

## Book Review

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**Elavathingal, Sebastian. *Handiworks of God: Art of Spiritual Life and Religious Formation*. Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2020. pp. xxxiv+198. ISBN 978-81-946576-5-1.**

The monograph, *Handiworks of God: Art of Spiritual Life and Religious Formation* is an accomplished work by Sebastian Elavathingal on the theme of human, religious, and priestly formation, a *vade mecum*, to be treasured by all involved in the art of imparting and receiving spiritual formation. The book is an outcome of the author's study and experience of Christian religious art and acquaintance with religious formation. It is deemed to fill the vacuum of literature regarding creativity in religious formation and religious life. It is equally useful for those who follow Jesus Christ in discipleship as well as those who are involved in preparing people to religious life.

The book is in the series of Dharmaram Publications and brought out at the behest of Vinayasadhana Institute of Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bengaluru as a source book. It evolved as a series of the 'Canisius Endowment Lectures' delivered by Dr Sebastian Elavathingal at Dharmaram Pontifical Athenaeum in August 2019.

The book is adorned with a befitting Foreword by the renowned artist and theologian, Sri Jyoti Sahi. According to Jyoti Sahi, "it is an exclusive book that reveals the amazing complementarity of artistic creativity and spiritual formation in priestly and religious life."

The theme of the book is creativity in spiritual life, considering religious formation as an art in which a person is transformed and conformed to the Image of Christ. The author has looked into the fine details of the subject treated in the different chapters of the book, concluding it with a strong, positive aspiration that it is the unfolding of the Christ-image that takes place in every instance of formation, effected in every disciple of Christ. This transformation is extended to the entire creation with the cosmic manifestation of the Image of Christ.

The exposition, spread over eleven chapters, summarily overviews the challenges to religious life today and shows the hindrances to a creative life in communities where religious life is destined to be joyful and beautiful (Chapter 1). In the subsequent chapters the author delves into the meaning of creativity (Chapter 2) and shows how human life can be changed by a creative attitude towards life (Chapter 3). Chapter 4 describes the possibility and scope of a creative religious life, by affirming the values of the Incarnation and the visibility and tangibility of God in Jesus Christ. The 'seeing' of Jesus kindles in a disciple of Christ the fire of the Holy Spirit, which inspires and enthuses him/her to imitate Jesus (Chapter 5). The transformation of the material realities into spiritual experiences takes place according to the vision of the Image of God (Chapter 6). The creative methods are illustrated by examples of their applications in various kinds of art, citing some of the celebrated artists and sculptors of all times and their masterpieces. All formation is aimed at conformation to the Christ-image, the ultimate of all human perfection as revealed in the person of Christ and presented to us by God the Father for 'model.' It is the basis of a Christian imagination and Christian imitation (Chapter 7).

Our human life provides all the raw materials needed to undergo transformation by the creative touch of the hands of God and His inspired and purposeful strokes. He is the divine Artist at whose hands the materials are transformed into fine pieces of art. Thus every disciple participates in the beauty and holiness of Christ. This process entails the paradox of beauty in the Christian sense. The holy Cross is the symbol of this paradox of humiliation and glory manifested in the cosmic Image of Christ (Chapter 8). Here the author borrows substantially from the Pauline theology of the liberation of the whole creation effected in and through the person of Jesus Christ.

Chapter 9 elaborates the creative dimension of the vows. The vowed life of the religious consists in weaving the fabric of a religious community, celebrating communion. Chapter 10 establishes that the religious community is a creative space for communion. The book concludes with an illustration of the beauty of holiness, as exemplified in the lives of Saint Chavara Kuriakose Elias and the Servant of God, Fr. Canisius CMI, showing how these

masters achieved beauty and joy in the pursuit of Christian spirituality. The author analytically exposes how these two holy men subjected themselves to the Will of God, underwent transformation and how their art of life became masterpieces of holiness and beauty (Chapter 11).

The book is very lucidly written and can be used by all 'formators and formees' as a guide-book. The perception of spiritual transformation from an artist-theologian's point of view is a novel approach to religious formation and spiritual life.

The handiwork of the Creator reveals the purpose and will and the exemplary craftsmanship of the Creator. It is the Spirit of God who guides history to its fulfilment. Call it evolution or salvation, the whole creation is in travail, yearning for perfection in its form, existence and purposefulness. Human formation is not untouched by these historical upheavals; humanity too undergoes significant transformation as testified by civilizations past and present.

Pauline vision of the salvation of all creation, in its manifestation of the Christ-person as the Art of God, is manifested at the centre of the universe in the Christ-Image. The author elucidates every articulation by profusely quoting St. Paul, St. John Paul II, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, and Pope Francis. The recent papal teachings on art and beauty form the backbone of the work. The author can unequivocally claim the assertions he makes based on his vast experience in art and religious formation. It is hoped that the book will get a wide circulation and adulatory readership.

Professor Dr Anto Amarnad unveils the *Handiworks of God* in the Introduction and presents the book to the readers with an exclamatory note the work rightly deserves. Dharmaram Publications has brought out the book of more than 200 pages in attractive layout and readable print.