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## Book Review: Deep Down Things

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## Book Review

*DEEP DOWN THINGS:*

*SELECTED WRITINGS OF REVEREND RICHARD McCULLEN, C.M.*

NEW YORK: NEW CITY PRESS, 1995. 784 PP.

*Deep Down Things*, a collection of almost 300 letters, homilies, and talks penned by Richard McCullen during his twelve years as superior general of the worldwide Vincentian communities, is at the same time personal and global; contemporary and historical; inspirational and practical; religious and secular; learned and popular. Chronologically arranged from 1980-1992, the book is directed principally to the extended Vincentian family, including Daughters of Charity, the Congregation of the Mission, and other charitable organizations who continue the vision of Saint Vincent de Paul.

The book, however, has relevance and appeal for a wider audience. The author's lyrical style and rich imagery, reflective of his Irish lineage, will appeal to those who demand literary craftsmanship and artistry as well as solid content. The fluid prose and the economical structure (very few entries exceed three pages) as well as the practical turn of the spirituality reveal a mature author who has passed through several decades of theological study, prayerful reflection, and pastoral service.

The title *Deep Down Things* is drawn from the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins and captures well the effect of the book on the reader. One is quietly invited to penetrate everyday events and encounters, and especially Scripture, to discover the essential, the "thisness" which binds all creation and human experience with its Source and Destiny. The spiritual commentaries are carefully woven through or drawn out of events as diverse as earthquakes in Mexico and Italy, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the celebration of the jubilee year in Rome, participation in a synod, a pilgrimage to Knock, the emergence of indigenous communities in Africa, and beatification/canonization proceedings. The original audiences for these writings circle the globe from Ireland to Indonesia, Cameroon to China, Salzburg to Saint Louis, Berlin to Bolivia, Prague to the Philippines, and a multiplicity of other locations within first and third worlds, free

nations and oppressed countries. Personal experiences such as an excursion to Mayan temples in Guatemala or a visit to the Roman church of San Andrea delle Fratte, with its associations with both Alphonse Ratisbonne and Maximilian Kolbe, successfully fuse the travel and devotional genres.

A few basic themes echo fugue-like throughout the various chapters of the book which approaches 800 pages. While the contexts differ, the Eucharist as the center of life and Mary as the model of discipleship, as well as Saint Vincent de Paul's special view of the poor, are explored in a variety of ways. The author's treatment of these subjects as well as his creative walking through the gospel parables often evoke that experience Eliot referred to as *making the familiar strange and the strange familiar*. It is the experience one has when an interpretation seems so obvious and apt, that one is delighted and yet surprised at not having thought of it oneself.

While the gamut of virtues have their place in Father McCullen's writings, he is particularly insistent on two qualities for effective Christian living. In a very Chestertonian way, he posits the need for a sense of awe and wonder to go "deep down things" and find the Spirit in the beauties of nature, the complexity of the psyche, and the meaning of the cross. Secondly, he places reconciliation at the pinnacle of human graces required for peace at the personal, interpersonal, and even international levels. He constantly invites the reader to reflect on the dignity of the human person and the effect of the Incarnation. While insisting on work for justice, he cautions that those who work for justice cannot pit one class against another or foment anger and contempt.

This book can be sampled, read in generous allotments, savored in carefully chosen topics, or studied chronologically. The style of the prose is very personal and original, but two distinctive methods of development recur frequently. In one, an experience, at times the author's but more often that of an historical, scriptural or literary figure, is narrated and then the contemporary significance of that event from the gospel perspective is explored. On the feast of the Magi, a fictional interview with a decidedly modern flavor is conducted with the Kings and on the occasion of the beatification of two Daughters of Charity martyred at Angers in 1794, their seventeenth-century foundress engages in a soliloquy.

In the second method, to make a spiritual point the author selects and explores, from a variety of perspectives, a concrete image (stained

glass to consumerism-clogged arteries). Many of these images derive from personal experiences while others are drawn from the poets, particularly the metaphysical poets, Hopkins, and Eliot. However, prose writers such as Chesterton, Cardinal Newman, Ronald Knox, and others find their way into his commentaries as well. This storehouse of literary allusions and carefully chosen images provide the memory hook that allows the listener or the reader to retain the message and in the worshiper's case, carry the homily from Sunday to Sunday. To recall the image or the reference, the part, is to remember the whole.

While the book will be most valued within the Vincentian families, it offers much to persons who are interested in religious formation and spirituality. Because the collection includes a large number of homilies developed by a talented preacher, it could serve as a very useful tool for those who preach and those who teach homiletics. Despite the careful editing, one does regret that a glossary was not provided to assist readers both within and outside the Vincentian family to orient themselves to the variety of historical and contemporary personalities alluded to throughout the text. However, this is not even a small deterrent to traveling "deep down things" and discovering in these pages, along with the Jesuit Hopkins and the Vincentian McCullen, the Holy Spirit brooding with "warm breast" and with very "bright wings."

Distributors of the book may be contacted at: The McCullen Project, 333 South Seton Avenue, Emmitsburg, MD 21727, phone: 301-447-3121. The price is \$25.00, plus \$3.50 for postage and handling.

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It is only God alone who can make us abandon all, wretched creatures that we are and objects of his justice, that we may become the objects of his love. O happy change! To abandon an earthly love for a love that is heavenly, eternal, and utterly divine!

*(Saint Vincent de Paul,  
conference to the Daughters of Charity, conference #18)*

You must place your trust in our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the father of the poor.

*(Saint Louise de Marillac to Sister Julienne Loret,  
19 September 1651, letter 327)*