

# A misfit's insightful confessions

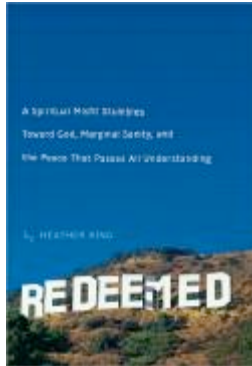
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I. Book Reviews



## **REDEEMED SPIRITUAL MISFIT STUMBLES TOWARD GOD, MARGINAL: A SANITY, AND THE PEACE THAT PASSES ALL UNDERSTANDING**

**By Heather King**

**Viking Press, 256 pages, \$24.95**

In its structure and purpose, Heather King's *Redeemed* is not unlike St. Augustine's *Confessions*. That first Christian conversion narrative, often misconstrued as being an acknowledgment of past sins, is really a confession of faith in God and the luminous praise of a grateful heart.

Similarly, in this well-written, insightful and funny book, Heather King, a frequent commentator on NPR's "All Things Considered," does not deny her hard life. It includes sexual promiscuity, three abortions, decades of alcohol abuse, hoarding, a short but hated legal career, and desperate loneliness. She narrates her suffering (breast cancer, divorce, her father's death) with precision devoid of self-pity, but *Redeemed* is not a litany of sorrows and she does not use her autobiographical reflections to titillate or shock.

Rather, she writes an eloquent hymn of gratitude and wonder for her Catholic life.

"From the outside my life doesn't look much different than anyone else's, but on the inside it's permeated by Christ -- physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually. Inside, it's Christ who illumines it, blesses it, enriches it, gives it spiritual water and food and air."

Raised a Protestant in rural New Hampshire, Ms. King made her first confession in the Catholic church on Aug. 15, the Feast of the Assumption, a little over a decade ago. Like many converts she embraces the

church's life and doctrine with a nonideological reverence. "As for the church, and all the other myriad complaints leveled against it: As much as I'd sometimes like to make it over a bit, I basically understand that the one who really needs to be made over is me."

Writing about the church's teaching on sex, she reflects on "men and women -- divorced, single, married, gay -- who are silently, anonymously doing the long, exacting work of consecrating their lives, including their sexuality, to Christ." If some of them are "indulging, they're refraining from taking the Eucharist, not out of guilt but out of a sense of honor and courtesy ... because they themselves are willing to be humbled and instructed."

Perhaps because community and friendships have been so important to Ms. King, she has an instinctive understanding of the church as the mystical body of Christ. "Maybe God uses even our illnesses, our compulsions, the defects we can't fix no matter how hard we try, for the greater good. As for the wounds other people inflict upon us -- maybe he uses those most of all." She reminds us that "when Christ appeared to his disciples after the Resurrection, he still bore the wounds. One of the things this seems to say is that our suffering counts."

One of Ms. King's spiritual gifts is the ability to recognize the invisible holy revealed in ordinary life. She crafts beautiful portraits of people like Barbara, a woman who has danced 25 years "as a form of prayer. I think of it as offering up my time and body and pain to someone who needs it more than I do. I say the rosary, one Hail Mary for each pli ." Walking home from their meeting, the author asks, "*Was she a nutcase or some kind of saint? I wondered. Was I, with my limited vision, capable of judging? Is sainthood perfection, or is surrendering our imperfections to be transformed into something that remains invisible to most of the rest of the world?*"

During her yearlong participation in the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults program, Ms. King came to understand that "Catholicism is centered in, and submits to, and bows in awe before mystery ..." As she is formed as a Catholic, Ms. King likewise begins to bow in awe before the mystery of her life, and her long, courageous surrender to God's love. She claims the authority to speak "as a human being, as a Catholic" simply because of her love. "One day, in the cool of the garden, like Mary Magdalene, I will meet him, and cry, 'Rabboni!' and fall into his arms, so that every moment on earth is a preparation to be worthy of that."

*Redeemed* gives evidence that Heather King has been a faithful steward of her gifts, her love and her suffering. She has written a book that will help

others prepare to recognize Jesus in the cool of the garden and fall into his arms.

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