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Strong Medicine: Spiritual Highlights for Sisters

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her visions and the manifestation of her power with all classes of people. She began her reform in Siena, making many conversions by prayer and by interview. She began to go out among the sick and to the prisons, preaching and beseeching that they turn to God. People came to her seeking help and advice.

The most important historical event of these times was the change of papal residence to Avignon; the Babylonian captivity, as it is called in the history books. After a bitter struggle aided by Catherine's action and prayers, the Pope was persuaded to return to Rome. In the fields of economics and political science too Catherine gave norms taken from the Gospels and the Fathers of the early Church

Catherine of Siena gave strength to the weak and courage to the fearful because she depended so much on God. This book can take its rightful place with the other biographies written about her.

SISTER MIRIAM CATHERINE

STRONG MEDICINE

SPIRITUAL HIGHLIGHTS FOR SISTERS. By Rev. Bruno M. Hagspiel, SVD. Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1960. x,228p.

This book is set up as conferences for religious, drawn from Father Hagspiel's fifty years of experience in giving retreats to Sisters. Since it focuses chiefly on the basic rules and regulations of day-to-day living in a religious community, it is useful both as a handbook of practical injunctions for novices still in training and as a recollection-day check-list for older religious. In any case some adaptation is needed: in general, because the spirit of religious communities differs one from another; for novices in particular, because the tone is too unremittingly stern; for older religious, because the points stressed are those about which they are admonished year after year so that the effect is negative and somewhat wearisome, whereas retreats (and recollections) should be principally precious times of "getting to know You".

Father Hagspiel's points are, of course, basic and no one who is interested in the development of personal spiritual life to the full would question them; but there is a rather frequent Jeremiastic tone to his exhortations. "Should someone accuse us of being covetous, dishonest, proud, lazy, sensual, uncharitable, we agree, because we

bear within us the tendency and inclination to all these vices." While perfectly true in the sense expressed, this seems a little strong. Working Sisters hardly have time to exemplify all these faults at once.

The first part of the book is almost a compendium of quotations from the writings of the masters of the spiritual life. Any one of these quotations could be developed into meditation material and perhaps this is the best way to use the book. If taken in small doses, it would certainly be salutary, but when read all at once, it becomes an avalanche. Talk about "welcoming humiliations" can be a foreign language; one can only grow gradually to such stature.

In discussing humility, the author states: "Perfect humility demands that I strive to convince myself of my personal despicableness and to arrive at the state where I prefer myself to absolutely nobody and honestly consider myself the most contemptible creature." This is a mighty big order and might underline the statement that the reading of this book by novices needs to be supplemented by guidance in the spirit of the particular community.

His material on fasting and prayer is more within our reach. He stresses the importance of fasting and penance and insists that total abnegation and renunciation should be the goal for all religious. By mortification we gain influence with God and "if we complain that our prayers are not heard, that our efforts to root out our predominant fault are unsuccessful and that we continue to give way to our moods—this is all evidence, Fr. Hagspiel states, that we lack the spirit of penance in our life. External mortification is necessary because it makes the more important internal mortification easier. Without the external practices we cannot mortify our judgment and will. Here he brings exterior penance into a focus that is milder, "in corporal penance, generally speaking, fidelity and regularity are far more important than the degree of pain inflicted."

The author draws an interesting analogy between our penances and Christ's life-long penances. Christ practiced deliberate penance but also, his wandering life, when he depended on the chance kindness of others, brought many days of unplanned penance. Further, says Father Hagspiel, we do not know Christ at all if we are not deeply familiar with the sufferings of His Passion and if we have no sufferings within ourselves His Passion remains theoretical and unknown.

External mortification should be concentrated practically on three senses, i.e., sight, taste and touch. Control of the eyes is stressed in any religious community and Fr. Hagspiel gives rather

minute examples of ways to practice this and then surprises us by a moderation of his strictures by stating that when it comes to looking at nature—the sky, the trees, the mountains, we should drink this in to the full. "Mortification by denying ourselves these things is not to be recommended."

His own stern exhortations regarding mortification of the appetite are kept within reality by his frequent quotations from St Thomas Aquinas, St. Ignatius, and St. Francis de Sales. From St. Thomas: "... Domination by the lust of the palate is a *peccatum puerile* shameful in an adult..." From St Francis de Sales: "Eating what is set before us, not seeking out the lesser [unpalatable] dishes... [and to] be inconspicuous." From St Ignatius: "Exercise self control, regard for good manners, attention to our companions."

Some of the things the author says are overly harsh. Speaking of religious who rebel at unliked assignments: "In their ill humor they respect neither the fourth, fifth, or eighth commandments." Some of his ways to practice mortification seem unnecessary: "Do not look up to see who is passing by." Some, however, of his suggestions are very practical as when he presents the story of St. Teresa's bout with distractions and when he lists the advantages of keeping a spiritual notebook for growth in self-awareness.

While there is unquestionably much of practical value in the book, its rather predominant tone of "let's toe the mark" constitutes a drawback, if one presumes that the book is directed universally to religious of very different communities and, within any given community, to religious of very different grades of religious experience. There is an embryonic movement in America regarding annual retreats (perhaps it will grow and spread), wherein the retreat master is trained in the group discussion method and can separate (at least for a few conferences) his audience into smaller groups divided according to the extent of their experience. After twenty-five or more years in religious life most religious are beyond the "sweet fervor of first vows" state but are too often given insufficient help in growing further. By guided discussion of the problems of their stage of the spiritual life with Sisters who have had similar experiences, the older religious might receive a much fresher re-motivation than the more general approach provides. She should thus be readied for renewed efforts in further spiritual advance, because a discussion of hardles and hindrances which is geared to her years of experience will be more valuable than merely passive absorption of points emphasized for the novice.