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BOOK REVIEW

David A. deSilva. *Sacramental Life: Spiritual Formation through the Book of Common Prayer*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008. 288 pp. Pbk. ISBN 0830835180.

As he states in the preface to his *Sacramental Life*, David deSilva has been an interested observer of worship in the Protestant tradition for most of his adult life. Important in the genesis of *Sacramental Life* is his lament that many contemporary Christians are so driven by “authentic” worship that they do not care to listen to the voices of the past. Thus deSilva turns to the liturgies of the Book of Common Prayer (BCP), which recommend themselves because of “their inclusivity both in terms of time and denominational breadth” (p. 13) and aims to explore the rites of the BCP as devotional resources. DeSilva grew up in the Episcopal tradition (he is now an ordained elder in the United Methodist Church) and has been marked by the rich liturgies of the BCP because “they gave [him] a language and a context for encountering God in [his] youth that continue to be essential vehicles for [his] own spiritual formation” (p. 11). Spiritual formation is at the heart of this project, and the aim of the book is to help worshippers in liturgical and non-liturgical traditions to “engage more fully the spiritual disciplines nurtured by these liturgies” (p. 13). In this aim, deSilva exceeds expectations.

On one hand, *Sacramental Life* is a theological introduction to four major liturgies of the BCP: Baptism, Holy Eucharist, Christian Marriage, and Christian Burial (other than a brief comment, deSilva does not engage the well-worn sacramental theologian’s seven-versus-two argument). On the other hand, the book is one extended spiritual exercise in which deSilva reflects on the theological importance of these liturgies and rites and how

important they are for the ongoing “sacramental life” and spiritual formation of the Christian. To explore the ways that the liturgies shape the life of the believer, deSilva has written forty-five meditations (each a separate “chapter” typically five to six pages in length), which cover a litany of topics that fall within the purview of the four major liturgies. One of the more novel features of *Sacramental Life* is deSilva’s decision to end each of the forty-five meditations with a specific devotional exercise with which the reader may wish to engage in order to practice and absorb the wisdom in these chapter meditations. In the exercises, readers are offered a balanced mixture of devotional questions (e.g., “how could you have attended more fully to your baptism vocation today?” [p. 67]) and specific devotional practices (e.g., “set out bread and a small amount of wine” as a visual reminder of the Eucharist in your home [p. 82]). This format indicates how one should read the book—as a devotional exercise—rather than as a book of scholarly information such as a textbook on liturgical theology.

There is a surprising amount of theological reflection packed into the book’s 288 pages; *Sacramental Life* is a welcome antidote for the recent dearth of thoughtful devotional resources. The author’s language is rich and evocative. For example, when one practices “worship as adoration” (which deSilva explains in chapter 23), then one experiences the “heightened attentiveness to the other that we experience with another human being as we are falling in love . . . ” (p. 148). The book seems to share bibliographic DNA with classics such as Thomas á Kempis’s *The Imitation of Christ*; yet, rather than the sometimes-didactic tone of *The Imitation*, deSilva’s *Sacramental Life* feels warmer and more personal. The reader is treated to personal reflections gleaned from deSilva’s years of ministry in the church—stories of people’s lives and how they have been renewed and even healed by the liturgies of the BCP. It is clear that deSilva intends the same for the reader of his book.

Sacramental Life is written for the educated lay reader, but will be equally satisfying for the pastor and scholar as well. If there is any weakness in the work, it is that it will leave readers wanting a deeper exposure to liturgical theology. Perhaps

deSilva might have included suggestions for further reading, though this seems a bit outside of the scope of the author's intended goals. It is important to note that deSilva has structured the book in such a way that it can be used as an individual devotional or as a small group study. He is quick to encourage the communal dimension of spiritual formation in his meditation exercises. Helpful in the work was the decision to include an index of references to the BCP, with allusions sprinkled liberally throughout the book, as well as a Scripture index. Readers will likely want to read *Sacramental Life* with a physical copy of the BCP near at hand, though deSilva offers the web address where it can be accessed freely online.

As mentioned, the book is appropriate for those in liturgical and non-liturgical traditions. DeSilva clearly expects readers who will be unfamiliar with terms like "collect" or "offertory" and even "sacrament" to read the book, and he defines the terms when first used. Thus, what risks becoming a somewhat provincial reflection on spiritual formation through the lens of the BCP becomes useful for a wide readership.

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