

FOREWORD

Dom Eugene Boylan (1904–1964) preached the community retreat to the Cistercian community of Our Lady of Gethsemani in 1958. Thomas Merton, in his journal, described him as “energetic, red faced, lean, a good Cistercian” who, Merton added, had that “slightly disorganized and disoriented way Cistercians have today, of being they know not what.” Boylan was a well-known spiritual writer whose *Difficulties in Mental Prayer* (1943), the fruit of his labors as a confessor and spiritual director, was written before his best-known book *This Tremendous Lover* (1946). Boylan would write two other books after the success of that volume: *The Spiritual Life of the Priest* (1949) and *The Priest’s Way to God* (1963).

Richard Kevin (in religion: Eugene) Boylan was born into a comfortable middle-class family and was raised in the suburbs of Dublin. The family was intensely Catholic; one of the brothers became a Carthusian monk at Parkminster in England, and a sister became a contemplative nun. After two years in a diocesan seminary studying for the diocesan priesthood, he returned to University College Dublin where his abilities in mathematics and science led to a two-year Rockefeller fellowship that took him to Vienna for a post-graduation period of advanced scientific study. He returned to Dublin’s University College as a lecturer but upon the advice of his Jesuit spiritual director he decided to enter St. Joseph’s Cistercian Abbey at Roscrea in 1931. He made solemn vows there in 1936 and was ordained to the priesthood the following year. At the monastery he taught philosophy to the young monks and was one of the regular confessors in the abbey’s public church.

In 1953 Boylan was sent by his superiors to Australia to start a Cistercian foundation in that country. Locating a suitable place north of Melbourne, he founded the monastery under the name of Notre Dame (it is now called Tarrawara Abbey). While he was in Australia the superior general appointed him superior *ad nutum* (i.e., acting superior) of the monastic community of Caldey Island off the Welsh Coast. Caldey Island had once been a community of Anglican monks that had entered the Catholic Church *en masse* and then moved to the mainland of England. The vacated island monastery was subsequently settled by a group of Belgian Cistercians, and Boylan was given the mandate to put the abbey on solid financial ground and stabilize the community. Drawing on his scientific background, he started a perfumery that produced scents derived from the native lavender and other wild flowers native to the island. By 1959 the Caldey community was stable enough for Boylan to return to Roscrea where he resumed his work as a confessor and a popular retreat master.

In July of 1962 Father Eugene Boylan was elected as abbot of Roscrea, but his abbatial office did not last long; he was killed in an automobile accident in 1964 before the Second Vatican Council finished its work. His early death (he was only sixty when he died) leaves us no way of judging how he would have responded to the monastic renewal unleashed by the reform impulses of the Council in its call for a return to the sources (*ressourcement*) that has had such an impact on post-conciliar monasticism. That his writings did not maintain a steady readership is perhaps one indication that his voice was that of an earlier era. That there is a renewed interest in him and other writers of that generation allows us to look back to what has been unjustly neglected.

In a sense *This Tremendous Lover* is a kind of benchmark of what monastic spirituality looked like in the hands of a sensitive monk writing a few decades before the Second Vatican Council. Boylan was educated on a diet of neo-scholastic handbooks dealing with ascetical and mystical theology. In lesser hands this sort of writing seemed rather detached from any serious encounter with the authentic sources of monastic spirituality, while often overly

concerned with a scholastic analysis of the stages of prayer and the somewhat esoteric question about whether or not contemplative experience, a gift of pure grace, was an uncommon experience for the elect or the natural end of the Christian life intensely lived.

It is interesting, to cite one conspicuous example, that in his chapter on meeting Christ in reading, Boylan devotes many pages to the central issue of “spiritual reading” as a necessary preparation for and nourishment of “mental prayer.” Nowhere in those pages do we find any discussion of the old monastic practice of *lectio divina* with its end being “contemplation” because Boylan was not yet conversant with the recovery of this ancient monastic practice.

What kept Boylan free from the aridity of manual theology was the same quality that made his fellow Irishman, Columba Marmion, writing in the generation or so before Boylan, such a powerful writer about the Christian life: a deep encounter with sacred scriptures absorbed in the common life of prayer and attended to by careful meditation. Boylan was a keen student of scripture in general and of Saint Paul in particular.

In fact, *This Tremendous Lover* reflects how deeply Boylan had absorbed the doctrine of the mystical body of Christ, inspired by the encyclical that Pope Pius XII had issued a few years earlier (*Mystici Corporis*, 1943). Boylan, with his deep knowledge of Paul and his good grasp of the early patristic tradition, develops a theology based not on some pallid individualism of the solitary believer in solitary communion with a solitary Christ, but a richly organic vision of one praying in union with the whole church, which is, as St. Augustine memorably said, the Whole Christ (*Totus Christus*).

This rich sense of the corporate character of our life in Christ allows Boylan to spend some time thinking about loving Christ in our neighbor. He makes the excellent point, reflecting on the then-much-promoted movement called “Catholic Action,” that too often the accent falls on “action” with little attention to the adjective “catholic,” whereas it is in that latter word that we can find the

rich notion of being “in Christ” (a term used by Paul well over 160 times) as we manifest our love and concern for our neighbor.

As an introductory epigraph for his work Father Boylan uses a line from St. Augustine: “*Et erit unus Christus se ipsum amans*”: “And there will be one Christ loving himself.” It is as apt a fragment as one can think of to summarize the inner dynamic of Boylan’s work. Building up the body of Christ is the work of Christ in each individual. That “building up” has a direction and a goal summarized in a lovely term used by St. Paul: recapitulation.

In some small ways this book shows its age, but as a complete work it is richly biblical, informed by the great tradition of the church, and obviously the work of someone who not only knew about Christ but knew him in that intimate way indicated in the very title of this work.

Lawrence S. Cunningham
John A. O’Brien Professor of Theology
University of Notre Dame