

AN ANGEL IN AMERICA

Review of
 Matthew Kelty, OCSO
My Song is of Mercy: Writings of Matthew Kelty
 Selected and edited by Michael Downey
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Reviewed by **Jonathan Montaldo**

The trend is to cool the angels. This is no great problem, since an age is entitled to its fads and styles. If yesterday's fashions seem ludicrous, yesterday's theological journals are as revealing as an old Sears catalog. We need not be disturbed. Scripture has a certain steadiness; it abounds in dreams and angels. [Holy Week, 1973]

Anyone who has retreated to the Abbey of Gethsemani within the last three years has met Matthew Kelty. As resident chaplain at the monastery's guest house, Father Matthew presents brief conferences after Compline. These conferences are pure Keltian — a genre all their own — not characterized neatly. He commences by reading poetry. His taste is catholic: the marriage of poems by Gerard Manley Hopkins and Bob Dylan not unusual. Sometimes he comments, sometimes not. The point of his program's first movement is simply the poems, softening up both himself and the crowd, everyone kept guessing where we go from here. When the poetry ceases, the magic begins. Holding the podium with both hands, Kelty's huge blue eyes begin their circuit through the air, east to west, up and down, like an air traffic controller's at a small airport. Kelty's body sways. Rhythmic with the dance of things he's scanning in the air, he transmits to us any patterns flying through. I have watched Kelty dancing as he speaks, just like this, many times.

At the conference I attended in August, disparate Keltian-caught observations landed. He suggested how beautiful and poignant the experience were we to arrive in church for morning Lauds to discover the monks replaced by a full choir of both the hearing-and-speech impaired. Wonderful to witness the psalms "sung in sign," one side of the choir signing to the other in unison, the beauty of hands weaving praise! Cusping on this image, Kelty readjusted his antennae and declared to all present the necessity of prayer for people like Tallulah Bankhead, "who probably never had anyone pray for her." Thus Kelty solemnly raised his eyes, turned his face and body slightly upward to his left, as if broaching the subject to someone floating just above our heads — a very characteristic gesture — and intoned a brief monk's prayer for Tallulah.

I always withdrew reluctantly from a Matthew Kelty conference — he never overstays. Last August the mean edges of the day I had brought in with me to his evening conference were, at its end, noticeably soothed away. It struck me then that the genre of Kelty's nightly talks is the "bedtime story." As I turned peacefully into bed, I sensed myself tucked in, blessed and secure with one monk's borrowed night light.

A Matthew Kelty performance is shamanistic: he's a poet, an Irish soul-healer, a consoler of hearts. A "word" from Kelty, however, always opens wounds, gaping human wounds like genocide. More often he gently uncovers less detectable wounds, like the chill that lingers along your shoulders on a Sunday evening when you realize once again that any hope for rising a new person on Monday morning is a failed soufflé. In a collection of conferences to his fellow monks, *Sermons in a Monastery: Chapter Talks* (1983), Kelty confessed:

Jonathan Montaldo lives in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. A member of the International Thomas Merton Society, he delivered a paper — "The Ideal of Solitude, the Reality of Community: Thomas Merton's Commitment to Gethsemani!" — at the Third General Meeting in 1993. He will participate in the "Response Sessions" at the Fourth General Meeting in 1995. He has been appointed as editor of the second volume of the *Merton Journals*, covering the years 1942-1951.

I am much concerned with the mystery of evil. I believe in the evil spirit. I say the Mass of the Angels every time I have Mass by myself, for I believe in angels too. They are as much a part of my world as birds and butterflies, trees and lakes. So are the evil ones who move about on our landscape, in our hearts and in our country. A monk must reckon with the powers of darkness.

Father Matthew writes with a small town doctor's approach to human ills. The medicine he offers tends to daily hurts. He usually prescribes a full swallow of our nature's alternating rhythms of good and bad. For health he feeds us, soaked in the juice of his own experiences, the bread of our common joys. A wound that goes unnoticed remains unassumed and thus cannot be healed. This is his wise word with the emphasis on healing by surrendering to yourself and to your neighbor as you both truly are in Christ, any song of Kelty's major chord:

Christ, then, is the song we sing, the tale we tell, the dream we dream. He is the great reality in us and around us, the Christ who daily grows more manifest until that last great day when, in one dazzling moment, the final epiphany, it will be made clear to all that Christ is the heart of everything.

My Song is of Mercy is a new collection of Matthew Kelty's writing in two parts. *Flute Solo*, written when he passing sixty almost twenty years ago, the memoir of his call to marry "Lady Solitude" ring and all, has been recollected and revised in this volume. He writes simply, his pitch sustained on God's mercy to him throughout his ways and days when he often didn't know his own heart:

If we listen to our dreams, if we remain still in the dark of the night, if we are available to the evidence that rises from deep within us in moments of quiet, of pondering, not to say hours of anguish or sudden grief, we must conclude that any assumption that innocent tranquility is the character of the heart is unfounded.

Part Two is a trove of sixty-nine sermons arranged chronologically. They trace the wide gamut of his loves and fears. He surveys our human scene in its variety with touching particularity: the death of a daffy but well-loved monk, the beauty of a single flower planted in a spoonful of earth: "nothing is trivial in the kingdom of God." A constant theme is the unnatural competitiveness and violence marking the "world's pattern" which you cannot follow "without inner contradictions that will tear you apart." The alternative is the way of humility, mercy, Christ's way: "To walk in Christ's way, to become a whole person, to be complete in him is song, is joy. And our hopes continue to grow in a way of joy and of peace. And will make us fearless even against the mighty."

I doubt we would have this lovely books without the perspicacity and prompting of its editor, Michael Downey. Downey has most recently edited *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* (1993), a prestigious and critically praised achievement. His editor's eye for the interesting and valuable, his theologian's instinct for the spiritually sound, has served both us and Kelty well.

One final observation: Matthew Kelty has a gay heart. This is not news. He publicly identified himself homosexual twenty years ago in *Flute Solo* and has more recently written a strong article on being gay and celibate, "The Land I Live In," in a collection edited by Jeannine Gramick, *Homosexuality in the Priesthood and the Religious Life* (1990). Be not too quick: Kelty professes himself gay *and* faithful both to the discipline of celibacy in the Roman Catholic priesthood and to the charism of continuing conversion of manners as a Cistercian monk. The cynic in me asks, "Why call yourself a poet when you haven't done a poem?" Kelty would point out the question itself is "disordered." For him, sex's source is in the heart: we *are* before we speak and do. "My life as a priest, as monk, as gay, is not what I say or even what I do, but is who I am." Being gay precedes performance, involves inner openness to the tensive dynamism of masculine and feminine forces, "is very creative in every sense." Kelty's epilogue to this new collection, "Celibacy and the Gift of Gay," reprises his conviction that "gays make superb celibates, the best celibates, the more so in community." Not a few in the solemnly professed ranks of Christian churches would find this notion counter-intuitive. Kelty concedes no points: "Our society punishes, repudiates, persecutes gay men because it hates the feminine. The gay man's whole gift is precisely in making evident the feminine dimension in every male, the call to inte-

gration and wholeness.”

Kelty’s balanced, gay reasoning deserves close reading. This is a seldom enunciated perspective from so pristine a source. I myself, another poor banished child of Eve, am pricking up my ears:

There is some spouse within we must meet, and failing that, fail wholeness. It is not enough to be charitable, to be busy in work of love, however splendid and generous. There is in the heart of us all some image of the Beloved that we must not merely acknowledge, but know, love, embrace. Without this marriage there can be no real human life. The human being was not born to live alone.

Matthew Kelty’s *My Song is of Mercy* is a menu apart from the mother lode of instant, computer-cooked pablum served up as “spiritual writing” today. This collection issues from the womb of a multi-faceted man of deep experience, of devotion to Christ and Scriptures, church and sacrament, to *the always hard task* of seeking God. Get your red hot copy now. Discover for yourself if the teacher you have been waiting for has finally come, if the messenger you have been hoping for has finally arrived.