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Ruth Burrows: Essential Writings

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Book Review

By Angela McCarthy

Jones, Michelle. *Ruth Burrows: Essential Writings*. Modern Spiritual Masters Series. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2019. ISBN 9781626983120

Occasionally a book comes to you that has to be read slowly and Jones' work on Ruth Burrows is one such book. Ruth Burrows, otherwise known as Sr Rachel OCD, was the focus of Michelle Jones' PhD thesis. Jones is a consecrated woman living in southern Western Australia, who is affiliated with the Carmelite Monastery at Quidenham, England. She has visited the monastery and met with Sr Rachel.

The reason for the slow reading is that the material is very dense and requires the reader to stop and consider the implications of what is possible to absorb into one's own life and spirituality. It is also possible to simply dip into the text and retrieve a paragraph or two for quiet thought and sustenance and in that sense, there are many different ways to move through the book.

Sr Rachel left home at 18 years of age to join the Carmelite sisters in the early 1940s, turning down an offer to attend Oxford University. Jones explains how she was an over-sensitive child born into a family of eight children and as a result 'suffered from profound and relentless anxiety' (4). Within the confines of a Carmelite convent that suffered from poor leadership, her suffering continued but it is through the suffering that her insights into life emerged. By world standards her life is a failure, she achieved nothing, and yet through her profound writings one becomes aware that she was able to enter into a state of total emptiness in Jesus, 'surrendering her poverty to God in trust' (5).

Jones explores the writings of Sr Rachel and offers five interrelated themes for consideration. 'First, the Christian life is about the transformation of the ego into the very life of Jesus' (10). Secondly, the mystical life is precisely the transformation of the ego from egocentricity into the self-emptying life of Jesus. The third theme is the transformation of our self-centredness and of every aspect of our lives into Jesus's receptivity to God's love. The fourth theme 'is that our being taken into Jesus's life of love is a collaboration between human effort and God's grace' (11). The final theme emphasises that the cultivation of openness to God's gift of love is through faith and trust. When Sr Rachel speaks of this deep trust she is taking us beyond our usual level of understanding what it means!

The material that Jones presents from Sr Rachel's writings provides a structured insight into these themes and the way in which she has learnt to move towards an encounter with God where she can receive God's total self-gift. Two of the sources are not published but all of the remaining material belongs to the published works of Sr Rachel. Jones' selection and placement of material within the chapters in this book point to two things: Jones' has a deep and comprehensive understanding of Sr Rachel's work and, therefore, she has been able to construct a pathway through the writings in such a way that we can journey with increasing understanding. Jones begins each chapter with a brief outline and background and then leads to the assembled excerpts from Sr Rachel's own writings.

Chapter one offers an insight into her beginnings and understanding of herself and her family: 'I was born into this world with a tortured sensitivity' (15). She describes her conversion, but this does not seem like a joyful experience. It was a radical change but from then on, the path lay in a deep darkness. It is through this darkness and her persistent way

of life in prayer that she understood with great humility her place in a poverty of spirit. Her prayer became deeply anchored in the gospels and her prayer took on a Trinitarian form which was also connected to daily Liturgy. The autobiographical aspects of this early section of the book give necessary insight to her development as a person and her growth in self-knowledge.

Chapter two onwards develops her spiritual thought through selected passages that Jones has carefully structured in a way that leads to a rich understanding of Sr Rachel's spiritual growth. This small book encompasses a lifetime of prayer, thought and self-emptying aided by a rejection of the world and all its empty promises. The works of St Thérèse of Lisieux, St Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross are instrumental in her search as well as the advice of trusted spiritual leaders and companions. Through Jones' careful guidance these chapters release their gifts and that is why the reading is slow. Some sections need to be read a number of times to grasp Sr Rachel's depth of thought and response to gospel texts. The result in one's own response to God can echo her pain but lead to a cognisance of what is needed to depth spiritual life. For many of us it is not possible, except for small pockets of time in retreat, to live completely separate from the world but it can be done in short bursts within the daily routine. Jones's book offers many treasures for retreat explorations.