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## Review of C.S. Lewis and Don Giovanni Calabria, The Latin Letters of C.S. Lewis

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## *Book Reviews*

C. S. Lewis and Don Giovanni Calabria, *The Latin Letters of C. S. Lewis*, ed. and trans. by Martin Moynihan (South Bend, 2009). 125 pages. \$12.00. ISBN 9781587314551.

This is yet another edition of C. S. Lewis' correspondence with the distinguished Italian Roman Catholic priest Don Giovanni Calabria (1873–1954; beatified in 1988 and canonized in 1999 by Pope John Paul II). Although this volume includes no new material, it does draw attention to these interesting letters. It is somewhat excessive to discuss the history and bibliographical specifications of this edition in light of Brian Murdoch's helpful review in *Literature and Theology* (2010, 24, 1: 91–2); in short, it duplicates the 1989 edition of the letters, including its tiny misprints. Of no small significance, however, the editor has overlooked a 1995 Italian collection of the letters, which seems especially surprising given that the present edition is described as "so far as currently known, the complete text of the Correspondence" (preface) Meanwhile, the 1995 Italian edition includes as many as .six letters missing from this new English edition.<sup>1</sup> If the absence of five of them can be justified (for example, the letters to Dr. Romolo Lodetti and Fr. Luigi Pedrollo, or the Italian letter from Warren Lewis), the absence of a letter from Lewis renders this collection incomplete.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Martin Moynihan is

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<sup>1</sup> Letter of C. S. Lewis to Romolo Lodetti, 31 December 1947; Letter of Don Giovanni Calabria to an unknown person, 25 January 1948; Letter of C. S. Lewis to Don Giovanni Calabria, 25 August 1950; Letter of C. S. Lewis to Luigi Pedrollo, 12 September 1950; Letter of C. S. Lewis to Luigi Pedrollo, 8 January 1958; Letter of Warren Lewis to Luigi Pedrollo, 20 April 1968. The letter of Don Giovanni Calabria from 25 January 1948 was probably not written to C. S. Lewis, which would justify its exclusion from the former English edition mentioned in Murdoch's review.

<sup>2</sup> The text of this letter according to the 1988 edition (156) reads as follows:

Magdalen College,  
Oxford,  
XXV. Aug. 1950

*Dilectissime Pater, venerunt mihi nuper in manus exemplaria quaedam libri mei De Aenig-*

unable to identify Lodetti, mentioned by Lewis in Letter Six, as “the Correspondence gives no further light on who he was” (113n.). The Italian edition, however, provides a letter to him from Lewis that explains the identity and personality of this Veronese physician and mentee of Calabria.

The Latin found in these letters is very simple, so it is rather difficult to make a bad translation. At the same time, it is also artful and beautiful in an especially Latin way, so it is almost impossible to make an adequate translation. Despite this reservation, Moynihan has done an excellent job. He even tries—rather successfully—to convey the composition of the Latin phrase. This translation should thus serve more than an auxiliary purpose, for what is most interesting in these letters is Lewis’ elegant Latin. Two passages from Letter Seven will illustrate his style:

*Apostolus iterum atque iterum jubet ‘gaudete.’ Ipsa naturalis mundi facies jam vere novo renovata proprio modo suo idem jubet.*<sup>3</sup>

*In paupere qui ad meam portam pulsat, in matre aegrotante, in juvene qui consilium meum petit, ipse Dominus adest: ergo ejus pedes lavemus.*<sup>4</sup>

That first passage in translation sounds rather trite and artificial; the second loses its magic of the distance conjured by the medieval picture of *juvenis* consulting with a *magister*, in which we can recognize the relationship between Lewis and his Oxford students.

In fact, this correspondence with a Catholic priest interested in Christian unity provided Lewis with a good opportunity to put his theories into practice: his “mere Christianity” approach to dialogue between parts of the divided church, his passive knowledge of Latin, and, so to speak, a passive remembrance of Western Christendom so sympathetically discussed in his fundamental lecture *De Descriptione Temporum*. An active exploration of the passive knowledge is, perhaps, one of the core characteristics of Lewis’ style and method in general. For a scholar particularly famous for his tendency to introduce the subjects of his studies into works of fiction and to speak Latin with a reanimated Merlin, a meeting with a

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*mate Doloris francogallice versi. Illam linguam, puto, bene intelligis. Quocirca, si tibi placuerit, mittam ad te exemplaria tria, primum tibi, alterum Dom. Lodettio, tertium Dom Arnaboldio. Fac me certiozem si hoc tibi cordi fuerit. Isagogem satis doctam et elegantem addidit quidam Mauriti-  
us Nédoncelle.*

*Omnia omina nunc infausta; placeat Deo haec in melius verti, spectanti haud nostra sed Christi merita. Vale, mi Pater, et semper habe in orationibus tuis*

C. S. Lewis

<sup>3</sup> “The Apostle again and again bids us ‘Rejoice.’ Nature herself bids us do so, the very face of the Earth being now renewed, after its own manner, at the start of Spring.”

<sup>4</sup> “In the poor man who knocks at my door, in my ailing mother, in the young man who seeks my advice, the Lord Himself is present: therefore let us wash His feet.”

live representative of an Old Europe looks like a graceful gift of fortune. It is not surprising, therefore, that Lewis appeared to be a more creative Latin speaker than his Italian correspondent. For Lewis, this correspondence was a chance to participate in the spiritual homeland to which he always felt himself to be a native, while for Calabria it served no more than a practical need for communication. It is especially remarkable that this communication turned into a lifelong affinity and a friendship with a special scholastic flavor between two men who never met (though members of Calabria's congregation sent his photo to Lewis at his request just after their patron's death). Such a long-distance friendship was not exceptional in the case of this English poet of friendly love, well known both for his tractate about friendship and for his friendships in real life.

This collection of letters may be considered as a *kunststück* mainly of interest to Lewis enthusiasts and leisured intellectuals fond of Latin translations of *Winnie the Pooh* and *Harry Potter*. Most of the ideas Lewis exercises here he develops elsewhere with more accuracy and, often, with more confidence. The whole collection may to a considerable degree be regarded as a formal exercise. Without these letters, however, our image of Lewis would be disappointingly incomplete; a taste for hearty interaction with interlocutors, an inclination to rhetorical flourishes, the intimacy required for quasi-prophetic utterances, and the strangeness essential to ritual are the quintessential features of this "humane medievalist."

The various published editions of Lewis' Latin letters are as follows:

- (1) C. S. Lewis and Don Giovanni Calabria, *The Latin letters of C. S. Lewis to Don Giovanni Calabria of Verona and to members of his congregation, 1947 to 1961*, trans. by Martin Moynihan (Longmont, Colorado, c.1987). 64 pages.
- (2) C. S. Lewis and Don Giovanni Calabria, *Letters: C. S. Lewis and Don Giovanni Calabria: A Study in Friendship*, ed. by Martin Moynihan (Ann Arbor, 1988). 125 pages.
- (3) *C. S. Lewis [and] Don Giovanni Calabria: A Study in Friendship*, ed. by Martin Moynihan (London, 1989). 125 pages.
- (4) C. S. Lewis and Don Giovanni Calabria, *Una gioia insolita: lettere tra un prete cattolico e un laico anglicano*, introduzione e note di Luciano Squizzato; traduzione di Patrizia Morelli (Milano, 1995). 307 pages.
- (5) C. S. Lewis and Don Giovanni Calabria, *The Latin Letters of C. S. Lewis*, ed. and trans. by Martin Moynihan (South Bend, 1998). 126 pages.
- (6) C. S. Lewis and Don Giovanni Calabria, *The Latin Letters of C. S. Lewis*, ed. and trans. by Martin Moynihan (South Bend, 2009). 125 pages.

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