

11-1-1998

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Recommended Citation

Frey, Barbara (1998) "The quotidian mysteries: laundry, liturgy, and 'women's work'," *Consensus*: Vol. 24 : Iss. 2 , Article 19.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol24/iss2/19>

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The Quotidian Mysteries: Laundry, Liturgy and “Women’s Work”

Kathleen Norris

New York/Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1998

89 pages, \$5.95 Softcover

There is a sacred connection between laundry, liturgy and “women’s work”, Kathleen Norris claims in this book which is the published text of her 1998 Madeleva Lecture in Spirituality. By probing her own daily acts of washing dishes, doing laundry and cleaning house, even as she writes poetry and books and delivers lectures, Kathleen Norris invites the reader to reflect personally on the meaning of the incarnation in the daily, routine, mundane tasks of everyday life. Surprisingly, given her adeptness in exploring incarnation in relation to geography (*Dakota*, 1993), she falls short of displaying a similar incarnational depth in relation to daily household tasks.

By way of numerous vignettes (ranging from her struggle with depression and her college years, to reflections on relationships, time spent in a monastery and her own journey as a writer), and interspersed with biblical excerpts, Norris examines the quotidian (the daily or ordinary) mysteries of day to day life. She determines that “dailiness can lead to...despair and yet also be at the core of our salvation” (10). Careful to dispel the myth that household and domestic tasks are the sole domain of women and defines who women are, Norris acknowledges the spiritual import inherent in these tasks. Linking her vignettes and reflections on daily life, Norris invites the reader to learn to appreciate the “thankless, boring, repetitive [daily] tasks” (27) and to “convert the drudgery” (28) of these tasks into praise, play and renewal. If one does not realize the spiritual significance of the daily routines of life, it becomes easy to resent their endless repetition despite the necessity of the tasks. This resentment is what is then expressed in *acedia*: a boredom with our daily lives which leads to a listless, apathetic inner spiritual life. Work (whether inside or outside of the home), liturgy, and relationships are all prone to *acedia*, a numbing spiritual apathy which prevents us from appreciating mystery, beauty and holiness in the everyday. These everyday occurrences, however, also hold the potential for the transformation of our lives. “[We] have the power to transform what seems meaningless — the endless repetitions of a litany or the motions of vacuuming a floor. What we dread as mindless activity can free us, minds and heart, for the workings of the Holy Spirit, and repetitive motions are conducive to devotions such as the Jesus prayer or the rosary” (82-83).

Norris touches on a crucial link between the sacred and the everyday by comparing the domains of domestic tasks to her experiences of liturgy, but

in so doing she imports religious experience and meaning *onto* daily tasks, rather than mining them for sacred or religious meaning embodied in the act itself. Cleaning her basement, sorting and dusting bits and pieces of her past, leads her to sing a hymn; defiantly hanging out her laundry on a bitter cold winter day breaks her claustrophobic mood; going for a walk at dawn grants her the time and space to turn her thoughts to the newness of each day. The daily tasks of life afford her the opportunity to break free from depression and acedia and transport her to a place of trust, hope and contentment in God. The tasks create a “cloister” for herself in the midst of drudgery or chaos, but the *doing* of the tasks themselves is mundane and not intrinsically religious. Norris, therefore, touches on but skirts the very incarnational embodiment of daily life she seeks to uplift.

Despite this fact, this book is an important contribution to the field of spirituality and encourages readers to examine the artificial boundaries between daily/sacred, religious/secular, holy/mundane. As such it provides excellent material for personal reading and small group reflection on the religious and spiritual significance experienced in the everyday acts of our lives.

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The Tiny Red Bathing Suit of Mr. July

Jean Clayton

Winfield, BC: Wood Lake Books, 1997

127 pages, \$12.95 Softcover

This is an inspiring resource book for those interested in offering pastoral care to the chronically ill who are institutionalized. Jean Clayton draws on her nine years of chaplaincy in a long term care facility and shares a variety of vignettes around various themes outlining her personal and professional learnings. She has offered ministry to those in need and has learned ministry from those in need. She addresses issues such as sexuality, dementia, ethics, worship services, communication challenges, multicultural realities, death and funerals. The title refers to a poster that a resident had on her hospital room wall that helped the residents and some staff address some of their sexual needs.

The strengths of the book are many. The issues that she addresses are important ones and she offers some insightful practical interventions around these issues. The book is easy to read, inspirational, and focuses on