

created about St Lutgarde. Commenting on the saint, for example, whose beauty he at one point captured in a very pleasing line-drawing, Merton regretted that St Lutgarde lacked the "Benedictine plainness" and the Cistercian 'technique of humility which consists in a kind of protective coloring, by which the monk simply disappears into the background of the common, everyday life, like those birds and animals whose plumage and fur make them almost indistinguishable from their surroundings' (p. 526).

To say that *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* is an important resource for Merton readers would be to state the obvious. In all likelihood it will come to occupy a place such as that occupied by Michael Mott's comprehensive biography of Merton as a standard reference work in the area. The reason for the book's importance issues primarily from the challenge posed to the Merton reader, who must canvass Merton's writings in order to try to piece together the varied and evolving meanings of particular ideas in those writings as he developed as a thinker and writer. The authors of *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* have done much of this work for us, allowing us to orient ourselves as to where Merton's thinking was at a particular stage in his career. Now that we have the book, we are likely to wonder how it was that we got along without it before.

Ross Labrie

TAYLOR, Terrence A. (ed.), *A Thomas Merton Curriculum* (Louisville, KY: The Thomas Merton Foundation, 2002).

Thomas Merton dedicated *No Man Is an Island* to the scholastics studying for the priesthood at the Abbey of Gethsemani, writing that they 'will perhaps recognize in it some notions they have received in spiritual direction'.<sup>1</sup> Merton was Master of Scholastics during the time that he wrote the book in the early 1950s, a role that combined teaching and individual spiritual guidance. The dedication was appropriate in that the book grew from what Merton learned about what the scholastics needed in their spiritual formation.

Merton had taught introductory conferences to novice monks for over a year prior to assuming his duties in the scholasticate in June 1951, but the new role was much more encompassing and demanding. After six months Merton reflected in his journal, 'I have stumbled around a lot, and on many days we have gone around in circles and fallen into ditches because the blind was leading the blind...I do not know if they have discovered anything new, or if they are able to love God more or if I have helped them in any way to find themselves, which is to say: to lose themselves'.<sup>2</sup> Searching for his own direction as a teacher and spiritual guide, Merton came to realize how much he had assumed that his students understood of the basic truths on which the spiritual life is founded, how much more he needed to address them if he was to help his students on the path of self-discovery. His uncertainty gave way to the conviction

1. Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1955), p. x.

2. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1953), p. 323.

that 'what they most need is not conferences on mysticism, but more light about the ordinary virtues'.<sup>3</sup>

As a result of his growing awareness of a developmental path in his students' spiritual formation, Merton shifted his curricular emphasis to an explication of virtues such as faith, charity, hope and justice;<sup>4</sup> these and related themes form the basis for *No Man Is an Island*. His students needed to be oriented by a corresponding understanding of the 'Mystery of Christ', beginning with an understanding of Christ in 'His Gospels and in the whole Bible'.<sup>5</sup> These understandings, in turn, would need to find their real roots in a deeper, inner experiential ground. As he pointed out in *No Man Is an Island*, virtues gain their substance from the life and charity of Christ in us.<sup>6</sup>

One of Merton's former students in the scholasticate, Fr John Eudes Bamberger, confirms a curriculum that was based on spiritual theology and biblical spirituality, noting Merton's lectures on St Paul in particular. Fr Eudes remarks, 'He saw our greatest needs as getting to understand the Christian mystery in a wholesome and integral way... He also understood that we needed to get to know ourselves at a deeper level, get in touch with our feelings and intuition'.<sup>7</sup>

As Master of Novices for ten years, beginning in 1955, Merton was challenged in both similar and different ways to chart a path of spiritual formation. The education of novices included an introduction to the monastic and specifically Cistercian way of life, in addition to topics such as mystical theology and Christian spiritual tradition typical of the scholasticate. To help others learn what it means to be a monk, and to develop as young monks, meant addressing the interior as well as communal dimensions of life at Gethsemani. It meant preparing new arrivals for a life ordered and cultured to seeking God, to a life centered on love for God.

Merton confronted a number of educational challenges in fulfilling his role. He learned that he had to understand the psychological and emotional as well as intellectual readiness of his students for the rigors of a spiritual life.<sup>8</sup> Psychologically and emotionally, he knew how spiritual aspiration can confound spiritual growth, how eagerness and a desire for results can lead to frustration and anxiety. He had to calibrate instruction and guidance so that it would lead to openness to the experience and presence of love, above all God's love, in a community of prayer, liturgical celebration and work.

As much as he knew how much silence and solitude were necessary to a contemplative life, he knew they were apt to lead to as many questions as answers, and that monks would need to learn to live with difficult questions.<sup>9</sup> He knew the

3. Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 327.

4. Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 327.

5. Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 327.

6. Merton, *No Man is An Island*, p. 259.

7. John Eudes Bamberger, OCSO, to the author, 12 January 1994.

8. Merton developed notes for the Novitiate on the question of emotional maturity with Fr John Eudes Bamberger. See Thomas Merton, 'The Mature Conscience', in *idem*, *The Collected Essays of Thomas Merton* (Louisville, KY: Bellarmine University Thomas Merton Center), pp. 210-16.

9. This is one of the themes in Merton's 'A Letter on the Contemplative Life', in Lawrence S. Cunningham (ed.), *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1992), pp. 422-27.

trials and necessity of the inner life, the importance of the knowing that comes from experience and the knowing that comes from learning from those who have had experience, and the challenge of providing for both. As he wrote to Mark Van Doren in 1961, 'For three months I have been pounding away at a mad course in mystical theology and have enjoyed the sweating, but it is finally ending and I enjoy that more. It is always racking to talk about what should not be said'.<sup>10</sup>

The curriculum Merton developed for the novices, together with themes in the talks that he gave, evince his awareness of the importance of addressing the power of illusion in our personal as well as social and cultural lives. It was not unusual for him to discuss themes of freedom and spontaneity, or to consider the secular landscape in all of its psychological, commercial and social dimensions in relation to monastic values and spiritual growth.<sup>11</sup> In his correspondence with young people he often sounded similar themes, as when he wrote to one high school sophomore, 'I can tell you that in reality life is good and a wonderful gift, and the more you put into it the better it is. But you must really grow up to be free, and truth loving, and sincere all the way with yourself and others. Don't live on illusions. You don't have to, reality is right there in front of you, and it is better than any illusion'.<sup>12</sup>

It would seem appropriate to consider Merton's overall experience as a teacher and spiritual director, as briefly outlined here, in relation to any effort to introduce young people to the Christian spiritual life and the idea of contemplation through his work. This is not to suggest that differences in setting, time and purpose can be ignored; but clearly what Merton understood about preparation for contemplative life from the point of view of a teacher can be as instructive as the example of his life and writings.

A *Thomas Merton Curriculum* produced by the Thomas Merton Foundation was developed in part to introduce college and high school age students to Merton's life, contemplative spirituality, commitment to social justice and the practice of interreligious dialogue. The curriculum is divided into four main sections in a three-ring binder based on these themes. Each section is prepared for a single class, although the entire curriculum can be addressed in 'three or four class sessions'. Each has background information for the teacher, an overall goal and more specific objectives, a list of the educational materials that are provided, and suggested in-class and homework activities. There is supplementary material, including photos of and by Merton, and one of his calligraphies.

It is important that the curriculum was intended originally as one component of a broader program called the 'Thomas Merton Scholastics Program' located in Louisville, Kentucky. The Scholastics program aims 'to educate young people about how to implement and integrate contemplative practices in their everyday lives'.<sup>13</sup> The program's educational approach is three dimensional, as it provides for growth through cognitive, experiential and service-oriented activity. Specific activities include three-hour meetings, retreats, an urban 'day of reflection' experience, and 'individual

10. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends* (ed. Robert E. Dagg; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989), p. 41.

11. For a discussion of these aspects of Merton's teaching, see Thomas Del Prete, 'Culture and the Formation of Personal Identity', *The Merton Annual* 8 (ed. Michael Downey; Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995), pp. 105-121.

12. Merton, *The Road to Joy*, p. 330.

13. Taylor (ed.), *A Thomas Merton Curriculum*, Introductory materials, p. 6.

social justice activities'. The curriculum appears much different depending on whether it is viewed as self-sufficient or in relation to the full Scholastics program.

To introduce students to Merton, the first section relies mainly on 'Merton: A Film Biography', by Paul Wilkes. As a prelude to viewing this excellent film, the guide suggests that students read and then discuss either Merton's well-known prayer, 'My Lord God...', responding to what they think the author is feeling or relating it to similar feelings of their own, or 'Day of a Stranger'. These are not comparable texts, and the choice of one or the other would seem to depend on the teacher's background knowledge of Merton, and students' backgrounds, as well as one's interpretation of the goal of familiarizing students with Merton's life and significance as a modern Catholic figure.

In its heartfelt tone and evocation of human vulnerability, trust and faith, the Merton prayer seems readily accessible to adolescents seeking to understand faith and the presence of God in their lives. In this sense it can build a sense of identity with Merton, and serve to open the door to knowing about him and learning from him. In its ironic tone and more layered meaning, 'Day of a Stranger' is more complex and potentially problematic. It was written for Latin American readers at a time when Merton had begun the eremitical life, and reflects Merton's social and ecological concerns, as well as his understanding of the freedom from self-care that solitude affords. It is for these reasons a delightful piece, but would seem to need more attention than allowed for by the guide in order to serve as a way for students to come to know about Merton and what he cared about.

The second section is designed to introduce students to Merton's idea of contemplative spirituality, drawing mainly on their own sense of the meaning of contemplation, with the option of looking closely at two selections from *New Seeds of Contemplation* ('Learning to Be Alone' and the beginning of the first chapter, 'What is Contemplation?'). It suggests that students spend 15 minutes in quiet contemplation in a chapel or church and then discuss whether the experience was contemplative or not, according to their definition, and why.

This part of the guide moves teacher and students quickly from some initial understanding of the concept of contemplation to inviting students to open themselves to an experience of contemplation, or, perhaps more accurately, to the experience of trying to experience contemplation. There is no question that a fruitful discussion can ensue from the experience of sitting quietly in an effort at recollection and opening oneself to the reality and presence of God; but, apart from referring to interesting distinctions on the topic in notes to the teacher, the guide does not offer particular suggestions on what the teacher might expect from students or how the teacher might respond. In this respect, as in the subsequent final two sections, the guide focuses on introduction, not formation. It does not grow out of a particular philosophy of spiritual formation or a theory for the development of social conscience, unlike what Merton developed in his monastic teaching.

The main goal of the third section of the Curriculum is to foster understanding of the relationship between contemplation and social justice. Contemplation and action in the name of social justice are considered mutually inclusive and informing activities, one flowing from and informing the other in dialectical fashion, a perspective with which Merton, no doubt, would basically agree.<sup>14</sup> To attain the goal for this

14. Taylor (ed.), *A Thomas Merton Curriculum*, Class session three, p. 1.

session, the guide suggests 15 minutes of discussion each on 'The Root of War is Fear', a chapter from *New Seeds of Contemplation*, and ten brief statements on war, violence and social justice taken from different Merton works. A summary of Catholic social teaching is made available for teachers. It would seem appropriate to introduce to students as well, but there is no recommendation to do so.

As compelling as they are, one is left to wonder whether the Merton selections are sufficient for realizing the objectives in this section. There seems an assumption that the meaning of the various selections will be self-evident, and that questions of context, of what prompted them and when in the development of Merton's own social voice, need not be addressed. In addition to the question of what background is necessary for students to develop a basic conceptual understanding of ideas related to the dynamics of violence, social oppression and non-violence, there is a question of how to illuminate the psychological and social understanding, and spiritual insight that shaped Merton's own thinking. To what extent are these less obvious aspects of the work important to know?

The more fundamental developmental, curricular and pedagogical questions have to do with what forms social consciousness, social understanding and a capacity for social critique, and social conscience, and what shapes understanding of an appropriate personal response to injustice. As much as one might expect their instinctively sympathetic response to Merton's views, and a genuine concern for issues of social justice, one wonders to what extent students will come to understand any of Merton's understanding of the spiritual dimensions of social justice and social action, and what he called 'the spiritual roots of protest'.<sup>15</sup> What, for instance, will students come to understand as the differences between compassionate service and non-violent social protest? It might be beyond the intended scope of the Curriculum to approach this section more ambitiously, but one wonders whether the goals can be achieved otherwise. In light of the goals, perhaps a short case study – for example, on Merton's advice to the young peace activist James Forest – would be helpful.<sup>16</sup>

The goal for the last session in the Curriculum, focused on inter-religious dialogue, is simply to open students to what can be learned from other religious traditions, to foster the attitude of dialogue and mutual understanding that Merton exemplified. There is one short Merton text to reflect upon, from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, in which Merton states his conviction that dialogue is vital to his own understanding and growth. As with its predecessors, this section is meant more to expose students to a topic and elicit an initial response from them than to delve into its complexity. One would have to question nonetheless whether there should be more attention given to what inter-religious dialogue meant to Merton – that it involves communication on the level of spiritual experience as well as doctrine, on the explication and understanding of spiritual tradition as well as core beliefs.<sup>17</sup>

15. See Thomas Merton, 'Retreat, November, 1964: Spiritual Roots of Protest', in *idem*, *The Nonviolent Alternative* (ed. Gordon C. Zahn; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980), pp. 259-60.

16. For example, Merton's letter to James Forest, 21 February 1966, in William H. Shannon (ed.), *Thomas Merton: The Hidden Ground of Love* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985), pp. 294-97.

17. See, e.g., the section on 'Interreligious Dialogue', in William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O'Connell (eds.), *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*

As an intentionally brief introduction to important themes in Merton's life and spirituality, *A Thomas Merton Curriculum* may be viewed as sufficient. Viewed as part of the Thomas Merton Scholastics Program, with its conceptual, experiential and service-oriented components, it would seem better able to achieve its goals. The broader program would allow for a more recursive and dialectical path for the development of student understanding, alternating conceptual development, experience with silence, and some form of social action – more in keeping with the depth and breadth of the topics, and one perhaps truer to Merton's own experience – rather than the linear one that is more typical for curriculum guides.

To become fully what it only begins – a Merton-inspired curriculum for spiritual formation and the corresponding development of social conscience and a Christian sense of social responsibility and dialogue – *A Thomas Merton Curriculum* would need significantly more development. To this end, the Curriculum might be combined with a text that it refers to several times, *Thomas Merton: Essential Writings*, edited by Christine Bochen.<sup>18</sup> Attention might also be given to themes Merton outlines in, for example, *No Man Is an Island*, as understandings helpful for those on the path of spiritual development. Finally, it would seem that students would benefit from study of Merton's struggle to find himself on the deepest possible level, and to live authentically, possibly under the rubric of 'Becoming Who We Are'. The prevailing cultural issues that students face, and which Merton learned affected the readiness of his novices for monastic life and contemplative spirituality, might be addressed in such a section. Some of the letters that Merton wrote to young people, such as the one or two referred to above, might be engaging starting points.

Thomas Del Prete

GEORGIU, S.T., *The Way of the Dreamcatcher: Spirit Lessons with Robert Lax* (Ottawa: Novalis, 2002), pp. 284. ISBN 2-89507-244-2 (paperback).

*The Way of the Dreamcatcher* captures the essence of one of the twentieth-century's enlightened beings – the poet and contemplative Robert Lax. Steve Theodore Georgiou characterizes Lax's work as 'a creative and soul-centered summation of the teacher-student relationship and free-flowing friendship that we shared over the years'. Indeed this book offers that and much more. It gives access to the wisdom and humor of a thinker and writer who deserves to be much better known.

Many readers of Thomas Merton are familiar with the name of Robert Lax, Merton's best friend from the early days at Columbia and Olean. But probably only a handful have read much of his poetry, with the possible exception of the memorable *Circus of the Sun* (1959).

Georgiou's new book might just change all that. Based on a series of interviews with the poet in the fall of 1999 and splendidly illuminated by candid photographs, *The Way of the Dreamcatcher* is organized around several central themes: origins, craft, art, and spirit. What might surprise readers who are familiar only with Lax's

(Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), pp. 220-22.

18. Christine M. Bochen (ed.), *Thomas Merton: Essential Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000).