

## Prodigious Ponderer

Review of

*An Elemental Life: Mystery and Mercy in the Work of Father Matthew Kelty, OCSO*

By Louis A. Ruprecht

Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2018

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Reviewed by **Monica Weis, SSJ**

This initial exploration into the life and thinking of Matthew Kelty (1915-2011) is just that: initial, and should be considered an invitation for scholars to explore more deeply Fr. Kelty's spirituality and theology, particularly as expressed in his well-received homilies. Louis A. Ruprecht, Director of the Center for Hellenic Studies at Georgia State University and research fellow at the Vatican Library and Secret Archives, met Fr. Kelty through Mike Beaver, a friend; he subsequently became fascinated with Kelty's autobiographical writings (*Flute Solo*) and his homilies. This short text includes Dedication, Preface, and twenty pages of Introduction which comprise the most sustained writing and information about Kelty: his birth in Boston, ordination to the priesthood, time in Papua New Guinea, entrance into the Gethsemani monastery, a second hermit experience in Papua, and his role as evening homilist for visitors to the abbey. The actual chapters of the book are a mixture of quotations mostly from Kelty with short comments by the author intended to weave together a theme. Purporting to be an "ethnography of monastic life" and prose poetic "counterpoint" to his friend Beaver's "cinematic testimonial" (xiii-xiv), Ruprecht's text views Kelty as a spiritual monk formed by his association with Thomas Merton.

Although not the subject of this book, Merton keeps showing up: as source of a quotation to begin the Dedication and as the backdrop for comments about Kelty. After introducing Kelty as a "prodigious ponderer . . . consumed with wonderment" at creation and alive to God's "infinite mercy" (4), the author maintains that Kelty is both a cosmic and historical thinker, tracing his spirituality and personality to his Celtic roots, and a monk concerned with "elemental" questions (4). That word *elemental* is the apparent starting point and structure for this book, built, says the author, on the Aristotelian virtues of courage, moderation, justice and practical wisdom, and the Pauline supernatural virtues of faith, hope and charity (xvi). However, at the end of the Introduction, the author abandons this historical list in favor of four chapters in Part One named for the ancient Celtic elements of earth, air, water and fire, which "made life possible, gave it order, and disorder, and mystic tragic meaning" (20). Nevertheless, these reflections are supported by references to Greek thinking and to the 18<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup>-century Romantics who were

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fascinated by the earlier classical culture. Each of the four chapters is a collection of quotations and author comments intended to probe the complex yet “elemental” thinking of Matthew Kelty.

In “Interlude,” the middle section (68-78), Ruprecht applies the characteristics of Jesus and Paul to Kelty and Merton. In the author’s view, Jesus is “virtually dismissive of the details of Jewish law”; Paul is the stoic trained in Greek philosophy (68). Similarly, Kelty is the Jesus man with the “same parabolic insight and quiet humor,” whereas Merton is the philosophical Pauline figure, interested in “multiple religious traditions” of the East (69). Their shared monastic experience creates for them “an elemental connection, both subliminal and sublime” (78). Despite the fact that these contrasts stretch the imagination a bit – “Merton the mountain-man, and Matthew, born of the sea” (72) – they do offer some insight into the complex relationship between Merton in his role as Kelty’s novice director and Kelty in his as Merton’s confessor.

Part Two, subtitled “The Spiritual,” includes three short chapters entitled “Art,” “Women” and “Ecstasy.” Ruprecht’s point is that monks are designers of artifacts and of life. Grounding his comments in the Greek Orthodox world of monks and solitude, the author comments that Kelty “understood the monk to be fundamentally an artist of solitude, a practitioner of wonderment and close attention. The monastic currency is love and the raw material is beauty, nothing less” (85). The next chapter, “Woman,” explores the concept of *anima*, quoting extensively from *Flute Solo* and the various collections of homilies to underscore Kelty’s belief that celebrating liturgy is a kind of love-making (92); that celibacy is “a state of mind, not an act of prowess” (95); and that being gay is clearly a gift for the Church. The final chapter, “Ecstasy” (a mere three pages long) touches on Charles Sprawson’s cultural history of Kelty’s beloved pastime, swimming (Greeks and Romans swam, Christians did not; Romantics returned to “her soft embrace”) and the centrality of eros “that points to our incompleteness” (104). Giving a shout-out to Leonard Cohen’s “Anthem,” the author notes that it is our incompleteness, our cracks that let through the light. Ruprecht concludes this chapter and the book with Kelty’s credo: “We are surrounded by eternity” and become transparent to God’s mercy (105).

Despite its brevity, this was a difficult book to read, primarily because of the assortment of quotations, largely unsupported by an argument or developing theme. This book is one man’s observations about Matthew Kelty, whom he met just once, but knew from his friend’s devotion to this monk and from reading Kelty’s homilies. His observations and the plethora of quotations remind me that I should read the original texts of Kelty’s collected homilies to understand the “mystery and mercy” of the man.