

Reviews

THURSTON, Bonnie, ed. with Mary Swain, SL, Loretto editor, *Hidden in the Same Mystery: Thomas Merton and Loretto* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2010) pp. xvi + 108. ISBN 9781891785603 (paper) \$15.95.

In Celebration of . . . ?

Two bold black and white photographs meet the reader who picks up *Hidden in the Same Mystery* – portraits of two major representatives of religious presence in the U.S. of the twentieth century – a man and a woman, both luminous, smiling, making direct eye contact, drawing the reader into their presence, into the “same mystery” in which both were “hidden” and which both saw as their vocation to share with the world. They are the faces of Thomas Merton, the well-known monk of Gethsemani, and of an equally luminous Sister of Loretto, but not one well known to the general reader – Sr. Mary Luke Tobin, SL.

The sub-title “Thomas Merton and *Loretto*” (my emphasis) correctly describes the focus of the volume – the interaction between the spiritual master of Gethsemani and the neighboring American-born Congregation of the Sisters of Loretto. For although the photograph of Sr. Mary Luke occupies equal space with that of Fr. Louis, and the editorial commentaries provide many and thorough references to both Luke and her religious community, the emphasis of the volume rests decidedly on Merton.

This observation is not intended as negative criticism. In fact, it reflects Mary Luke’s own orientation – to make more widely known the message which her community had enjoyed hearing first-hand from Merton, and to share the gift she had been graced with in her friendship and collaboration with her friend just down the road from Loretto. It was she who approached General Editor Bonnie Thurston with the idea of publishing Merton’s talks to her community in book form; and after substantial service to her immediate religious community (as prioress, etc.) and to the universal Church (as one of five women observers at the Second Vatican Council), she devoted the final decade of her life to actively promoting Merton’s ideas and ideals (founding the Merton Center for Creative

Exchange in Denver). While this aspect of her life is alluded to in the editorial commentary and footnotes and photographs, it does not figure in the primary written articles collected here.

Insights into a Culture

The book offers a glimpse into important aspects of the Catholic Church as it was in the 1960s, through the lens of two observer-participants. It also catches the spirit of monastic spirituality of those years with its sense of the religious vocation as special, as uniquely and intensely attuned to God, with its counter-culturality, even separation from "the world." All this happened just as "religious life" was on the verge of taking new directions by "turning toward the world" (cf. the summarizing title of the volume of Merton's journal which covers those years of 1960-63).

At the same time both Merton and Tobin, as prescient participants, were aware of the opening up which was to become, and is now, the norm – i.e., a greater awareness of an "active" responsibility for and participation in that "world." Both Luke and Merton became spokespersons for such opening. An example was Merton's hopes for a center for monastic-lay interaction, referred to in two of the selections, the result of which was Mary Luke's Denver Center. One might venture to say that Mary Luke was the *active* continuation of some of Merton's major concerns during and after the heady days of Vatican II with the Catholic Church on the verge of a different role (hence, "The Church in the Modern World" as the title of one of the most important of the Vatican II documents).

The Structure of *Hidden in the Same Mystery*

An extensive and well-executed editorial apparatus figures prominently in this volume and makes it accordingly less a book *by* Merton than a witness of the on-going perennial resonance of his thought. The editors' introductions to the individual selections place the primary sources (Merton's and Tobin's lectures, letters and interviews) chronologically and situationally. Also, especially in the case of the Merton selections, they point out major ideas, often in reference to the familiar published works of the period. Meticulous endnotes for each selection do a similar service for the reader.

General Editor Bonnie Thurston traces the genesis of the volume to Luke's request of her to arrange for publishing four of Merton's

talks to her Loretto community as a book, pieces which contain in more or less structured form his central themes of the early 1960s. These four, plus the pamphlet Merton composed on the occasion of the one-hundred-fiftieth anniversary of the Community of Loretto, constitute Part I, "Thomas Merton: Writings for Loretto." Part II, "Sr. Mary Luke Tobin on Merton" contains three pieces by Luke: a brief interview with her on "Merton: Ten Years Later" from 1978, and two talks about him, delivered in 1984 and 1990. These pieces witness to her sense of commitment to make Merton's message known to the wider world beyond religious communities. The substance of her two talks relies heavily on those of Merton in Part I, so that the reader either welcomes their restatement of major themes or is mildly bemused at their redundancy. Inclusion of a longer and wider-ranging interview with Luke conducted for *The Merton Annual* in 1989 (Volume 2) would have helped flesh out this section, as would the inclusion of the Loretto Community's Constitutions (*I Am the Way*) that Merton refers to enthusiastically in his correspondence with Luke (cf. her interview [50]).

Part III, fittingly entitled "A Portrait of Loretto and Faces of Wisdom," reprises the visual celebration of Loretto caught so luminously in the Luke portrait on the book's cover. It is here, in some twenty-two pages of black and white photography, that she and her community do become the major protagonists. The photography catches the essence of these women during some fifty years of their lives, both individually and in loving interaction with others. And the captions beneath each picture actually develop into a succinct history of the community as it has borne witness to its vocation, maturing and adapting along with the changes affecting the world and the Church. One of my favorites presents a placard-bearing Luke at a demonstration for equality of women in the Roman Catholic Church, mid-1990s: "I Am a WOMAN Survivor of the Catholic Church" (89).

This shot is an example of how Part III restores the balance which was suggested by the cover but which was not addressed by the prose selections of the first two parts. For it is here that one sees Luke in *her* several roles of ministry and influence: as prioress, Vatican-II participant, social activist within both her geographical and ecclesial milieus. The concluding poem (by her friend Cecily Jones, SL) and portrait of the nonagenarian Luke provide a fitting finale, the photograph radiating warmth, depth, and awakesness (as the many familiar studies of Merton do). The poem, "The World Beyond Your

Window" (103), evokes Luke's dedication to a religious life lived in full awareness of gifts abundantly given which, paradoxically, reach their culmination in that life's diminishment, in the *kenosis* of which her Gethsemani friend had so often spoken.

Major Ideas

While the editors note that prayer became the major focus of the book in the course of its development, Thurston singles out four themes that she considers central "to what Merton wanted to say to his friends at Loretto" (38), themes that characterize his work in general during those years (1960-1963):

First: vocation, that of the religious/monastic life as well as of the universal call to holiness for all Christians living in "an uncertain and violent world" (38).

Second: The Good News (which had not been commonly taught in this way for some centuries) that God's Life lives Itself in the lives of Christians, that God, totally free of censure, always takes the initiative: "Heaven is in our hearts since Christ is in our hearts. . . . [Y]ou don't have to go anywhere much in order to find Our Lord. We don't have to find Him because He comes to find us, you see; that is what we must remember most of all; we find Him by letting Him find us" (10).

Third, Merton expands the traditional Pauline theology of the "power of weakness" and thus the importance of the Cross. "Our lives . . . are to be led purely and simply under a sign of contradiction" (38).

Fourth, the advice to let our lives of prayer develop naturally from the seeds planted by God in our everyday situations. Closely connected with this is his call to avoid the temptation of separating our lives into a "spiritual" and a "secular" compartment, "as if prayer and work were somehow opposed" (39), but rather to live them as a whole.

A Historical Excursus

In their introductory discussions, both James Conner, OCSO, and Thurston allude to the need for further research and writing on the shared history of Merton/Gethsemani and Loretto, a relationship now more than 150 years old. For the Sisters of Loretto provided the property – and the name Gethsemani – to the monks who established their new foundation in Kentucky. Part I concludes

with Merton's beautiful celebration of that history in his sesqui-centennial reflection: "We cannot understand our vocation except in the light of that solitude and that love, in which we are as inextricably one as the bones of the founders of two Gethsemanis in one grave: the first Loretine nuns who dedicated the place to Mary and the first Breton Trappists who took it over from them" (40). Conner notes further that Gethsemani has never followed Cistercian practice of adopting a Trappistine community as part of its connection with the women of their Order: "But in many respects Loretto has fulfilled this same goal for the monks" (viii). As support of the editors' hopes for further consideration of the relationship between Merton (Gethsemani) and Loretto (Luke), I shall conclude with a brief historical reference.

The method of this volume is Merton expressing himself to Loretto, and Loretto – through the person of Mary Luke – both receiving the message and then communicating it to others. In that process, Merton's insights are drawn into ever-clearer articulation through the personal interaction of master and audience. Readers can observe the process of dialogue leading into ideas. Now history presents several instances of fruitful interaction between male spiritual masters and their female directees or correspondents, and scholarship since the 1920s has come to evaluate those relationships as more complex than the one-way path of teacher to student long presumed. A prime example is that between the Rhineland mystics (Dominicans Eckhart, Tauler, Seuse) and the Dominican nuns to whom they ministered. The groundbreaking thesis by Herbert Grundmann (1924) suggested that the *men* were actually the *beneficiaries* – through intense shared dialogue – and then the gifted *articulators*, of the *women's* lived experience of God. Merton has written often of his love for his own novices and juniors. Clearly his thoughts were being formed in and through the course of his teaching ministry. His "sons" became God's words, his "seeds of contemplation."

Might not the listening presence granted him by generous young women open to God, longing to experience God in their lives and to lead others to experience such love, as well as the shared work with his kindred spirit Luke, have helped him as it helped the Rhineland mystics, to "extend the power of the resurrection to the whole world" (cf. editor's "Postscript" [39])?

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