

plus the five volumes of over 2,000 letters edited by William H. Shannon *et al.* The Shannon volumes are incomplete, selective, and full of excisions. Thankfully, Pearson has left the text of the letters untouched; unfortunately, he has provided too little background for a complete understanding of the correspondence. The all too sparse editing is nevertheless balanced and sensible.

The publication of these letters is a welcome aid to our understanding both of the appeal of Shaker Perfectionism and the spirit of Thomas Merton. And also to the oddity of late-life friendships.

Mario De Pillis, Sr.

Thomas Merton: A Life in Letters – The Essential Collection, edited by William H. Shannon and Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2008), pp. xiv + 402. ISBN 978-0-06-134832-7 (cloth) \$29.95; (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2010), pp. xiv + 402. ISBN 978-1-59471-256-2 (paper) \$18.95.

Thomas Merton was a consummate letter writer. He was also prolific in his epistolary output – most letters being written in the last decade of his life. Evelyn Waugh, the English novelist and editor of *The Seven Storey Mountain* in Great Britain (retitled *Elected Silence* in its somewhat abridged British form), even advised Merton to give up other forms of writing and perfect letter writing as a literary art form. Indeed, five volumes of Merton's collected letters were published between 1985 and 1994.

Now, thanks to the excellent editorial work of William H. Shannon and Christine M. Bochen, we have a single-volume compilation of letters taken from the existing five-volume series that well deserves its designation as "The Essential Collection" of this massive corpus. The editors have permitted Merton's letters to speak for themselves. Their brief introduction and helpful notes along the way do not obstruct the free flow of the letters; they only help to enhance our understanding of necessary context.

Selection of the letters themselves from the previously published volumes must have been a daunting task. Many questions arise: what letters to include, what letters to omit? why? why not? So many questions, but Shannon and Bochen are clearly up to the challenge. Who better than William Shannon, general editor of the Merton Correspondence, and Christine Bochen, editor of the fourth volume, *The Courage for Truth*, to do the job? Without solid, knowledgeable editors, "essential collections" of any sort can crash

and burn. In the case of this collection, however, there is nothing to fear with Shannon and Bochen in the driver's seat.

They have to make their selections from thousands of letters. Paul Pearson, director and archivist at the Thomas Merton Center, estimates that Merton wrote over 10,000 letters to some 2,100 different individuals. Immediately, this begs the question: why did Merton write so many letters? Imagine the time this demanded of Merton in an already busy (too busy?) monastic schedule – even in the last years at his hermitage.

In their introduction, Shannon and Bochen provide us with something of an answer to this question. A clue, they propose, can be found in a letter Merton wrote to Pope John XXIII in November 1958. I too think that this letter has the key that unlocks, at least in part, Merton's motivation for many of his letters. He tells the pope that in addition to his many monastic responsibilities he felt called to an "apostolate of friendship" (xi) through letter writing. This ministry in letters was meant to open dialogue and establish friendships with "intellectuals" from around the world.

Those at all familiar with Merton know that he could not limit his epistolary "apostolate of friendship" to intellectuals alone. His ministry of letters came to embrace people from all walks of life – from popes to the laity, from theologians to social activists, from Catholic believers to interfaith friends, from young to old, from the famous to people like you and me. Writing and receiving letters gave this cloistered monk a window to the world and all its problems. But at an even more basic level, Merton simply enjoyed people and this was a way for him to develop spiritual kinships he would not otherwise have had.

One good example of this kind of spiritual connection was his friendship with Amiya Chakravarty. On April 13, 1967, Merton wrote to Chakravarty and his Smith College students about the happiness that united them in "that hidden ground of Love for which there can be no explanations" (382). In fact, Merton wrote many of his letters with the intent of connecting with others, like himself, who were seeking a deeper sense of self and God. This communion of spirit, often little known or understood, was something Merton sought to explore and experience with many of his correspondents. In reading, and rereading, the Chakravarty letter in *A Life in Letters*, I realized how much this "essential collection" of Merton's letters was an occasion for *lectio divina*. Once again, I was drawn by the reading of Merton's letters to meditation, in

this case, to ponder the meaning of the "hidden ground of Love" for my own life and living.

There are indeed multiple ways of reading *A Life in Letters*. We can read its letters for spiritual insight (as I tend to do). We also can read them to discover more about Merton's many interests, about his amazing epistolary friends, and about the times in which he and his contemporaries lived. So much valuable information is in the letters. Here, we are exposed to a Merton who can write freely without worry about the censors from his Order who examined all of his works intended for publication – but not his letters.

A Life in Letters is for me a book truly to be enjoyed. In an unscientific experiment, before reading *A Life in Letters*, I wrote down six of my "favorite" Merton letters, taking into account Shannon and Bochen and their editorial emphasis on "scope and variety" (xiii). I was certain there would be some overlap between my short list and the letters selected by Shannon and Bochen, but to my surprise all half dozen of my "favorites" were included in *A Life in Letters*.

In addition to the letters to Pope John XXIII and to Chakravarty, I had included in my list Merton's January 1966 letter to Abdul Aziz explaining his daily life at his hermitage; his February 1966 letter to Jim Forest encouraging Forest not to worry about results in the peace movement but rather to focus on simply being faithful in his witness; his January 1961 letter to Doña Luisa Coomaraswamy calling for some in their troubled times to be "sacraments" or signs of peace; and finally, his April 1968 letter to his Quaker friend June Yungblut expressing his deep sorrow over the murder of Martin Luther King, Jr. All these precious letters are in *A Life in Letters*. My hunch, almost to a certainty, is that Shannon and Bochen also have included most if not all of the letters that readers of this review might put on their list of "favorite" Merton letters.

Every book, of course, has its limitations and *A Life in Letters* is no exception. For example, I would like to have seen the complete text of some selections included only in abridged versions in the five collected volumes and sometimes further abridged here. The texts in their entirety are found in the Thomas Merton Center archives and could be made available (barring any problems with permission to print). By reading a small sample of Merton's letters in their unedited versions, we could gain an even greater sense that what we are reading are "real" letters. Of course, we would be exposed to some of the more mundane and inconsequential parts

of Merton's letters, but this would help humanize the letters even more for Merton readers.

A second criticism is more an expression of hope. I would like to see the printing of a companion to *A Life in Letters* that might be entitled something like *Letters between Merton and His Friends: The Essential Collection*. Although there have been a number of volumes including both sides of a correspondence, for example the letters of Merton and Boris Pasternak, and the exchange of letters between Merton and Rosemary Radford Ruether, there has yet to appear something comparable to *A Life in Letters* which would represent "an essential collection" of both sides of Merton's correspondence in a single volume. Those found on the other end of Merton's letters are often as fascinating and spiritually astute as Merton. With exposure to both sides of the correspondence, we could experience more directly the dialogical nature of letter writing which Merton himself so valued and cherished.

In sum, *A Life in Letters* should be added immediately to any personal or institutional library of Merton's basic works. In addition, I would recommend reading *A Life in Letters* as the place to start for anyone who wants to explore Thomas Merton as a letter writer. Evelyn Waugh was correct in his assessment of Merton's abilities as a master of correspondence and he remains so today. Who could have ever imagined, however, that Merton's "apostolate of friendship" in letters, initiated a half century ago, would now appear in our mailboxes – as fresh and new as ever.

William Apel

MERTON, Thomas, *A Book of Hours*, edited with an Introduction by Kathleen Deignan, Foreword by James Finley, illustrations by John Giuliani (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2007), pp. 224. ISBN 978-1-933495-05-7 (cloth) \$18.95.

Through this magnificent *Book of Hours*, Thomas Merton guides the prayers of an "active contemplative" for one week – if one uses it as Kathleen Deignan intended. Deignan has selected texts from Merton's mountainous corpus and arranged them into seven daily, meditative readings. Each day's reading is further divided into texts for dawn, day, dusk, and night. The book was inspired by the "Book of Hours" format first made popular in Europe throughout the Middle Ages, and which is now commonplace in the devotional life of the Church (hence the title: this is merely *A Book of Hours*).

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