

CONTEMPORARY HAGIOGRAPHY

Review of

THOMAS MERTON, BROTHER MONK:

The Quest for True Freedom
by M. Basil Pennington, O.C.S.O.
San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987
xvii, 205p. -- \$15.95

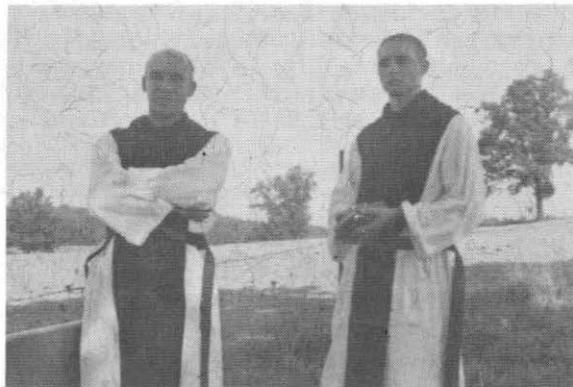
--Reviewed by **Paul Quenon**, O.C.S.O.

As the title suggests, Fr. M. Basil Pennington is speaking as one member of the Cistercian family about another, and this is what gives this book a unique perspective. Although members of separate monasteries, Cistercian monks are bound together by a unanimity of spirit and experience that runs throughout the houses of the Order. This had its expression in the very detailed observance prior to Vatican II, and in the co-operation among the houses today. Basil speaks from experience about how it was to sleep on a hot summer night with ten times as much clothing as needed. Although this book does not intend to be a biography, it is laced with anecdotes and descriptions of life within the monastery and so surpasses anything written by biographers who have had no experience of the life, no matter how well disposed they have been. Basil can say things with just the right shade of humor as only one who has been through it himself can do:

I can remember one monk saying, "You never know what is in the soup." And his listener responding: "You always know exactly what's in the soup, it is always whatever was served the day before, with some water added."

Some of these stories are common currency among monasteries, some are gathered from interviews with monks at Gethsemani, some from Basil's own personal acquaintance with Merton. In choosing to refer to him as "Tom," Pennington shows his personal closeness while betraying his distance from the specific community situation, since everyone here addressed him as "Fr. Louis." After he was relieved of office in the monastery, some called him "Louie."

Although rich in concrete details, the main part of the book is thematic -- a spirituality of freedom, as it developed in the life of Thomas Merton. One could hardly pick a theme more central to Merton than this, and so in an indirect sense it too is biographical. In fact, Pennington originally wanted to write a monastic biography of Merton, but the publishers asked for something of a different genre. The result is a fairly chronological treatment of Merton's growth in freedom and its meaning for us, but



THOMAS MERTON & PAUL QUENON

Photo by Jean Bowling Quenon (1960)

□ **Brother Paul Quenon**, is a monk of the Abbey of Gethsemani. He has written several reviews of books by and about Merton. His poem, "More Geography from Lograire: Written in Merton's Hermitage," appeared in the Spring 1985 *Merton Seasonal*. More recently, he reviewed *The Gethsemani Poems*, by Ron Seitz in the Spring 1986 issue.

with stories and incidents told to illustrate a point, taken from his life and writings with no regard for proper sequence. Thus, what we have is not biography, but something which I would like to designate -- at the risk of being misunderstood -- as *hagiography*. More precisely, a particularly contemporary kind of hagiography.

This word is much discredited as implying idealization, falsification and stereotyping a person to conform to a popular and accepted image of sanctity. But the original intention of such literature is to present the lives of a holy person for the edification of the faithful. It is a matter of showing how the truth of their lives applies to ours. There is no more a risk of losing the truth in this than there is in the current style of biography that tries to show "the warts and all" and risks losing the inner spirituality of the person. Pennington is to be commended for making an attempt to take up in contemporary terms a task as old as the Gospels. It is not without its success, and many will be grateful for his bringing together some of the most relevant and central implications of Merton's life.

Some may wonder if he is not also attempting to apply cosmetics to some of Merton's more unsettling blemishes, namely the relationship with the nurse designated as S in Michael Mott's biography. As one monk quipped: "Basil is very concerned to preserve Merton's chastity." One can make matters worse by trying too hard to make them better. As another monk once observed: "People have a deep need to defend Fr. Louis, and he doesn't need to be defended." Merton seems to have chosen to leave himself defenseless in making such sensitive material available for publication -- itself a dramatic gesture about something he might have over-dramatized. However, I myself would not fault Basil for making a fair estimate of the matter by putting it within the context of Merton's clear and traditional teaching on celibacy.

High credit must be given for the appendix, a descriptive bibliography of unpublished journals, letters, tapes, poetry and notes. A section is devoted to each of these, starting with the private journals, showing the period they cover and how, if at all, they are later worked into published books. The section on letters summarizes the "Circular Letters" written for friends and distributed in mimeographed form. The tapes and notes are of conferences given to the novices and temporary professed, of which only about one-tenth has seen publication. Basil gives some idea of the style, content and origin of these sources. All of this gives the public some idea of material that has not and may never see the light of day in published form.

Lest I create false expectations, let me say again that the main bulk of this book is thematic, not biographical, and deals often in generalities. There are occasional digressions into Basil's own fields of interest, such as Canon Law, which hardly won a word from Merton himself. The content and structure of the book is nicely summed up by the author in seven stages:

First of all there was Tom's quest for basic human freedom, which he exploited and abused. Then came his quest for the freedom of the faith and the fuller freedom of the monastic life. Within that life he continued to seek, finding a freedom to be open to all reality. He went on to seek the freedom of the eremitical life. In all of this he was seeking the freedom of final integration, which prepared him to enter into the ultimate freedom of the Kingdom of Heaven.