

A Christmas Present for the Spirit

Review of

Advent and Christmas with Thomas Merton

A Redemptorist Pastoral Publication

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The cover alone on this slim book was enough to put me in the Christmas spirit. A banner across its middle announces the title and separates (or joins?) an appealing manger scene situated above it with a computer-generated graphic of a poinsettia at the bottom. This red and green combination of Old Master and modern graphic works visually, even if one misses the metaphor of Advent as a story at once old and new. And the combination of texts from Scripture and from Thomas Merton for the Advent/Christmas Season meditations works equally well.

There is something off-putting (to some of us anyway) about a how-to book of prayer. However, this book does not condescend; it has merely done the work of highlighting appropriate and complementary passages from the Bible and from Merton's writings. There are twenty-eight "Days" in Part 1, even though "the fourth week of Advent is never really finished; it is . . . abrogated by the annual coming . . . of Christ" (xi). Part 2 follows the same pattern to highlight the Twelve Days of Christmas. Each Day's reflection begins with a passage from scripture, continues with a thoughtful excerpt from Thomas Merton and concludes with a prayer.

On the reflection for "Day 1" in Advent, for example, the Bible passage is from Romans 13:11-14: "You know what time it is, / how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep . . ." The Merton selection, titled "Awake, You Sleepers," is from *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*. Here Merton uses the metaphor of the ringing of an alarm clock to explain, Zen fashion, that we have choices. As for the sleeper in that story, the alarm can be a wakeup or it can be ignored. A prayer follows the Merton selection and ties the Scripture and Merton together, asking "Lord, be our alarm clock . . . through this Advent" (2-3).

The Merton selections, though some are admittedly too short to do justice to his ideas, still manage to be thought-provoking. For instance, "Day 7" centers on the "Three Advents" of St. Bernard, a profound meditation on Christ's coming which I had never heard, but will not soon forget (14-15). "Day 10" brings readings of "Penance and Forgiveness" (20-21) and "Day 16" tackles "Giving without Strings" (32-33). As ever, Merton ably straddles the line between the spiritual and the secular. Few writers use Zen stories as effectively as he does to make old truths resound, yet Discussion Group Leaders can rely on the fact that, for all his reaching outside the Catholic tradition

for insights, Merton's feet are always firmly within the parameters of orthodoxy.

The compilers of this small book have put together a fine Advent help for Catholics trying to live this busy season mindful of its spiritual roots. The *avant garde* will be happy with Merton's later, Zen-inspired writings, while traditional observers will be happy to find that Mary as Mother of God is not neglected. Other favorite topics inform the meditations, such as: the bells of Gethsemani, the tyranny and ubiquity of noise, and, of course, the constant struggle towards one's true self.

This collection of meditations also includes an appendix for those who want to continue their meditating as part of morning or evening prayers. The introductory section to the "Days" includes a somewhat superfluous "How to use this book." There is also a short (one-page plus) biography to identify Merton to those who don't know him. New readers probably would not remember it anyway, but seasoned readers will notice the mistake about Merton's parents on the first page of text: his father was the New Zealander and his mother the American, not the reverse (ix). But this does not detract from the purpose of this book, which is to provide rich nourishment for the Catholic individual or group with an appetite for meditation in the Advent/Christmas Season.