are of course passages on nature and the cycle of the seasons, on Merton's enthusiastic responses to his reading, on liturgy, and solitude, and old and new selves, and interreligious dialogue, and the Kingdom of God, on social issues—perhaps not as numerous as they might be (Merton's interest in racial justice is largely absent), but those that are included are striking and powerful—see for example the passages on peace and realized eschatology (71 [March 9]), on Chuang Tzu and commitment to peace (112 [April 18]), on Vietnam and Christ's passion (130 [May 4]), on non-violence in spirit (244 [August 22])—on technology, on humorous and slightly surrealistic monastic events (see "Another Lost Customer": 338 [November 20]), on "St. Benedict's Sanity" (289 [October 3]) and four days later on "America, the World's Mad Abbot" (293 [October 7]). Above all there is the ongoing story of Merton's successes and failures—neither of them absolute and definitive—in his ongoing efforts to surrender himself entirely to God and to God's mercy in humility and gratitude and *hesychia*—the peace that passes understanding.

In assembling these selections, Jonathan Montaldo has provided a precious resource both for long-time readers of Merton and for those encountering him for the first time. *A Year with Thomas Merton* is certainly worth spending a year with, and worth returning to, in part or in whole, for many subsequent years thereafter.

Patrick F. O'Connell

KOWNACKI, Mary Lou, *Between Two Souls: Conversations with Ryokan*, Introduction by Joan D. Chittister. Calligraphy by Eri Takase. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004). xxii + 191 pages. ISBN 0802828094. (Hardcover) $20.00

Between Two Souls is a striking and a singular book. It is, as the subtitle suggests, a "conversation"—one that spans more than two centuries, bridging East and West and plumbing the depths of the human spirit beyond geography.

Joan D. Chittister's "Introduction to a Dialogue on Life" introduces readers to two monks and poets: Ryokan, a Japanese Buddhist, who moves back and forth from the solitary quiet of the forest to the village where he goes to beg for food and play with the village children, and Mary Lou Kownacki, a Catholic Benedictine, who finds solitude and community in an American

inner-city where she administers a program in the arts. Chittister situates the book within the larger monastic tradition. "Both these poets," she writes, "are monks, *monastics*, a man and a woman, devoted to finding the One Thing Necessary in Life" (p. xii). Each is a seeker and their seeking forges a link between them.

Interspersed throughout the book are calligraphies by Eri Takase. The calligraphies serve as chapter headings, previewing themes of poems that follow: "Two Souls," "Heart," "Poem," "Rain," "Saint," "Pine," "Wind," "Ball," "Dream," "Bowl," "Children," "Letter." Indeed, these brush drawings might be likened to the tolling of a bell—a call to stop and attend to what is at hand. Such attention to the present moment, which characterizes the way of the Buddhist monk and the way of the Christian contemplative alike, marks Ryokan's poems and Kownacki's as well.

Ryokan's poems, translated by John Stevens, are reprinted from *Dewdrops on a Lotus Leaf: Zen Poems of Ryokan* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1993). Kownacki's poems offer a contemporary counterpoint to those of the Zen master. In her "Prelude," Kownacki tells how she came to know Ryokan (1758-1831) and enter into a poetic dialogue with him. Confessing that she "fell in love" with him, Kownacki tells how Ryokan was summoned by a friend to speak to his "wayward" son. The monk said not a word but as "the boy was helping tie Ryokan's sandals, he felt a warm drop of water on his shoulder. Glancing up, the boy saw Ryokan, eyes full of tears, looking down on him. Ryokan departed silently and the boy mended his ways." In this story and the poem that captures its lesson, Mary Lou Kownacki writes that she found "all the scriptures" she "needed to live as a monk." The poem is short and to the point: "Oh, that my monk's robes were wide enough to embrace the whole world."

Over the course of two years, reading Ryokan's poems became for Kownacki an exercise in *lectio divina*. *Between Two Souls* is the product of this "slow reading" which led to meditation and, in turn, gave rise to poetry. Presented alongside Ryokan's poems, Kownacki's poems are at once responses to Ryokan, reflections on her own experiences, and forays into the deepest recesses of the human heart. The result is a rich and nuanced exchange that invites the reader to imitate Kownacki's exercise of "slow reading"—perhaps with pen in hand.

It is apparent that in Ryokan, Mary Lou Kownacki found a kindred spirit: a poet to be imitated, a muse to inspire her, and a spiritual master to guide her journey. Sometimes, she takes her

cue from the nineteenth century Buddhist monk's first lines, rewriting them as she reflects on her own experiences. So, Ryokan's "Thinking back, I recall my days at Ents?-ji ..." evokes Kownacki's memory of her year as a novice. And a poem Ryokan wrote on returning to his native village after a long absence prompts Kownacki to write about returning to her monastery after a year's leave. But Kownacki's poems are much more than the work of one poet imitating another. Ryokan's poems spark a memory, a feeling, or an experience that takes shape in the lines of a poem and the poems draw the reader into her world, where, as in Ryokan's world, the boundaries between monastery and world disappear and being a monk becomes a way of being *in* the world.

Like Ryokan, Kownacki shares the story of her spiritual journey. Despite all that Kownacki discovers that she has in common with the nineteenth-century Buddhist, their poems highlight some significant differences in lifestyle. Ryokan wrote:

In my youth I put aside my studies

And I aspired to be a saint.
Living austerely as a mendicant monk,
I wandered here and there for many springs.
Finally I returned home to settle under a craggy peak.
I live peacefully in a grass hut,
Listening to birds for music.
Clouds are my best neighbors.
Below, a pure spring where I refresh body and mind;
Above, towering pines and oaks that provide shade and brushwood.
Free, so free, day after day –
I never want to leave!

In response, Mary Lou Kownacki writes:

In my youth I put aside my talents
And aspired to be a saint.
I fasted on bread and water,
Prayed long hours into night,
Gave loaves of bread to the poor,
Was dragged to jail trying to stop war.

Finally, I found a single room in the inner city.
Outside my window
Police sirens, screams . . . footsteps in the night.

Three in the morning, children roaming the street.
I fold my hands and bow.
I pick up a pen and write.
All is well. All is well.

Both discover that their spiritual practice, however solitary, awakens within them deep compassion and a sense of solidarity with others. The needs of others penetrated and expanded Ryokan's solitude as they do Kownacki's.

For both the world is at once a place of beauty and of suffering, of innocence and ignorance. Each tends a garden—mindful of the fragility of the plants they raise: Ryokan surrendering plants and flowers "To the will / Of the wind" and Kownacki surrendering her tulips and daffodils "To the mercy / Of neighborhood children."

Inspired by Ryokan, Mary Lou Kownacki eloquently expresses her pleasure and gratitude for gifts at once simple and profound:

First blooming in the month of May,
The lilac pours perfume over my inner city street
Like God's mercy.

Soon the children are writing poems
On mirrors, balloons, rocks, kites . . . .
Soon the room smells
Of fresh words and ideas.
A bold phrase or image
Pops out of a child's hand and struts across the page,
So free and alive
That I feel the movement of a tickle inside of me.
Do you want to know the secret of life?
Listen a child is reading a new poem.

But the world in which Kownacki lives is a world in which children also suffer and die:

After a two-day search
We found five-year-old Lila's
Battered body in the dumpster
Her cotton underpants
Draping from one ankle.
How dare the wild violets
Continue to bloom.

It is a world in which people suffer from poverty and injustice and a world which makes martyrs of women like Ita, Dorothy, Maura and Jean who work to lessen that suffering. It is a world in which we experience loss and come to know the nearness of death.

There is a realism to Kownacki's poems (as there is in Ryokan's) but there is hope too as we come to see things as they are and as they can be—if we wake up and act with compassion. There is grace and healing.

Reading these poems we move easily between two worlds, invited to see our own world with new clarity. Ryokan and Kownacki have pared life to the basics—each in their own way. Ryokan writes:

> I have an old staff
> That has well served many.
> Its bark is worn away;
> All that remains is the strong core.
> I used it to test the waters,
> And often it got me out of trouble.
> Now, though, it leans against the wall,
> Out of service for years (p. 168).

And Kownacki:

> I have an old wooden
> Bookcase that folds flat
> For easy carrying. Whenever
> I move it becomes my backpack.
> Right now it sits
> In the corner of my room
> Holding all my worldly possessions:
> A half-burnt white candle,
> An icon of Our Lady of Tenderness
> (replica of one that hung in Saint Seraphim's cell),
> A gong to summon prayer,
> A framed colored photo
> of an angel tossing incense with abandon.
> My four favorite poetry books, A pen and lined notebook,
> A card with this quote by Saint Romould,
> "Sit in your cell as in paradise" (p. 169).

Reading *Between Two Souls* and especially the lines quoted above, I am reminded of Merton's *Day of a Stranger*, written to offer Latin

American readers a glimpse of his day in the hermitage and the inner world of his heart. Like Merton, Kownacki invites us to observe the outer landscape of our world and nurture the inner landscape of our spirit as we enter into this amazing conversation "between two souls."

Christine M. Bochen

CHITTISTER, Joan, *Called to Question: A Spiritual Memoir,* (Sheed & Ward, 2004). pp. 260. ISBN # 1580511430. (Hardcover) $21.95.

In *Called to Question: A Spiritual Memoir*, Sister Joan D. Chittister, a well-known spokesperson for social justice, calls for a spirituality which continually questions hierarchy, orthodoxies, and traditional religious assumptions, while celebrating the sacramentality and holiness of daily life. This little book consists of 25 brief chapters, each 6-8 pages in length, suitable for daily devotional reading. The chapters cover topics such as prayer, solitude, gender, justice, friendship, and the dark night of the soul.

The chapters are built around Sister Chittister's journal entries responding to quotations she found in a diary she used for a period of time (*In Good Company: A Woman's Journal for Spiritual Reflection*, published by Pilgrim Press, 1998). Every chapter in Chittister's book begins with a quotation she found in the journal, usually quotations of scripture or from women such as Teresa of Avila, Ann E. Carr, Thérèse of Lisieux, and Madeleine L'Engle. Each chapter's epigraphic quotation is followed by an excerpt from Chittister's own journal entry, responding to the quote. The chapter then expands on the theme begun in the journal, forming Chittister's conversation with the women quoted in the journal.

Called to Question is heavily autobiographical in style, as it opens with a discussion of Chittister's upbringing by parents in a "mixed marriage" and her questioning of fellow Roman Catholics who believed her Presbyterian stepfather would go to hell. Many chapters relate Chittister's wrestling with what she believes to be many Christians' rigid and hierarchical interpretation of their tradition. She describes her struggle to remain within the Roman Catholic Church, even as she finds resources within the tradition, especially monasticism, to be beneficial.

In many instances, her prose is insightful and profound, as she contrasts "real prayer" with escapist "self-induced hypnotism": "Real prayer plunges us into life, red and raw. It gives us new