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Jane Marie Richardson, S.L., editor. *The Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani*. Thomas Merton. New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1992. 285 pages. \$22.00 hardcover.

Reviewed by Mary Damian Zynda, C.S.S.F.

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In the years immediately following the Second Vatican Council, Thomas Merton felt it necessary to speak to contemplative religious women (prioresses and abbesses), leaders of religious houses, whose responsibility it was to guide their sisters through the rough transition upon which the Church was embarking. Merton ". . . realized that their vocation demanded a new maturity within a patriarchal system" (ix). So he invited twelve women (without permission from his abbot, of course!) to visit Gethsemani in order to facilitate learning and dialogue. This effort was Merton's "pastoral outreach" to these contemplative women and his contribution to assisting them in the formation of a vision which could carry them into the future; it is a vision which was responsive to contemporary society, culture, economics and to the challenges and proposals of Vatican II.

Merton gave two retreats to these sisters, one in December 1967 and the other in May 1968, the last year of his life. *The Springs of Contemplation* distills the wide variety of topics on which he spoke and leaves us with a concentrated sample of the experienced, mature Merton. Loretto Sr. Jane Marie Richardson's efforts in transcribing and editing these talks constitute a significant contribution, edifying for both contemplative and active religious, those involved in professional Merton studies, for women, and for serious Christians in general. The text is a valuable edition filled with the sharp insight, thoughtful wisdom and practical spirit of Thomas Merton.

Merton began the December 1967 retreat by addressing the topics of "Presence, Silence, and Communication," all of which are elements integral to the monastic life. "Genuine silence is the fruit of maturity, a blending of many positive and negative aspects" (10). Understanding the psychological dynamics of the cloistered community, Merton pointed out that silence provides "some distance and time in order for people to collect themselves" (11). Discovering and nurturing an

individual identity within a community, while requiring distance and space, is not an individual effort. Merton called on religious institutions to assist in forming human beings who are whole. This said, however, he also asserted that it was the proper role of the community to foster the growth of saints: people who are more than just fully developed human beings.

A realist with a keen awareness of American society, culture, and politics in the 1960s, Merton turned his conference entitled "Changing Forms of Contemplative Commitment" to the task of challenging the sisters to reexamine their religious traditions and lifestyles in light of their contemporary social reality. He reminded the leaders that renewal did not mean just being *more Carmelite, more Cistercian, or more Franciscan*. Rather, what was needed would be a reexamination of their respective traditions with an eye toward bringing their own contemplative spiritualities into more dynamic dialogue with the world around them. Contemplative commitment, Merton emphasized, is a commitment to all humanity: "Where there is human presence we have to be present to it. And wherever there is a person, there is to be a personal communication. There God can work. Where there is presence, there is God" (31).

In the conference entitled "Responsibility in the Community of Love," Merton addresses the prophetic nature of the contemplative. For Merton this nature rested fundamentally on prayer and is supported by the community. He reinforced the primary fact that contemplative communities must respond to the Word of God, and this response is intimately related to the prophetic call of the contemplative. It is precisely within this contemplative call that he encouraged the sisters to live fully their vocation as religious women and not rely upon clerics to define their vision. He urged them to stand on their own two feet, take risks, and make necessary changes to develop personally and communally. Speaking specifically to personal growth, Merton challenged these leaders to respond seriously to the need for healthy psychological development among their sisters, as encouraged by the Council which recognized the need for religious to grow into mature adulthood.

The contemplative community should be charismatic, Merton claimed in this conference, and all community members should be women available to God's call at any time. He expounded upon Cassian's understanding of prayer as the attainment of purity of heart,

the necessary posture which for Merton provided the basis for hearing the call of God.

Merton's activist tone intensified in the conference "Contemporary Prophetic Choices," where he stated that as contemplatives ". . . we have to rock the boat" (80). A prophet himself to a Church involved in worldly power, Merton asserted that "the great problem of contemplative life, of religious life, of the priesthood and of everyone else, is that we have been corrupted by that power" (81). Prophets are not acceptable to authority, warned Merton, they must question everything. This is the contemplative's charism to freedom.

The freedom of true psychological maturity concerned Merton in his last conference "Respect for Each Person's Diversity in Community." One cannot be spiritually mature without first achieving psychological maturity. A male religious, no less than a great contemplative authority, Merton was convinced of the real need for more communication between men and women contemplatives. He stated, "Men contemplatives should be in the position to appreciate the values of women more. You have to remember that men are jealous of women, as you probably know if you had brothers. I think one of the problems of the American male today is that he is terrified of women. He constantly has to hit women over the head to prove he's the boss. Advertising also ties into this image business, the macho male. But it seems to me that men in contemplative life should not necessarily have that drawback" (108). The dialogue between male and female contemplatives, therefore, constituted for Merton an opportunity to depart from the psychological immaturity of the culture which, left unchallenged, would compromise the development of an authentic spiritual maturity in both the individual contemplative and the community.

The contemplative life as prophetic in nature and function was Merton's point of departure as he opened the May 1968 retreat. In the first two conferences, "Contemplative Life as Prophetic Vocation" and "Prophecy, Alienation and Language," Merton reinforced the need for contemplatives to become self-actualized so as to maintain their presence in American culture and society. Merton reaffirmed ". . . before we can become prophetic, we have to be authentic human beings, people who can exist outside a structure, who can create their own existence, who have within themselves the resources for affirming their identity and their freedom in any situation in which they find themselves" (136). Asserting his own prophetic voice he stressed, "If

we are to live up to our prophetic vocation, we have to realize that whether we're revolutionary or not, we have to be radical enough to dissent from what is basically a totalitarian society. And we're in it" (133).

Continuing his analysis of American culture, Merton told the sisters that the prophetic vocation demanded they be deeply aware of the many contradictions in life. He pointed out, ". . . our prophetic vocation consists in hurting from the contradictions in society . . . the contradictions in the Church . . . and the contradictions in our own backgrounds and our own Christian lives . . ." (157). Recognizing these contradictions, he suggested a contemplative response to the situation: silence (the monastic practice that would communicate the protest of contemplatives). "People should be able to sense that our silence comes from a deep reflection and honest suffering about the contradictions in the world and in ourselves" (158). For Merton, this prophetic function was the fundamental root of the contemplative life, a life which demands the kind of self-knowledge and risk-taking that challenges not only American society, but the global village as well.

Throughout history, asserted Merton, women—especially contemplative women—have been oppressed and suppressed by the "feminine mystique." Merton's third conference, "The Feminine Mystique" naturally flowed from the two previous. Here Merton acknowledged the evil of this mystique which has prevented women from being strong prophetic voices in the Church and in the world. Real women, women who are whole, women like Teresa of Avila, did not compromise their prophetic vocation and effected change in the Church and the world as well. Merton insisted that "it is time to end this mystique, which does no one any good" (163).

Religious women have been harmed from the beginning in the Church, Merton pointed out, by both the feminine mystique and the Church's severe gender bias. "Being a person, is what has to be emphasized" (172). "We need a whole new theological anthropology, a whole new understanding of what a human being is, what a woman is, what a man is" (172-73).

Merton would be remiss if he did not explore the benefits of Zen with the sisters. In "Zen: A Way of Living Directly," he pointed out that "Zen was nothing but John of the Cross without the Christian theology" (177). Presenting Zen as a way of life, and not merely as another form of contemplative prayer, he offered the sisters a spiri-

tual tool which could sharpen their inner awareness as well as their awareness of the world around them.

Contemplative life is a life of obedience. However, in "Acting in Freedom and Obedience," Merton clarified the fact that religious obedience is not a question of submission to authority nor is it an instrument for keeping an institution going properly, ". . . [O]bedience is meant to free us so that we can follow the Holy Spirit. We respect the authority of others and obey it, but we also have to follow our own conscience" (229). Religious obedience, Merton believed, "makes a person supple, free from attachments to self-will . . ." (227) which allows a person to live the prophetic vocation of total availability to God.

Merton included other conferences which addressed the topics of asceticism, penance, and celibacy, all of which, for him, conspire to create the contemplative heart: a heart desiring to love God alone, and seeking therein to love all of God's creation.

Thomas Merton's many and varied messages to these contemplative leaders twenty-five years ago prophetically challenge us today. For persons engaged in their own inner process and aware of how that process impacts all of creation, *Springs of Contemplation* will be an asset, an inspiration and a challenge to the journey toward wholeness and prophetic Christian witness in the world.

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Denise Levertov. *Evening Train*. New York: New Directions, 1992. 128 pages. \$17.95. *New and Selected Essays*. New York: New Directions, 1992. 266 pages. \$21.95 hardcover.

Reviewed by Emily Archer

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If there is any poet in these times whose work elucidates "contemplation in a world of action," it is Denise Levertov. "The poet stands open-mouthed in the temple of life," wrote Levertov in 1965, exploring the etymology of *contemplation*. Nearly thirty years later, this poet continues to gift us with the in-spirings of her own attention to the world, with poems that emerge awake and breathing. Denise Levertov has two new volumes from New Directions that witness the world