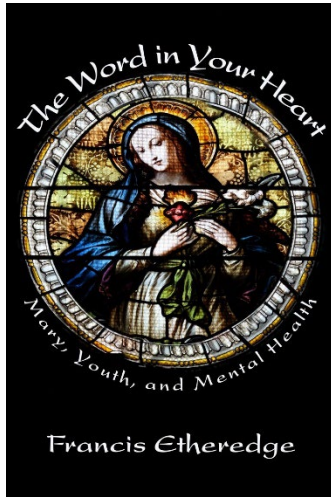


A Pilgrimage into Truth and Beauty



The Word in Your Heart: Mary, Youth, and Mental Health by Francis Etheredge (St. Louis, MO: En Route Books and Media, 2024)

Reviewed by Christine Sunderland

In this collection of prose, poetry, and prayer, Francis Etheredge, bioethicist, theologian, and philosopher, invites us on a pilgrimage through words and pages, interweaving meditations on the Virgin Mary as protective mother to all, the truth of the human person, and the challenges young people face in today's materialistic and divisive world. The common answer to these vital questions is found in the Word implanted in our hearts, meaning Holy Scripture to be sure, but also the action of God in history and today, the Word made flesh who dwells among us.

And so, on this journey, we meet Christ and his healing power, for Etheredge has placed the Word in our hearts. We learn about *The Neocatechumenal Way*, an evangelistic group within the Roman Catholic Church, established in the 1960s, and giving life to parishes by promoting family, eucharist, and community, proclaiming the love of Christ. *The Way* changed Etheredge and brought him back to Christ and the Church and, on this journey, we see why and how and the importance of growing in a community of persons and words and sacraments, and thus living more fully the time we are given.

The pilgrimage is for real and not mere metaphor: Francis Etheredge and his family of eight join a pilgrimage of youth from London to Lisbon, stopping at Nemours, Lourdes, Pamplona, St. Francis Xavier's home, Santiago de Compostella, and Fatima. We encounter Mary's appearances and experience her help and direction. We learn of St. Ignatius, St. James, and St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein). We see the power of God working, miracles and more miracles, as we mourn the suffering of the innocent in not only the Holocaust of World War II but in Herod's slaughter of the innocents and today's slaughter of the unborn.

The power of God reforms and recreates and burnishes:

"The Lord, like a craftsman, then, takes our whole history and makes a stained-glass window of even the scraps and pieces that we would be happier if they were in someone else's life or no one's! But, as beautiful light transfigures everything into a

blazing pattern of the Lord's glorious, redeeming love, let us hope to rejoice that we can see how God has blessed us and that the love of God can show through the whole of our life and so help others." (76)

Etheredge's fervent faith is tangible, as is his deep concern for the "needs of young people today!" Thus, he speaks of the Virgin Mary, the power of pilgrimage, the human person, and the love of God seeking to heal the broken hearts and bodies of the young, born into our nihilistic world, an age at war with the spirit of man and the Spirit of God. "This is a book about the power of God to change a man's life..." he begins, as he shares his own conversion at age forty, one that led him to greater and greater awareness that God had a vocation for him and every unique and holy person.

He writes of the contemplative nuns at The Monastery of Our Lady of Bethlehem:

"Given, then, that the Eucharist, and being able to see the Blessed Sacrament from where they lived in their hermitages, was central to their life, the image of the Blessed Virgin Mary as the 'Monstrance of the Lord' comes, it seems, almost to take on flesh in the day-to-day life which these sisters lived: a reciprocal discovery of the mystery of God and of the self – both in community and in the solitariness of their monastic vocation." (42)

Etheredge's prose reads like a conversation, an enthusiastic and compelling conversation that answers questions crucial to life and death. Between the conversations and the catecheses he gave during the pilgrimage, lives powerful poetry, rendering depth to the words and offering new ways of seeing. To be sure, within these pages Francis Etheredge offers theology and bioethics for the layperson.

In many ways this is not only words that open doors to places never visited, but it is a rosary (Etheredge's image) that strings together moments of reflection, instruction, encouragement, and visions of Mary, prayers to live in our hearts, guiding the young (and old) on the next leg of their journey.

Words have power. Here, we see theology incarnated on the page, so that we witness the true nature of the human person, ideas taking on flesh. We ask, what is man? Body, mind, spirit? Can these be divided as is done in today's materialistic culture where drugs become the answer and then the problem? Is wholeness lost, a holy wholeness, no longer taught to our children? How

can we know that wholeness? How can we know our true selves? Francis Etheredge in these remarkable reflections grounds theology in reality, and touches us with truth.

And what are the real crises of our youth? Etheredge suggests one is perfectionism, including “body shaming” and the false need for plastic surgery. We see the necessary role of humor in mental health and how to find a harmony of the heart, mind, and body. We consider how the Internet “fashions fashion,” how body parts are for sale, embryos frozen, and the dignity of human life assaulted. All these factors encourage suicide. We question the treatment of mental health problems with drugs, creating side-effects that require more drugs. Shouldn’t we deal with the root causes of abortion and be honest about the true costs to mother, father, family, and society? What is gender confusion? Shouldn’t we listen to the whole of who we are and are called to be? Shouldn’t we be pilgrims, learning the vocation God has ordained for us, rather than what we have planned, or society demands.

Francis Etheredge has words for doctors: they must abide by their oath “to do no harm.” They must treat the whole human person – body, mind, and spirit – interrelated and integrated. For when only part of the person is treated, depression and euthanasia are not far behind.

And as in all of Etheredge’s works, there is goodness and beauty and truth. Weave them into your own heart. For words point to ideas unseen and feelings behind the ideas. Words do this, just as the Word, the Son of God, did this on that first Christmas in a stable in Bethlehem, bringing life and light and hope to a world of death and darkness and despair. Just so, that same Word that came in the beginning, then made flesh, enters our hearts today, bringing life and light and hope to all, especially those confused and suicidal and looking for God in all the wrong places.

One of the right places to find God is in the Church:

“The vocation of the Church is to take us towards heaven, uniting us as we travel there with the host of heaven; and, making good use of our talents and what we do in this life, if what we do is of God, then what we do is already impregnated with the golden destiny of eternal life – however hidden this reality is from us or from others.” (41)

Life is a pilgrimage from birth to death to life in Heaven. We are all pilgrims walking through time, and as pilgrims we search for meaning and for God. As pilgrims we learn to pray and take part in the greatest conversation of all, the Creator with his Creation.

And one last word... I continue to marvel at Francis Etheredge's pulling together many genres into one book – essay, instruction, poetry, memoir, travel journal, history, even hagiography. Publishers often demand their separation, so that librarians and booksellers and marketers can tag them, shelve them, and brand them. Francis Etheredge defies them all with a certain faith that his writings have their own wholeness, their own life, their own vocation, their own shelf, their own brand, uniquely ordained by God.

Enter this world of truth and beauty. It's a good place to be, even on a pilgrimage of words, following and welcoming the Word into your heart.

Christine Sunderland has authored seven award-winning novels: *Pilgrimage*, set in Italy, *Offerings*, set in France, *Inheritance*, set in England, *Hana-lani*, set in Hawaii, *The Magdalene Mystery*, set in Rome and Provence (all Oaktara), *The Fire Trail* (eLectio), set at UC Berkeley, and *Angel Mountain* (Wipf and Stock), set on Mount Diablo, east of Berkeley. She serves as Managing Editor for the American Church Union (www.AmericanChurchUnion.com) and is a member of the Anglican Province of Christ the King (www.Anglicanpck.com). Visit Christine at www.ChristineSunderland.com.

