominate” (Bernard, 168) – and here we are in an election year! Every day there is something abuzz on the campaign trail as the candidates jockey for influence or power.

More than twenty men and women are represented in the anthology, from the Desert Fathers and Mothers and St. Benedict, through great medieval teachers like Bede and Gertrude, Bernard and Hildegard, to the present. When Feiss comes to the “words” of our generation, with teachers like Merton (represented by more than two dozen passages) and Joan Chittister, the words they speak have been reiterated many times within the tradition, but they are repristinated: “A humble man can do great things with an uncommon perfection because he is no longer concerned about incidentals, like his own interests and his own reputation, and therefore he no longer needs to waste his efforts in defending them” (Merton, 98); “[Humility is] a proper sense of self in a universe of wonders” (Chittister, 99); “it is not perfection that leads us to God; it is perseverance” (Chittister, 150). Modern monastic teachers spout essential monastic wisdom from the fountain we have come to rely on, the *Rule* of Saint Benedict: “[Benedict] does not want people in positions simply to get a job done. He wants people in positions who embody why we bother to do the job at all. He wants holy listeners who care about the effect of what they do on everybody else” (Chittister, 171), because “whoever loves God, loves his own soul” (Antony, 183). Such monastic wisdom is ever ancient, ever new, and ever beautiful.