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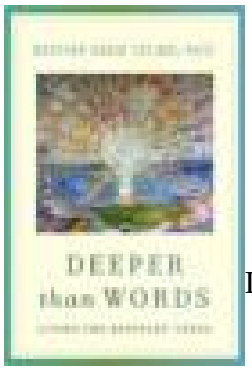
Authors reach for a sense of the sacred

Diane Scharper | Nov. 3, 2010

THE SACRAMENTS WE CELEBRATE: A CATHOLIC GUIDE TO THE SEVEN MYSTERIES OF FAITH
By Peter J. Vaghi
Published by Ave Maria Press, $12.95

Msgr. Peter J. Vaghi believes that people have lost the sense of the sacred and must regain it. Vaghi isn?t talking about the latest poll of some nebulous group of Americans. He?s talking about Roman Catholics who seldom receive the sacraments, and when they do, dress inappropriately, talk, daydream and generally lack respect. Do they believe in the ?central mystery of our faith,? the real presence of Christ? Probably not. Do they receive the sacrament of penance? Forty-five percent do not. Do Catholics know the definition of a sacrament? Usually no.

Vaghi wrote *The Sacraments We Celebrate* partly to combat Catholic ignorance. Author, pastor in Bethesda Md., and spiritual advisor to Washington?s elite, including Supreme Court Justices Clarence Thomas and John Roberts, Vaghi writes in an informative and conversational style. He explains each sacrament with references to history, scripture, writings of the church fathers, papal documents, the catechism, and his own experience. Catholics, Vaghi suggests, need not be one-dimensional and materialistic. The sacraments provide other options.

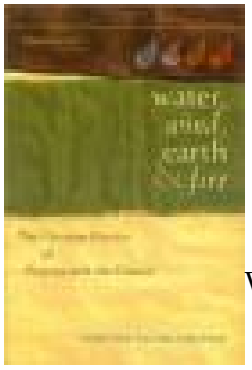


DEEPER THAN WORDS: LIVING THE APOSTLES? CREED
By Br. David Steindl-Rast
Published by Doubleday, $12

What does the Apostles? Creed mean? What does it really mean? In *Deeper Than Words*, Br. David Steindl-Rast examines this ancient summary of Christian belief -- word by word. With references to philosophy, history, etymology, meditation, New Age musings and poetry, he tries to understand the meaning that lies behind the words.

A Benedictine monk known for his ecumenical work, Steindl-Rast wants not only to foster interfaith dialogue but also to prove that the Christian idea of a divine creator equals the Buddhist notion of interdependent arising. Allusions to the poetry of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Mary Oliver, T.S. Eliot, and e.e. cummings appear frequently. While a nice touch, the poetry tends to push Steindl-Rast?s metaphysical subject matter to an even higher level of abstraction. At times, he seems far to the left of Roman Catholic doctrine, most of which he considers to be metaphorical. Perhaps Steindl-Rast should have referenced the Nicean Creed, which

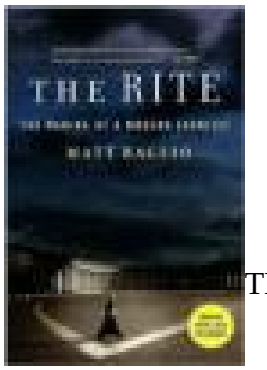
spells out many of the concepts with which he valiantly struggles.



WATER, WIND, EARTH & FIRE: THE CHRISTIAN PRACTICE OF PRAYING WITH THE ELEMENTS
By Christine Valters Paintner
Published by Sorin Books, $14.95

Quoting from scripture, poetry and meditations from spiritual and not-so-spiritual writers, Christine Valters Paintner tries in *Water, Wind, Earth & Fire* to lead readers to a deeper understanding of their own spirituality, as well as to increase their appreciation of the natural world. But her argument is hardly persuasive. Her book reads like a daybook of quotes and jottings with very few connecting thoughts. On occasion, Paintner adds anecdotes, but more such stories would have given her book a human dimension.

A Benedictine Oblate, Paintner lives in the Pacific Northwest, whose natural beauty inspires her and her writing. It?s evidently given her a love for nature writing. Some of her quotes by authors like Gerard Manley Hopkins, Mechtild of Magdeburg and Thomas Merton are profound. Yet others feel gimmicky. It seems that Paintner wants to make the point that nature reveals God, although she never fully explains how.



THE RITE: THE MAKING OF A MODERN EXORCIST
By Matt Baglio
Published by Doubleday, $15

Americans have become increasingly enamored with the occult. According to the 1990 American Religious Identity Survey, the Wiccan religion had 8,000 members. In 2006, their numbers had grown to 800,000. Yet most Americans doubt the existence of the supernatural and see the devil as a metaphor instead of a reality-- but not Matt Baglio. An American journalist living in Rome, Baglio learned more than he thought possible about evil when he decided to take a course in exorcism.

He tells all in his chilling, well-researched book, *The Rite*, which is a combination of riveting details and scholarship. The book focuses on Fr. Gary Thomas, who, in his 22 years as a priest in California, hadn?t heard of any cases of demonic possession. So when in his early 50s, he was chosen as the diocesan exorcist and sent to study at Rome?s North American College, he wasn?t sure what to expect. He didn?t think that he himself would witness and participate in nearly 80 exorcisms. But he did. He didn?t know that he would be attacked by the

devil. But he was. Nor did he believe he would see people levitate. But he saw that too.

If you, like many other Catholics, view exorcism as an embarrassment and a superstitious relic from the past, this mesmerizing book, which will soon come out as a movie, may well make you change your mind.

ABANDONMENT TO DIVINE PROVIDENCE

By Jean-Pierre de Caussade, with commentary by Dennis Billy
Published by Ave Maria Press, $17.95

Hoping to show people how to connect with the reality of God?s presence in their daily lives, Redemptorist Fr. Dennis Billy offers commentary to the 18th-century spiritual guide *Abandonment to Divine Providence*. An author of numerous books and articles and a professor at the St. Charles Borromeo Seminary in Philadelphia, Billy writes an overview for each section of the book, a thesis, introductory remarks, and follow-up considerations.

He doesn?t say that this book resulted from course notes, but it seems as though it did. The writing is clear, succinct and informative, and anticipates questions a reader might have. Billy takes what could be a fussy text and makes it accessible to the contemporary reader. The book began as a series of letters most likely written in the 1730s by Jesuit Fr. Jean-Pierre de Caussade, who served as spiritual advisor to the Visitation convent in France. Another Jesuit, Henri Ramière, discovered, edited and published the letters as a book in 1861, giving it the present title. According to this hidden gem of a book, God speaks continuously to all people. They need only to learn how to listen.

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