

Features

Treasury provides ammunition for defenders of the faith

THE TREASURY OF CATHOLIC WISDOM

By John A. Hardon, SJ
Doubleday, New York, 1987
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By Dominic A. Aquila

Since the earliest days of Christianity, thoughtful and inspired writing has profoundly affected its readers. Perhaps there is no greater example of the mystical relation of reader and text than the one offered by the account of St. Augustine's conversion.

St. Augustine wrote that one day, after weeks of confusion and painful hungering for God, he heard a child's voice chanting: "Take and read; take and read!" He interpreted the voice "quite certainly" as a divine command to open his Bible and read the first passage upon which his eyes fell. He read a few lines of the 13th chapter of St. Paul's letter to the Romans, closed the book and proclaimed that "a light of utter confidence" had shone in all his heart and that with this light "all the darkness of uncertainty vanished away." Without this strong conviction of mind granted to St. Augustine through Scripture, it is doubtful that he would have prevailed against the heretical beliefs gaining ground during the fifth century.

St. Augustine knew that the first step in defending the faith is a clear exposition of that faith. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger and others call for a similar strategy in our modern

Between the Lines

world where, in Cardinal Ratzinger's words, "many believers are gripped by skepticism." Such clear exposition is amply provided by Faith John A. Hardon's *Treasury of Catholic Wisdom*, a much-needed contribution toward rebuilding a vigorous Catholic position from which to make a stand against the spiritual, moral and aesthetic violence of our secular culture.

Taking this type of stand is not work for the fainthearted; it demands a courage of will, which Father Hardon says "is born only from deep conviction of mind, when a Catholic knows that the Church founded by Christ and build upon Peter is true." Father Hardon says that the writings of the "intellectual giants of Catholic history" gathered in this volume provide the enlightenment that must precede our "conviction of mind."

The *Treasury* includes some well-known works of St. Augustine, St. Benedict, St. Fran-

cis of Assisi, St. Thomas Aquinas, Dante Alighieri, Thomas a Kempis and St. Ignatius of Loyola, along with the more obscure writings of such familiar writers as St. John of the Cross, John Cardinal Newman, Gerard Manley Hopkins, G.K. Chesterton and Fulton J. Sheen. The historical sweep of the *Treasury* is breathtaking; to read the selections chronologically in two or three sittings is to understand first-hand the mystery of the Church's stability and change through time.

What's more, the reader is struck by the artistry and craft of each writer, a feature recognized by secular readers — who may encounter these works in literature and history classes — but not wholly appreciated because the religious dimension of the writing is usually ignored in secular settings. For example, Father Hardon includes excerpts from *The Confessions of St. Augustine* that contain the previously discussed account of his conversion. Professors often have their students read the confessions, through the lens of psychoanalysis, treating the work as a well-written example of confessional literature, a genre through which the author publicly purges himself of his long-suppressed guilt. Clearly much is lost with such a narrow reading.

Father Hardon provides the reader with a very useful index. One can look up a subject — say the Eucharist — and then locate the

points at which each author addresses this topic. The *Treasury* needs a more generous and instructive introduction, however, especially with respect to the material's relation to the official teaching of the Church. Father Hardon notes that he has deliberately excluded papal writings from his collection because, in his words, "the Bishops of Rome are in a category of their own, with supreme teaching authority in the Church of God."

But it can be misleading to draw such a sharp distinction between the writings of the Church's great intellectuals and her official teachings. The Church teaching on the existence of evil, for instance, draws almost exclusively on St. Augustine's writings; her teaching on politics and the state rests on the work of St. Thomas Aquinas.

Finally, when the reader sees that the last entry in the collection dates from 1946, he wonders why Father Hardon stopped at that point. The silence of the next 42 years can be haunting and worrisome. Certainly Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, Henri de Lubac, Romano Guardini, Thomas Molnar and James Hitchcock are worthy candidates to fill this void. At the very least, however, silence should provoke a discussion about a proper successor to Bishop Sheen, Chesterton and the rest — and about who merits the unique papal designation of "Defender of Catholic Faith."

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