

Roger Lipsey, *Make Peace Before the Sun Goes Down: The Long Encounter of Thomas Merton and His Abbot, James Fox* (Boston, Shambhala, 2015), pp. xiv + 323. ISBN 978-1-61180-225-2 (paper) \$18.95.

This biography of two monks by Roger Lipsey is based on a thorough familiarity with the writings of the protagonists of this engagingly written work. Contact with certain monks who lived with Abbot Fox and with Merton add observations concerning them which give further color to the account of their manner of living and relating in a growing community. Lipsey came to visit the abbey and interviewed some monks who had known in varying degrees the two of them in the Gethsemani community. His theme is well stated in the subtitle of this book: the relations between the abbot and the monk who had suddenly become widely known through his autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

It is not possible to summarize this dual biography in a brief phrase, for the author provides extensive detail as he recounts the exchanges between these two monks who, after all, lived together in the same community or exchanged letters from the first day Merton entered the abbey until his death in 1968. Merton spent almost exactly half his life as a Gethsemani monk, entering at the age of twenty-six. Lipsey covers in concrete and extensive detail the whole period of their relationship. Their mutual dealings with one another increased with time, especially after Merton was named master of junior monks. I myself was a member of that group for the three years of simple vows and so profited from his lectures and spiritual guidance. He further provides a detailed and nuanced knowledge of those developments in the Order that were significant in their lives.

Lipsey contributes important insights that are subtle and essential to grasp the most personal factors in the relations of Merton and his abbot. Both were convinced they were required by their vocation to deal constructively with one another. In a lengthy citation from Merton's journal in which he expresses his frustrations in relation to the abbot, he adds as a final observation that it is Providence that the two are bound together (128). Lipsey notes that Merton and Dom James were united by a mutual personal affection that was providential.

One of the engaging features of the account of the two protagonists of this drama is the honest objectivity with which the foibles of each are portrayed in detail. Those of Merton are brought out prominently in the account of his party with two unexpected visitors (136-37). Against all monastic rules, Merton went swimming in the lake with his visitors. They also had a picnic lunch. Merton had no qualms over such behavior that was contrary to the life he had professed. Lipsey rather seems to accept

this behavior on Merton's part, uncritically, though he recognizes it as unacceptable for young monks who would be sent away for such behavior.

A topic that occupies extensive attention in these pages is the effort repeatedly made by Merton to obtain permission from authorities to transfer to an order that included hermits, the Camaldolese. Since this desire for a more solitary life persisted over the years, the many details of the initiatives he took are treated at length. In the course of learning the specifics of these numerous efforts the reader is provided with considerable light on the relations Merton had with his abbot and with Rome. This issue became especially significant in the late 1950s. The vicissitudes accompanying these attempts to get permission to enter the Camaldolese provide insights into the complex dealings between Merton, his abbot and Rome. Well set out by Lipsey, the various exchanges allow the reader to gain an understanding of the struggles involved, especially for Dom James and then for the would-be hermit. Merton was very persuasive and managed to convince some of us as well as the Roman officials of his views. But Dom James proved up to the occasion and making a visit to Rome, supported by the Abbot General he was given the authority to decide the matter. Merton graciously accepted the refusal in a calm spirit of faith and asked Abbot James to continue to assign him to the position of novice master. The abbot readily acceded to his request. He faithfully carried on in this position for some years with dedication. How earnestly he sought to instill in novices the Cistercian way of life is evidenced by the recent publication of the conferences he gave to them regularly.¹

A major reason why Lipsey shows appreciable insight into Merton's complex character is his obvious sympathy for the man. He consistently describes in detail the interactions and activities of both men, often citing their words and writings. However, it is well to keep in mind that while Thomas Merton was a poet and gifted wielder of the pen, the abbot had chosen to renounce the intellectual life in large measure when he entered the monastery. Since both are presented here in good part by their writings and, to a lesser extent, by persons who knew them, inevitably the abbot is at a disadvantage as concerns his personal life.

This appears most significantly in the discussion of Merton's relationship with the young student nurse, identified only as M, who had been assigned to care for him when in the hospital in Louisville. After this initial contact they developed a mutual affection that grew into a

1. See Thomas Merton's *Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* series of monastic conferences (volumes 1-8), edited by Patrick F. O'Connell (Kalamazoo, MI & Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2005-2016). These volumes are part of the larger Monastic Wisdom Series, a joint project of Cistercian Publications and Liturgical Press.

strong, passionate attraction. This resulted in their clandestine meetings and phone calls for some time after his return to the monastery. Their contacts were forbidden when the abbot became aware of them. Merton for a time continued to call in spite of the abbot's prohibition. After a while he came to see that he had acted foolishly. In his journals he noted that he felt nothing as he burned her letters.²

The account that Lipsey provides of the subsequent and unforeseen developments that eventuated in the major changes in the lives of both Merton and Dom James moves along rapidly. When the abbot tells Merton he intends to resign and live as a hermit, a new situation is created for both. Merton encourages his abbot to carry out his desire to resign and live in a hermitage. What is not mentioned as this work comes to an end is that, in a strange and unforeseen way, Providence seems to indicate that Dom James was more intuitively correct than he is given credit for. The abbot's position that Merton could have more influence by remaining in the monastery than he could by traveling gains plausibility in light of Merton's tragic death.

Roger Lipsey presents both Dom James and Thomas Merton with extensive and reliable detail. He describes them with accuracy and insight. Merton had an uncommon gift of charm that was spontaneous. He communicated in a highly effective manner through writing but also through personal encounter. I was able to observe how certain of the younger monks would unconsciously imitate some of Fr. Merton's manner, so warmly did they respond to him. There was no trace of sentimentality involved on either side, however. Dom James, though definitely capable of effective writing when occasion called for it, usually gave little attention to style in his talks to the community. Lipsey is consciously sensitive to the role of this marked difference in causing the tension between the two. The reader does well to remember that Lipsey, while sharing with Merton the interests and gifts of a writer, never was a member of the community, never lived with or knew personally either protagonist of this work. His account is all the more commendable for that. Yet it is possible to appreciate the fuller significance of certain human relations only by personal participation in the various exchanges, made more significant in a cloistered, enclosed community.

That Merton himself may well have chosen to return to his Gethsemani hermitage after his travels seems to me a reasonable possibility. Two days before his accidental death he wrote to Brother Patrick Hart, his secretary, that on this Feast of the Immaculate Conception he felt homesick for the

2. See Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey. Journals, vol. 7: 1967-1968*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998) 157.

abbey and sends warm greeting to his friends in the community.³ His words are a sad and affectionate farewell to those of us who will always be indebted to our greatly appreciated brother and dedicated teacher.

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GARDNER, Fiona, *The Only Mind Worth Having: Thomas Merton and the Child Mind*, Foreword by Rowan Williams (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015), pp. xiv + 228. ISBN 978-1-4982-3022-3 (paper) \$27.00.

Early in her new book, Fiona Gardner notes that there is only a single reference to child/children in the indices to the seven volumes of Thomas Merton's complete journals (4), a statistic that might seem to indicate that this topic is rather peripheral to Merton's thought. But as she convincingly demonstrates in this perceptive and wide-ranging exploration of the theme of the "child mind" in Merton's writing, it is on the contrary a key image intrinsically linked with much of what is most significant in Merton's spiritual teaching. It has perhaps been too easily overlooked or taken for granted by readers and commentators, but that should change due to Gardner's thorough and thoroughly engaging presentation here.

The fundamental context for the entire discussion is the message of Jesus that "unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 18:3; cf. Mk. 10:15, Lk. 18:17) (1). Merton is considered principally as a guide to understanding and putting into practice this gospel admonition, which is echoed in various ways by the poets, psychologists and spiritual writers whose insights are drawn on throughout the book. As an experienced psychoanalytic therapist and spiritual director, the author has both a wide and deep acquaintance with relevant theoretical sources and an extensive engagement in clinical and pastoral practice that guards against an overly cerebral or abstract treatment of the topic. Her approach is empathetic and (to use a favorite Merton term) sapiential, a participatory way of knowing marked, as Archbishop Rowan Williams points out in his preface, by her "sensitivity, warmth and candour" (x) that encourage the reader to place trust in her wisdom and spiritual maturity.

In her opening chapter (1-11) Gardner provides a concise articulation of her central thesis that for Thomas Merton the "child mind" is a synthesis of the openness and wonder of childhood responsiveness to the mystery of existence and the reawakening and recovery of this simplicity, this

3. Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: Letters on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990) 416-17.