

BELTRÁN LLAVADOR, Fernando and Paul M. Pearson, Eds., *Seeds of Hope: Thomas Merton's Contemplative Message / Semillas de Esperanza: El Mensaje Contemplativo de Thomas Merton* (Cobreces: Cistercium-Ciem, 2008), pp. x + 158 / x + 171. ISBN 978-84-612-4211-5 (paper) \$25.00.

The seeds of Merton's thought have been scattered throughout the world. Seeds grow where nourished. Like the shoots on Mencius' Ox Mountain, we are reminded that trees of contemplation used to fill the land. Thus with *Seeds of Hope: Thomas Merton's Contemplative Message*, a collection of papers from a historic meeting in Spain in 2006, we learn that the message of contemplation continues to grow. Books themselves, like seeds, can be symbols as well as expressions of hope that the life they contain will mature and flourish. What one finds in this collection of papers is the germination of a living conference, a packet of seeds from what has been planted in Spain. This bilingual book continues the relay of Merton's contemplative message to the world, and I think it is best approached as a set of highlights from what must have been a significant, joyful and beautiful conversation in Spain.

This book has roots. The first seeds were planted in 1993 when a proposal was made to pursue a working relationship between the Merton Center at Bellarmine University and the International Center for Mystical Studies in Ávila. The agreement was formalized in 2004 at the Fifth Meeting of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland, which led to the planning of the conference in Spain in October of 2006. The conference was attended by 350 participants from 19 countries.

*Seeds of Hope* is composed of nine articles, with most of the authors being very familiar to readers of Merton in America. Hope is the theme of the book but not necessarily the literal focus of each and every essay; hope comes through every page, however, as in the hope that the reader will heed Merton's contemplative message no matter what the subject matter might be. What stands out the most in these articles is the portrait of Merton, a kind of celebration of his life as a contemplative message to all of us. For many readers of Merton, this book will not provide much in the way of new information, but that is not where its value lies; rather, its value lies in giving voice to a more international and multicultural appreciation for Merton's life and writings. All the essays are presented in both English and in Spanish, for good reasons.

May the seeds of this book grow.

The opening essay, "Thomas Merton and 'the Great Feast of Christian Hope'" (1-16) is by Fernando Beltrán Llavador, a long-time International Advisor to the ITMS, who presents Merton as "a peace-bearer and a source of hope for our critical times" (1). Beltrán is concerned about the ethics of love in an unjust world and finds Merton exemplary for our times because of his constant interconnections of contemplation, action and compassion.

Paul Pearson's presentation, "Emblems for a Season of Fury: The Art of Thomas Merton" (17-31) appears next as Pearson continues Beltrán's appreciation for Merton's concern for the world we live in by showing how his contemplative message was communicated through his art in parallel with his spiritual journey. Pearson expertly conveys Merton's "turn to the world" as evidenced in his poetry, experimental work with Zen calligraphies, graffiti, ink-blots, as well as his friendship with Ad Reinhardt, someone who was also influenced by the apophatic mystical tradition – a point of particular interest at this meeting in Teresa of Ávila's hometown.

The third entry is written by a Cistercian monk at the Abbey of Viaceli in Cantabria, Francisco R. de Pascual, OCSO, intriguingly titled "The Secret Hope and the Hoped for Secret: Keys for Life" (33-45). For Pascual, "The end is not the person of Merton, but rather to gather the seeds of contemplation in hope that he scattered them in the furrows of the world" (35). To remember the message is essential because "there is no hope when memory of the past has been lost, when personal or collective continuity with all that has gone before us has been broken: we are the fruit of seeds planted long ago" (35).

Jim Forest reminds us of the hope presented by "Thomas Merton as a Living Bridge Linking Christians East and West" (47-59). Forest expounds on the ways in which Merton drew from the wells of the Orthodox tradition, his indebtedness to and insights into icons, and his dedication to promoting the wisdom of the Desert Fathers.

Sonia Petisco Martinez, a former recipient of a Daggy Youth Scholarship and a Shannon Fellowship offered by the ITMS, is an associate professor at University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. Her essay (61-79) relates her reflections on a set of Merton's poems that she had translated into Spanish. The poems are quoted in full in the essay and include the following: "Macarius the Younger," "Hymn of Not Much Praise for New York City," "A Letter to My

Friends," "The Communion," "The Poet, to His Book," "The Sting of Conscience," "Whether There is Enjoyment in Bitterness" and finally "Night-Flowering Cactus." She finds his contemplative message through poetry to "constitute an authentic source of strength, inspiration, and joy" (61).

Familiar to many ITMS conference goers is the enthusiastic face and voice of Cristóbal Serrán-Pagán y Fuentes who supplies the next essay on "Seeds of Hope in Times of Crisis: Saint John of the Cross and Thomas Merton" (81-100). After briefly surveying the life and writings of both men, he concludes that the crises of our lives are "sometimes a necessary part of our own growth" (97) and that we should be encouraged by the realization that both Merton and John "found hope even in the most desperate situations" (98), and that the contemplative message is a prophetic message.

Islam has a strong presence in Spain; thus Bonnie Thurston's thoughtful essay, "'A Realm of White-Hot Faith': Thomas Merton on Islam in Spain" (101-21) is particularly fitting in this volume for the hope that it brings to the conversation. Thurston notes that both Spain and Islam influenced the thought of Merton. She teases out, in particular, Islamic threads in a variety of Merton's writings. In concluding, Thurston alerts us to two "white-hot" contemporary issues that Merton's universal contemplative message of hope can help us with: (1) the war between intellect and experience in religious life, and (2) the still-stubborn tendency to regard the "other" as evil.

The eighth essay, "Hope as an Unexpected, Incomprehensible and Total Gift: Reflections on Merton's Life and Writings" (123-40) by Erlinda Paguio explores Merton's message of hope as the fruit of a deep prayer life. Merton's hope in Christ, his acknowledgement of Mary as the model of hope and his hope for a deeper prayer life fed his own hopes to live out his vocation as a hermit. From his deep solitary prayer life sprung his contemplative message for the world.

The final chapter follows Paguio's return to Merton's home at Gethsemani in tracing the roots of his message of hope: "Thomas Merton: A Monk of Compassion, A Man of Paradox" (141-54) in which Fr. James Conner, OCSO, shares his personal reflections of the man behind this contemplative message. Conner discusses Merton's impact on the novices and students under his care. Conner reviews the life of Merton at Gethsemani and argues for the continued relevance of his message for today, correcting mispercep-

tions that some may have, and reassuring us that “Merton’s love for solitude was not an evasion from conflicts in community” (148). Merton faced the world and he faced himself, which enabled him to find real hope for unity with all in the solitude of the heart.

After you read this book, which can be ordered through the Merton Center ([www.merton.org/seeds](http://www.merton.org/seeds)), share your own seeds of hope with others.

Gray Matthews

FOREST, Jim, *Living with Wisdom: A Life of Thomas Merton*, Revised Edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), pp. xxvi + 262. ISBN 978-1-57075-754-9 (paper) \$22.00.

Those of us who study the life and work of Thomas Merton are often asked, in one form or another, the same question from a myriad of well-wishing people who may have just heard of Merton for the first time and want to learn more. Whether in the basement hall of some parish, at a dessert reception after a Merton lecture or on a plane ride home from the International Thomas Merton Society conference, inevitably those at first unfamiliar with our beloved Fr. Louis and now intrigued by our enthusiasm for this figure will ask: “What books would you recommend for me to learn more about Thomas Merton?”

I have found myself in this situation enough times now to have a quick list ready to give at a moment’s notice. It usually follows this sequence: *The Seven Storey Mountain*, *New Seeds of Contemplation* and *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* for the “must read” primary source texts from each major Mertonian era. Then comes the recommendation for which of the many biographies I would endorse. My choice has always been Jim Forest’s *Living with Wisdom*.

At this point Forest’s book has been around for quite some time, if in a variety of forms. In 1979 Forest published *Thomas Merton: A Pictorial Biography* (Paulist), the first incarnation of what would eventually become *Living with Wisdom* (Orbis, 1991) and now the revised edition under review here. The first book, as Forest recalls in the acknowledgments of the revised edition, was much smaller yet featured an element that would remain a distinguishing staple of Forest’s biography for decades to come – lots of photographs. When invited by Orbis Press to expand the text twelve years later, Forest returned to the manuscript to enlarge what had been primarily a pictorial collection. It is this 1991 text that has been an