

Refreshing Springs

Review of

The Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani

by Thomas Merton

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 Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1997 206 pages / \$ 9.95 paperback

Reviewed by **Kathleen Norris**

I find it refreshing, when reading this roughcut gem of a book, to find that back in the late 1960's, as Thomas Merton wrestled with what it could mean for monastic people to be prophetic in the world, he was himself *being* prophetic, saying what we need to hear *now*, at the close of this chaotic century. As we drown in the verbiage of advertising it helps to be reminded that "People don't want to hear any more words. In our mechanical age, all words have become alike . . . To say 'God is Love' is like saying, 'Eat Wheaties.'" (p. 9)

Merton reveals a considerable prescience with regard to the way in which a celebrity culture comes to trivialize everything. A glance at any magazine rack confirms his observation that "everything is reduced to a kind of indifference . . . Page 1 is a nun with a new habit, page 2 is a burlesque queen — equally newsworthy. There's no indication that one thing means more than another." (p. 129) In a way, *The Springs of Contemplation* is as much about American consumerism as it is about American monastic life in the era just after Vatican II.

I treasure the way that Merton makes us aware of the extent to which we have been formed as consumers; the extent to which, in a society "organized for profit and for marketing . . . there's no freedom. You're free to choose your gimmicks, your brand of TV, your new make of new car. But you're not free not to have a car." (p. 129) To be prophetic now, Merton tells the contemplative nuns he'd invited to Gethsemani, is to begin to speak like the Old Testament prophets, "telling people who think they're free that they're slaves." (p. 131)

Freedom, of course, was a buzz word of the 1960's, and Merton recognized even in the midst of that heady decade that the merely novel was often being mistaken for the prophetic, and that seemingly countercultural movements such as the hippies were in fact a part of the mainstream. In several passages Merton suggests that both contemporary industrial society and the Roman Catholic church are structured to allow for quantitative rather than qualitative change. And he firmly claims (or reclaims) Christian monasticism as a resistance movement standing for the latter.

As a window into the lives of contemplative nuns in mid-century, this book provides occasion for reflection on how much (and how little) has changed in the past thirty years. The questions the sisters bring up — should contemplative nuns be given permission to have sisters in active apostolates take retreats with them? Should nuns be allowed to read *Time*? are of their era. And Merton's responses are a treasure — in the first case, why ask permission, why not simply do it? "If you love someone, you invite them in," (p. 125) he says. As to the second question: yes, if you're asking if nuns should be informed, no "if it implies that by reading *Time* you are informed." (p. 153)

At a time when books such as *One-Minute Wisdom* fill bookstore shelves, it's good to hear Merton say, "There's no such thing as a quick course in contemplation. It just doesn't exist. If it does, somebody's being

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sold a bill of goods.” (p. 124) As meditation, spiritual direction and traditional monastic prayer become increasingly popular among laypeople, including many outside the churches, it is good to keep in mind Merton’s view that for all such practices, “self-forgetfulness is the real litmus test.” (p. 94)

The Springs of Contemplation is of its time, but it is also strikingly contemporary. Merton says, for instance, that both Zen and Christian monasticism are for ordinary life, ordinary people. He points out that in a Christianity centered on the incarnation, “theology . . . happens in relations between people” (p. 76) and that “because we love, God is present.” (p. 55) In his hope that monasteries might be truly counter-cultural, he says to the women, “We’re supposed to provide a place where people can find what they can’t find elsewhere.” (p. 148) With monastic vocations to contemplative houses on the rise, and retreat facilities booked for many months in advance, it would seem that contemporary monasteries are doing just that.

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