

## Creation as Revelation and Responsibility

Review of

*Prophet and Mystic of Creation: On Retreat with Thomas Merton*

By Kathleen Deignan, CND

6 Conferences on 2 DVDs / 3 CDs

Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2014

\$29.95 (DVDs); \$19.95 (CDs); \$15.95 (MP3)

Reviewed by **Walt Chura, OFS**

Of course, the Bible starts with it. Yet, it suffers as a subject of concern because it's SO BIG. The subject of care for creation requires a steady gaze from so many perspectives that many citizens of planet earth simply feel they have to get on with their lives without thinking about it. For too many, the personal survival of themselves and their families requires all of their attention. For others, especially those of us in the "developed" nations, getting "MORE" – more comfort, more pleasure, more time, more power – is thought number ONE, and we have whole industries dedicated to encouraging those desires.

Focusing on care for creation is a daunting goal, a challenge for our attention. Kathleen Deignan, CND has once again enlisted Thomas Merton in the challenge to awaken the religious population to the reality that "attention must be paid" to this spiritual/religious/mystical crisis. Of course, Kathleen Deignan is "an embarrassment of riches," which I needn't rehearse for ITMS members and friends who have experienced her gifts and diverse accomplishments.

I first met Sr. Kathleen a couple of decades ago when we were both visiting the Sabbathday Lake Shaker community in Maine. I did not know then of her interest in Merton. Mine had yet to blossom, in some part by way of Deignan's writings. The DVD/CD retreat program, *Prophet and Mystic of Creation: On Retreat with Thomas Merton*, provides something of both a summation and expansion of the insights one may have garnered from two of Sr. Kathleen's previous – and indispensable – collections of Merton's writings featuring creation as the locus of contemplative experience: *When the Trees Say Nothing* and *A Book of Hours*.

For twenty years I conducted an annual Merton contemplative, silent weekend retreat at Pyramid Life Center, an Albany Diocesan facility in the Adirondack mountains of New York. Upon their publication, these books became foundational in acquainting retreatants with a contemplative experience in and of creation. All this prepared me to relish the opportunity to be "On Retreat with Thomas Merton" as presented by Kathleen Deignan.

The presentation is enhanced by lovely songs on the themes of the "retreat," sung beautifully, as always, by Sr. Kathleen and by photographs (in the DVD version) of God's stunning Creation. Personally,

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however, I must say that I was distracted by Sr. Kathleen's presentation of this profound Merton material from behind a podium, with little to no verbal animation, though speaking of profoundly consequential and ultimate spiritual matters. This material is NOT, in the pejorative sense, "academic."

Sr. Kathleen begins at the beginning, in the Biblical sense. The opening conference, "Pieces of the Paradise Isle," laments the "environmental disaster" that is the current state of "Eden," at the convergence of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, brought on not only by greed and conflict but by a spiritual blindness unable to comprehend "creation . . . radiating the Divine Presence." She goes on to enumerate some of the many consequences of our environmental sins exemplifying the "current state of Paradise" as a *spiritual* crisis, requiring "ecological metanoia." Conference 2 establishes the importance of recognizing the "two books of Revelation," not the Old and New Testaments but Scripture and creation itself. Conference 3 then proceeds to rehearse Patristic and post-Patristic creation masters' positions on Nature as revelatory of divinity, including Benedict and Bernard, the Celts, Hildegard, Dame Julian and more. "Dislocations" follow. Finally, the narrative settles on "Merton's Practice of *Lectio Creationis*" – "reading" creation itself. Conference 3 begins to explore "Love for the Paradise Mystery," tracing Merton's insights into "The Recovery of Paradise," highlighting the "wisdom that focused Merton's attention on the encompassing mystery of Paradise." Conference 4, "Remembering Paradise," examines influences on Merton's creation spirituality, beginning with his parents and their vocations as artists, his Welsh Celtic roots, the Franciscan and Cistercian traditions. And, of course, "once inside the monastic cloister, Merton found a safe haven in which to heal the deep afflictions of his alienated, fragmented soul." Conference 5, "The Wisdom of Paradise," examines how Merton's immersion in Cistercian life helped his recovery of his "paradise mind," not least by his eventual appointment as forester. Of course the pinnacle experience was his moving to the hermitage. His travels which ended with his death reached a psychological pinnacle in a "paradise garden." Conference 6 sums Merton up as "The Prophet of Paradise," referring to the *Rule* of St. Benedict as a "survival response" to the end of the world "in utopian form." Survival means not eating the forbidden fruit yet again. We owe a debt of thanks to Fr. Louis, and to Sr. Kathleen as well, for this prophetic and mystical reminder.