

## Reviews\*

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INCHAUSTI, Robert, ed., *The Pocket Thomas Merton* (London & Boston: New Seeds Books, 2005), pp. 217. ISBN 1-59030-273-7 (paperback). \$6.95.

It is always strangely refreshing to be reminded of the truth at the heart of a well-worn cliché. Robert Inchausti's carefully selected collection from Thomas Merton's vast writings in *The Pocket Thomas Merton* reminds the reader that great things really do come in small packages. But yet that cliché remains a bit pedantic, especially in the context of Merton's often cliché-busting spirit. I found this little book (an abridgement of Inchausti's *Seeds* [Shambhala, 2002]) instead to be like gazing out of a small window onto a majestic mountain landscape. The frame through which one looks is

### \*Editor's Note:

These fifteen reviews divide into four categories. The first group consists of three texts by Thomas Merton:

- 1) *The Pocket Thomas Merton*;
- 2) *Cassian and the Fathers: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition*;
- 3) *Original Child Bomb* [A film inspired by Merton's poem].

The second category consists of texts about Merton:

- 1) *Thomas Merton: An Introduction*;
- 2) *Love Burning in the Soul: The Story of the Christian Mystics, from Saint Paul to Thomas Merton*;
- 3) *Thomas Merton's Gethsemani: Landscapes of Paradise*.

The third category emphasizes the importance of community as a conduit of faith development:

- 1) *Fully Human, Fully Divine: An Interactive Christology*;
- 2) *In the Heart of the Temple: My Spiritual Vision for Today's World*;
- 3) *The Way We Were: A Story of Conversion and Renewal*;
- 4) *Creating the Beloved Community*.

The final group focuses on spiritual direction and culture:

- 1) *The Inner Room: A Journey into Lay Monasticism*;
- 2) *With Open Heart: Spiritual Direction in the Alphonsian Tradition*;
- 3) *Humble and Awake: Coping with our Comatose Culture*;
- 4) *Engaging Benedict: What the Rule Can Teach Us Today*;
- 5) *Benedictine Daily Prayer: A Short Breviary*.

[GC]

decidedly small and limited but the view it provides is spectacular. My attention, though, to size here is not a critique, for the brevity of the collection has its limitations, but I do not imagine it was designed to satisfy entirely the reader's search or exhaust the vast quantity of Merton's thought.

Just the same, I want to stay with the "great things in small packages" theme as a guiding motif for this review because this deceptively small book does present itself well for multiple types of equally edifying usage. First, it certainly can serve as a solid introduction to Thomas Merton for any reader who comes to it unfamiliar with his work. It can also serve well to break down many of the misunderstandings about Merton that seem to be currently rampant and seen in such things as the U.S. bishops' concern over whether or not to include Merton in an upcoming catechism geared for young people. Inchausti selects well from the vast possibilities and gives the reader a glimpse into the heart of Merton that breaks open the depths of the monk's intriguing thought as it reveals his basic faithfulness and prophetic voice. This editor also does well in providing clear references to the source of each passage and lists, at the back of the book, the full titles so the reader can easily find where to go for more in-depth searching, if he or she wishes to follow more fully a particular thread of Merton's thought.

Secondly, this collection would serve well as a re-introduction into Merton's writing. If someone, perhaps, encountered Merton previously but never was able to read more of this challenging spiritual writer's works, Inchausti provides the perfect re-entry text. The selections in the text quickly engage the mind and heart. And with the ample material provided, the reader is more likely to find it difficult choosing a direction to go in, rather than not finding enough to spark his or her interests. But that too is a tribute to the wealth and quality of Merton's work. One is rarely if ever left, having to search for a thread to follow enthusiastically. But even though this little book does both provide a quality entrée into Merton for the first-timer and an enticing re-entry for the returning searcher, I believe it perhaps best serves as a book of prayer.

Staying true to the Benedictine-Cistercian monasticism that shaped Thomas Merton, Inchausti, in paying tribute to Merton as a master of the paragraph, creates a text that lends itself beautifully to the practice of "Lectio Divina." Whether that was a consideration of this editor as he shaped the text I do not know but

this was how I primarily engage it. Praying with and through Merton is perhaps the best path into the heart of this writing monk as it also leads one along, through the Word to the heart of God. The editor indicates in his introduction that Merton is at his best as a writer in how he crafts paragraphs. He therefore chooses quotations that go often no more than two or three paragraphs and the majority of selections are single paragraphs in length. This certainly does highlight Merton's mastery of the paragraph but it also makes the text ideal for a slow read in the context of prayer and reflection. To pray with Merton is to get to the heart of his work and to see that all which underlies his insight, critique, and commitment is a profound love of God. The structure of this book lends itself quite well to prayer and I would highly recommend it for that purpose.

No matter, though, how the reader chooses to engage this collection, Merton's wisdom is revealed here as still so very necessary and what he offers still so very pertinent for the life of the individual seeker and the life of the world. Amid our culture's ever-increasing realization of groundlessness and impermanence which fuels the basic human temptation to grasp and cling, rigidify and codify, Merton's still unrealized "contemplative counterculture" (p. ix), as Inchausti so eloquently puts it in his introduction, needs to be cultivated more than ever. To pick up this collection of Merton's thought and to encounter him for the first time, or to come to know him all over again, or to simply pray with him, can help us all realize the vision which offers us "an interior life free from rigid philosophical categories, narrow political agendas and trite religious truisms" (p. ix). This small book expertly tackles the big task of moving us toward an authenticity of self that can help the world to continue to slough off its own falseness and illusion, if we will heed Merton's voice. So in the end we are reminded by Merton not to simply stay in our small-framed points of view but to remember the great vastness of life is not meant to be simply looked at but fully and freely lived in.

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