Praying The Psalms: A Layperson's Path to Contemplation

Kathy Hoffman

During the decades that preceded the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, scripture held a secondary role in the liturgy and life of the Roman Catholic Church. For the Catholic faithful, the sacrament of the Eucharist was the focus of the Mass, and prayer often centered on the rosary and other sacramentals. It seems unlikely that there would have been a significant audience for books devoted to the use of scripture in private prayer in the 1950s, yet Thomas Merton was responsible for two separate and successful efforts involving the use of the psalms in prayer and contemplation.

The material in *Bread in the Wilderness* was first published in 1950 as a series of articles in *Orate Fratres*.[1] Offered as a book in 1953, it was followed closely by *Praying the Psalms* in 1956. This article explores these literary efforts in relation to the following points: 1) as related to the background of the times and the framework of Merton's monastic experience and his vocation as writer and poet; 2) as a practical aid for personal piety and for meeting the challenges to prayer faced by Catholic laity in world of the twentieth-century; 3) as revelations about the nature of contemplation; 4) as aspects of thought that establish Merton's importance among the theologians of the twentieth century; 5) as keen insights into the psalms' value in prayer, which continue to be explored and developed by contemporary spiritual teachers and poets.

The Psalms: Merton's Background Music

By 1953, Thomas Merton had led a cloistered, monastic life for almost a dozen years, and he had been a best-selling author longer than he had been a priest. Merton's first breviary was purchased in 1940, as a response to his rejection by the Franciscans. Saying the Office became the icon representing his dream of entering the religious life, and praying the psalms kept alive his resolve to "live in the world as if I were a monk."[2] Real life in the monastery pre-

sented unexpected challenges, however. Passionate in the search for solitude and contemplation, Merton wrestled with a need for silence and detachment that often seemed incompatible with his literary career. However, by the 1950s, Merton had also clearly come to understand that his vocation as a Cistercian monk included a call to share the fruits of his experience of God with the world. He had already published *What is Contemplation?* in 1948 and *Seeds of Contemplation* in 1949.

Merton sometimes noted that Cistercian community life, with its emphasis on communal liturgy, work and study, could be an obstacle to true solitude and contemplation. At the same time, monastic prayer, centered on the chanting of the Divine Office, immersed Merton in the psalms. In 1947, Merton's journal shows evidence that saturation in psalmody had a profound effect on his thinking and writing. Verses from psalms spontaneously punctuate journal entries from this period, often as Merton struggled to maintain his focus on God in the midst of the distractions of the community and various writing projects.[3] In the entry of September 25, 1947, Merton expresses the pure joy he experienced in "saying the psalter all alone and looking at the hills in the cool morning shadows behind the Church." He voices the conviction that the psalms, said "wisely" and in solitude, will "stay with you all day afterwards." In the next line of this entry, solitude and the beauty of nature carry Merton away in a flood of psalm-prayer that culminates in a cry of desire and frustration: "My heart burns in my side when I write about contemplation ... and I want to cast fire on the earth."[4] Already in April 1948, Merton had completed writing a pamphlet on contemplation which had met with criticism by his Cistercian censor for "the assertion that mystical contemplation was for everybody and was an integral part in Christian perfection." Even though the censor disagreed with the principle, Merton was allowed the freedom to express his conviction that contemplation was a fundamental and universal element of the Christian call to holiness.[5]

George Woodcock characterizes Merton's lyrical works of this period as "poetry of the choir" because the poet's monastic experience of the psalms is so clearly reflected. Woodcock observes that Merton's early poetry is more "ornate" than his later compositions (aptly named "poetry of the desert").[6] The poetry of the choir dominates Merton's work in the 1940s and many of these works reflect the structure, repetition, imagery, tone, and themes of the psalms.[7] Woodcock notes an "ecstatic expansiveness of the

Psalms that mainly rules the poems of the choir,"[8] which is evident in Merton's song of praise entitled "The Communion" (published in *Thirty Poems*, 1944):

> O sweet escape! O smiling flight!
> O what bright secret breaks our jails of flesh?
> For we are fled, among the shining vineyards,
> And ride in praises in the hills of wheat,
> To find our hero, in His tents of light!
> O sweet escape! O smiling flight![9]

The repetition of the first line of this opening stanza continues throughout the poem, which builds to a crescendo of praise for Jesus' transforming power.

"A Whitsun Canticle" (*A Man in the Divided Sea*, 1946) is Woodcock's choice as Merton's poem that most clearly illustrates the influence of psalmody. "It is a poem of laudation in which the poet calls upon man and nature to praise God.... One is immediately impressed by the sustained tone of joy, breathless, beyond breath, that provides the dominant feeling to the poem. It is a song of praise.... But in more than spirit is the Canticle in the true psalmodic tradition; the imagery, the diction, the prosody being there also."[10] Woodcock speculates that these early poems of the choir were the songs of Merton's personal rebirth into contemplative life,[11] and it seems as if the psalms acted as midwives in his birthing process. In "A Psalm" (*The Tears of the Blind Lions*, 1949), we glimpse the interplay of psalmody and contemplation in Merton's experience:

> When psalms surprise me with their music
> And antiphons turn to rum
> The Spirit sings: the bottom drops out of my soul
>
> And from the center of my cellar, Love, louder than
> thunder
> Opens a heaven of naked air.
>
> New eyes awaken.
> I send Love's name into the world with wings
> And songs grow up around me like a jungle.
> Choirs of all creatures sing the tunes
> Your Spirit played in Eden.[12]

Walter Brueggemann has observed that the "movement of our life, if we are attentive, is a cycle of *orientation, disorientation,* and *reorientation,*" and the psalms reflect this rhythm.[13] All growth necessarily involves a relinquishing of former, comfortable ways of life (*orientation*)—a process of *disorientation* that is painful, but essential. Eventually, a new way of living and being emerges (*reorientation*).[14] As Merton journeyed toward spiritual maturity, his poetry changed stylistically in ways that parallel Brueggemann's pattern, while also reflecting the inner silence of Merton's contemplative life.[15] His journals show a similar progression away from the breathless excitement of the early years to the constant struggle to find the balance between the active life and solitude, between sound and silence:

> I am more and more persuaded that our way of trying to be contemplatives by our individualism is utterly ruinous. But also, at the same time, what passes for community life and spirit can be just as ruinous.... What a disaster to build the contemplative life on the negation of communication. That is what, in fact, our silence often is – because we are obscuring it without really wanting it (yet needing it nonetheless) and without understanding what it is all about. That is why there is so much noise in a Trappist monastery....all this protests that we hate silence with all our power because, with our wrong motives for seeking it, it is ruining our lives. Yet the fact remains that silence is our life – but a *silence which is communication and better communication than words!* If only someone could tell us how to find it. The worse pity of all is that we think we know. What we have found is our own noise. No, that is not true. The Paradox is that in spite of all, we have found God and that is probably the trouble. Such a discovery is altogether too much and we beat a hasty retreat into any kind of protection.[16]

Merton's sometimes confusion and frustration are cries of disorientation. During this period of transition, it is not surprising that few poems from the 1950s display the elaborate qualities of the poetry of the choir;[17] however, echoes of biblical psalms remain. "Whether There is Enjoyment in Bitterness" (*The Strange Islands,* 1957) serves as a psalm of personal lament,[18] reflecting Merton's inner turmoil:

This afternoon, let me
Be a sad person. Am I not
Permitted (like other men)
To be sick of myself?

Am I not allowed to be hollow,
Or fall in the hole
Or break my bones (within me)
In the trap set by my own
Lie to myself? O my friend,
I too must sin and sin.

I too must hurt other people and
(Since I am no exception)
I must be hated by them.

Do not forbid me, therefore,
To taste the same bitter poison,
And drink the gall that love
(Love most of all) so easily becomes.

Do not forbid me (once again) to be
Angry, bitter, disillusioned,
Wishing I could die.

While life and death
Are killing one another in my flesh,
Leave me in peace. I can enjoy,
Even as other men, this agony.

Only (whoever you may be)
Pray for my soul. Speak my name
To Him, for in my bitterness
I hardly speak to Him: and He
While He is busy killing me
Refuses to listen.

Merton's words of self-pity evoke images of Psalm 38, "My wounds grow foul and fester because of my foolishness; I am utterly bowed down and prostrate; all day long I go around mourning."[19] Both laments end with a faint ray of optimism that God's silence will eventually give way to mercy and help, displaying the classic pattern of movement from despair toward hope which is characteristic of the psalms.

The study portion of Merton's days at Gethsemani involved extensive reading of diverse works from a wide array of authors, ranging from his theological contemporaries to the Fathers of the Church. During this period, Merton's attention was drawn to the work of Jean Daniélou, a Jesuit priest and professor at the *Institut Catholique* in Paris, who was part of the "New Theology" movement centered in France. Daniélou's patristic scholarship and his ideas about liturgy and biblical exegesis had a strong influence upon Merton's understanding of the psalms. Significantly, Merton dedicated *Bread in the Wilderness* to Daniélou, and in a relationship maintained through correspondence, Daniélou remained a trusted friend and mentor until Merton's death in 1968. Merton's effort to share the riches of the psalms with a popular audience also mirrors Daniélou's desire to inspire the laity of the church toward a renewal of faith that would make Catholicism relevant in a rapidly changing world.[20]

Merton's Writings about the Psalms' Value in Prayer

Bread in the Wilderness was characterized by its author as "not a systematic treatise, but only a collection of personal notes on the Psalter . . . . One supposes that they might appeal above all to monks. But in this mysterious age, there is no telling whom the book may reach."[21] In fact, this general sense of almost confusion about the nature of the reader permeates the entire text. The prologue attempts to bridge the gap between monastic experience and that of the lay Catholic with a tone that is conversational and informative. However, the title of the first chapter reveals that Merton's primary focus remains a religious audience: *"The Problem: Contemplation in the Liturgy."*

Immediately, Merton discourses on monastic life, the search for God, and the wisdom found in the Church Fathers. Abstract concepts of "acquired contemplation" and "infused contemplation" are used without benefit of explanation, and countless references are made to reciting or chanting the Divine Office. A layperson of the period would have found little in common with Merton's experience of prayer. Themes of symbolism, typology, sacrament and liturgy all evidence strong influence by Daniélou and the "New Theology" of that period. The overall structure of the book and much of its content indicate a scholarly intent that would have

been beyond the scope of the ordinary layperson's understanding of scripture and liturgy in this era.

Bread in the Wilderness hints at Merton's "separatist" mentality during this period. Lawrence Cunningham has noted that "his writings well into the 1950s are full of his disgust with contemporary secular culture."[22] Merton's initial entrance into the monastic community at Gethsemani was motivated by his desire to escape society's myriad evils. Yet even within the refuge of the monastery, dissatisfaction ultimately emerged. Merton's yearning for absolute dedication to God fueled a stubborn resistance to the Cistercian Rule's requisite limited contact with other monks. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that Merton's characterization of the world can seem to be very black and white: "Christ's Cross has become the key to a history whose purpose is to separate the City of God from the city of this world, which has Babylon for its symbolic name."[23] With Merton's focus on the institutional Church, liturgical prayer, and monastic life, the psalms become songs of the "City of God." Considering his own struggle to find peace in the context of his own monastic society, it is hardly surprising that Merton offers little practical help for the layperson struggling to survive in the world of "Babylon."

However, within this rather lofty view of Church, Merton occasionally establishes striking points of connection for the ordinary Christian. In one of his frequent warnings regarding a psychological approach to contemplation and the psalms, Merton emphasizes the importance for *all* the faithful to grasp the truth of the presence of Christ:

> The spiritual understanding of the Psalter will therefore not introduce us to some esoteric technique of prayer, nor will it tempt us to induce within our minds some peculiar psychological state. It will, above all, tell us not merely what we ought to be but the unbelievable thing that we already *are*. It will tell us over and over again that we are Christ in this world, and that He lives in us.[24]

Underneath the general piety and apparent focus on monastic life, Merton clearly senses that every human is on the same journey, which is a microcosm of the journey of the Church. That is why his two books on the psalms remain important today. There are many moments when he captures the essence of the connection

between the Church and the singular soul finding his way in the world quite beautifully:

> Just as the whole people of God is still crossing the desert to the Promised Land, still passing through the Jordan, still building Jerusalem and raising God's temple on Sion, so each individual soul must normally know something of the same journey, the same hunger and thirst, the same battles and prayers, light and darkness, the same sacrifices and the same struggle to build Jerusalem within itself.[25]

Robert Waldron has observed that "every page of *Bread in the Wilderness* gives us a glimpse of Merton the poet," who has a keen appreciation for the lyric power, mystery and sacredness of the psalms. As "poems that spring from the depths of the soul where true religious experience abides," [26] the psalms mirror Merton's own poetic attempts to convey his experience of God. For all who embark on the soul-journey to unity with the cross of Christ, the psalms provide spiritual nourishment. As members of the Mystical Body of Christ, laypersons join those in religious life in singing these "songs of this City of God" and "become more fully incorporated into the mystery of God's action in human history."[27]

In addressing problems that are more widespread within human experience (such as distractions to prayer, unfamiliar language within the scriptures, and a universal aversion to suffering and pain) Merton successfully connects with his wider audience. He advises his readers to unite their personal struggles to those of the psalmist, offering the words of the sacred songs as their own prayer, rooted in personal, real-life experience. In this way, Merton establishes a common ground with the average Catholic layperson.

In 1956, Merton published an abbreviated treatment of the same topic for Liturgical Press' "Popular Liturgical Library" series. His *Praying the Psalms* is a thirty-eight page pamphlet, broken into seven untitled reflections on the value of the psalms in personal prayer. Merton's tone is much more conversational than in the earlier book, and the audience and intent are established in a question posed in the opening paragraph: "Why ... should the Christian layman turn to the Psalms and make use of them in his own prayer to God?"[28]

Praying the Psalms takes a basic look at the role of the psalms in the prayer of the Church and it also emphasizes their predominant theme of praise. Only a small section is devoted to the value

of praise for contemplation. Significantly, Merton suggests the psalms are an untapped resource for family prayer, and he encourages Catholic parents (particularly fathers) to gain sufficient knowledge to discern the appropriateness of particular psalms to meet their family's specific daily needs.

By 1956, Merton seemed to have arrived at a new and clearer appreciation for the laity's ability to connect with the psalms. In *Bread in the Wilderness,* Merton struggled to imagine a laity capable of understanding the mystery and power of the psalms. Three years later in *Praying the Psalms,* Merton indicated that the layperson might actually have an *advantage* over those in religious life in appreciating the psalms.

Merton asserts that clerics, who often approach the psalms as an obligation or intellectual exercise, may be at a serious disadvantage in entering into them in any deeper way. Conversely, Merton imagines that any serious Christian can encounter God and connect with the psalmist's experience by developing a habit of reciting and meditating on a single psalm each day:

> The problem is therefore not to learn from the Psalms a totally new experience, but rather to recognize, in the Psalms, our own experience lived out and perfected, orientated to God and made fruitful, by the action of loving faith. Ultimately we do this by uniting our joys with the joys of Christ in the Psalms, our sorrows with the sorrows of Christ, and thus allowing ourselves to be carried to heaven on the tide of His victory.[29]

Merton devotes the last two sections of his essay, more than half its content, to identifying recurring themes within the psalms and providing excerpts to illustrate. Passages of scripture make up fifty percent of this portion of the text (a clear indication that the intended audience may lack proficiency in biblical study).

Merton also establishes recurring themes that are universal to the human condition: the delight and peace of following God's will; the struggle to surrender to God; suffering and trials; social and personal sin; and Messianic and eschatological visions of hope and deliverance. Throughout, he illustrates how one can appropriate the words of the given psalms as personal prayers for peace, strength, surrender, and healing, according to one's immediate need.

Aside from the previously mentioned reference to the world as "Babylon," *Bread in the Wilderness* makes no attempt to address

the challenges faced by a layperson in living a contemplative life in secular society. No attempt was made to offer practical insights into how to incorporate the psalms into non-religious life. Nevertheless, while Merton's view of the world is sometimes bleak, hope is eternally present in Christ:

> It is not necessary for us to scale heaven to bring down Christ to us by some mysterious technique of contemplation. The Liturgy does not have to bring Christ from heaven. It is the manifestation of His presence and His power on earth. . . . It tells us that His Kingdom has already come. . . . It is established in full power in the midst of a godless humanity. Heaven is within us and all around us, even though we seem to be living in hell.[30]

Praying the Psalms is much more cognizant of the culture surrounding the reader, and the particular difficulties posed by mid-twentieth century society. With the media explosion that accompanied advances in television and radio, Merton questions whether advertising has irrevocably altered the meaning of praise and foreshadows some of his later work as a critic of culture. Judging most praise to be "cheap," "overdone" and "empty," he wonders if any superlatives remain to characterize the holiness of the Lord. The inability to break through this barrier presents a serious obstacle to experiencing the glory of God.

Merton views modern consumer-oriented society as a serious detriment to prayer:

> So we go to Him to ask help and to get out of being punished, and to mumble that we need a better job, more money, more of the things that are praised by the advertisements. And we wonder why our prayer is so often dead . . . But we do not really think we need God. Least of all do we think we need to praise Him.[31]

In Merton's view, the psalms contain a power to revive that spirit of praise in the human heart. By uniting one's daily struggles and joys with those of the psalmist, one can therefore once again recognize that not only is God *needed*, but that He is *everything*.

Since *Bread in the Wilderness* was apparently directed toward those in religious life, it discusses contemplation in much greater depth than *Praying the Psalms*. The prologue proposes a renewed

appreciation for the mystical power of scripture (similar to the teaching of Vatican II in the next decade): "The reality which nourishes us in the Psalms is the same reality which nourishes us in the Eucharist, though in a far different form. In either case, we are fed by the Word of God."[32]

After a lengthy treatment of the multiple senses of scripture and the distinction between typology and allegory, Merton makes an important connection between the words of scripture and one's personal experience of God:

> The spiritual understanding of Scripture leads to a mystical awareness of the Spirit of God Himself living and working in our own souls, carrying out, by His mysterious power, in our own lives, the same salvific actions which we can see prefigured and then realized in the Old and New Testaments.[33]

Since the psalms are the words of God written by men under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Merton asserts, in reciting the psalms, one speaks the very words of God. Merton regards this truth as fundamental to the psalms' value for contemplation.

> The peculiar mystical impact with which certain verses of Psalms suddenly produce this silent depth-charge in the heart of the contemplative is only to be accounted for by the fact that we, in the Spirit, recognize the Spirit singing in ourselves.[34]

What is important is that Religious and laity alike can appreciate this excellent image of the mystery of contemplative prayer. Authentic contemplative experience widens one's consciousness of God and leads to greater love for others. In Merton's view, the value of one's contemplation can be measured in terms of growth of charity:

> Our growth in Christ is measured not only by intensity of love but also by the deepening of our vision, for we begin to see Christ now not only in our own deep souls, not only in the Psalms, not only in the Mass, but everywhere, shining to the Father in the features of men's faces. The more we are united to Him in love the more we are united in love to one another, because there is only one charity embracing both God and our brother.[35]

Here, also, we see evidence of Merton's personal growth as a monk and his developing thinking about relationships beyond the monastery. As he deepened his understanding of contemplation, he identified more strongly with Christ's presence in other people and moved away from the notion of the world as an evil to be avoided.

As noted, within the context of *Praying the Psalms*, Merton devoted less attention to discussing contemplative prayer. This word appears only three times in thirty-eight pages. In fact, Merton seems consciously to avoid terminology that might seem intimidating to a layperson:

> Let us prescind entirely from the whole question of mystical contemplation. Can we live the Psalms in this particular way without any special gift of God? Can we come to appreciate and "experience" the inner meaning of the Psalms without departing from the ordinary ways of prayer? Certainly we can. All that we need is the ability to understand the meaning of the Psalms, their literal meaning as poems, and to "echo" or answer their meaning in our own experience. Religious experience is born of loving faith. [36]

Praying the Psalms makes no attempt to instruct the reader about contemplation in the same manner evidenced in *Bread in the Wilderness*; however, the core of Merton's message is similar. Any deep experience of prayer (contemplation) involves an attitude of praise, a loving faith, and Christ's mystical presence in both the human heart and the words of scripture.

Both discourses on prayer carry a strong message about approaching the psalms with a focus on achieving a psychological or spiritual "experience." *Praying the Psalms* speaks directly to selfish intents. "If we seek only to 'get something out of them' we will perhaps get less than we expect, and generous efforts may be frustrated because they are turned in the wrong direction: toward ourselves rather than toward God."[37]

Bread in the Wilderness addresses its warning even more directly to seeking mystical contemplative experience: "It is useless ... to seek some secret esoteric 'method' of reciting the Psalter in order to 'get contemplation.' If we chant the psalms with faith, God will manifest Himself to us; and that is contemplation."[38] In both treatments, Merton insists that God's revelation is manifested to hearts

that are centered only on God; it is a gift that may only be received, never taken.

The absence of published work devoted to the psalms during the last fifteen years of Merton's life might lead one to question whether his opinion of their value changed. As Merton's focus turned toward the outside world and its problems in the 1960s, his journals reflect less of the angst of his own interior journey than was more evident during his early years as a monk. With the granting of his request for more time of solitude (and, we assume, a corresponding decrease in choir participation), specific references to the psalms become infrequent. However, glimpses of the dialogue between the psalms and Merton's soul are still quite evident. In an entry from January 9, 1962, Merton shares a powerful moment of connection: "Deeply moved by this psalm in particular, in the night office. As if I have never seen it before (Ps. 55). Sometimes you get the impression a psalm is being given to you brand new, to be your own, by God."[39] Later in 1962 he returns to this same Psalm.

In July, 1965, as Merton joyfully anticipated full-time life in his hermitage, he regarded the Psalter an important point of connection between his own solitary life and the experience of the Desert Fathers: "In the evening began a perpetual Psalter.... Need for the continuity the Psalter offers – continuity with my own past and with the past of eremitism.... It is a deep communion with the Lord and His saints..."[40] Woodcock observes that Merton had a deep appreciation for the customs of the Desert Fathers in the formation of the monastic traditions of Christianity,[41] and it seems that his personal experience as a hermit drew him more deeply into the use of the psalms for prayer and meditation.

Eighteen months later, the silence of the hermitage had not eliminated Merton's interior struggles, but lessons from the psalms continue to emerge within Merton's journal:

> But one thing I know: as long as I am in the hermitage I can live according to my conscience, not anyone else's! I am not pure either, but at least I can struggle honestly with my ordinary dishonesty and not inflict my problems on other people. I know at least this solitude and this responsibility and this privileged silence. And the need to pray. Words of my Latin psalms have been driving themselves home to me lately... [42]

This passage concludes with five separate references to verses from the psalms related to the certainty of God's protection and the assurance of victory. Clearly this means Merton was, in a sense, living the Psalms.

Meanwhile, images of the psalms disappeared from much of the poetry in the 1960s. With the publication of *Original Child Bomb* in 1962, Merton's style of verse shifted dramatically from his previous work. With an increase in solitude and a profound concern about the perils of the nuclear age, "Merton himself had taken up poetic residence very near 'the moonlit cemeteries of surrealism,'"[43] says Woodcock. One could, however, argue that there are echoes of psalms in poetry as late as *Cables to the Ace.*

Contemporary Interest in Psalm Prayer

Merton's insights into the laity's interest in contemplative prayer, and particularly into the universal appeal of the psalms as an aid to contemplation, is supported by contemporary writings from a variety of sources. Cynthia Bourgeault, whose work in the field of contemplative prayer is well-known, observes that "contemplative prayer, once regarded as the pinnacle of monastic attainment, is now practiced daily by tens of thousands of Christians worldwide through simplified methods such as Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation."[44] She also characterizes the psalms as "some of the most ancient holy ground in our common Judeo-Christian heritage."[45] Brueggemann observes that "the Psalms are very much like our lives, which are seasons of scattering and gathering."[46] He regards the longevity of the psalms' use in liturgy as confirmation of their importance: "The community has found these words and modes of speech faithful, adequate, and satisfying because the original articulations of prayer have – in our judgement, in our faith, and in our experience – gotten it right."[47] Kathleen Norris agrees that "the psalms are holy in part because they are so well-used," and recognizes in them a "holistic" quality that insists that "the mundane and the holy are inextricably linked."[48] In reflecting the basic movements of human existence, the psalms offer a mirror for recognizing one's personal experience as part of the shared experience of God's people. Bourgeault observes that "the personal nature of the psalms is always in a creative tension with the collective...in a mysterious and dynamic way, the psalms still carry the heart and soul of the ongoing human adventure with God."[49] Praying with the psalms offers a unique opportunity to

reflect one's individual experience "back into community and tradition."[50]

While recognizing the value of the psalms for personal prayer, Bourgeault also admits, "while the Divine Office may be the centerpiece of the monastic program of spiritual transformation, it continues to be a hard sell among contemporary lay contemplatives."[51] It is important to remember that the Liturgy of the Hours is designed to be a communal prayer, and the absence of community can make praying the Office an arduous challenge.[52] Followed systematically, the Office leads one through the entire collection of one hundred fifty psalms in the course of just one or two weeks. Norris suggests that this process is "disconcerting for contemporary people...raised in a culture that idolizes individual experience, they find it difficult to recite a lament when they're in a good mood, or to sing a hymn of praise when they're in pain."[53] However, the Divine Office provides a structure that is needed for personal prayer. Arthur Boers claims that "the Office helps us pray when prayer is hard," particularly during the discouragement of spiritual dryness.[54] Without structure and direction from the wisdom of Christian tradition, he observes that modern Christians can find that they are isolated and disconnected from the community of faith. A subjective and emotional focus in prayer ultimately can result in a sense of being "increasingly disconnected from God."[55]

Contemporary Christian debate continues regarding the usefulness of particular psalms which Brueggemann characterizes as "the psalms of negativity" — complaints addressed to God that demand vengeance upon Israel's enemies.[56] Norris reports recent changes in some Benedictine communities of women, which have led to the omission of some parts of the harsh, cursing psalms from their public liturgy.[57] It is no surprise, then, that these psalms are typically avoided in mainstream Christian worship. Such psalms present a particular problem for many who resolve to use the psalms as a meaningful part of their personal prayer. Norris characterizes this perspective as she asks, "How in the world can we read, let alone pray, these angry and often violent poems from an ancient warrior culture? At a glance they seem overwhelmingly patriarchal, ill-tempered, moralistic, vengeful, and often seem to reflect precisely what is wrong with our world."[58] Similar impressions have surely led many readers to Nan Merrill's less shocking and more peaceful translation entitled *Psalms for Praying: An*

Invitation to Wholeness. Originally released in September, 1997, Merrill's poetic rendering of the psalms has enjoyed considerable success and is currently offered in a newly revised tenth-anniversary edition. While Merrill's beautifully tranquil images are attractive and soothing, her translations of these difficult psalms bear no resemblance to their biblical origins. The striking contrast is evident in a comparative reading of Psalm 137:

By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we
wept when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there
we hung up our harps.
For there our captors
asked us for songs,
And our tormentors asked for mirth,
saying,
"Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
(Ps. 137:1-3)

Plunge into the Ocean of Love,
where heart meets Heart,
Where sorrows are comforted and
wounds are mended.
There, melodies of sadness min-
gle with dolphin songs of joy;
Past fears dissolve in deep
harmonic tones,
the future—pure mystery.
For eternal moments lived in
total surrender
glide smoothly over troubled
waters.

Merrill eliminates all references to the historical setting of the text and erases the bitterness of the psalmist's tone. The closing verses of this psalm, which present what may be the most disturbing and violent images in the entire Bible, are sanitized beyond recognition:

Remember, O LORD, against the
Edomites
the day of Jerusalem's fall,
How they said, "Tear it down!
Tear it down!"
down to its foundations!"
O daughter Babylon, you
devastator!
Happy shall they be who pay
you back
what you have done to us!
Happy shall they be who take
your little ones
and dash them against the rock!
(Ps. 137:7-9)

Hide not from Love, O friends,
sink not into the sea of despair,
the mire of hatred.
Awaken, O my heart, that I drown
not in fear!
Too long have I sailed where'ere
the winds have blown!
Drop anchor!
O, Heart of all hearts, set a
clear course,
that I might follow!
Guide me to the Promised Shore! [59]

Such attempts to reinterpret the psalms, rendering them less repugnant to modern sensibilities and more conducive to cultivating inner peace, are well intentioned; however, the result sometimes is verse that hardly seems to qualify as a "translation." (It should be noted that Merrill is careful to preface her work with the disclaimer that her verse is "in no way meant to replace the well-loved, still meaningful, and historically important Psalms of the Hebrew Scripture."[60]) While Merrill's volume is beautifully crafted poetic prayer, which in many instances is faithful to the original text, her treatment of the most disturbing psalms seems to support Brueggemann's assessment that modern Christian piety has become "romantic and unreal in its positiveness...seeking to go from strength to strength, from victory to victory. But such a way not only ignores the Psalms; it is a lie in terms of our experience... the honest recognition that there is an untamed darkness in our life that must be embraced – all of that is fundamental to the gift of new life." Observing that our society prefers to live in denial and avoidance, which results in a collective numbness, he claims that the recovery and use of these psalms could serve as a valuable reality check for our culture. He suggests that the spiritual crisis that resulted for many in the wake of the tragedies of September 11, 2001 illustrate "how urgent the descent into disorientation is for the practice of faith."[61]

Norris and Bourgeault are in agreement with Brueggemann that these psalms merit closer consideration because they hold an important key to an authentic prayer life. Norris asserts that the darker psalms force us to face the realities of the human psyche: "The psalms reveal our most difficult conflicts, and our deep desire, in Jungian terms, to run from the shadow. In them, the shadow speaks to us directly, in words that are painful to hear... They ask us to be honest about ourselves and admit that we, too, harbor the capacity for vengeance."[62] Bourgeault affirms the benefit that arises when these psalms take up residence in our consciousness and

> begin to create a safe spiritual container for recognizing and processing those dark shadows within ourselves, those places we'd prefer not to think about. There are times in the spiritual journey when anger is a very real part of our life, just as jealousy, abandonment, helplessness, rage and terror are. All of these emotions are in us, and they're all in the psalms.[63]

By acknowledging and validating the reality of these emotions, and connecting us to three millennia of shared human experience, these psalms remind us that others have walked through these same dark passages. Bourgeault believes engagement with these psalms offers an opportunity to acknowledge fully the emotions without "getting stuck in them." In a very real sense, praying these psalms can "serve as a kind of confessional, allowing us to place our shadow side on the altar of prayer and find our release there." She concludes that "contemporary revisionist criticism that finds fault with the violence of the imagery is misplaced in contemplative psalmody. The psalms are psychological tools. They describe the interior warfare, the desolation, the shadow and its transfiguration."[64]

Norris concurs that engaging the psalms in prayer offers the opportunity for transformation. Praying through destructive feelings like vengeance opens the possibility of diffusing these deadly forces, and (much to our surprise!) finding in them occasions for praise. The discomfort of encountering the psalms is in this tension between pain and praise.

> They don't allow us to deny either the depth of our pain or the possibility of its transformation into praise, [demanding] that we recognize that praise does not spring from a delusion that things are better than they are, but rather from the human capacity for joy. Only when we see this can we understand that both lamentation and exultation can be forms of praise... The psalms are evidence that praise need not be a fruit of optimism.[65]

Brueggemann agrees that a faith which attempts to bring even the most painful experiences to speech and use those experiences as a basis for conversation with God is a "*transformed* faith," which demonstrates a recognition of God's presence in even the darkest moments of human existence. However, he insists that the transformative power of the psalms extends beyond the personal to the communal dimension of spirituality, resulting in a deeper concern for social justice. Conventional, privatistic spirituality often fails to appreciate the issue of theodicy which is inherent in the prayers of ancient Israel. For Israel, "*communion with God* cannot be celebrated without attention to *the nature of the community*, both among human persons and with God." Unless the spirituality we

find in the psalms causes us to confront questions of God's justice, we have missed a vital aspect of psalmic faith. "The Psalms crave for and mediate communion with God, but Israel insists that communion must be honest, open to criticism, and capable of transformation." Authentic Christian spirituality founded on the psalms must involve a "vigorous, candid and daring" dialogue with God about the state of our world and our own call to the pursuit of justice.[66]

While Thomas Merton's context for psalmody was rooted in the monastic choir, until recently little attention has been given to the relationship between the vocalization of the psalms and the contemplative experience. Since references to musical instruments and possible melodies are present in the titles to many psalms, it is curious that so little attention has been paid to music's contribution to the psalms' power to mediate an experience of God. Earlier references in Merton's journals clearly demonstrate that he had committed certain verses of the psalms to memory. An interesting question arises when one considers what effect the chanting of the verses may have had on Merton's ability to retrieve the words. Was it the words themselves, or the words in combination with the melody, which caused the psalms to sink into Merton's soul? The fact that words become more memorable when set to music is fact that few people would question. Whether attending a concert or listening to the radio in the privacy of their own cars, music-lovers can be found singing along with the words of their favorite tunes. By overlooking the musical accompaniment that has long been a part of the Christian tradition of psalmody, modern efforts to pray the psalms may be lacking a vital component of contemplation.

In recent years, modern culture has expressed an interest in several offerings of the psalms set to music. The CD *"Chant,"* a rendition of the Latin psalter produced by the monks of Santo Domingo de Silos in Spain, was a very popular success that renewed interest in Gregorian chant. The Taizé community in France, which welcomes between 2,500 and 6,000 pilgrims each week of the summer season, has also developed a following for their music. Taizé presents prayer that is beautiful in its simplicity, usually in the form of mantra-like chants formed by the blending of short texts from the psalms with a repetitive melody. Brother Jean-Marie of the Taizé community says their efforts are aimed at helping people discover that "there's something natural in prayer, some-

thing a little bit like breathing, like eating... We all need to find some way that God becomes—and faith becomes—a natural element of life." He observes that musicality adds to the experience of prayer: "There's a fullness to sung prayer, an element of wholeness."[67]

In *Chanting the Psalms*, Bourgeault characterizes the psalms as "soul music" and insists that "there's a hidden wisdom in psalmody that makes sense of the practice itself and pulls a lot of the other elements in the Christian contemplative path together." She acknowledges the challenges of learning to chant the psalms but insists that "there is a mysterious vital current that flows between the psalms and Christian inner awakening, each pole revivifying and intensifying the other" which makes the effort worthwhile.[68] Certainly, contemporary interest in the psalms as a medium for prayer and contemplation is quite likely to continue.

Merton's Vision

Bread in the Wilderness and *Praying the Psalms* offer interesting insights into Merton's growth as a monk, a writer and a contemplative and in his desires to communicate about the psalms for laypersons. His reader catches brief glimpses of Merton's personal struggle to find solitude, even within the lifestyle of a monastic community. Longing to escape the world to rest in God alone, Merton was paradoxically drawn to share his journey with this same world through his writing.

Moving away from the scholarly, religious treatment of the psalms found in *Bread in the Wilderness*, a distinctly new approach was adopted in *Praying the Psalms*, as Merton's attention turned to the laity. As his own contemplation deepened with each passing year, so did his skill and his desire for bringing others to a more profound experience of God.

Neither *Bread in the Wilderness* or *Praying the Psalms* is considered among Merton's finest work, but re-examined in the context of the decade in which they were written, they establish Merton among the theologians of the twentieth century whose vision helped form the reforms of the Second Vatican Council. His concern for "active participation in the Liturgy"[69] is echoed in Vatican II's *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (14).

Merton's sense of scripture as the Word of God, equal to and inseparable from the reality of Christ in the Eucharist parallels the

Council's emphasis on the liturgy's "one table of the Word of God and the Body of Christ."[70] Through his effort to inspire Catholics toward a deeper experience of prayer, Merton advanced the same hope for the laity's power to transform the world that the Council expressed in the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* (31-38). The Church would not officially encourage the laity to personal study of the word of God until November, 1964,[71] but already a full decade beforehand, Thomas Merton was advocating daily meditation on scripture and especially the psalms as every Christian's most effective path to knowing and loving God.

As the Holy Spirit moved within the Church in preparation for Vatican II, Thomas Merton joined with leading theologians of the time to imagine a new vision of the Church which would address the issues faced by mankind in the twentieth century. In a rapidly changing world where silence and solitude were in short supply, Merton believed that both the laity and religious within the Church could experience God as he had: through contemplation and the words of sacred scripture. More than fifty years later, as distractions and noise remain an enduring plague for residents of the twenty-first century, the need to find meaningful expression and context for experiences of joy, fear, anger and pain is perhaps stronger than ever. While many well-meaning contemporary authors continue to follow in Merton's footsteps in offering advice to the masses on techniques of prayer (and even updated translations of the Hebrew psalms), many of these attempts to satisfy our spiritual hungers prove insufficient. As a new generation is discovering, and as Merton argued, the psalms provide authentic nourishment and offer a timeless pathway to prayer and contemplation.

Notes

1. Now entitled *Worship.*

2. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) p. 300.

3. Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence*, ed. Jonathon Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996). See entries for 1947: May 4, 14, 29, June 24, July 6, August 20, Sept. 14, 24 (71, 73, 79, 87, 89, 102, 112, 122).

4. Merton, *Entering the Silence*, p. 122.

5. Merton, *Entering the Silence*, pp. 196-198.

6. George Woodcock, *Thomas Merton, Monk and Poet* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1978), p. 51.

7. Woodcock, *Thomas Merton*, pp. 55-58.

8. Woodcock, *Thomas Merton*, p. 61.

9. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), p. 40.

10. Woodcock, *Thomas Merton*, pp. 56-57.

11. Woodcock, *Thomas Merton*, p. 53.

12. Merton,*Collected Poems*, p. 220.

13. Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, ed. Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), p. 24.

14. Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, p. 31.

15. See Woodcock, *Thomas Merton*, p. 58.

16. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, ed. Lawrence Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), p. 71.

17. Woodcock, *Thomas Merton*, p. 56.

18. Merton, *Collected Poems*, pp. 231-32. Brueggemann classifies psalms of disorientation into two general categories: communal and personal laments. See *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), pp. 51-77.

19. Psalm 38:5-6. All quotations are from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, New Revised Standard Version, 1994.

20. For further reading, see Jean Daniélou, *The Bible and the Liturgy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1956) and *From Shadows to Reality: Studies in the Biblical Typology of the Fathers*, trans. Wulstan Hibberd (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1960).

21. Thomas Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness* (New York: New Directions, 1953), p. 4.

22. Lawrence S. Cunningham, *Thomas Merton and the Monastic Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 26.

23. Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness*, p. 43.

24. Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness*, p. 38.

25. Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness*, pp. 89-90.

26. Robert Waldron, *Poetry as Prayer: Thomas Merton* (Boston: Pauline Books, 2000), p. 47.

27. Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness*, pp. 43-44.

28. Thomas Merton, *Praying the Psalms* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1956), p. 3.

29. Merton, *Praying the* Psalms, pp. 16-17.

30. Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness*, p. 136.

31. Merton, *Praying the Psalms*, p. 6.

32. Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness*, pp. 3-4.

33. Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness*, p. 37.

34. Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness*, p. 75.

35. Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness*, p. 92.
36. Merton, *Praying the Psalms*, p. 16.
37. Merton, *Praying the Psalms*, p. 31.
38. Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness*, p. 15.
39. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), p. 193.
40. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, ed. Robert E. Daggy, (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997), p. 273.
41. Woodcock, *Thomas Merton*, p. 78.
42. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997), p. 170.
43. Woodcock, *Thomas Merton*, p. 56.
44. Cynthia Bourgeault, *Chanting the Psalms* (Boston: New Seeds, 2006), p. ix.
45. Bourgeault, *Chanting the Psalms*, p. 9.
46. Brueggeman, *Psalms and Life*, p. 31.
47. Brueggeman, *Psalms and Life*, p. 33.
48. Kathleen Norris, *Cloister Walk* (New York: Riverhead, 1996), p. 93.
49. Bourgeault, *Chanting the* Psalms, p. 16.
50. Norris, *Cloister Walk*, p. 100.
51. Bourgeault, *Chanting the Psalms*, p. 3.
52. Arthur P. Boers, "Learning the Ancient Rhythms of Prayer," *Christianity Today* 45 (2001): p. 42.
53. Norris, *Chanting the Psalms*, p. 101.
54. Boers, "Learning the Ancient Rhythms of Prayer," p. 41.
55. Boers, "Learning the Ancient Rhythms of Prayer," p. 40.
56. Brueggemann, *Spirituality of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Fortress: 2002), p. xii.
57. Norris, *Cloister Walk*, p. 97.
58. Norris, *Cloister Walk*, p. 93.
59. Nan C. Merrill, *Psalms for Praying* (New York: Continuum, 2007), p. 275.
60. Merrill, *Psalms for Praying*, p. x.
61. Brueggemann, *Spirituality* xii, xv, 13.
62. Norris, *Cloister Walk*, p. 97, p. 104.
63. Bourgeault *Chanting the Psalms*, p. 41, p.43.
64. Bourgeault *Chanting the Psalms*, p. 44, p. 47.
65. Norris, *Cloister Walk*, p. 94, p. 96, p. 104.
66. Brueggemann, *Spirituality* 27, 59-74.
67. Brother Jean-Marie, "Prayer at Taizé: Singing and Silence," *Christian Century* 118 (2001), pp. 16-17.

68. Bourgeault, *Chanting the Psalms*, p. 6, p. 49.
69. Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness*, p. 42.
70. Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* (Northport NY: Costello, 1998), p. 21.
71. Flannery, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, p. 37.