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The title is significant. It may signal to college teachers that this book will not serve very well as an undergraduate reading assignment, since "wisdom" is generally not yet a usual characteristic, or even a much sought-after value, of the 18-22 age-group. Added to that, many of the experiences and reminiscences which are building blocks for the author's reflections come from an ecclesial context unfamiliar to the present generation. But faculty types — general readers and specialists alike — will find it genuinely helpful in thinking about moral concepts in the light of Christian tradition. Wisdom is more than cognition or notional understanding: heart is involved in wisdom, as well as mind. James Keenan brings both to bear, and that makes his work heartening as well as enlightening.

Keenan postulates, with the help of a brief survey of the development of moral theology and some personal reminiscences which readers of a certain age will immediately recognize, that the Christian community has over time accumulated a wealth of "moral wisdom." We have learned "through a variety of venues and methods to know which values to pursue and which virtues to embody." We were taught "not only about who we were, but also about who we could become." He wants to help the reader to appreciate this tradition. To do that, the book selects from that tradition, some "Texts" and some "Lessons."

He uses the word "texts" in a broad sense, selecting four as the sources for developing our moral wisdom: "the person of Jesus in the New Testament, the Ten Commandments in the catechism, the practice of the corporal works of mercy, and the development of the four cardinal virtues." These were the "texts," he suggests, to which, historically, "bishops, preachers, teachers, religious orders, lay associations, confessions of faith and others regularly appealed in order to become full moral persons."

By "Lessons," Keenan means certain specific reflections which have "frequently arisen over the centuries that define more specifically the contours of our wisdom." In this book he examines the lessons we have learned about love, conscience, sin, and suffering, which he sees as "the most important in the history of Christian moral wisdom."

1. His treatment begins with the Examples, using examples and anecdotes, citing pastoral and personal experiences, drawing on insights from life and literature, authors past and present — all of it helpful, in this reviewer's judgment, for doing just what he intends: drawing readers into the Tradition and calling them to "receive it, enrich it and humanize it." To cite two examples:

Love: On September 11, 2001, an amazingly high number of people who knew they were about to die — on a high floor of a Twin Tower or in an airplane speeding toward destruction — used their cell phones to call people to tell them they loved them. "They did not ask, 'Do you love me?' As they faced death and separation, as they were filled with panic imagining how they could ever escape from each of the 110 stories of the buildings, their frightened spirits passed for a moment and rolled out of themselves to another to say, 'I love you.'" The lesson: "The human spirit so clearly feels how incomplete it is that it moves relentlessly toward union with others."

Sim: Keenan contrasts the way earlier Christians including...
Thomas Aquinas conceived mortal sin—using the conditions of ‘grace matter, full knowledge and full consent’ to illustrate—to our latterday tendency of using those same conditions to enumerating ourselves from it. His grandson’s counseling, "You're right, Jimmy. It's very hard to commit a mortal sin," has ceded; for him, to the conviction that "we have become an incredibly self-excusing people of God." Despite the nuances and qualifications he uses in talking about this, I suspect that not all will find what he says convincing. But it is provocative of very good questions about how we view grave sin, especially our own. And few will want to dispute what he goes on to say more generally about sin.

He thinks we easily trivialize sin. "We talk sin into nice prepackaged categories, we need the evident ones, the ones on the surface, the obvious ones or the easy-to-name ones. So we say, 'I got angry three times..."' But in fact it isn’t our sins of weakness which are the really corrosive ones. They ‘do not highlight our coldness of heart, our mean-spiritedness, our pettiness, our deep-seated resentfulness...’

He goes on to use Camus’ The Plague and the life of Hitler’s armament minister Albert Speer —"a nice man, a family man,"— to illuminate dramatically that "we have deep within us some incredible, hidden selfishness." That broad, deep, pervasive selfishness, he proposes to define as "simply the failure to bother to love," and expands on that insightfully.

II.

Years ago in a memorable article, Karl Rahner, S.J., contended that "the structural organization of the whole corpus of theology must be provided by pastoral theology." ("The New Claims which Pastoral Theology Makes upon Theology as a Whole," Theological Investigations 11). Rahner suggests that, if this were accepted as true, the self-understanding of person and Church, the problems of society, and the development of person in society would be the proper context for the study of all other theological questions. I think that same insight underlies the progression of Keenan’s thought in this book.

Having reflected on the experiences Christians, have of these important "lessons" he goes on to examine and reflect on key "texts" of our tradition, beginning, of course, with the New Testament accounts of Jesus Christ. His treatment is not exegetical nor purely scholarly (though he relies on sound commentaries and solid scholarship); it is anchored in pastoral practice and the questions that mirror, and it relies without apology on experience, both personal and as found in Christian history.

Chapter 6, "The Ten Commandments in the Catechism," provides a way of looking at our own moral practice by getting beneath the surface of well-known religious phronesis, training it with the help of the Christian tradition for the moral wisdom it contains. His treatment in Chapter 7 of sorrow as a particularly Catholic virtue is especially interesting, spelling out some clear priorities for practical Christian living today. Those are my favorites. But the chapters on the other "Tests" will also provide food for thought and reflection, and touch chords of common experience.

III.

Is this a perfect book? The contents were in large part derived from a series of lectures delivered successively (and not always successfully) in several places; the compilation shows some predictable results of that. Grammarians will find the occasional lapse, logicians the occasional elision. Once in a while, the very personal anecdotes which illustrate and give affective tone may seem intrusive when written in a way they would not orally. The final chapter reads like an attachment rather than an organic growth from what preceded. A few sections (e.g., on "The Wounding Consolation") seem reminiscent of research esoteric enough to be dubiously helpful in a book destined for more popular consumption.

But even one who sees the above as imperfections will not miss the substantial helpfulness of Keenan’s thought, nor the attractive human and spiritual quality his personal reflections bring to it. I first met James Keenan in the 90s in Rome, where he was being mentored by Josef Fuchs, S.J., the same professor of moral theology at the Gregorian University who had been my own mentor many years before. One of the great moralists of the 20th century, Fuchs died just a few months ago, well into his nineties. But still sounds of mind: I have no idea whether he would have been able to read this book of his former protegé. I hope so; it does him honor and it would have made him proud.