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The Autobiography of an American Peace Bishop

***Wise and Otherwise: The Life and Times of a Cottonpicking Texas Bishop.* Leroy T. Matthiesen. Self-Published. Printed by Custom Printing Company, 1st edition, 2005, paper, 235 pp., ASIN: B004N2P3BC.**

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In *Wise and Otherwise: The Life and Times of a Cottonpicking Texas Bishop*, the late bishop Leroy T. Matthiesen provides an autobiography about his life as a priest and bishop in the diocese of Amarillo, Texas. Initially published in 2005, his autobiography was written in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terror attacks and the United States' subsequent war on terror. Matthiesen reflects on these events and interprets his lived experiences through this lens. Revisiting this book eighteen years later, it serves as a powerful reminder that the intra- and extra-ecclesial struggles we face on a daily basis are not new phenomena. Being known for his firm opposition to nuclear arms, his book strikes a particular nerve in today's world. With the Russian invasion of Ukraine omnipresent, a renewed fear of nuclear warfare has emerged. In addition, the continuous struggles within the Catholic Church remind us that a firm stance toward peace, justice, and unity in light of God's eternal grace is of utmost significance. Matthiesen's life is a model of how to live out these virtues.

Moreover, one should not limit his autobiography as a sole testament to social justice. Matthiesen was an eyewitness to the changes of the Second Vatican Council. In his autobiography, the reader gets rare insights into how these changes affected the priesthood, how some priests outright rejected these changes and, as a result, left the priesthood. Matthiesen, who was more enthusiastic about the Council's changes, documents these times in a manner that also represents his life as a priest and disciple of Christ: with grace, humility, and charity. Bishop Matthiesen structured his autobiography in four parts. Part I discusses his background and early childhood in the Texas Panhandle. Parts II and III discuss his path toward the priesthood, his life as a priest, and as bishop of the diocese of Amarillo. A particular concern is given to his firm stance against the *Pantex* factory, which was commissioned to assemble nuclear weapons for the United States. His call for workers to seek a new employer received immense media attraction in the 1980s. Part IV concludes as a reflection of the changes that the Second Vatican Council has brought, how the church has responded and is in continuous need to respond to the challenges of her times, including the war against terrorism, the decline of seminarians, and the growing number of people leaving the church.

Leroy T. Matthiesen was the son of a cotton-farming family, a sibling of seven, and a grandson of German-American immigrants. Growing up in West Texas, he learned how to love the farm life, helping his family wherever he was needed. He described his parents as very caring and protective of their children, trying to shield them from external factors which remained out of their control.

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Matthiesen recognized his family's struggles only in a few instances, such as when government officials came to their farm to shoot some of their cattle due to the National Recovery Act.

One of several themes that run through his autobiography is his search to find his own voice. Most vividly, he remembered such soul-searching through different names his family, friends, and acquaintances have given him throughout his life. For example, at his baptism, the local priest objected to his first name, calling it "unsaintly" and "French" (p. 10). During his time at the seminary, his fellow seminarians called him "Matt" or "Little Matt." Lastly, he remembered a final change of name, outlining the growing sense of responsibility he felt for himself and others: Father.

Each name corresponds to a specific period of his life. As Leroy, he grew up in a traditional Catholic household in the 1920s and 1930s in rural West Texas. He learned the ins and outs of farming and developed a deep love for the Catholic church. He looked up to his local priests and, therefore, desired to become a priest in the early stages of his life. During this time, one can sense the innocence of a young boy, fascinated by the things that surround him the most: the rural life, the authority of the priest, and a deep sense of familial belonging.

Leroy entered the minor seminary of the Pontifical College Josephinum as a teenager at the age of fourteen. Life at the Josephinum was rigid, structured, and in line with the pre-Vatican II era of the "Church triumphant." "Little Matt" described a life framed by discipline and punctuality, a love toward academic learning, an openness toward others, and a worldview following the dogmas of a hierarchical church. At times, Matthiesen compares his traditional seminarian education with his real-life experiences as a parish priest in Texas. And quite often, he describes them as at odds. The discrepancy between theory and the lived experiences of the parishioners was likely a factor in his continuous search to find his voice. And in retrospect, his description of sexual education at the minor seminary, or the lack thereof, as a fourteen-year-old teenager leaves the reader wondering about the nature of seminary education back then and today. In this respect, bishop Matthiesen's book is much more than a biography of a social justice bishop. It is a telling historical record of the church and clerical education of the early and mid-twentieth century that challenges the reader in many ways.

Since bishop Matthiesen was most known for his peace activism, his journey toward pacifism is another theme in his autobiography. Early in his book, he described several instances with guns that served as points of conversion toward his anti-arms and pacifist virtues. Initially, he recalled that owning a gun on a Texas farm was not uncommon. On Christmas—out of all days—his parents gifted him a shotgun rifle as a child. He developed a strong relationship with his rifle. Most telling was his story of when his parents' house burned down; all he could think of was the well-being of his rifle. Yet, his relationship with guns changed when he shot a stray cat walking around the farm. Not firing a fatal shot, he saw the pain and misery he had caused with such a rifle. A second experience, when he accidentally fired a gun, not knowing that it was cocked and barely missed his friend's head, was another frightful epiphany. The climax of his conversion, however, occurred when he witnessed a young man being accidentally shot and killed by a gun.

Matthiesen's anti-nuclear arms stance is grounded in the aftermaths of World War II and the emerging Cold War. Matthiesen initially supported the United States' entry to the war, as the

seminary taught that the war met the Just War criteria. During the war, he experienced the changing landscape in the Texas Panhandle. Farmers were forced to sell their properties and cattle to build factories that supported the ongoing war efforts. After the war, the government refused to return the land to the farmers. Instead, it continued to purchase land and properties and, ultimately, planned to build an MX Missile System in the area. Matthiesen firmly rejected such plans, saying that they would "bring in a boom-town atmosphere, then leave us with ghost towns ... Worst of all, when it is finished, you will have made us a primary target for enemy bombs" (p. 132-133). His request and point of view were clear: "I do not ask you to move the MX Missile System elsewhere. I ask you to forget it entirely" (p. 133).

It is important to note that Bishop Matthiesen never portrayed himself as the leader or frontrunner of the anti-nuclear arms movement. In fact, he admitted that he was "temporized" (p. 135) for quite some time, not knowing how to adequately respond to the issues at hand, while others have already staged protests against nuclear arms in other major cities. It was those precedents that encouraged him to become more outspoken about the scandal of nuclear warfare. However, a statement in the West Texas Catholic newspaper of the Archdiocese of Amarillo turned the tide of how people looked at the bishop from then on. In this newspaper, Matthiesen denounced the arms race and urged employees of *Pantex* – the factory that assembled nuclear warheads – "to consider what they are doing, to resign from such activities, and to seek employment in peaceful pursuits" (p. 140).

The call for employees to lay down their jobs caused immense media attention then. News agencies and newspapers began to report about the "rebel" priest, and journalists rushed to the Amarillo area to receive a statement or even a picture of Matthiesen, "the radical," as some people began to call him. But radical was far from what he had in mind. In his speech to students and faculty members at West Texas Student University, he explained his points of view, which were deeply personal. His upbringing with guns and the tragedies he experienced, World War II, and the devastating force of the atomic bomb at Hiroshima and Nagasaki -- all of this convinced him that nuclear arms do not make the world a safer but a more dangerous place.

Matthiesen's statement to *West Texas Catholic* was timely and prophetic as it was released when the National Conference of Catholic Bishops approved a committee to draft a pastoral letter on war and peace. "The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response" was released on May 3, 1983, and bore much resemblance with Matthiesen's standpoints against nuclear weapons.

That Bishop Matthiesen's pacifism was not restricted to anti-nuclear activism is outlined in the last part of his autobiography. Here, Matthiesen does not follow a straightforward autobiographical approach. Instead, it serves more of a reflection on concerns that the church and society faced at the time of the book's publication. And again, the book emphasizes how deeply prophetic, radical, and sensitive the bishop was. For example, he laments our throwaway culture and our wasteful use of fossil fuels, a theme that gained prominence thanks to Pope Francis' social encyclical *Laudato Si'*. At the same time, he was radical in supporting lifting the status of celibacy for priests and allowing married men to receive the sacrament of holy orders. Lastly, he was sensitively aware of the systemic intricacies of racism in the United States.

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But, at times, Matthiesen showed signs of clerical naïveté when he discussed the church's sexual abuse scandal. Asking the rhetorical question of what to do with the priests who have sexually molested children and served a lengthy prison sentence, his response was clear:

"I believe the bishops should consider providing an isolated facility where these priests be supervised, allowed to concelebrate the Eucharist, pray the Liturgy of the Hours together, and live out their days without posing a further threat to children and young people. ... We ordained them in good conscience, but we cannot in good conscience now wash them off our hands" (p. 173-174).

One can understand his point of view, especially after reading his autobiography, as it follows the trajectory of his time as a priest and bishop: encountering life with grace, humility, and charity. Nonetheless, one may dare ask if such a response may foster the clericalism that Matthiesen was adamantly against over the last forty years of his ministry.

Overall, *Wise and Otherwise* is a well-written and easily accessible autobiography about a bishop who fully committed himself to the life of Christ and toward a work of social justice. This book is not only a historical document about the immediate social, political, and religious challenges of a church in the post-Vatican II era. It also offers valuable lessons on how Catholics can become prophetic witnesses against social injustices in today's world. The book will interest scholars, activists, and people interested in Catholic social activism alike and can serve as a valuable resource in the undergraduate classroom, parishes, and ministry work.