Appendix

An Email Interview with Fr. Murray Bodo OFM (July 30, 2007)

Fr. Murray Bodo, a Franciscan priest, was Denise Levertov’s spiritual mentor and friend for over twenty years. He is the author of seventeen books, including the international best seller, *Francis, the Journey and the Dream*, and *Poetry as Prayer: Denise Levertov*. He is visiting professor of poetry and visiting scholar in the Franciscan Institute at St. Bonaventure University, New York. His poems have appeared in *The Paris Review*, *Western Humanities Review*, *Mystics Quarterly*, *Cistercian Studies*, *Tracks* (Dublin), *The Cord*, and *St. Anthony Messenger*; and they have been anthologized in *Odd Angles of Heaven: Contemporary Poetry by People of Faith* and *Place of Passage: Contemporary Catholic Poetry*.

1. As a Catholic priest who had a long and close relationship/association with Denise Levertov, I am sure you know aspects of her life and faith unknown to others. I am aware, from a comment she made in an interview by Michael Andre, that Levertov was rather antagonistic to what is called confessional poetry, which seems to exploit the private life. Prior to the sixties, she suppressed the direct autobiographical allusions. However she seems to pull in more actual facts in her later poetry. Would you say this is so? How autobiographical do you think is her poetry especially with regard to her coming to the faith?

Fr. Bodo: What Levertov was against in so-called confessional poetry was the exploitation of the private life without artifice and craft. If the poem
itself was a good poem as an art object, then it would not be a poem she would reject as poem, though that type of poetry was not something she herself liked to read or write. As far as the autobiographical in her poetry, in one sense all of her poetry is autobiographical, drawn from her own experiences. However, in her coming to faith, the reader notices it more because this is a new emphasis in her explorations, as were the so-called war poems of the sixties. One sees, though, from the very beginning an already heightened sensitivity to the ravages of war, as in the poem she wrote in 1940 when she was only 17 years old, “Listening to Distant Guns.” And also from the beginning there is a search for the transcendent, especially in nature. A key poem here is “First Love” from her final collection, This Great Unknowing. Her contact with the divine was always through the concrete object, as it was in Gerard Manley Hopkins and Julian of Norwich. And yes, the articulation of her religious Faith’s journey is more pronounced in the poems toward the end of her life.

2. Denise Levertov was extremely interested in Christian mystical experience and has written a whole bunch of poems about Julian of Norwich. The three aspects of our life – being, increasing and fulfilling – move like a spiral that is deepening and widening at the same time, or as Julian said in Middle English, “forth spredying.” Would you say this deepening and widening, this increasing as Levertov spreads forth in God’s love, is reflected in her poetry?
Fr. Bodo: Yes, I would; though again, from the very beginning there is ample evidence that she is “forth spredying” even in her early poems. Cf. the poem, “Overland to the Islands,” from her 1958 collection of the same name.

3. It was from your article in *Image* that I came to know of her being baptised a Catholic. Her poems reveal a movement from an altar to unknown gods to an awareness of God (capital G) to an understanding of “God as revealed in the Incarnation.” Would you throw some light on her deepening understanding of the Incarnation as it figured in her gradual conversion to Christianity that ultimately leads to her commitment as a Catholic?

Fr. Bodo: I believe Levertov was aware of God in the Incarnation from the very beginning. It was not God but religion that scandalized her because of some of the inadequate responses of religion to war and injustice. Her father was the model of the truly religious man for her, a kind, compassionate, deeply social-justice oriented priest. But Levertov was not one to merely embrace whatever religion was bequeathed to her; she needed to work it through in her own deep search for God, for a religion that addressed the problems of the world that she was most concerned about, and for a religion that reverenced mystery. She found that religion in Catholicism, in its sacramental approach to reality and in its teachings on social justice, especially as she saw them exemplified in Catholics she’d met like the Trappist, Thomas Merton, and Daniel Berrigan, the Jesuit activist. Despite her reservations about the hierarchical Church’s stance toward women and
often toward social issues, especially in Latin America, she was drawn to Catholicism as she saw it lived out in the lives of people she admired and in the dynamic and mystery of the Catholic liturgy and Sacraments.

4. One of the consistent principles in Levertov’s writings and in her life as an activist is that in the final analysis deeds are more important than words, works more powerful than faith. She seems to favour the Catholic idea of “works that enfaith” rather than the Protestant idea of a faith that works. Could you comment on this emphasis on works in her personal, political and spiritual life?

Fr. Bodo: Yes, “works that enfaith” was her own articulation of the old dilemma and controversy about faith versus works. “Works that enfaith” is the very essence of the Sacramental theology of the Catholic Church. It is also a phrase that describes her own life’s work, both as a poet and an activist. Every thing she wrote “enfaithed” something she believed in deeply and which was a part of her Faith at the time of the poem’s writing.

5. Would you agree that the deepening of her faith resulted in a corresponding deepening or maturing as a poet?

Fr. Bodo: Not necessarily. Levertov was consistently a deep poet from the beginning. There is a continuance in her work as she so beautifully renders in her, “For Those Whom the Gods Love Less,” from her 1996 collection, Sands of the Well. What I will say about her deepening faith is that it both gave a new direction to the content of her poems and chronicled what she
called her own slow movement from agnosticism to Christian faith. I believe her faith was there like a seed from the beginning and her “conversion” gave her a way of articulating what was there from the beginning. Her later poems are like an uncovering of what was there in her soul from the beginning. According to her, a further deepening and explicit exploration of faith began with the writing of the poem/libretto, “Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus,” although the earliest poem in her collection of poems on Religious themes, *The Stream and the Sapphire*, dates from 1978.

6. Through a study of Levertov’s poetry one is able to delineate a linear movement from agnosticism to faith that leads to a resolution, as well as a corresponding poetic development towards maturity. Unlike Levertov who affirms God in the accomplishment of her intellectual and moral activity and in the exercise of her imagination, Dickinson remains a doubter throughout with her back and forth movements from scepticism to faith. There is no such linear development or a resolution, and this is reflected in her poetry wherein there is no poetic development towards maturity, no “late manner” so integrally held that she could not, in conscience, deviate therefrom. Would you agree?

**Fr. Bodo:** With Emily Dickinson, as with Levertov, I believe the skepticism is over religion more than over God and God’s existence. Look, for example, at Dickinson’s “Some Keep the Sabbath Going to Church.”