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Flanagan, Brian P.: *Stumbling in Holiness*. Sin and Sanctity in the Church. – Collegeville: Liturgical Press 2018. (VIII) 185 S., pb. \$ 24,95 ISBN: 978-0-8146-8420-7

Brian Flanagan's *Stumbling in Holiness* is clearly the work of an outstanding teacher and careful scholar. The text is remarkable in how it manages to enter into, clarify, and contribute to important contemporary theological debates while at the same time remaining quite accessible and keenly sensitive to pastoral issues. At the core of the text is one of the most fundamental questions in Catholic ecclesiology: what is the Church's relationship to holiness and sin? On the one hand, Christians have affirmed since the earliest creeds that the Church is rightly called holy. By grace, the Church participates in the holiness of God, exists as a sacrament of holiness for humanity, and is eschatologically oriented towards the consummation of all things in the holiness of God. And yet, on the other hand, the impact of sin on the life of the Church is obvious. Can one thus say that the Church is sinful? Or is it only the "members" of the Church who sin? And to the extent one recognizes sinfulness within the Church, how does this impact the confession that the Church is holy?

F. offers his readers six insightful and balanced chap.s that work through many of the most fundamental issues in Catholic ecclesiology. The book opens with an unexpected but entirely fitting and worthwhile chap. on the invocation of the ideas of sin and holiness within the liturgy. This initial excursus into liturgical practice is far from gratuitous, for "the liturgy is not something separate from the church, but simply the church caught in the act of being most overtly itself as it stands faithfully in the presence of the One who is both object and sources of that faith" (13—quoting A. Kavanaugh). F.'s engagement with the liturgy is insightful and does significant theological work: it directs the reader to the concrete community against a tendency to see the Church as an abstract reality separate from the people, and it illustrates how the community and individuals are continually called to turn away from sin and towards a participation in God's holiness. In the liturgy the community repeatedly (within each liturgy and with every new liturgy) confesses its sin and continues its journey toward the holiness of God. The theme of journey is key here. Liturgical practice illuminates that the relationship between sinfulness and holiness in the Church is not a static relationship, a simple both/and, "but rather a dynamic juxtaposition of 'already' and 'not yet'" (27).

Chap. two offers an engaging account of how to define "holiness," "sinfulness" and "church." This chap. illustrates many of the strengths of the book: impeccably clear throughout, helpful definition of terms, consistent use of these terms, fair presentations of competing theological options, and a coherent vision for moving forward. Chap. three explores the ascription of "holiness" to the Church and chap. four focuses on "sin." Chap. five then analyzes common ways in which theologians and Church leaders have sought to engage, unravel, and/or persist with the paradox of holiness and

sinfulness—most commonly by means of naming the Church as holy and restricting sinfulness to the “members.” Finally, in chap. six, F. offers his own theological synthesis, but one that seeks to illuminate and live within the paradox rather than eliminate it. The tension found in the dynamics of holiness and sinfulness in the liturgy is not to be prematurely resolved by theological maneuvers.

F. rightly notes that all attempts to deal with the paradox of the church’s holiness and sinfulness ultimately depend upon how one actually defines “the Church” (145). In response to this challenge, two fundamental theological claims ground the text as a whole. First, the Church is the people of God. In line with the work of Joseph Komonchak and others, a central emphasis of F.’s whole book is the need to oppose visions of the Church that fail to identify the Church with the whole people of God. Whether in the form of (usually implicitly) identifying the Church exclusively with the bishops or Pope or by speaking of the Church as an abstract “it” or “she” seemingly separate from the people, there is the constant danger of failing to grasp and affirm the core ecclesiology of *Lumen Gentium*. There is the danger, against the teachings on the Church as the people of God and the universal call to holiness, of envisioning a Church that is strangely other than the actual people who make up the Church. As F. writes, “While the church might be something *more* than any particularly assembly in time and space, it is not something *different* from any particular eucharistic assembly” (38—his emphasis). And, furthermore: “The recognition that the assembly, when it gathers, consistently and regularly asks for forgiveness of its sins requires either some sort of attribution of sinfulness to the church or the invention of an entity called ‘church’ distance from the historical community of the faithful” (38).

This first point of emphasis, of course, makes the task of theology much more difficult. How does one take up and affirm the early Christian creedal affirmation of the holiness of the Church when the presence of personal and social sin in the community, among leaders as well as laity, is so abundantly clear? For F., the key way forward is primarily by means of an *eschatological* understanding of the Church—this is a second major emphasis in the book and it is wonderfully engaged throughout. Rather than ascribing holiness to an abstract “Church” and sinfulness only to its “members,” F. sees a way forward in recognizing the way in which the holy-yet-sinful Church exists in the tension-filled space of the already/not yet of salvation. God is truly present in the Church, God’s faithfulness makes holiness a mark of the Church in history and its sure destiny, and sanctity can be seen in history in both individuals and particular Christian communities; and yet, this holiness is the holiness of a pilgrim on a journey and thus not the fullness of holiness. Against “ecclesiological monophysitism” or “ecclesiological Docetism,” sin is one aspect of life of the Church in history—perhaps even in a certain way necessary, given that the mission of the Church is to draw sinners closer into the life of God.

Any critiques I have of the book are mild, particularly given its significant scope and relatively short length. Short presentations of thinkers necessarily simplify at times, and the core thinkers represented in the text are mostly limited to mainstream North American and European theologians. Delores Williams, James Cone, Jon Sobrino, Oscar Romero, and various post-colonial thinkers all come to mind as figures who could productive extend certain discussions and insights in the text. And, I should note, F.’s helpful account of structural sin (68–71) and brief engagement with Latina theologians on the everyday-ness of holiness (96) indicate that his work is certainly open to further exploration in light of such thinkers.

Stumbling in Holiness is particular gift to teachers of theology. The book as a whole would be highly profitable for graduate students and scholars looking for an introduction to the ecclesiology of

Vatican II and one of the thorniest issues in ecclesiology flowing from the Council. Portions of the text could be used in an undergraduate course or even in parish setting. F. manages a remarkable balance of genuine hope for the eschatological fullness of holiness, celebration for the presence of real holiness in history, and uncompromising recognition of sin in our midst. It is highly recommended.

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