Book Review. For Your Own People: Aelred of Rievaulx’s Pastoral Prayer, trans. by Mark DelCogliano. The Way

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‘O Bone pastor Iesu, pastor bone, pastor clemens, pastor pie, ad te clamat miser et miserabilis quidam pastor’ (O Good Shepherd Jesus! Good shepherd, merciful shepherd, loving shepherd, to you a shepherd now cries, a poor and pitiable shepherd.). Such is the beginning of Aelred of Rievaulx’s Pastoral Prayer. Aelred (1110–1167) felt keenly the duties of a pastor, as abbot of the large Cistercian monastery of Rievaulx in Yorkshire. It was an office, he reveals in his Prayer, that he was unworthy and unsuited to fulfil, but which he strove to fulfil nevertheless, with God’s grace. Aelred took Jesus Christ as his model and pattern of life, as taught by St Benedict in his Rule: ‘for it is Christ’s place that [the abbot] is believed to hold in the monastery’ (RB 2:2). It naturally follows, therefore, that the primary sources of the Pastoral Prayer are scripture and the Rule of St Benedict—especially chapters 2, 27 and 64. As one who chanted the Psalms and listened to scripture multiple times each day in choir, probably read the scriptures again as part of his lectio divina, and heard the Rule read each morning in chapter, it is no surprise that Aelred should have expressed himself as he did.

This edition of Aelred of Rievaulx’s Pastoral Prayer consists of a long and informative introduction (pp.1–35), a critical edition of the Latin text with facing page English translation (pp.38–57), bibliography (pp.59–65), and tables of biblical (pp.66–67) and non-biblical references (pp.68–69). The core of the book, namely the critical edition and translation of the Pastoral Prayer, is reprinted from Cistercian Studies Quarterly. This is by no means the first critical edition of the Latin text or the first translation of it into English. Notable previous editions include those published in the Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Medievalis and in the Cistercian Fathers Series. So what justifies the publication of this new edition? It is not the discovery of new manuscripts, for the Pastoral Prayer survives in only a single manuscript of the twelfth or thirteenth century, originally belonging to Rievaulx Abbey and now at Jesus College, Cambridge. It is that the first published edition and those based upon it contain various flaws and errors, and so, therefore, do the translations based upon them.

Marsha L. Dutton’s introduction briefly describes the life of St Aelred, the manuscript, and the contents, sources and genre of the Pastoral Prayer. It is interesting to learn that ‘from the Middle Ages until the late
nineteenth century, Aelred was known primarily as a historian’ (p. 7), since probably most today know him as a spiritual writer. Her primary concern in the introduction is to put the Prayer in the context of the relationship between abbot and community, showing Aelred’s concern for his monks. While admitting that the Pastoral Prayer is intended chiefly for prelates, she argues that it is also beneficial reading for others. ‘It reminds readers that they are not alone in their sense of inadequacy or in their failure to pray sufficiently or to listen often to God’ (p. 30). Moreover, ‘it teaches that all men and women are to be more loving than they naturally are to all those with whom they live and work’ (p. 32). This new edition and translation of Aelred of Rievaulx’s Pastoral Prayer is not only more accurate, but with the addition of an introduction, bibliography, and tables, is more accessible and useful to both ordinary and scholarly reader alike.

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