

Praising God from Dawn to Dusk

Review of

A Book of Hours: At Prayer with Thomas Merton

By Kathleen Deignan, CND, with Jonathan Montaldo and Paul Avgerinos

Washington, DC: Schola Ministries, 2009

Audio Dual Compact Discs / \$20.00

Reviewed by **John Berger**

You might want to buy three of these CDs and an extra player (mine was \$5.00 at a garage sale). Give two to your intimate contemplative friends and, sometime, you will want to talk about the rhythms and depths this music has taken you to. The extra player will let you savor the “Dawn” and “Dusk” selections without the need to change discs, find where to begin, and the other distractions of preparing to listen to a rare feast of song and narration.

Sr. Kathleen Deignan, CND, with Jonathan Montaldo, former co-director of the Merton Institute for Contemplative Living, and Paul Avgerinos of Studio Unicorn, have compiled and composed what Schola Ministries calls an “audio breviary composed of the prayers, poems, and psalms of the spiritual master who has taught the world to pray,” songs and readings for the beginning and end of each day of the week. It’s not essential to have Sr. Kathleen’s earlier *A Book of Hours* (Sorin Books, 2007), but it is certainly the complement and inspiration for these CDs. (Amazon.com, which gives these recordings five stars, has a combined offer of book and CDs for \$32.89.)

In *Day of a Stranger*, Thomas Merton describes his favorite writers as a kind of chorus whose “golden sounds” he hears in the silence of the hermitage. Christine Bochen says, “[Merton] also discovers that the language of music enables him to speak of the inner unity of contemplation. . . . Merton understood the language of music.” Sr. Kathleen Deignan’s crystal-clear, lyrical soprano invites us to the pure pleasure of being fully alive in praising God from dawn to dusk. Like the mockingbird or meadowlark on beautiful spring mornings singing for pure pleasure, Sr. Kathleen’s voice beckons us to contemplation, thanksgiving, mercy.

Here’s the content for a typical 11-minute selection. In Sunday “Dawn,” the tuning fork fixes our attention for Kathleen’s opening song and narration: “The most wonderful moment of the day.” Listen carefully. This is important. She sings us into the presence of our God. “I am giving Thee worship with my whole living. . . . I am giving Thee praise with my heart singing.” Jonathan sequences this with his resonant baritone reading Merton: “When the psalms surprise me with their music and antiphons turn to rum / The Spirit sings: the bottom drops out of my soul. . . .” “Today, Father, the blue sky lauds you. The delicate green and orange flowers of the tulip poplar tree praise you. The distant blue hills praise you together with the sweet smelling air that is full of brilliant light. . . . You have made us one and many.” Then Kathleen’s melody re-enters: “Before we speak you already heard us” – followed by her reading Merton: “Contemplation is the response

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to a call: a call from Him who has no voice, and yet Who speaks in everything that is, and Who, most of all, speaks in the depths of our own being; for we ourselves are words of His.” “Kyrie Eleison, Christe Eleison—Lord, have mercy, mercy, mercy.” Jonathan’s counterpoint: “Keep me above all things from sin . . . that I may love for You alone. . . . With my hair almost on end, with the eyes of the soul wide open I am present. O paradise of simplicity . . . self-awareness and self-forgetfulness.” Kathleen, with a background of drums, sings the conclusion to the meditation: “O what their joy must be.” It is enough for one morning. It fills us.

Sunday “Dusk” follows a similar pattern. The tuning fork, like the Buddhist gong, soothes our cluttered souls and calls us to prepare for the night, to get ready to give all the day to the Creator of a “mystic heaven setting a place where souls dark night.” Kathleen calms with a beautiful song from Merton’s poetry: “O night of admiration, full of choirs, O night of deepest praise, and darkness of sweet delight.” Jonathan’s narrative, with the Schola singers in the background, tucks us in with a blanket of peace as he reads from *New Seeds of Contemplation*: “Let my eyes see nothing in the world but Your glory. . . . I will hear Your voice and I will hear all harmonies You have created, singing your hymns to find joy in giving You glory.” Kathleen narrates, “The Lord plays in the garden of His creation,” and then invites us with song “to forget ourselves on purpose and join in the general dance.” This is followed by Jonathan and Kathleen as a duet reciting Merton’s beautiful litany from *A Search for Solitude*: “Teach me to go to this country beyond words and beyond names. . . . I need my heart to be moved by you. . . . I need the world to be saved and changed by You. . . . I need your healing hand to work always in my life. . . . It is necessary. Amen.” We are emptied of the day and taken into the unknown night with the closing prayer from *Entering the Silence*: “This is the land where You have given me roots in eternity. O God of heaven and earth . . . the place of peace, the place of silence, the place of wrestling with the angel.” It is enough. Our souls are past the sunset and ready for the end of evening twilight. Each day’s selections have a comparable richness of word and melody.

A word about the Schola Ministries that keep alive the ancient Christian tradition of the *schola cantorum* – those musicians of the spirit or “schools of singers” who for centuries have breathed life into worship with their vibrant song. Schola musicians bring this ancient inspiration into a new time and fresh musical idiom in service of the *anima*, the life-force, breath, spirit, soul. Since 1966, Sr. Kathleen has been a Sister of the Congregation of Notre Dame (CND), the first and lasting home of her music. Since 1975, she has been the leader of song and composer in residence at the Benedictine Grange, a vibrant Christian worship community in West Redding, Connecticut. For decades they have been developing a sound and style unique in the world of sacred music. They interweave the haunting sounds of Native American flute, recorder, medieval psaltery, acoustic guitar, African rattles and tambourines, with the intensity of Middle Eastern percussion and Celtic lyricism. Sr. Kathleen’s voice is at once celestial, earthy, contemplative, and ecstatic.

Although reviews purport to be objective as they give a synopsis of the work, the reviewer hopes for a reader-response like: “I’d want to read that book or listen to the CD. I’d like to know more.” Of course the opposite reaction is also possible: “I don’t need to know more.” In listening to this beautifully profound music that touched the depth of my awareness and the core of my

being, I just wanted to shout: “Buy it! Listen to it! Give it away!” Your birthday or anniversary shopping will be done. Your friends will thank you. They will definitely remember the gift you gave them.