

Saint Martin

• Reviewed by Nancy Blanning

Saint Martin: Between Michaelmas and the Holy Nights by Michael Martin (WECAN Books, 2009).

Martinmas is not one of the American traditional celebrations (outside of some Waldorf schools), yet it is appealing in its images. The simple story of the legend of Saint Martin we know. Martin, a Roman soldier, took pity on a poor, shivering beggar. He cut his cloak in two and bestowed half of it upon the beggar. Later in a dream Martin saw that the beggar he had served was the Christ. This event at age eighteen transformed his young life completely, and shortly afterward he sought baptism and true, humble dedication to his new Christian faith. Two years later while still serving in the Roman army, he laid down his sword and refused to bear arms against another human being—in opposition to family expectation, training, and instruction of his Roman commanders. Martin went on to become bishop of Tours in France. He was known for his humility and compassion toward others, especially the downcast, the poor, and those whom society had rejected. The light and sense of hope he brought to these people is reflected in the Lantern Festival some of us celebrate in our Waldorf schools each autumn around November 11.

That is the simple story. The new WECAN publication, ***Saint Martin***, expands the picture. It shows how profoundly and courageously the

example of Martin stands for humanity seeking its own understanding of spiritual realities and striving for unselfish, personal development. This tenth volume of “The Little Series” was written by Michael Martin, a handwork teacher in Nuremberg. The English translation provides a wealth and depth of information and insight into this autumn festival. The Roman era marked a change in human consciousness toward individualization, which can become aggressively ego-centered, a Mars characteristic. Martin’s biography, occurring at a turning point in this evolution of consciousness, offers a striking counter-image. His life radiated quiet humility and compassion toward other human beings, incredible self-discipline, and firm courage to oppose acts of inhumanity. He carried firm conviction to replace earlier pagan beliefs and practices with Christianity.

Martinmas is not one of the four major festivals—Michaelmas, Christmas, Easter, and St. John’s—but occurs in November, a transitional time of the year. This is the month when the dead are remembered, an aspect connected in European celebrations to St. Martin. The gates to the spiritual world open at this time. The light of heaven streams down to illumine our deeds and reveal their true nature—kind, selfish, generous, greedy, indifferent. The book explains that in European tradition St. Martin has been

accompanied by “Pelzmartl” or “Fur-Martin,” whose spirit is more familiarly represented in our celebrations by St. Nicholas’ companion, Ruprecht. As the book elaborates on Pelzmartl and this mood of evaluation, it becomes very striking how Martinmas is the first step from Michaelmas toward Advent and Christmas.

In the festival year, Martinmas stands between Michaelmas and Advent, offering a path from one to the other. November 11 stands exactly midway between Michaelmas on September 29 and Christmas Eve on December 24. Martin’s life occurred at a pivotal moment in the evolution of human consciousness when strong individuality emerges. At Michaelmas we confront the dragon with the fierceness of his oppositions and intention to rule. The light we experience at that time comes from the far cosmos in shooting stars and from sparks of weapons clashing in a warrior mood. Martinmas, with its encouraging yet revealing lantern light, pictures the saint who stands as a strong individuality developing with humility and unselfishness. This example naturally leads toward the images of Advent. The journey toward Christmas is a long path that requires

preparation. Advent is the time of preparation for Christmas. In a similar way, Martinmas can be looked upon as the preparation time leading to Advent when acts of kindness and generosity serve others without desire to elevate oneself.

Saint Martin fills the picture standing behind the simple traditions with rich biographical and historical information. The book further reveals spiritual content within these traditions through the insights of Rudolf Steiner and anthroposophy. The more we, as educators, understand what stands behind each experience we bring to the children, the more potent it becomes. Festival images thus become spiritual nourishment for humanity. This book provides a wealth of information to help us deepen our understanding and derive new inspiration for this festival. Deepest thanks to the author, Michael Martin; to Dr. Helmut von Kügelgen for making these “Little Series” resources available to Waldorf educators; and to the translators (for this volume, Dorothea Mier together with Lory Widmer, WECAN Managing Editor) for making this quiet treasure available to us all.