

Gregor Mendel

Reviewed by Lesley Payne

For a secular text, Oxford University Press' *Gregor Mendel and the Roots of Genetics*, presents a surprisingly sympathetic view of the German abbot who founded the modern science of genetics. In spite of several drawbacks (such as the author's unqualified praises of Darwinism and genetic engineering), I would recommend the book for older elementary/middle school-aged Catholic homeschoolers. As is typical for OUP, the book does a great job in presenting a broad subject, without "dumbing down" or cramming one particular viewpoint down students' throats. Because *Gregor Mendel* covers so many aspects of the priest-scientist's life—his scientific studies, his religious life, the culture in which he lived—the book could easily be adapted into a unit study, adding Catholic history sources, geography and further science, depending on your student's level and interests (I know some kids who would honestly be interested in learning about the political upheavals of the 19th and 20th centuries which make it so difficult to say what country Mendel lived in—Germany, Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, the Czech Republic, etc.).

While hearing the interesting story of Mendel's life and times, the kids get a painless introduction to the slow process by which scientific knowledge progresses (often slowed further by erroneous scientific fads or politically-motivated research).

The book includes a fascinating account of how Mendel's work, after being re-discovered the first time, was suppressed by the Communists after they took control of the country because his findings did not fit with Marxist theories about how to make the "New Man" within a single generation.

I was happy to see that the book presented priests and monks as a central part of Austro-Hungarian intellectual life, not acting surprised that priests like Mendel would conduct research and engage in scientific debates. The author does dwell on financial problems which may have influenced Mendel's decision to become a priest, but subsequent descriptions of his life in the monastery show that Mendel embraced priestly life wholeheartedly, even down to his humble response to his important research findings being ignored. Mendel was actually a bit of a George Bailey-type character (*It's a Wonderful Life*), working quietly as a school teacher (for low wages, since he kept failing his licensure test) and doing research on plant hybrids during his off-hours, and as such is a great role model for our would-be scientists.

Some people might want to simply skip the final section in which the author gushes about the Human Genome Project and the possibilities for genetic engineering. Or you could add a frank discussion about the political and moral problems associated with genetic engineering.

Order *Gregor Mendel and the Roots of Genetics* from Oxford University Press. Call (800) 451-7556 or visit www.oup-usa.com.

