

A Compelling, Fearless, Outrageous Voice

Review of

Gethsemani Homilies

By Matthew Kelty, OCSO

Edited by William O. Paulsell

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Reviewed by **Tony Russo**

To anyone familiar with Fr. Matthew Kelty's evening talks to retreatants at the Abbey of Gethsemani, his voice speaks loud and clear from these pages. For those unfamiliar with Fr. Matthew, don't worry. A quick glance at the pictures on the back cover and on page v and a perusal of the Introduction put you in the chapter room or church listening with the monks or retreatants - and "Introduction" is the correct word, for it is an interview by the editor, William O. Paulsell, with Fr. Matthew. As the interview unfolds, the reader settles into the Gethsemani of Kelty and Merton. Fr. Matthew is quick to distance himself from the "intellectual" Merton. But, Paulsell confronts him at one point: "I disagree with you in your comparison of yourself with Merton. You are an intellectual" (xxiii). Fr. Matthew retorts that he had not had intellectual training. Furthermore, he points out that his intuitive style is not seen as intellectual by some. Some find his style haphazard, intuitive, and juvenile. Paulsell sees Fr. Matthew as a self-educated intellectual. Fr. Matthew does not disagree. As Lawrence S. Cunningham, Merton scholar, comments on the back cover, "In reading through this selection of homilies, I could hear Fr. Matthew's voice and, more tellingly, his style; sharp-angled readings from the liturgy; love for the poetic turn of phrase; deeply felt (because deeply experienced) religious faith; a keen nose for detecting pious cant."

As its title suggests, *Gethsemani Homilies* is a collection of presentations given by Father Matthew on different occasions at the abbey - community masses or funerals for monks or their relatives, as well as talks to retreatants. It is divided into seven sections: Monastic Life, Issues of Faith, Jesus, Saints, Ethics and Evil, Sacraments, and Death. In these talks, Fr. Matthew embodies poet, satirist, story-teller, comedian, and lover. In describing Jesus, Fr. Matthew says: "He is at once compelling, fearless, and outrageous. He is spell-binding for His grasp of truth, ardent in His expression of it, and heedless of what may follow" (85). This description fits Fr. Matthew as well.

What is this experience of faith that Lawrence Cunningham refers to in his comments above? One theme that Fr. Matthew returns to again and again is mystery. In preaching the funeral homily for Brother Aelred, a monk who was diagnosed as paranoid schizophrenic, Matthew speaks touch-

Tony Russo serves currently as coordinator of the Cincinnati Chapter of the ITMS and as chair of the ITMS Membership Committee. He is retired from over thirty years of human services work as teacher, chemical dependency counselor and administrator, and consultant. Besides his interest in Merton and others, he provides retreats, talks and workshops on chemical dependency, ecology, and spirituality. He and wife Josie live the empty-nest life with frequent contact with daughter Erica who lives in Milwaukee.

ingly of a deep love for Brother Aelred, lived out through the abbots who cared for his well-being as well as by the community in general. This is a key concept that Fr. Matthew refers to in other places. The monks don't relate as friends but as brothers. Matthew believes that they have been called to community to love and accept each other, not necessarily to be friends in the ordinary sense.

As we all face mysteries and unanswered questions, the words in this homily for Brother Aelred echo in our ears: "A life of this kind tests our faith profoundly, for all its truly being a profound engagement with the mystery of salvation. I suggest it's better not to try to understand, but rather accept this mystery of God's providence. For all we know he may be the outstanding member of this community. Maybe he made Merton possible. Or you. Or me. It is dangerous to read the mind of God, and foolhardy to explain Him. After the Passion, Death, and Rising of His son there is no telling any more how it works, how it adds up" (193). So often in these pages, Fr. Matthew takes a story, or life, or short memory, connects it up with scripture or moral and makes his point. But, he can touch another deeply as he does in closing this homily. He addresses Brother Aelred's nephew: "Father Thomas, nephew, you will tell his sisters Regina and Ottilia that we loved their brother very much" (193).

It is interesting to note that as Fr. Matthew tried to distance himself from Merton, he moved into some of the same territories. He spent nine years as a hermit. He now gives talks daily to retreatants and has published several books. One difference that comes out in the introduction is how Matthew goes with the flow in ways Merton never did. When he is told as a young man that he is not material for a monastery, he gives up the idea and enters the Divine Word Order. When he is sent to New Guinea, he goes although he is not super-fervent about missionary work. When he is told to return to the States to edit the order's magazine, he goes. When he heard Merton talk of being a hermit, he thought little of the idea. Then, later, off he goes for nine years in New Guinea.

Throughout the introduction, a picture of the old days at Gethsemani with its hardships comes out. But, Matthew does not judge new versus old. Paulsell questions Fr. Matthew about what it was like to have Merton for a novice master. This is where Fr. Matthew says that Merton was not his type - Merton was an intellectual. Then he states that he and Merton could never have been friends. In fact, Fr. Matthew says he could not be friends with any of these monks, "and yet there is real love and I am very fond of them. . . . It's the difference from having good friends and having your brothers" (xiv). Fr. Matthew describes some situations between Merton and himself that shed light on both men. For one, typing for Merton was a dreaded task. His handwriting was impossible; and, once Merton started writing for the day, he did not want to be interrupted. Fr. Matthew details one memorable exchange in which Fr. Matthew refused Merton's order to type twice before agreeing to do so. This was an exchange between two men aged 45, one the novice and one the master. But, Fr. Matthew found Merton to be understanding of what a 45-year-old was undergoing getting used to the rigorous life of Gethsemani. He found Merton to be tolerant generally and admits that he himself would not have bothered to be so tolerant.

What else do we find out about the relationship or feelings of Fr. Matthew toward Thomas Merton? In Section 4, "Saints," there appears a homily given on the Thirtieth Anniversary of Merton's death. (This appeared originally in *The Merton Seasonal*, 24.1 [Spring 1999].) This is Kelty at his poetic best. He makes his point by understatement through telling short tales or anecdotes. The shock of the death and the human pathos of such a loss is carried in the simple relating of how the death was announced to the monks by the abbot after dinner, at noon. Just the fact, but what a fact.

As alive in telling thirty years later as the day it happened. One can feel the atmosphere in the refectory. Fr. Matthew: "He (the Abbot) then said the closing meal prayers and life went on as usual. And forever different" (127). He ends this homily with the closing meditation from *The Seven Storey Mountain*. I wondered if Fr. Matthew was pushing for official sainting of Merton by placing this in this "Saint" section and including the following tale. A man in a Chicago suburb survived a terrific shock when he contacted a high-tension cable digging with a rented power tool. The man, who was familiar with Merton's works but no groupie, told the power people that he had a clear moment of vision of Merton dead of electrocution in the midst of the contact with the cable. The power people told him he should get down on his knees and thank Thomas Merton that he was alive.

In every one of the sections, I could cite other touching, direct, and deeply moving examples of Fr. Matthew at work. But, for all his tenderness and ability to touch, his ability to confront - and force others to confront - the evil in our world is powerful, as seen particularly in Section 5, "Ethics and Evil." Discussing abortion in "Abortion: A Personal Experience," he shows what is involved in the choice and the consequence of that choice - to abort or not - that in one particular set of circumstances made his own life possible. "We do not condemn, point the finger, or send to hell. We rather pray. It is grace and light involved, not human passion" (136). In "Good News/Bad News" (144-46), he treats of violence in America, as he does also in "Purple Curtain" (160-63). In treating of capital punishment, Fr. Matthew notes that President Bush as governor of Texas signed death warrants for 122 people and is proud of it. This included the life of a paranoid schizophrenic on whose behalf the Pope and other world leaders petitioned Mr. Bush for clemency. Fr. Matthew minces no words: "Putting people to death for a punishment or as a lesson to society is a travesty of justice and an outrage too gross to stomach. That mistakes are made proves it" (161).

Before closing, I want to mention two things about the makeup of the book. First, I indicated that there is a picture of Fr. Matthew on the back cover. This photo introduces Fr. Matthew well. The front is a simple woodcarving of Jesus breaking bread with two disciples. This and the woodcuts accompanying each homily are all done by a former monk. I found them simple and prayerful. These elements are a plus. Second, as an old advisor to yearbooks with years of proofreading behind me, I caution you that there are typos present throughout the text. Not being a math major, I did not count them and found that none was so egregious as to prevent my knowing what was meant. Hopefully, if the book is reprinted, these will be corrected.

In conclusion I stress what I said in the opening of this review. For those of you familiar with Fr. Matthew Kelty, you will encounter him here anew. For those of you who have never heard him speak, you will experience him in reading these homilies. I do suggest that you spend time with the photos of Fr. Matthew, especially the one on the back cover where he sits holding a small bouquet of flowers.