

## WRITING IN THE SPIRIT OF MERTON

Review of

### MOVING IN THE SPIRIT:

Becoming a Contemplative in Action

by Richard J. Hauser, S.J.

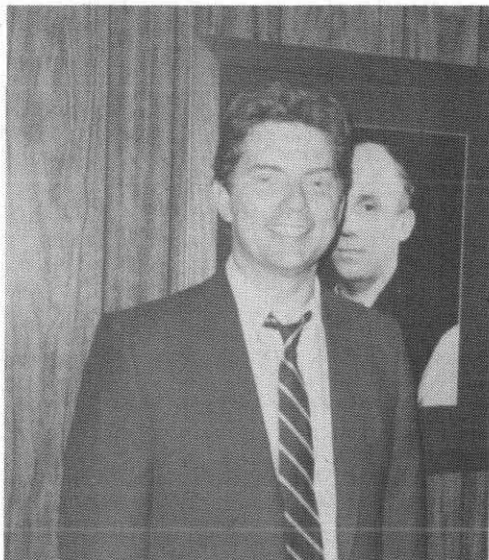
New York/ Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1986

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--Reviewed by **Gregory J. Ryan**

The author is a college professor who, in the course of one of his classes, asked himself the question: "Do I have a method to teach others how to become a contemplative in action?" His affirmative answer led to the writing of this book.

While accepting the age-old dichotomy between those who seek union with God primarily through prayer and those who seek union with God through service to others, he goes on to show how one can serve others *after* a prayerful discernment and acceptance of God's will for the actions of his/her life. The foundation for his methodology rests on three underlying influences: (1) the thought of Thomas Merton [The title itself recalls Merton's posthumously published *Contemplation in a World of Action*]; (2) an appreciation of the role of the Holy Spirit in Christian life; and (3) a deeper understanding of the *Spiritual Exercises*. While this third area may not be explicitly "Mertonian," it does show how people can learn from Merton and, after internalizing his outlook on the spiritual life, can then creatively apply new insights to their own particular field. It points up the difference between "studying-Merton-for-the-sake-of-study" and "studying-Merton-for-the-sake-of-service." In the case of the present volume, Jesuit Father Hauser revitalizes the spirituality of St. Ignatius in a helpful way.



**GREGORY J. RYAN**

Photo by Robert E. Daggy

Each of the book's five chapters is followed by Reflection Questions that are meant to help the reader clarify his/her reactions to the material and to help plan practical ways to incorporate the new knowledge into individual lifestyles.

The first chapter focuses on "Awakening to the Holy Spirit." This awakening is the key to all further responses to the inner stirrings of the heart to share fully in God's life. The next chapter assists the reader in "Recognizing the Holy Spirit" in the rhythms of daily life. By drawing on

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personal experiences, Father Hauser shows that God's presence in our lives is not always apparent. We must become attuned to His presence and learn "to take the right next step." The chapter on "Obstacles to the Spirit" shows how good moods and bad moods can affect how we perceive God's action in our lives. Hauser suggests positive steps for recognizing, naming, and replacing bad moods, so that our direction remains God-ward. "Seeking God's Will" details five steps in making decisions, not just with our heads, but with our hearts. "Keeping a Spiritual Journal" offers a daily discipline for keeping all elements of the book in proper balance so the reader might reach that freedom of spirit which allows us to "love God and others with our whole heart, soul, mind and body."

Much of this book shows Merton's influence and some of it could have come from his pen: "If our heart is moving toward the desire to love and serve God and others, the Spirit is present -- by 'heart' let us understand the deepest part of our being, our center, the place from which we make our most free choices." (page 30) And again: "...it is comforting to remind ourselves that as long as the desire for loving and serving God is present, we are under the influence of the Holy Spirit." (page 32) Just the "desire" to please God is pleasing to God.

There is something of a problem about this book, however, since its positive elements may cause negative results. For instance, so important is journal-keeping to Father Hauser that he admits: "Sometimes recording in the journal will even pre-empt my prayer period." (page 89) To some readers this may seem a little extreme. A person's constant attention to monitoring moods (good or bad), to weighing each decision with great deliberation, to writing everything down --all of this can certainly contribute to growth, but it may inadvertently lead some to focus unduly on the "self." Self-analysis should give way to self-forgetfulness in the Other. We should cultivate a preference for dropping everything and returning to our heart each day in prayer. Thus are we brought to true freedom. By diligently and lovingly allowing God to be in us. In silence and simplicity.

While some readers may find that certain aspects of the book serve unnecessarily to complicate what is essentially a "simple" vocation offered to all Christians, others will find welcome suggestions for unloading a great deal of the baggage that hampers their journey Homeward.