

A Glimpse of Glory

Review of

Thomas Merton: A Book of Hours

edited by Kathleen Deignan

Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2006

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Reviewed by **Daniel Coughlin**

In his *Moral Reflections on Job* St. Gregory the Great writes: “Since the daybreak or the dawn is changed gradually from darkness into light, the Church . . . is being led from the night of infidelity to the light of faith. She is opened gradually to the splendor of heavenly brightness, just as dawn yields to the day after darkness.” These words, found on Thursday of the Ninth Week in Ordinary Time in the Roman Breviary, were certainly a great encouragement as I planned to spend a week of prayer led by *Thomas Merton: A Book of Hours*. But Kathleen Deignan’s compilation of Merton passages, stretched over each day, Sunday through Saturday, offers more than anyone might expect. Arranged around themes of Dawn, Day, Dusk and Dark, each day Merton’s poetry and reflective writing becomes a glimpse of glory much like a surprising sunrise or a softer sunset. Her text may enlighten the day or any one of the hours may surface some darkness within.

This treasured handbook is not a prayer book to be recited, but a primer for contemplative prayer. The foreword by James Finley (9-12) and the excellent introduction by Kathleen Deignan (15-42) prepare the person who picks up this piece to find the right time for oneself, a clear space in a cluttered life to take up a Merton text and slowly and reflectively ponder it (*lectio*), wrestle with it (*meditatio*), and then rest with it (*contemplatio*). The monk’s lovely language, especially crafted and pieced together by this gifted editor, cannot help but grasp attention, and then set each person off into a different direction and a new depth of light and darkness.

Experience with this “book” brings to mind the story of the very prayerful but illiterate monk who simply sits listening to the choir monks chant the traditional text of the Divine Office until he hears the one phrase which holds his attention. He repeats it over and over again, ruminates on it for a while. Then he leaves his back pew and takes the Word with him to fill his inner silence for the rest of the day.

A woman religious and dear friend wrote to me that she discovered “the Introduction opens the aspiring, contemplative reader to the wisdom and wondrous mystery of pursuing prayer-filled poetry that has power to bring one to exult, lament, and wonder at the gratuitous goodness and mercy of the Living God. Merton’s wisdom leads the novice through pathways of ceaseless prayer into the depths of wordless contemplation.”

Here the writings of Thomas Merton are treated with great reverence and are presented only to lift readers to prayer. To quote other lines from Gregory, this little book is like the dawn: “It dispels

the darkness and welcomes the light. It holds both of them, the one mixed with the other, as it were. Are not all of us who follow the truth of this life daybreak and dawn? While we do some things which already belong to the light, we are not entirely free from the remnants of darkness.”

Merton aficionados, those very familiar with his writings, and especially those who love his poetry, will not only enjoy this piecemeal portion, they will flip to the splendid notes in the back of the book to verify the source of the selection or excerpt. Progression through the *Hours* may uncover, as it did for me, a couple of books missing from my library. What a joy to come across familiar pieces in a new context such as: the classic prayer: “My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going”; the encounter at Fourth and Walnut in Louisville; and the celebrated Fire Watch.

Selecting my own hour of the day for prayer or reflective reading, I made my way through the week. I disavowed myself from the diligent and careful work of the editor because I found the titles of Breath Prayer, Opening Prayer, Exhortation, Lesson, or Responsory obstacles rather than helpful. For me this was not a prayer book to be recited alone or in community. After years of working with liturgical texts for ICEL, including the Liturgy of the Hours, I found the multiple pieces and misnomers confusing. About Monday, this prejudice of mine loomed up to devour my attention. Once freed from the arbitrary titles in faint print, I simply enjoyed the texts and made my own margin notes throughout the rest of the book. Years of liturgical work still leave me with the impression that at Eucharist, as well as the Hours, most people, including priests and musicians, understand a prayer, a reading, an invitation, an exhortation, an acclamation, a preface, or a litany, to be flat texts, without any different rhythm, tone, inner structure of composition or pattern to their ending, seeking a response. The fact is the Church’s prayer has a wide genre of texts each with clear singularity. The many texts of Merton found here do not necessarily fit into these liturgical molds. But, this is my problem, not Kathleen Deignan’s. She does her best with her superimposed structure. Rather than recite words, I took the texts long or short, as a launch for more contemplative prayer, as the Introduction invites.

The book’s psalms are distinctive. Taken from Merton’s poetry, they echo the sound of ancient psalms. In fact, Merton often entitled them “psalms” himself. The Saturday collection is climactic. The segments from *Hagia Sophia* give Saturday a spectacular, beautiful tribute to Mary and to the feminine aspect of the soul. The Firewatch provides a classic epilogue.

This aspect of my experience with the Merton prayer book makes me desirous of another book. I would love to see a Scripture scholar and a Merton scholar collaborate on the Merton Office of Readings. Personally, I think many Americans would relish a more Quaker form of daily prayer rather than the complicated structure of the Hours. After a brief Invitatory, a simple structure of two longer readings would prepare one for the day or serve as a second nocturne for the existent Office of Readings. The first reading from Old or New Testament followed by a Merton reading as commentary on the sacred scriptures would be enough for a person to compose his/her own oration or litany of prayers.

This little book, *Thomas Merton: A Book of Hours*, has already stirred some rumblings here on Capitol Hill. As the Chaplain of the House of Representatives, I compose an Opening Prayer for the legislative sessions. Most often, I base my invocation as a response to one of the psalms or some other Scripture text. On June 15, 2007, I was inspired by some of the language and the sentiment behind the text Kathleen used as a closing prayer for “Dawn on Tuesday.”

The Faith and Politics Institute hosts reflective sessions for Members of the U.S. House. Father

Clete Kiley tells me they often use Merton texts as common ground for their reflection. I am sure they will find *A Book of Hours* very helpful for ecumenical reflections. Just yesterday, while on the floor of the House Chamber, a Congressman came up to me and said: “You know me, Father. You know I am not easily impressed. But I have been reading this *Thomas Merton: A Book of Hours*. It is just wonderful. I have been using it for daily prayer. Such contemporary and beautiful language!” I told the Congressman I would be working on this review over the weekend. “Do you have a quote for me?” I asked. “I just love Merton’s language. He says it all.”