

...that amazing and rare combination of utter groundedness and constant risk-taking that characterizes the true Gospel...these women wasted no time in fixing, controlling, or even needing to understand what is wrong with others. Instead, they put all their time and energy into letting God change them. From that transformed place, they serve and carry the pain of the world, which they are convinced is the pain of God. (p. 124)

With God's grace, we may come to understand what the sisters, the mystics and contemplatives know to be the only way to live in our world, learning in the silence that, "Our lives are usable for God. We need not be effective, but only transparent and vulnerable. God takes it all from there...we are all partial images slowly coming into focus, to the degree we allow and filter the Light and Love of God" (p. 134). In terms perhaps more accessible to the paradox of our daily struggle for justice, mercy and love, "...action is the ongoing good and the needed school, but the concluding lesson is always a contemplative seeing and being" (p. 130).

Aaron Froehlich's essay, "Eyes That See," was written following a trip from Albuquerque to Israel and the West Bank. The conclusion of his essay expresses the foundational premise of this book, and serves as a fitting summary to my experience of contemplation in action in Juarez:

Since then, my struggle to understand and communicate my experience has continued...It's not my place to search for the "solution" or to lead anyone else there either; my call is to be faithful to God's ongoing incarnation in my life, and to walk forward with a growing commitment to see with new eyes and live with greater integrity (p. 58).

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RAKOCZY, Susan, *Great Mystics & Social Justice, Walking on the Two Feet of Love* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2006), pp. 217. ISBN 0-8091-4307-0 (paperback). \$18.95.

How can we meaningfully live out our Christian vocation in a world plagued by war, economic hegemony, ecological destruction and other structural evils? For Sister Susan Rakoczy, the answer lies in the example of the great Christian mystics whose lives of deep prayer lead to outward lives of love toward others and

efforts to bring about justice and peace. Rakoczy should be commended for calling us all to consider the tie between love of God and love of neighbor in her new book, *Great Mystics and Social Justice, Walking on the Two Feet of Love*. She addresses the tension between contemplation and action by urging us to consider the testimony of the mystics that neither is sufficient without the other. Her personal experience, as a theologian, academic and spiritual director, actively engaged in working for justice as a white, woman religious in South Africa, qualifies her to speak on the subject of love of God and neighbor and the necessary link between prayer and working toward a more just and equitable society.

Rakoczy's thesis is "That the writings of the mystics have important things to say to contemporary Christians as they seek to integrate prayer and commitment to justice and peace."<sup>1</sup> She accepts William James' view that mysticism is not reserved for the rarified few, but is open to all and is the core of all religious experience.<sup>2</sup> This permits her to profile some who have not traditionally been acclaimed as mystics by devoting a chapter to the biblical account of Martha and Mary, and another chapter to four men who worked toward abolishing apartheid in South Africa: Nelson Mandela, Beyers Naudé, Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Catholic Archbishop Denis Hurley. The backbone of the book is a brief life history and selected insights from the writings of Catherine of Siena, Ignatius of Loyola, Evelyn Underhill, Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton.

The theme of this work is taken from the writings of Catherine of Siena—the two feet of love represent love of God and love of neighbor. Rakoczy sees love of God and love of neighbor as one love. For her, loving God is necessarily loving neighbor and loving neighbor is necessarily loving God. Somehow these loves should or will grow together, and if one is present so must be the other. She observes: "It does not matter which conversion happens first: to a deeper faith commitment in Jesus the Christ or an awakening to the imperative to labor for a just and peaceful society. Growth in both must continue apace."<sup>3</sup> Rakoczy's book challenges the reader to question himself, his church community and the Church at large as to why the love of neighbor that motivates both social justice and the desire for peace is not more evident in our world. The mystics she explores begin from profound experiences of God that over time fundamentally alter their way of seeing and engaging with themselves and with their worlds. Read-

ing the testimonies of these mystics, in whose lives both love of God and love of neighbor grow and find meaningful expression, one is struck with the fact that the love of God and love of neighbor do not seem to grow equally in the life of the average Christian.

Rakoczy does not define social justice or offer us a clear distinction between it and the virtue of charity. Her assumption that love of God will automatically translate into love of neighbor for the average Christian is a significant and perhaps unbridgeable leap; assuming love of neighbor will automatically translate into a commitment to justice and peace is a quantum leap she fails to acknowledge. Consumed by the endeavor to live out her faith in the struggle for social justice, she might overlook the possibility that many Christians, particularly in the United States, think in individualistic rather than communal terms. While most Americans acknowledge that individual piety and acts of charity are fundamental to Christianity, many do not connect Christianity with a social justice imperative.

The mystics, like world-class chefs, show us what a perfect soufflé or a flaky puff pastry could look like but do not give us a step-by-step recipe. Those who have tried to raise social consciousness and incite action within Christian faith communities must often wonder what missing ingredients or yet-to-be mastered techniques might yield better results. What is it about the mystic's relationship with God that brings about a different relationship with neighbor that both motivates and emboldens him or her to work for a more just and peaceful society? If mysticism is open to all, why aren't more Christians experiencing the love of God and love of neighbor of which the mystics write?

Rakoczy's book showcases the mystics' insights that love of God and neighbor are inseparable but stops short of connecting their experiences to those of mainstream Christians so the reader might follow the path to transformed consciousness.

One mystic who profoundly connects mystical insights and experiences with mainstream Christianity and encourages the everyday Christian to follow the path to transformed consciousness and a social justice imperative, is Thomas Merton. Rakoczy describes Merton's progression from one who seeks solitude as an escape from the world to one who appreciates the true objective of Christian solitude and contemplation—encountering the truth which must then be spoken boldly and prophetically. Rakoczy

paints the "before" and "after" pictures of Merton's personal journey and spirituality and devotes considerable space to his commitment to peace and nonviolence, but readers who appreciate Merton might wish for more. She never invites the reader into the kitchen, to continue the culinary analogy, to learn how Merton breaks the eggs and chops up the raw ingredients in order to help the reader connect the contemplative experience with love of neighbor and a commitment to justice.

Merton's writings openly describe the journey by which the Christian detaches from the false self and pseudo-Christianity and enters into the kind of experience that will result in an awakened social conscience. Merton boldly proclaims Christianity as it is commonly practiced as "scarcely Christian," resulting in "darkness" from which many "good people and souls of prayer suffer these days." He denounces the Christianity "we have subtly substituted for the will of God and for true Christian tradition" as a practice "of individualism, of greed, of cruelty, of injustice, which hides behind specious maxims and encourages a kind of spiritual quietism."<sup>4</sup> Merton attributes "a sense of righteousness and complacent satisfaction in the midst of the most shocking injustices and crimes" to collective narcissism.<sup>5</sup> He decries the well-fed man who "entertain[s] the most laudable sentiments of love for his neighbor, while ignoring the fact that his brother is struggling to solve insoluble and tragic problems."<sup>6</sup>

According to Merton, the antidote to this for all Christians is a serious daily commitment to contemplation and solitude, in which one finds freedom from the commotion of the world, detachment from the false self, oneness with the true self within and thereby oneness with God and others.<sup>7</sup> Like Merton, many Christian mystics emphasize detachment from the world as necessary in order to apprehend the ground of being in which all are one: the Mystery of Life, Love, Truth and Mercy. Discovering one's true self for Merton is discovering the great Mystery in whose image and likeness the soul is fashioned. Into a brilliant light that is read by the confounded senses as darkness, the mystic enters not simply with his mind but his entire being, and is transformed in God.<sup>8</sup> As one persists in the life of interior prayer, one becomes increasingly aware of the presence and action of the Holy Spirit in all things, and individual goal orientation is replaced by "an obedient and cooperative submission to grace."<sup>9</sup> Thereby the will of the individual is conformed to the will of God. Merton has much to say to

contemporary Christians about love of God and love of neighbor and living these out in the struggle for social justice. To Merton, Christian vocation is not a choice between the contemplative life and the active life, but an entering into contemplation and solitude in order to find Truth and the will to live out of Truth – God's will. Getting the inward experience right, allowing God full access to one's being in silence, naturally leads one into expressing that experience outwardly in love of neighbor and a commitment to a more just and peaceful society.

Rakoczy's book urges us to wrestle seriously with the witness of the Christian mystics. Their prophetic voices challenge us not to be comfortable with a private piety that is not expressed in love of neighbor and a commitment to justice and peace. Merton's writings, in particular, can help Christians make the connection between mystical experience and social justice in the concrete particulars of their own lives.

## Notes

1. Rakoczy, Susan, *Great Mystics and Social Justice, Walking on the Two Feet of Love* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2006), p. 11.

2. Rakoczy, p. 8.

3. Rakoczy, p. 4.

4. Merton, Thomas, *Cold War Letters*, ed. Christine M. Bochen and William H. Shannon (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), p. 64.

5. Merton, Thomas, *Love and Living* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979), p. 147.

6. Merton, p. 138.

7. Givney, David W, *The Social Thought of Thomas Merton, The Way of Nonviolence and Peace for the Future* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983), p. 32.

8. Merton, Thomas, *The Ascent to Truth* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951), p. 261.

9. Merton, Thomas, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), p. 49.

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