Report of the Chairman of the Committee on the

John Gilmary Shea Prize 2011:


The Committee on the John Gilmary Shea Prize, consisting of Professors Katherine L. Jansen of the Catholic University of America (Chair); Thomas Shelley of Fordham University and Charles Parker of St. Louis University is honored to award the prize in this year’s competition to Dr. Ulrich L. Lehner, *Enlightened Monks: The German Benedictines (1740-1803)* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

Dr. Lehner’s remarkable book adopts the notion of an eighteenth-century religious enlightenment to argue that a large number of German Benedictines in southern and Middle Germany (as well as Austria and Switzerland) responded to the unprecedented challenges of the period by promoting enlightened thought and attitudes which steered between the extremes of secularism and reactionary Catholicism. The book demonstrates in surprising new ways how eighteenth-century Benedictines of the Catholic Enlightenment engaged with all branches of contemporary academic study while simultaneously accommodating the monastic life to modernizing trends in European society.

Working from a vast array of primary sources, including records from an impressive number of monastic archives, Lehner shows how the Benedictines became interested in the critical study of history, developing first a historical self-consciousness that paved the way for an acceptance of enlightenment attitudes. With the historical stage set, Lehner then goes on to show how the Benedictines responded to a series of contemporary challenges, the first of which was adopting a new monastic “lifestyle” in which they dispensed with liturgical hours so that they could pursue academic studies; enjoyed such pleasures as coffee, tea, chocolate, card-games, and billiards; did away with tonsure; adopted lay clothing and travel, all in an effort to accommodate the novelties of modern life. Another challenge to the enlightened monks was the question of how to deal with new concepts of liberty. Here Lehner shows how the monks began to assert individual right of conscience and thus challenged, sued, and disputed with abbots and priors. The study spotlights a number of discontented monastics, some of whom even embraced the French revolution in
hopes of liberation at the hands of French armies. In subsequent chapters Lehner goes on to document opposition to monastic prisons and to narrate several well-documented and sensational cases of runaway monks. Meeting the challenge of new age of media, Lehner also uncovers how German monks created extensive communication networks among monasteries, corresponded extensively and involved themselves in academic journals, academic societies, and collaborative academic endeavors. The final chapters treat the enlightened Benedictines’ active intellectual engagement with new ideas emanating from the fields of law, philosophy and theology, documenting their considerable contributions to those fields. Charting the development of enlightened monasticism, Lehner also shows its demise when Napoleon’s armies overran Germany, which enabled territorial governments to secularize monastic lands and disband monastic communities. With the support of bishops who hoped to appropriate monastic revenues, and the papacy which opposed the enlightened posture of the Benedictines, the Catholic Enlightenment embodied by enlightened monks withered away in the decades following 1803.

Engagingly written, deeply researched, and seriously engaged with current research, Lehner’s work demonstrates that the Enlightenment was far more than a secular movement pitted against an obscurantist religious outlook. It was, rather, a multi-faceted trend to reconcile science and reason with matters of faith. *Enlightened Monks* illustrates how, paradoxically, an institution known most as a relic of the medieval past actually stood on the front lines of this endeavor.

Respectfully submitted,

Katherine L. Jansen, Chair