

Sowing A Future for Contemplative Spirituality

Review of
Seeds of Peace: Contemplation and Non - Violence

by William H. Shannon

New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996

181 pages / \$14.95 softcover

Reviewed by **Jonathan Montaldo**

While William H. Shannon, professor emeritus of Religious Studies at Nazareth College in Rochester, New York, has focused critical scholarship on Merton (his "reflective biography," *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story*, remains the jewel of his contributions to the best in secondary Merton literature), Dr. Shannon has never eschewed expressing his priesthood as he appropriates and translates Merton's message for others. *Seeds of Peace* is the final installment of a trilogy devoted to this scholar's more pastoral reflections on prayer with Merton's writing as the chief but not only mentor of his meditations. The antecedents to this new volume, *Seeking the Face of God* (1988) and *Silence on Fire* (1991) found an audience eager for this more personal and expressive approach to the implications of Merton's writing and life for prayer and spirituality. This audience will find continuing nourishment in *Seeds of Peace*. Teachers, too, might also find this volume instructive for Dr. Shannon's translations of difficult theological concepts into readable and engaging prose. Who will not admire a twelve-page expository chapter on "God as mystery" ("Who Is the God of Contemplative Spirituality?") during which Shannon evokes Meister Eckhart, Gregory of Nyssa and Merton to aid his clear argument that God is best "grasped" in darkness? Shannon the scholar knows how to hide himself, utilizing the folksy anecdote, the personal experience and a conversational tone, as he cunningly, effectively invites a lay readership to grasp the basics of apophatic theology. *Seeds of Peace* as exemplifying an effective teaching method is a "class act."

One of the central concerns of *Seeds of Peace* is describing the shift in Roman Catholic spirituality in the twentieth century as a passage through a "spirituality of devotion," which wedged distinctions between the clerical and the lay, between Sunday and the rest of the week in the "real world," toward what Dr. Shannon calls a "contemplative spirituality" which narrows the gap between rhetoric and behavior, between one sacred day and six profane ones, and views "the whole of life [as needing to be] lived contemplatively and in process of continual growth toward personal wholeness and authenticity." Growth towards personal wholeness involves a "new level of human consciousness" in which God is understood as "the mystery that is at the heart of reality" which grounds all creation in solidarity. Such a consciousness of holiness as wholeness is incarnated in non-violence, the conscious will to repair all divisions and reheal all rifts simultaneously at the micro-level of one's personal life and at the macro-level of the community to which one belongs. This community begins as family but extends to neighborhood, passes national borders, moves in general intention, but through specific actions in the place one lives, to the entire creation we call Earth. This "contemplative spirituality," for Shannon, is Merton's "gift to the Christian community." Not that Merton invented a new spirituality but rather rescued this contemplative approach "from the marginal position it had occupied in Catholic thinking and practice and placed it at the center of our understanding of spirituality."

Seeds of Peace is the type of book perfect for a personal retreat. Exposition of theories of contemplation, peace and non-violence are always kept close to our common human concerns and quotidian experiences. Practical suggestions for introducing the spirit of non-violence into one's family life are only one example of Shannon's care to ground his exposition of spirituality where everyone lives. His use of Merton's writing is judicious and never over-bears: the book is very much Shannon's and not merely Merton "as filtered through." *Seeds of Peace* is yet another reason to be grateful for the teaching and writing of this dedicated scholar and pastor.