Nicholas Alan Worssam SSF, *In the Stillness, Waiting: Christian Origins of the Prayer of the Heart* (Canterbury Press, 2024) ISBN 9781786224880, paperback, 176pp. £16.99; eBook £16.99.

Many years ago I was introduced to the wonder and depth of contemplative prayer through Thomas Keating's book, *Invitation to Love*. Here, in *In the Stillness, Waiting* we have, for me at least, a worthy successor. Nicholas Worssam's exploration of the Christian origins of the prayer of the heart is the best book I have read on spirituality and practice since that time.

Guardian of Glasshampton Monastery in Worcestershire, Worssam brings an in-depth exploration and distillation of the central teachings and development of contemplative silence and prayer. He introduces the reader to significant people and texts of spiritual writing from the fourth century onwards. Within its pages we meet figures such as Antony, Evagrius, Syncletica of Alexandria and the Desert Mothers, Macarius, John Climacus, Maximus the Confessor, Isaac of Syria right through to the fourteenth century and Gregory Palamas. Some names will be more familiar than others but the author's approach is one which enables us to become acquainted with all the participants.

The back cover proclaims that this is 'A book about silence… Love silence and silence will echo that love, filling you with peace.' Yet it is not as easy as that, is it? Many people struggle with silence and the distracting thoughts that interfere with our desire to commune with God. Combine with that the often-unfulfilled hope that if we are silent God will speak, and this can be a difficult aspect of our attempts to live out a faithful and prayerful life.

Tackling this very human issue head on, Worssam quotes the last-mentioned companion, Gregory Palamas, who summarizes the difficulty many of us have when experiencing silence and trying to practise contemplative prayer. We 'fail to grasp that nothing in the world is in fact more difficult to contemplate and more mobile and shifting than the mind.'

So it is with beautiful imagery that the author introduces us to the skills of watchfulness and attentiveness. 'Realizing just how crowded the mind is becomes the beginning of a stepping back from the crowds,' he writes, 'discreetly exiting the dance floor of the nightclub of the mind, and walking out into the cool, refreshing air of a night sky full of stars.' Amidst the depth of

spiritual experience recounted by those accompanying the reader, Worssam is realistic throughout. Citing Barsanuphius, a sixth-century Coptic Egyptian monk, affectionately known as an Old Man of Gaza, we are reminded:

> Just make the most of your situation and do the best you can. Pray when you are able, recite the psalms when you can, give thanks and endlessly repeat 'Lord, have mercy'. Above all, rejoice and do not be afraid.

These reality-checks are reassuring points in the journey through this book. Quoting Hesychius, we are reminded that 'An eagle needs to beat its wings to climb into the sky, but once there it can glide on the warm thermal currents in the air.' He continues, 'The struggle to get airborne in our prayers is the necessary precursor to the delight of contemplation.'

Rather like reading Thomas Keating (among many learned authors), *In the Stillness, Waiting* is a book not to be rushed. There will be times when certain paragraphs, sentences even, will need to be read more than once. But that in itself is part of how each of us can learn how to experience that about which the psalmist writes in Psalm 62: 'On God alone my soul in stillness waits'.

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Rowan Williams, *Passions of the Soul* (Bloomsbury Continuum, 2024)
ISBN 9781399415682, paperback, 160pp. £10.79; eBook £7.34.

At first glance, this volume might be thought to be a lightweight introduction to the seven deadly sins, to inform new Christians of the snares against which they need to be on guard. But given the author, we know that even his books of a few pages require attention and some experience of living the Christian life. This title originated in a series of recorded retreat addresses given to the sisters of the Society of the Holy Cross which have been transcribed for publication. They retain the relaxed style of a pastor addressing a familiar audience, which makes the narrative accessible and helpful.

The addresses are centred around the writings of Evagrius and Cassian concerning the ways we can fall into the temptations which deflect our best efforts to follow the Christian way, and which assault us particularly when