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Book Review: God and Eros: The Ethos of the Nuptial Mystery

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**Colin Paterson and Conor Sweeney, Eds., *God and Eros:
The Ethos of the Nuptial Mystery.***

Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015.

Pp. 268. Price \$32.00 USD

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While coming to publication around the same time as the two synods on marriage and the family (2014-2015), and seeming to address many of the hot button issues discussed at those meetings, the essays which comprise this volume were written well in advance of those synods. They reflect thinking which is both theologically rigorous and of profound pastoral sensitivity.

God and Eros: The Ethos of the Nuptial Mystery is a collection of papers from the John Paul II Institute for Marriage and Family in Melbourne, Australia. This compilation reflects not only the wide range of interests and expertise of scholars from that institute, but also a profound unity of thought animated by the “ethos of the nuptial mystery,” what the editors of this book claim is at the heart of a culture of life and a civilization of love.

Nuptial Mystery theology has in recent times begun to animate theological discussion in significant centres around the world, and yet for many people the phrase and the project remain an oddity. Those who are even remotely interested in this significant development in contemporary Catholic theology will be aware that Karol Wojtyła/Pope John Paul II brought this theme to the forefront of academic discussion in and through his collected reflections on human and divine love in what is most commonly referred to as his Theology of the Body.

The book is comprised of two parts, “Approaching the Mystery,” and “Applying the Mystery.” Organised in this manner, the collection reflects a fundamental affirmation of the primacy of logos over ethos, of truth over praxis.

“Approaching the Mystery” contains valuable essays from Bishop Peter Elliot, Professor Tracey Rowland, Dr. Adam Cooper, and Dr. Anna Silvas. Of particular interest will be the contribution from Rowland, Dean of the Institute, who takes the reader on a romp through the life and work of Karol Wojtyła/St. Pope John Paul II. As the patron and founder of the Institute, the legacy of John Paul II permeates the entirety of this volume. Rowland’s contribution sets the trailblazing work of John Paul II within the tremendous dramatic that was the Twentieth Century, providing a useful context from which the reader can approach the work of this great saint, and the work of the John Paul II Institute world-wide that builds upon it.

Also noteworthy is Adam Cooper’s paper, “The Theology of the Body in Outline.” Cooper’s strength is his meticulous and scholarly approach, coupled with an eye on the pastoral implications – careful all the while to avoid the excesses of enthusiasm which has plagued many presentations of the Theology of the Body to date. This essay will prove to be of tremendous use to anyone seeking an introduction to that important work or those involved in the teaching of the theology of the body.

Part Two, “Applying the Mystery,” demonstrates the wide variety of applications that nuptial mystery theology has, from obvious implications for marriage and family life (no less valuable for their obviousness), to bioethics, approaches to secularism, Religious Education, priestly formation, and the relationship between faith and reason.

Contributions from Conor Sweeney, Gerard O’Shea, Anna Krohn, Owen Vyner, and Cardinal Marc Ouellet offer a great deal of insight.

A particularly welcome inclusion in this volume is from the late Professor Nicholas Tonti-Filippini (1956-2014) who was, at the time of his death, Associate Dean and Head of Bioethics at the Institute. His paper, entitled “The Role of Natural Law in Bioethics: Anthropocentrism or Theocentrism,” details a shift, not only in his own thinking, but more broadly in Catholic Bioethics as a whole. Tonti-Filippini provides a careful critique of the New Natural Law theory of John Finnis and Germain Grisez. He argues that the role of the Catholic bioethicist is to position the ethical dilemma in the context of the broader dramatic of a life lived within the context of encounter with the person of Christ.

In an interview with papal biographer George Weigel, “[Cardinal Angelo] Scola goes so far as to suggest that virtually every thesis in theology – God, Christ, the Trinity, grace, the Church, the sacraments – could be seen in a new light if theologians explored in depth the rich personalism implied in John Paul II’s theology of the body [here we can read nuptial mystery theology].”¹ It is in this spirit that this collection comes to us.

Representative as it is of the work of the faculty of the unfortunately ill-fated Australian John Paul II Institute, this collection moves well beyond the boundaries of reflection on the mysteries of marriage and the family to our relationship with God, through to the Church’s engagement with culture more broadly.

This volume will be of interest to scholars and students of theology, as well as priests and pastors of souls, who remain fascinated by the teaching and example of St. Pope John Paul II, and his radical reiteration of the reality of the universal call to holiness of the Second Vatican Council. It will stand as a unique testimony to the incredible work of the Australian John Paul II Institute for Marriage and Family.

¹ George Weigel, *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II 1920-2005* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 2005), p. 343. See also p. 918, footnote 51.