

Book Review: *An Astonishing Secret*

By Monsignor Tony Doherty

For the last thirty years Irish-born priest-writer Daniel O'Leary has brought his fresh perspective to those of us struggling to make sense of a traditional faith, frequently battered from all sides, in what has been described as a post-Christian age. His books, such as *Travelling Light* and *Passion for the Possible*, are full of story and poetry, as well as a touch of his special Celtic imagination. They have made uncommon sense for contemporary believers - sometimes also for half-believers, or even once-upon-a-time believers.

Early this year O'Leary published (arguably) his most powerful book - *An Astonishing Secret*. At its heart the reflections it contains are about the wonder of the evolving creation we are caught up in, and the mystery of what it means to be human: the two big Christian themes - Creation and Incarnation.

Astonishing Secret contains forty-nine reflections, all grounded in selective extracts from Pope Francis' pace-setting 2015 letter on the sacredness of the environment, *Laudato Si*. O'Leary brings his own insights to the Pope's words. A typical question - "How can our image of God shrunken over the ages, be big enough to cope with the dimension of the universe as we know it today?"

Let's admit it, many Catholics and other believers are profoundly confused. Caught between faith in an old church which is slowly splintering, and simultaneously, a stubborn resistance not to let it go. They search for seeds of a deeper faith that could communicate a sense of creation large enough to accommodate the findings of science. O'Leary locates those promising seeds in the writings of some of the impressive minds in Catholic tradition: French Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin, Passionist priest Thomas Berry, and contemporary woman writers such as Ilia Delio ofm, Judy Canato, Elizabeth Johnson.

The election of 'Papa Franco', the pope from Latin America, provided further evidence of a few new seedlings. His papal letter *Laudato Si*, contains three themes:

- Care for our common home - planet earth.
- The mystery of living in an immense universe.
- A new appreciation of the depth of what it means to be human.

In the book's opening page, O'Leary makes a challenging claim: "Once we equate God with life itself a transformation takes place in the way we believe". *Laudato Si* speaks of a God at the 'burning heart of creation'.

This fragile planet of ours stands in great danger. It is not only our consumerist lifestyle that is at the heart of this danger, O'Leary claims. More importantly, it is the way we understand ourselves at depth, and how we appreciate the wonder of the creation in which we live, move and have our being.

*This world is too dangerous
for anything but truth;
too small for anything but love.*

William Sloane Coffin

Think carefully before reading *An Astonishing Secret*. It breaks open many of the religious frameworks of the past, and opens the reader up to new ideas about the sacredness of our life, and a faith that can genuinely transform.

Recommended as valuable reading for springtime.