

THE CUP RUNNETH OVER

Gisela H. Kreglinger, *The Spirituality of Wine*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2016.

“Wine should be reserved for contemplatives,” claims Gisela Kreglinger (97). A well-crafted wine is subtle, complex, and ought to command one’s attention. It takes the patience and discipline of a contemplative to truly appreciate its richness, she explains. Yet fine wines and contemplative prayer can be mystifying to the uninitiated. Does this make Kreglinger a kind of spiritual wine snob? To the contrary, her hope with *The Spirituality of Wine* is that readers—especially those with little familiarity with Christian theology—might be introduced to some central elements of Christian spirituality through a deepened appreciation of wine. Her aim in this book is to use the attractiveness of one to uncover the beauty and power of the other.

The author herself grew up with a unique opportunity to appreciate both subjects of this study. Kreglinger, a Lutheran, was raised on a small vineyard in Bavaria, which her family has owned and operated since the seventeenth century. In the preface she describes the childhood work she and her siblings did at the winery, and recounts the experience that first helped her grasp the connection between her faith and her family’s livelihood. At her confirmation service at the local church, as she received from the chalice for the first time, she was surprised to discover that this wine was in fact a product of the family vineyard. Rather than something new and foreign to her, it “smelled and tasted like home” (xiii). This experience revealed to Kreglinger the spiritual delight that gave greater purpose to her family’s labor of love. When Kreglinger turns to the history of Christianity, one is made to realize her experience is by no means unique. Benedictine nuns first developed viticulture in Kreglinger’s home region around the year 600 AD—precisely for the sake of the wine’s liturgical use.

European monasteries were responsible for significant advances in wine production throughout the medieval and early-modern periods. And the half-million acres of vineyards found today in California? We have eighteenth-century Spanish Franciscans to thank for those, as they cultivated the first vineyards. As soon as these friars established their missions in California's fertile valleys, they began to craft wines to use for the celebration of the Mass (61).

The crucial role of religious orders in the history of wine-making is not the motivation for Kreglinger's claim about wine being the purview of contemplatives, however. She instead seeks to use wine and wine-drinking to communicate a vision of the Christian life, one organized around gratitude, joy, fellowship, and an appreciation of God's creation. She writes:

If wine is indeed a special gift from God, then it should be enjoyed prayerfully. Drinking wine at its best is like prayer. We respond to God by enjoying his gifts and allowing wine to instill within us a sense of wonder, not just for the wine but even more for the generous giver of such a lavish gift. Wine calls us to worship. (97)

Throughout the book, Kreglinger provides much material to contemplate. Yet *The Spirituality of Wine* moves at a much swifter pace than the author wishes her readers to proceed through a glass of wine. This creates some tension between the book's purpose and one's reading experience. The first hundred pages, for example, cover tens of thousands of years of history. In Part I, labelled "Sustenance," Kreglinger begins with a chapter that catalogues references to wine and vineyards in the Scriptures. This compilation is itself quite a feat, considering that in the Bible there are more references to the vine—and its fermented product, wine—than to any other plant. She then considers the role of wine in the history of the Church and in the liturgy, respectively. An impressive amount of historical data is brought together in these chapters, along with a number of delightful quotations (a new

favorite of mine belongs to St. John Chrysostom: “If the devil merely sees you returning from the master’s banquet, he flees faster than any wind... If you show him a tongue stained with the precious blood, he will not be able to make a stand” [80]). But because of Kreglinger’s desire to draw together a rich array of materials, no one Scriptural passage or historical episode can be savored for long. What the book offers is a tasting, where a full jeroboam is in order (King Jeroboam I, from 1 Kings and from whom the massive jeroboam bottle receives its name, goes without mention in the book—a rare omission).

The broad historical overview also means that gaps emerge. In her discussion of Church history, the author attempts to characterize the early and medieval Church as ambivalent to the senses—the same senses with which we experience the many delights of God’s creation, among them the fruit of the vine. She associates this ambivalence with the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition in particular, characterizing Aristotle’s anthropology as exhibiting a “deep suspicion of the five senses with respect to the pursuit of knowledge” (106). To the contrary, no ancient philosopher appreciated the work that the senses do more than Aristotle. And, in a simile Kreglinger would sincerely appreciate, St. Thomas describes how philosophy is like the water which is transformed into the wine of theology (*Super Boethium de Trinitate*, article 3).

The pace of the book does slow in the second half, as the focus shifts to Kreglinger’s reflections upon a number of subjects related to wine culture, such as the role of the vintner as a quasi-theologian, evidence for the health benefits of wine, and the problem of overindulgence and addiction. These chapters are organized under the heading of “Sustainability.” In their common emphasis on themes such as craftsmanship over industrial processing, as well as social unity over isolated self-indulgence and waste, one recognizes spiritual insights reminiscent of those found in Pope Francis’ recent encyclical, *Laudato Si’*. This is not Kreglinger’s stated intention, but it is interesting to notice how she uses wine to

explore matters related to human ecology that are similar to those treated by the Holy Father. At the same time, Part II reinforces that this book is indeed concerned with the development of a spirituality of wine—something distinct from a consideration of wine as an image or trope for the Christian spiritual life. This difference in emphasis distinguishes *The Spirituality of Wine* from a title like Paul Murray's *The New Wine of Dominican Spirituality: A Drink Called Happiness* (2006), where the goods of the earth are never considered as their own end, but always as a means by which the reader's attention is directed to the divine. Because of her lifelong passion for wine, and her broader social and economic concerns, Kreglinger's approach is different.

Overall, *The Spirituality of Wine* is a unique vintage. It serves as a testament to God's supreme goodness, and it inspires reflection on the ways in which one's appreciation of creation draws one closer to the Creator. For indeed, as the Psalmist proclaims, wine gladdens the heart (Ps 104:15), especially when it moves the heart and mind to contemplate the Giver.

Br. Jordan Zajac entered the Order of Preachers in 2013. Before joining the Order, he attended the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where he received a doctorate in English Literature, specializing in Shakespearean drama.