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Mario L. Aguilar, Contemplating God, Changing the World

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From the inspiration to seek a ‘new form of contemplation’, Aguilar’s latest book explores the mature roots of living a prayerful life, one that inseparably flows in its natural form toward, and into becoming, a discerning political engagement. The introduction prepares the tone of the work by summarizing some of the main highlights throughout the history of monastic life, all presented as a means toward entering and embodying the basic tenets of socio-political living. Indeed, to further give flesh to this rhythm between the contemplative and the political, Aguilar takes hold of six contemporary figures whose mix of these seemingly dichotomous realms, often separated or subordinated one to the other, is revealed through the brief but methodical biographical sketch given of each person. In order, then, he examines the life-works of Thomas Merton, Ernesto Cardenal, Daniel Berrigan, Sheila Cassidy, Desmond Tutu and Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Each figure is subsequently rendered as exemplary so that their respective devotions to daily prayer, in the midst of often harrowing political and socio-cultural contexts, can be illuminated against the backdrop of a life lived in true liturgical form.

Accordingly, Aguilar’s analysis of these religious figures, given in the context of his political and religious grounding in the Chile of the 1970s, draws attention to the embodied nature of both contemplative and political life, something brought to a peak in the practice of a Eucharistic faith. In essence, he deduces that it is bodies shaped through contemplation of the body of Christ that then become prime exemplars of a Eucharistic surrender to God, a discipline of the faith meant to exhibit the road both to overcoming political oppression and to forming a responsible citizenship. For Aguilar, and in contradistinction to William Cavanaugh’s Torture and Eucharist (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998) at which Aguilar aims the most potent of his criticisms, the prayerful life can become a body of resistance to disrespectful materialisms at the same time as it can offer itself up as a body of inclusion and hospitality; an act of becoming political in response to a Trinitarian model of relationship. Within this framework of a Eucharistic-centred praxis, therefore, it makes sense that Aguilar restricts his focus to the Catholic, Anglican and even Methodist traditions that embody this liturgical emphasis.

In accordance with his search for a ‘new contemplation’ of practical living in relation to others, Aguilar concludes this work with a call for the (re-)examination of a person’s daily prayer life as a way of making the necessary openings toward a life lived in a contemplative context. He then offers insights as to how such a life might naturally and organically stretch to embrace solutions for politically concrete issues such
as ecology and poverty. In short, this book is a general survey of the interrelation between contemplative and political life that draws its main source of strength from the lives of those on whom the book focuses.

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