

for this edition which sets just the right tone for reading it. The book, in a limited edition, is published by Harry and Sandra Reese at their Turkey Press in Isla Vista, California. It is a beautiful tribute to Thomas Merton and they are all to be congratulated. New Directions will publish a trade edition which will also include the conferences that Merton gave while he was in Alaska.

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M. Basil Pennington, O.C.S.O.  
*THOMAS MERTON, BROTHER MONK:*  
*The Quest for True Freedom*  
San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987  
xvii, 205 pages -- \$15.95

Reviewed by **John Eudes Bamberger**, O.C.S.O.

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When Michael Mott's biography, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, was published in 1984 it was read in the refectory at Genesee Abbey. One of the brothers, who had been a member of the Gethsemani community during Merton's last fifteen years there, remarked to me that he had no idea that all those doings detailed in the biography were occurring. Rather, he knew Fr. Louis Merton as one of the monks, living a quiet and regular life and doing his work peacefully as novice-master, then living as a hermit. The Merton he knew did not seem to be described in this biography: his monastic life somehow seemed to disappear behind all the events and contacts depicted in such wealth of detail in the story of his life.

Though I was aware of many of those details, I too felt that somehow a major aspect of the life that Fr. Louis had led in the monastery over so many years had largely proved elusive. Perhaps anyone who has shared life with another, who made up a part of one's daily life for any protracted period of time, would inevitably feel some such incompleteness in any account, even as expert a one as that provided by Mott. Though Fr. M. Basil Pennington never lived with Fr. Louis in community and had but little personal contact with him, he too felt that the monastic dimension of Merton's life had not as yet been adequately treated in any of the

biographies, even that of Mott which, in so many respects is a highly competent and readable work. Rather than attempt the daunting task, however, of presenting the full account of Fr. Louis' monastic life and experience Pennington informs his readers that he will only attempt "to fill in some of the lacunae which will enable us to see Thomas Merton more integrally, more fully in context, more deeply." In particular, he focuses on Merton's quest for true freedom, seeking to present Merton's understanding of it and the particulars of his growth in freedom.

Thus this work does not claim to be a biography of Thomas Merton, but rather a study of his life from the point of view of freedom, with a particular attention to his monastic experience in his own community of Gethsemani. As such, it makes a useful contribution to the growing body of material dealing with Merton's life and work.

One of the very real contributions of this work is the use it makes of certain of Merton's writings that have been little utilized in other studies. Even though much of the corpus of Merton's work has been published since his death in 1968, there still remain vast quantities of unpublished and little utilized material. This includes not only some portions of journals, original manuscripts of various works that have been published in highly edited versions, but also some thousands of letters and many of his personal notes used for classes at Gethsemani. In addition to this written body of Mertoniana there are hundreds of taped conferences that remain unedited. Without laying claim to having mined all this material, Fr. Basil does make good use of a significant portion of it and, as he does so quite effectively, illustrates its importance for presenting the daily life of Fr. Louis in its monastic setting.

Here we touch upon what is perhaps a major contribution of this study, namely, its pointing up the need for access to these unpublished materials and their thorough utilization for properly assessing the monastic experience of Thomas Merton, and, secondly, the continuing lack of adequate knowledge and assessment of the daily context of Merton's life as a monk. The present work certainly advances this knowledge and helps the reader to realize more vividly its place in Merton's personal development and thought at various points. One need not agree fully with every explanation and assessment made by the author to profit from his presentation of material and his stress on the importance of the whole question of freedom in Merton's work and life. I believe, too, that this work succeeds, as it sets out to do, in making the reader more conscious of his or her own freedom, of the call to realize it in life, whether lived in the cloister or in the world.

For one thing, Fr. Basil captures something of the sense of freedom and spontaneity that Fr. Louis so largely embodied in his daily life. Even when he was living conscientiously according to the old usages before they had been adapted to the post-Vatican II Church and the modern world, he managed to bring a light touch to life and to evince a spirit of liberty that served to build morale. This was the result not only of his temperament and lively sense of humor, but was also a witness to a strongly held view about monastic life -- it is meant to reveal something of the joy and activity of the Risen Savior and of His Spirit. There was, we felt in the community at that time, an earnestness of purpose even in Merton's lightness of spirit. Various pages of this book rightly set forth this characteristic quite clearly. For instance, Fr. Basil refrains from predicting what Fr. Louis would have done or might have become had he not met the sudden death that overtook him in Bangkok, pointing out that surprise and unpredictability had their role in a special way in his life and that his character displayed surprising attitudes that caused surprise to others.

Fr. Basil seeks to show that there was a kind of unity in Merton's life and experience which is not sufficiently brought out by earlier studies on him. While there are limits to any such demonstration, of course, seeing that even the simplest and dullest of us remains mysterious in so many ways, this study does help one to appreciate better the focus of unity which made Merton's life a whole.

In one or two relationships, however, the attempt to demonstrate this unity does not do full justice to the facts. In the relation of Fr. Louis with his abbot, Dom James Fox, there is acknowledgment in passing of some of the positive elements, but the abbot's relation to his monk is presented largely as a foil to bring out the ways in which Fr. Louis was led to assert and cultivate his freedom. This picture is not altogether false, but it is vastly oversimplified and obviously not sympathetic to the abbot. At this stage of our knowledge about the abbot and community of Gethsemani, anybody who describes in some detail this whole issue of Merton's relation to his superiors, and especially his abbot, would be working with incomplete data. What is needed is a serious study of the community of Gethsemani during these years, as well as a biography of Dom James. Meantime, it might be pointed out that some of the evidence indicates considerable magnanimity on Dom James' part, and Fr. Louis himself came to appreciate that side of his abbot. Not too many relationships would survive the kind of criticism that Merton made to a reporter about his abbot once it got into print; Dom James read it and chose to overlook it and later Merton came to

see that he had gone too far. After reading the very blunt critical remarks Merton made in a note to the abbot which Fr. Basil cites, one becomes aware that there were two freedoms involved in their relationships, not one. Only a very free person, such as Dom James Fox, whatever his psychological limits, could have maintained an ongoing and in many ways fruitful relationship with Fr. Louis. So far, too little has been said about the great humility that it required to be Merton's superior for so long.

The other place where the author appears to go too far in presenting Fr. Louis in a favorable light is in justifying his dealings with the student nurse. Michael Mott first presented the data on this relationship and Fr. Basil acknowledges that he bases his interpretation on Mott's account, but takes considerable pains to evaluate the incident in a more positive way. Not everyone who reads both accounts will be persuaded by Fr. Basil's view. It is not an indication, I believe, that one has too rigid a view of what is included under the rubric of "monk" to consider initiating overtures to someone else's fiancée incompatible with that vocation. This does not mean that good cannot come of it in the end, seeing that, due to Merton's great courage and profound faith, he was able to fight his way back to an authentic way of life, as Mott puts it, after a period of compromise. I believe it quite understandable that Fr. Louis got involved in this relationship: I also believe it admirable that he was eventually to work his way back to a new and fuller commitment to his vocation as a monk and that, as a result of what he had experienced, he became a more compassionate and integral human being. But Mott's account, based on the evidence, will suggest to some readers, at least, that there was something inauthentic from the start.

Some of the best pages in this work deal with the place of the Greek Fathers in Fr. Louis' life and, specifically, with their role in stimulating his appreciation of creation as a way to God. "Theoria Physike" led Merton to a deeper involvement with the created world precisely as revealing in contemplation the presence and activity of God in His world. Merton's greater concern for politics and for other aspects of creation is rooted, in part, in his meditation on this teaching of the Greek Fathers.

In summary, Fr. Basil Pennington has made a very real contribution to our understanding of Merton's life and work. He does achieve, I believe, what he set out to do -- to help us hear Merton and his prophetic message. His book also shows us there remains more to do before we shall be adequately informed of Merton's life as a monk and just what it meant in the concreteness of daily life for him and his community as he lived out his adult years at Gethsemani. I think it not the least merit of this book to have

made it plain that we do not yet understand very adequately the life of his community during his years at Gethsemani, nor the life of Dom James Fox, his abbot for most of his monastic years. Perhaps there is no such thing as a definitive biography of any person; certainly there are reasons to think there will never be one of Merton. But this study adds to our knowledge and appreciation of him and that makes it worth reading.

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Brother Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O.

*THOMAS MERTON: FIRST AND LAST MEMORIES*

Illustrations by Jim Cantrell

Bardstown, Kentucky: Necessity Press, 1986

Unpagged -- Limited Edition [250 copies] -- \$35.00

Reviewed by **Karl A. Plank**

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Memory gives rise to presence. A curator of lived moments, memory gathers scattered fragments of experience and bids them abide within the story of their happening. Recollection seeks narrative and therein imparts to remembered bits and pieces a new power and wholeness. Following its own course, time's passing would weaken our tie to the precious instants of former days; freighted encounters, once vital and immediate, grow dull and lose their living relation to each other and to those selves who had been arrested by the wonder of meeting. This threat memory combats, not by restoring a lost time, but by piecing from its scraps a present story within which the past continues to claim us. What time denies, the remembered story enables: an enduring link to our personal history, the presence of time past.

The past does not become present in its entirety. Memory selects. We remember not the sum of our lives, but those portions which identify us: the moments of profundity and simplicity, emptiness and fullness, within which we have glimpsed some aspect of who we are. Whether they recall the novelty of an extraordinary event, or an unsought-for grace in the rhythm of daily life, these memories furnish the fabric of our self-understanding. They claim us with fear and promise; but it is we who claim them in the stories we tell. The choice to narrate is a choice to affirm, to host