

Comforting and Discomforting Truths

Review of

Bridges to Contemplative Living with Thomas Merton: Advent and Christmas

Edited by Jonathan Montaldo and Robert G. Toth

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Reviewed by **Michael Brennan**

There is a quietude that imbues this latest offering in the series of booklets edited by Jonathan Montaldo, former director of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University and past president of the ITMS, and Robert Toth, who serves as Director of Special Initiatives for The Merton Institute for Contemplative Living. I imagined myself walking around the Abbey of Gethsemani, and I could almost hear the crunch of snow and feel the silence of winter. The booklet is intended either for small group discussion or “as texts for private spiritual reading to prepare for the graces of this holy season” (7). Unlike the previous booklets, which offered eight sessions, this one offers five sessions (for the four weeks of Advent and Christmas), with expanded texts for “Merton’s Voice” and “Another Voice.” Because there is more material, the editors suggest that groups pre-read each session, “not[ing] what words or ideas in the session most resonate with their own experiences” (7). The sessions are otherwise structured the same as other booklets in the “Bridges to Contemplative Living” series, beginning with a psalm as the opening reflection, an introduction to the texts, a Merton text, “Another Voice,” and questions for reflection and dialogue.

The other voices selected include Gerard Thomas Straub, Anne LeClaire, the late French Orthodox theologian Olivier Clément (who also appeared in the fourth booklet, *Finding Our Own Souls*), Australian Cistercian Michael Casey, OCSO and Christopher Bamford. Themes explored in the five sessions focus on hope, salvation, compassion, tenderness, and incarnation. The introductory Merton passage, taken from “The Good News of the Nativity,” describes the decision to accept Christ as “an inexorable renunciation of any attempt to live on two levels at once: one a sacred level . . . the other a material level . . . somehow unrelated to what goes on in church or in my ‘interior castle’” (3).

There are a number of memorable lines sprinkled throughout the volume, including the often witty observations of Montaldo and Toth: “We cannot equate a financial quarter of accelerated commercial activity with the Church’s Advent call for repentance” (17). They describe Advent as “a ritual moment for confronting discomforting truths” (18), and quote Olivier Clément: “Every one who relinquishes the security of a sleepwalking existence is sooner or later mortally wounded by the world’s suffering. But because God became man and took this suffering on himself, the way of vulnerability and death becomes for us resurrection” (18-19).

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“Merton’s Voice” for the first week of Advent, from the essay “The Time of the End Is the Time of No Room,” in *Raids on the Unspeakable*, was exceptionally dark, a veritable catalogue of those discomfiting truths that builds to an apocalyptic crescendo – not very Christmas-y:

In the time of the end there is no longer room for the desire to go on living. The time of the end is the time when men call upon the mountains to fall upon them, because they wish they did not exist.

Why? Because they are part of a proliferation of life that is not fully alive, it is programmed for death. A life that has not been chosen, and can hardly be accepted, has no more room for hope. Yet it must pretend to go on hoping. It is haunted by the demon of emptiness. And out of this unutterable void come the armies, the missiles, the weapons, the bombs, the concentration camps, the race riots, the racist murders, and all the other crimes of mass society. (19-20)

But this chilling recitation adds a certain counterpoint to the theme of the First Week of Advent – hope – for one certainly hungers for hope after reflecting on such a dreadful landscape.

Filmmaker Gerard Straub uses a Merton passage from *No Man Is an Island* to consider the importance in his own life, as well as in ours, of taking time for silence, stillness and reflection to counteract the effects of

the gun-toting, hopeless nihilism of postmodern life where everything is reduced to a commodity for sale, where unbridled greed has caused a catastrophic global economic recession, where materialism without qualification and sex without love are affirmed and championed, where mainstream corporations distribute pornography without shame or reproach, where dialogue has given way to vitriolic hate speech, where conflicts are settled by violence, where barbarous acts of terrorism threaten all, where blind religious fundamentalism passes for true faith, where drug addiction and alcoholism are rampant, where thousands of kids die every day from hunger, and where selfishness and individualism have created prisons of poverty and are destroying the earth. (23)

Moving on the Second Week of Advent, the texts explore the joy of finding “life’s sacred place” (27), celebrating in particular Merton’s first Christmas at Gethsemani. “Merton’s Voice” is taken from *Contemplative Prayer*, reminding us that “Contemplation is essentially a listening in silence, an expectancy” (29). Author Anne LeClaire reflects on her choice to embrace solitude and silence, asking, “Hadn’t my silent days initially been met with resistance and curiosity, even judgment? And hadn’t they proved to be enriching? Hadn’t I learned that silence and solitude could strengthen my connection to others? Hadn’t it been solitude and silence that taught Thomas Merton to love his brother monks?” (30)

The Third Week of Advent focuses on compassion. “The contemplative struggles to keep lit the flame of the candle that has been entrusted solely to him or her in order to make the world less dark,” say the editors (34). The Merton passage, from *Seeds of Destruction*, is a discussion of the meaning of “monastic withdrawal from secular time” (35). The response from a text by Olivier Clément gives a challenging summation of what it means to be a Christian: “Christians are

making ready within history a transformation that will surpass it, the transformation that is already secretly accomplished in Christ. Thus they escape the dilemma of ‘all or nothing.’ Nor do they simply accept things as they are, like the helpless or the well-to-do. They are watchful for every opportunity of promoting freedom, justice, or dignity” (36). He adds, “The struggle against ‘the spirit of heaviness,’ against stupidity and hatred, is neverending. Only a hope anchored beyond the world – but already transforming the world through personal beings – can give us the patience to serve life without falling into bitterness or despair” (37).

The Fourth Week of Advent is a celebration of Mary as Mother of the Church and as Wisdom-Bearer. The editors discuss Merton’s devotion to Mary and select a passage from *Love and Living* in which he speaks about her meaning for Christians as a “revelation of the infinite motherly compassion of God” (42). Michael Casey’s description of the way in which monasteries balanced the masculine and feminine, in which the “monk’s devotion to an interior life was governed by principles complementary to his masculine exterior life” (44), may offer some insights into Merton’s text, but seems a bit clerical for the general reader, and deals exclusively with the male expression of monastic life. The discussion of a “feminine” spirituality in monasticism, ironically, excludes women. In fairness, Casey was discussing twelfth-century Cistercian monasteries, and I understand the historical context, but it served as a disquieting reminder of a Church run by men and concerned primarily with the perspectives of men.

Finally, it’s Christmas. The editors write, “In his Christmas sermon, Merton appropriates the Good News of the Incarnation as enabling every one of us to become manifestations of Christ’s salvific presence to others” (48). Merton says, “our souls are born to new life and new grace by receiving Him who is the Truth. For Christ, invisible in his own nature, has become visible in our nature” (50). Unfortunately, the rather long concluding passage by Christopher Bamford, except for his reflections on the words of Clement of Alexandria, was not especially uplifting. Indeed, he finishes: “At the turn of the ages, when Christendom has all but disappeared and Christian teaching has practically been forgotten, we must connect with this tradition and set down for our time and way whatever we can find to know and tell” (53). What? Disappeared? Forgotten? Guess it’s time to look at those quarterly statements!

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