Check for updates

Simone de Beauvoir (95) and G. K. Chesterton (123). In that regard, an index would have been a plus for the book. Another fresh characteristic of M.'s commentary seldom encountered in scholarship: M. acknowledges quite frankly when he does not understand a passage (see comments on 3:14–15 and on the famous cruces of 5:5 and 11:7–10).

In sum, the commentary is concise, ecclesial, energetic, and deeply personal in a very refreshing way. M.'s personality springs from the page but never distracts from first-century Corinth or Paul's passionate commitment to his churches.

Marc Rastoin, S.J.
Centre Sèvres, Paris

Thorns in the Flesh: Illness and Sanctity in Late Ancient Christianity. By Andrew Crislip. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2012. Pp. 238. $65.

True to the dictum "You can't tell a book by its cover," the dust jacket of Crislip's academic volume displays a dramatic 16th-century painting of the stigmata of St. Francis of Assisi, who lived in the twelfth century. But the book is about the ascetic practices of early Christian monks who flourished in the fourth to the sixth centuries. Not a stigmatist among them and, unlike Francis, many lived to a ripe old age. Anthony of Egypt, for example, the first true *monachos*, lived alone in the Egyptian desert to the age of 105, if Athanasius's *Life of Anthony* is to be believed. According to the anonymous *History of the Monks in Egypt*, written in the 390s, the monks' health and longevity were due not to their abstemious diet and ascetical practices, but were seen as rewards from God for having renounced the world, fought off temptations, and devoted themselves to spiritual rather than carnal concerns.

Ancient folk wisdom regarded a healthy long life as a divine reward for virtuous living, a notion found in both the OT and NT and dramatized in the early chapters of Genesis. The *Life of Adam and Eve*, an ancient work that amplifies the biblical narrative, elaborates on the consequences of the first sin, including pain and disease in addition to toil and death. Saintly superheroes living in the desert seemed to embody the belief that spiritual health and physical well-being went hand in hand.

But not always. Just as the author of Job confronted the problem of why bad things happen to good people, early Christian writers and the monks themselves had to figure out why asceticism was not always rewarded with positive physical consequences. Suffering and sickness forced thoughtful Christians to construct a more nuanced interpretation of health and its opposite than did the authors of Proverbs and the Psalms. The desert fathers in particular faced an existential dilemma that was peculiar to monks: "On the one hand, illness functions as a component of asceticism: it accomplishes many of the same goals as other practices that are more commonly called 'ascetic.' On the other hand, illness undermines asceticism" when it reduces the ability to focus on God (24).

Having thus presented the problem, C. examines a number of early texts that grapple with it. Besides the works already mentioned, he draws on the letters of Anthony, Pachomius, and some lesser-known desert fathers for whom the "great wound" inflicted on humanity was the loss of primal unity between the Creator and creation, resulting in illness and temptation (51–53). Eating only vegetables and bread, drinking only water and a little wine, abstaining from bathing and sex, and sleeping on a straw mat were prescribed for both spiritual and physical well-being. "The health of the monastic thus offers the observer a window into the monk's soul and an indication of his or her ascetic merit" (66). Around this theme are woven a number of monastic hagiographies, including those of Paul of Thebes, Paul of Concordia, and Onnophrius of Egypt.

As time went on, however, and as hagiography yielded to something closer to biography, writers had to deal with actual experiences of sickness and suffering. The ascetic life can be looked upon as "choosing illness" (81–83), insofar as one chooses discomfort and disease rather than a comfortable and easy life. While this choice was sometimes carried to extremes, as in the case of Simeon the Stylite who famously lived atop a pillar for 37 years, other figures like Basil of Caesarea took a more common-sense approach. His monastic rules counseled eating enough to do God's work and forbade any self-mortification that resulted in illness or injury. Likewise, Evagrius of Pontus, no amateur in the arena of self-denial, labeled the desire for extreme asceticism a form of gluttony. And Amma Syncletica, having experienced the harmful consequences of reckless fasting earlier in her life, advised moderation and self-control to the women in her care.

With the Great Coptic *Life of Our Father Pachomius*, the history of monastic asceticism takes a different turn. Pachomius was chronically ill during most of his life, and so his biographer was forced to move beyond simple identification of health and holiness and develop "a vision of enduring illness as a marker of sanctity" (109). His six major bouts with bodily ailments ended with his death in his late 50s, which was much too young to fit the Antonian model of saintly longevity, so his suffering was reinterpreted as a sort of martyrdom, a form of "humble servitude, patiently enduring the world's endemic disease" (112).

C.'s last chapter solidifies the transformation of meaning that took place in the Christian interpretation of illness from being a result of the expulsion from Paradise to being a form of divine testing that can bring the sufferer closer to God. Letters from two older monks to a younger one in constant poor health are almost modern in their counsel to rise from despair, avoid anxiety, and seek spiritual transcendence.

This second volume based on C.'s research into health and healthcare in late antiquity (the first being about monasteries as the prototypes of hospitals) is a valuable addition to any serious theological library.

Joseph Martos
Aquinas Institute of Theology, St. Louis