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An Ode to the “Free Book Shelf”

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An Ode to the “Free Book Shelf”

By Henry Eising

It is rumored the younger generation does not know those solid joys and lasting pleasures in those ancient treasures. O tempora, O mores!

— William Dallmann, *My Life*

When a new mound of books begins to accumulate in some obscure corner of our campus, it is as though new life is stirring. There is excitement when it is brought to our attention that some seminarian of uncommon fortune has been given a set of the Ante-Nicene Fathers. Our ears prick up at the hushed mention of some Ancient Christian Commentary volumes that have been acquired, which have also—blessedly—been made available for borrowing and perusal. Sometimes, seminarians begin to see the campus in terms of who has which books, and where among the vast network of people and shelves they are located. Indeed, we love our many and various libraries.

Libraries! How marvelous they are—whether great or small, tended by magus, monk, duke, or lowly student. It is rather an odd truth that libraries have been at the center of so many of history's great twists of fate. We need not speak here of the adventure and intrigue surrounding Sinaiticus and Vaticanus. How wildly do the wheels of the ages turn, and so often in such close proximity to so many books! One wonders how the mighty course of the West might have been charted, had we not been witness to the accursed flames which burned in Alexandria, long ago. What sandstorm swallowed Eusebius's books, which had been bequeathed to him by the old sage, Origen? What tribe of voracious worms ate up the bulk of the fabled Hexapla? And oh! To sigh with Chemnitz as he caressed the treasured tomes in the Silver Library at Königsberg! Those, as the Second Martin himself would say, were “days of clover.”

And here, we today on our little plot of earth, sigh in our dear

libraries, where innumerable storied volumes are working, playing, and resting. And we do dream—in flights of fancy—of the stories they might tell us, if they could say more than what is pressed into their pages...which of their brethren were lost on the doomed *Amalia*? How many of them were uncrated by a young W. H. T. Dau in the old Jefferson Avenue building, long after the log cabin was no longer sufficient? How many of those books now dwelling in Hasse saw their kinsmen carried off, when the hall was ransacked by the confused and wayward Seminex-ers? And let us not forget that there are also the professors' libraries...what rarities and oddities are shelved in those remote caches? The students, too, we may hope, possess treasures of their own. Perhaps there are more books than there are bricks on this campus.

There is one “library” on the campus that is especially dear to this author’s heart. And apart from the fact that the humble library under consideration is where the author met his wife, it displays many delights and virtues that ought to be touted. This little piece of writing aims to garner appreciation for this unassuming and ever-changing home for books.

Pressed against a wall between two doorways, a pair of lowly bookshelves stand. From these, the books watch seminarians going out and coming in, all to study among Hasse’s formidable shelves—or to retreat from studying in that noble setting. But our in-between and wayside library is nothing grand. The books which call it home are drifters. They have been cast off in fits of pragmatism. Downsizing has sent them hither and yon, until we find them and are left to wonder what lonely studies these volumes have called home. What weary pastor has pulled them from the shelf in an hour of emptiness? What lately refreshed pastor has pored over them in a fit of unbridled curiosity and delight? What is remembered of them by their former owners? Why were they ever kept? Why were they discarded? These things we might ask of any book which has found itself on Concordia Seminary’s beloved “Free Book Shelf.”

As we know, not all the batches of books that make their way onto those humble shelves are to be cherished. Indeed, oftentimes, we are grieved to see that the shelves are “dry”—filled only with outdated self-help books, comic artifacts from the Church Growth fad, or profuse wads of “how-to” literature. But such spells serve to send our thoughts and imaginings forward to the next rich crop, whenever it may appear, to be greeted with wonder and delight. Always, we wait in quiet expectation for the next interesting item or collection to be cast upon the shelves, as if waiting for a rain-shower to water a patch of fertile ground that has been planted.

This wayside inn for wandering books has supplied my own shelves with rich food. The Free Book Shelf is responsible for some of the dearest

treasures in my library. These select volumes are not particularly rare, nor are they exceptionally useful, or even pretty. Rather, what gives them their worth (a worth that I alone have attached to them) is their provenance. By these humble books, once left to the winds of fortune in their liminal, out-of-the-way orphanage, I have been ushered into the studies and homes of men I never knew. I have been able to sit at the feet of teachers I never heard speak. I am invited to imagine and reflect upon days gone by in the Church, and on our own campus, which has itself been a waystation—and final resting place—for so many drifting books.

Permit me to tell you of two treasures now, which have fallen into my hands by way of the selfless Free Book Shelf.

The first dear little treasure is entitled *Monumental Brasses*. What on earth is a monumental brass? When I found the book, I was ready to take it simply because the title was so intriguing. What a strange artifact! It was printed in London in 1890, and bears an inscription by the author, an Anglican priest who was, among other things, the secretary of the Cambridge University Association of Brass Collectors. The “brasses” in question, I have since learned, refer to life-sized, richly inscribed slabs of brass which were used to cover the graves of English knights, nobles, and clergy between the 13th and 16th centuries. The volume contains plates depicting these brasses, which are mostly portraits of the aforementioned personages, and are all pleasing and interesting to behold.

As agreeable as the subject matter already was, this book garnered even more curiosity because it was among some books that had the name “Feuerhahn” written inside the front cover. Here was a name that aroused my interest. I wish that I could have known the sainted Rev. Dr. Ronald Feuerhahn. If you listen for his name, you will hear it, perhaps most likely when a professor speaks of Sasse, of things confessional, or of things liturgical. It is easy enough to read his writings and hear recordings of his marvelous sermons. But Dr. Feuerhahn’s book that I lifted from the shelf would tell me more of this great pastor, churchman, and teacher. After I picked up the book about brasses, I learned that the Feuerhahns had made a hobby of collecting rubbings from these monuments when they lived in England. Some of their rubbings are now housed in Concordia Historical Institute. Did they pack this book along as they travelled from site to site? Even now, as I page through the antique guide, I am transported to the countryside surrounding a little Lutheran parish in Cardiff, at the end of the earth, back in those heady days when the Missouri Synod was putting down roots in England—of all places—and I am filled with wonder.

The second and final treasure which I share with you here is the book that is perhaps most dear to my heart out of all the volumes in my per-

sonal library. Two Decembers ago, the shelves of the Free Book Rack were weighed down with abundant contributions. In those days, this would occur not infrequently, and the shelves would be so full that portable racks would have to be wheeled out into the passageway in order to contain all of the books that were being offered up. On this particular occasion, the collection was a farrago of obscure humor and cartoon books, thrown among English travel guides from the 1960's, Kingsley Amis's *On Drink*, paperback guides to engaging in polite conversation, and a number of other "head-scratchers." As I pawed through the odd assortment, my hand alighted on a pocket-sized and beat-up poetry anthology entitled *The Poet's Way*. When I looked inside the front cover of faded green cloth, a label placed there by the former owner provided the key to the unusual mixture of books which had found themselves upon the shelf.

The label read,

N. E. NAGEL
CONCORDIA COLLEGE
UNLEY, ADELAIDE
SOUTH AUSTRALIA

I was stunned. I flipped through the volume and saw that the margins were filled with the sainted professor's unmistakable Carolingian miniscule. These poems had been lovingly read and reread. Here was a treasure of treasures—college notes from one of the seminary's most beloved and memorable teachers, a man whose heart and mind were graciously distributed among a blessed generation of Missouri pastors. To this day, Dr. Nagel's fingerprints are ubiquitous upon the many surfaces of the Church's life, and he retains an exalted place within the hearts of many of the Church's people. When I page through his college poetry textbook, I am reminded of my own humble gratitude for Dr. Nagel and his many gifts.

These are not the only things which have fallen into my possession by way of the Free Book Shelf. These are not the only books collected there with such stories and sentiments attached to them. I am sure that there are many such books around campus. For my part, the books described here each urge me to think on my gratitude for these faithful men, and for the many other saints who have guided me upon the way. I am reminded of what I have inherited from them theologically. I think of all that they gave to the Church, and to the ministerium which, prayerfully, I will be blessed to enter soon. Above all these things, I am reminded that I am bound to these men by more than a dusty codex which has taken up residence on my

humble shelf. These men taught Jesus Christ. They lived to speak of Christ crucified for the sins of the whole world—for their sins, and for mine. Like me, and all of us, they, too, were *and remain* members of Christ's mystical body. And for that body, I am eternally grateful.