

A Jewel in Gethsemani's Crown

Review of
The Poetry of a Soul: A Monk's Story
 Morgan Atkinson, producer
 Louisville, KY: Duckworks, 2005
 DVD, 42 minutes / \$18.75

Reviewed by **Jeanne Doriot, SP**

"A masterpiece, so down to earth!" exclaimed my friend after viewing *The Poetry of a Soul*. "Do you mean the DVD or Matthew?" I asked. "Both" was the answer. This film relates the spiritual journey of Matthew Kelty, a Cistercian monk of the Abbey of Gethsemani. Viewers familiar with Morgan Atkinson's previous two films on the Kentucky Trappists (*Gethsemani* and its shorter version *Time in the Garden*) will recognize some footage from them in this presentation, but most is new. Nature motifs – dawn to dark, season to season – and the daily monastic schedule's rhythms enhance the Matthew journey on film even as they play vital parts in his life.

The title should strike a chord with readers of St. Thérèse's autobiography, *The Story of a Soul* (ah, the poetry of the soul of Matthew Kelty as read by God!). For viewers familiar with the monk's post-compline (night prayer) talks, the title also suggests his custom of reading several poems during them. Father Matthew reveals in this film how that routine began. According to many guests, it is a highlight of their retreat experience. But, as the monk says frequently, with his wry grin, "There's more to it than that, Honey!"

"Life itself is a mystery" is Father Matthew's underlying theme. During the interview with producer Morgan Atkinson, he acknowledges that he doesn't know all the answers to life. "All you can do is give what you've got, what you've learned over the years," he says, shrugging his shoulders. And share he does, willingly, easily, on-camera or off-, as his brother Trappists and others can attest.

An interview shot of Father Matthew opens the film, followed by the monk vesting for his "Milkers' Mass," so named by him years ago because the daily (4 a.m.) Mass was attended mostly by farmers who rose early to milk their cows. While retreatants and a few monks regularly comprise Father Matthew's faithful daily congregation, his Sunday Mass draws more locals and a few visitors who must leave Gethsemani early to return home.

The road to Gethsemani began for Charles Richard Kelty Jr. in South Boston almost 90 years ago (November 25, 1915). He is a product of "excellent public schools," where his love of poetry was fostered. Although attracted to monasticism while studying medieval history in high school, as he discloses in this video, he joined an active missionary congregation, the Society of the Divine Word

in Techny, Illinois. He was sent to do mission work in New Guinea, little dreaming of that assignment's importance in his life. However, as he relates in the film, all his dreams have been fulfilled, including those of becoming a monk and a hermit.

Eventually, at 45, self-described as "at odds with himself," Charlie Kelty yielded to the strong pull toward monasticism and entered Gethsemani in 1960, where he received the name of Matthew. His novice master was Thomas Merton (Father Louis), whose confessor he became some years later. He even followed Merton as a hermit, first dwelling in a small house on the Abbey property and then spending nine years as a hermit in New Guinea.

Much of the film is done with "Matthew live," recounting his story in an interview setting. Another man's voice is at times heard reading from the monk's writing: for example, still photos of the monk as a hermit in New Guinea are shown as excerpts from *Letters from a Hermit*, a book of his New Guinea letters written to a friend, are read. A woman narrator and soft music, varying from organ and the chanting of psalms, also contribute to the fine quality of the entire production.

Outstanding are the well-edited views of Father Matthew, whether he is easily answering Atkinson's questions, walking in the woods, or sitting quietly, cane across his knees, beside the statue of Our Lady in the chapel where he celebrates his Mass and gives his conferences. All display different facets of what goes into the journey to make a monk of this man.

As Father Matthew has said, "Merton was our diamond." However, every monk at Gethsemani is a jewel in the crown. Not least of these is this life-loving little monk with the big sense of humor and a depth of spirituality. Readers of Father Matthew's books and anyone who has met or heard him will welcome this film. It will also offer newcomers an introduction to one of Gethsemani's treasures. At once paraphrasing and addressing Matthew the monk, "We hope there's more to come, Honey!"