

Introduction: Thomas Merton's Commitments to Community: The Need for Courtesy, Exchange and Engagement

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In the December 1998 issue of *The Catholic Worker*, Anna Brown provides an incisive reflection upon the thirtieth anniversary of Thomas Merton's death. Her commentary grows out of the conviction that Merton's continual 'receptivity to God... devotion to the contemplative life and a commitment to social engagement' are the basic indicators of how he swam moment to moment in God's love.¹ These ingredients, fundamental to his lived vocation, can serve as a guide to our current understanding of this monk and man of letters who, according to Brown, 'despite moments of awkwardness' was able 'to plunge so gracefully and beautifully into the often choppy waters of life itself'.²

The essays included in this volume of *The Merton Annual* remind us of the complementary gifts that Merton possessed and nurtured. For him, monasticism meant life, living, loving, yet this was never merely a matter of turning inward. As a writer he was always looking for an audience. As a monk, it always was a matter of receptivity and definite devotion to the life of the monastic within a particular house and circumstances while this also paradoxically always meant an awareness of social engagement at many levels. All Merton's varied writing deals with the fundamental question of how to be engaged.

Because Merton wrote so much, we are beginning to understand in

1. Anna Brown, 'Thomas Merton, Rooted in God', *The Catholic Worker* 65.7 (1998), pp. 1, 3 (1).

2. Brown, 'Thomas Merton, Rooted in God', pp. 1, 3 (1).

retrospect, there are many places in his work that might well have been more tailored, nuanced, adjusted. Surely that is true for any writerly life, but even more so for someone for whom the written word so definitely reflects an awareness of vocation. Merton was so full of energy, manifested in his diverse writings, that it is often difficult for readers to follow him, to keep up with his strenuous efforts to stay afloat in that great sea of 'écriture'—the myriad of words which he produced and to which he reacted. Yet that ocean of writing, also a gift, is what allowed him to keep swimming beyond his earliest and simplest commitments.

As we know from earlier scholarship, Thomas Merton's relationship to monasticism evolved and changed considerably during his 27 years at the Abbey of Gethsemani. He was, as reflected in the variety of inquiries gathered for this volume, a figure who was challenged by the life he chose, while he also—through his writing—challenged aspects of that way of life. Not surprisingly some of the scholarly articles included in this collection are critical of Merton. This is part of a new healthy variety of scholarship which is, if not an attack, the beginning of the demythologization of our collective image of a Merton so long associated only with his first years as a Catholic and his first decade as a monk.

1998 is the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. That text is a classic, yet Merton himself, in retrospect, was embarrassed by aspects of its overconfidence and even, what we might now call, triumphalism. As he grew in experience and wisdom, he was less sure that he, or any institution, had all 'the answers'. Yet as Robert Giroux points out in his introduction to this new fiftieth anniversary edition of the most famous spiritual autobiography of the century, *The Seven Storey Mountain*,³ the seeds of Merton's mature accomplishments are included in that complicated narrative which has all the literary qualities of a good novel.

In this new memorial edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Giroux, its original editor, ponders the power of this text and Merton's extraordinary gift subsequently for writing and making contacts worldwide. Giroux emphasizes how Merton's gift for writing propelled him into literary contact with an extraordinary range of figures throughout the world including Boris Pasternak and Czeslaw Milosz, yet we see now that such varied contacts were never a movement away from his monastic commitment. Such fruitful exchange would also be the

case with much of his poetry writing and connections maintained with poets such as his close friend, Robert Lax. All this writing helped him to remain centered.

A project waiting to be done in Merton studies would be to attempt to assess the influence that Merton's enthusiasm exercised upon fellow monks and others, as they too were encouraged to develop more contacts beyond their own narrow lives. The publication of the journal *Monastic Exchange*, a newsletter for the North American houses of the Cistercian Order which Merton encouraged at its inception in 1967, would be a good example of how his insights and encouragement helped others to build contacts. Similarly, Merton's encouragement of the foundation of the publishing venture, Cistercian Publications, is still another example of his perennial ability to see that connections needed to be developed.

Articles in this volume of *The Merton Annual* reflect Merton's legacy as an articulate spokesman for monasticism, yet also always as a somewhat distanced solitary and thinker who examined the culture as a whole. He therefore pondered the legacy of those living and working within the Benedictine tradition of disciplined *ora et labora*, but not just for himself, rather for the greater good of a wider community beyond any limited locale. Thus, Merton's life and writings speak to a wide variety of readers today, not because he was the 'perfect monk', but rather because he consistently provided encouragement through what he discovered because of his developing vocation. Through the complexity of his literary endeavors he helped others who were living, like us today, in an increasingly individualistic and often self-centered society, to be aware of their need for community.

As is made clear by several of the articles included here, Merton's personal failings, inconsistencies in action and articulation and his occasional inability to remain an old-fashioned 'community-man' were often disturbing to him, and certainly remain so as analyzed by his critics. Yet these sharpest critics, such as Michael Casey, OCSO and James Wiseman, OSB, do here also acknowledge the validity of his continuing honesty as he himself systematically documented his gaps and omissions—even his ego trips and sometimes arrogant acts—which were inevitably to distance him from the very community he so loved. Not to acknowledge such facts ignores the complexity of this monk/writer, this solitary 'lover of the place', a person who has come to symbolize a culture's longing to move beyond its 'false self'.

What we learn from these scholarly essays is that the complexity of Merton was a complexity of evolution and change. He embraced the

3. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1998.

future even as this demanded a dark embrace of the unknown. Continual conversion meant an embrace of tradition, but also a willingness for adaptation and change which allowed grace-filled movement into the future.

While *The Merton Annual* has existed for over 12 years, no attempt has previously been made by its editors to gather articles that provide a systematic analysis of Merton's contribution to current monastic life. Earlier scholarly materials simply came in a natural flow. With this volume, we encouraged scholars to submit essays about Merton's relationship to monasticism and are pleased to select materials and articles that give a new perspective on this important subject. Thus, Brother Patrick Hart, who has edited many heretofore unpublished Merton manuscripts for the annual, unearthed an unknown informal piece which Merton wrote for his novices. It demonstrates his care as Novice Master and shows his acute awareness that monks in formation must remember they are living in communities.

Both of the pieces chosen to appear at the beginning of this section on Merton and monasticism are by fellow Cistercians who knew him quite well. Abbot John Eudes Bamberger and Fr Louis Bourget both acknowledge the strengths that Merton brought to the Cistercian monastic project. They also place him within the context of an evolving monastic culture as it adapted to the changes in contemporary culture and acknowledge his undoubted, strong influence on the present moment.

Other articles within this section reflect two complementary aspects of Merton's contribution both to the development of Benedictine monasticism and to the necessary relationship of that solitary strain to the wider culture. Separation or isolation is part of what we sometimes mistakenly associate with contemporary religious life, but for Merton some separation from community (or communities) finally had to be something experienced for a greater good. For him, in daily existence, or in its remembrance as he imagines this throughout his journals, a complexity is revealed. Surprisingly, his own petulance, selfishness, pettiness—as Merton came to recognize it and reveal it in his private journals—was quite disappointing, and a challenge. This is precisely the value of these journals now available word for word as he honestly compiled them.

Merton's entire body of writing, not just the journals, indicate that he came more and more to realize that his solitary life had to be lived contemplatively *and* with a full awareness of the wider culture as it affected him and as his writings might affect others later. At the core of this monk/writer's existence, which was also his journey toward

God, is his continual redefinition of what it means to be a Christian, and how he would articulate in words his sense of continual conversion.

The articles by Sister Joan Chittister OSB and Abbot Francis Kline OCSO serve as analyses of Merton's contributions and as a prophetic challenge to today's reader. The essay by Joan Chittister is an expanded and revised version of a paper which was first given at the International Thomas Merton Society meeting in Rochester, New York, in 1991, now brought up to date in terms of contemporary culture. Francis Kline's enumeration of principles concerning relationships between the monastic life and action beyond suggest Merton's continuing relevance. Both of these articles demonstrate how Merton, in effect, articulated principles that remain of continuing value both within a monastic culture and beyond, but also that look to the future.

The analytical readings of six key early related poems which constitute the article by Patrick O'Connell, 'Thomas Merton's Wake-Up Calls', informs us of how successfully Merton was able to build poetic connections between his secular experiences of awakening and similar experiences within his new monastic setting. These poems chronicle the young man's spiritual journey and, as well, his subsequent insight about, and commitment to, monasticism, a testimony to his moving across his personal 'Divided Sea'.

Three articles follow which derive from a conference held in the spring of 1998 at Rivier College in Nashua, New Hampshire, about the life and writings of Merton and Dorothy Day. These essays are especially appropriate within the context of the present gathering because together they demonstrate that both Day's and Merton's 'long loneliness' had to lead to forms of socially responsible action. Bradford Stull, who was the director of this conference, agreed to provide an essay that describes the conference as a whole. The articles by Harry Murray and Sister Marilyn Sunderman grow out of their presentations at the conference and demonstrate the significance of Day's and Merton's thinking in relation to the contemporary moment.

The bibliographical survey for 1998 has once again been ably prepared by fellow editor George A. Kilcourse, Jr, who has been an editor of *The Merton Annual* since Volume 6. His astute appraisal of the changes in Merton scholarship continues to provide valuable insights.

The book reviews were selected by me as editor. David King, my doctoral student at Georgia State University, coordinated contacts with reviewers. King first assisted me as a graduate research assistant with preparation of materials for *The Merton Annual* in 1991–92, as

Volumes 4 and 5 were prepared for press, and I acknowledge his continuing help.

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Lastly, I must express my thanks to the Officers and Board of the International Thomas Merton Society who have now officially endorsed the scholarly work of the *The Merton Annual*. In cooperation with Sheffield Academic Press, which is now offering copies of the *The Merton Annual* to ITMS members at a reduced cost, the Society has provided a guarantee of a limited subsidy toward the publication of Volumes 11 and 12 of *The Merton Annual*.

The aims of the Society and this publication are proving to be mutually supportive. The editors of *The Merton Annual* have also pledged, therefore, to work closely with the Society to further its aims. Thus, the editors of *The Merton Annual* have agreed especially to work systematically with the International Thomas Merton Society to ensure that presentations given at its General Meetings might be used as the basis for scholarly articles submitted for future issues of this annual.

All these kinds of cooperation bode well for the future of developing Merton scholarship.