



ETHICS IN CONVERSATION

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The Art of Living in Season

Sylvie Vanhoozer, *The Art of Living in Season: A Year of Reflections for Everyday Saints* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Formatio, 2024)

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This book artfully brings together two of my favorite themes: the church calendar and ordinary living. When local customs are woven into a celebration of Christ, Christology has reached its culmination.

The whole purpose of Christology (at least Christology done well) is not to stay in its borders.

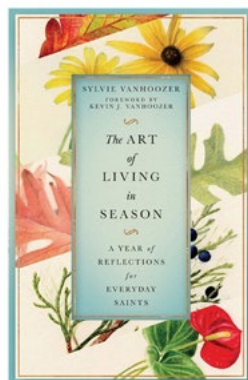
Christology should never, *can never*, be nice and tidy. It can never be hemmed in. Its edges are always blurring. Its borders are like those of a country garden (rather than a formal one), where the flowers are ever running into the lawn and climbing the weathervane to encompass even more of life, even more of the view. Christology transgresses.

Where one wouldn't expect this kind of riotous Christology is in a small book chronicling a French custom, originating in one of its smaller (and poorer) provinces (perhaps nondescript enough originally that it was

simply named "Provence"). But that, of course, is precisely its insight. This is where Christology is often best on display, in the elemental smells, sights, colors of a region formerly left to itself. It is here where things grow from the Christ-terroir of all things and all places.

Sylvie Vanhoozer is an artist, musician, and theologian. (As most couples know, if one is married to a theologian, one unavoidably becomes – perhaps quite by happy accident – a theologian too. Kevin Vanhoozer writes a wonderful forward to his wife's book). Hailing from France and having

been set down in that sometimes-dreary land of suburban Illinois, she has spent a lifetime reflecting upon the traditions of her home country. (One wonders whether it is only because of this displacement that she could have been able to have the space and longing to write this book). The tradition through which she takes us on a liturgical journey is that of the *santons* ("saints") – little clay figurines who all journey to the nativity scene set up





in each Provençal home during Advent. But these *santons* are not limited to the traditional figures one would expect – Mary, Joseph, the Three Kings, shepherds, angels – but are comprised primarily of poor French peasants busy with everyday occupations: bakers, the holy fool, Romani travelers, lavender sellers, knife sharpeners who all gather around the manger, awaiting the Christchild. Through these *santons*, Vanhoozer gives us a creative way to interact with a sacred calendar deeply embedded in a culture, yet which still holds an invitation for us in our own.

The first half of the book begins with Advent, and then Christmastide / Epiphany / Candlemas, Lent, Easter and then Pentecost. Each season is led by a particular *santon* who represents an appropriate spiritual posture for the season. (Don't miss the watercolors of each one – exquisite!) Vanhoozer breaks down the seasons into each week, with a "Pause" for reflection and deeper spiritual entry, as well as observations for the weather, seasonal eating, her own personal pilgrimage over the years, and at the end of each chapter – suggestions for an "ordinary saint" such as you and me. The second half of the book ranges into theological reflection created by Ordinary Time, where the "mystery of the everyday" is the business of these clay *santons*. They guide us into the Land, the Table, the Garden, the Marketplace, with Children and the Elderly, and finally into Christ's own presence. This second half is pure gold, and an invitation for us – ordinary saints ourselves – to find our own roles to play in Jesus' story, as we move out of the creche and into our daily lives. Paying attention to our own terroir – with our unique geography and growing seasons and neighbors – is part of this art of living the calendar, and living worship.

In this book, we see Christ taking up residence in a culture, in its creativity, with its poor and in its simplicity. We see Christ fitting himself to the rhythms of ordinary life in Provence, both by being directly celebrated, and also in his role of hallowing life itself. As Vanhoozer explains of this marvelous and centuries-old French tradition:

Yet always in the background lies the Christ child. He is an integral part of this scene as well. Many *Provençaux* may

not talk about him, nor know much about him, yet he still belongs to the scene. His quiet presence hallows the land. He is what renders these clay figurines of plain villagers something special: he makes them little saints, set apart to serve him and his story.

Here we see Christology not just on display, but at work. Christology on display would be content to see a Christchild in the heart of every creche, properly celebrated: "putting the Christ back into Christmas." But this is mistaken at its heart, even if the intentions are good. Good Christology knows that Christ is not content to be celebrated and worshiped, but that God *becomes what he loves*. And not only does he become what he loves, but he lifts what he loves into his own life.

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