

# A LASTING & PRODUCTIVE RELATIONSHIP

Review of

Robert Imperato

*MERTON & WALSH ON THE PERSON*

Lake Worth, Florida: Sunday Publications, 1988

224 pages \$14.95

Reviewed by **John H. Ford**

There have been many distinguished as well as some superficial works commenting on the life and writings of Thomas Merton. None have more than casually referred to the relationship between the world famous monk and Daniel C. Walsh. When mentioned at all, Walsh is identified as the mentor at Columbia University who introduced Merton to prominent Catholic writers and subsequently suggested a visit to Gethsemani. Robert Imperato reminds us in his perceptive book that there was a more personal friendship which continued from the encounter at Columbia until Merton's untimely death.

In his contemplative solitude Merton became a renowned author of immeasurable influence. Walsh wrote little and was something of a contemplative in the world. While teaching at Bellarmine College and Gethsemani for over a decade, he could be described as a kind of Socrates, convinced that the truth should not be so much brought to the student as the student brought to the truth.

Imperato contends that, despite their different audiences and methods, a common and central ground gave direction to their thought. It is a concern with the implications of the meaning of person. While the concept of nature and that of person cannot be seen as opposed, they are quite distinct. Person intimates a uniqueness, more than a refined notion of nature, which is original. The intimacy between creator and creature is the awesomely illusive meaning sought in understanding person. Merton (and Walsh would agree), while not denying the difference between God and His image, said "God and the soul seem to have but one single 'I'."

With copious references to support his thesis, Imperato proposes that the notion of the person is of "central" impetus in the writings of Merton, from the implications of his social teaching and political writings, to his concern with progress in the spiritual life. There is a consistent reference to the need to recognize and develop the "true self." It is the illusion of a false self which not only keeps us from a true knowledge of ourselves or our personhood;

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it makes a productive relationship with others impossible. When one has emptied self of illusion then true created identity will begin to be perceived.

In and through the person one finds genuine community. "The Christian," says Merton, "is one with all his 'brothers in Christ'. His inner self is, in fact, inseparable from Christ and hence in a mysterious and unique way inseparable from the other 'I's' who live in Christ, so that they all form one mystical Person which is Christ."

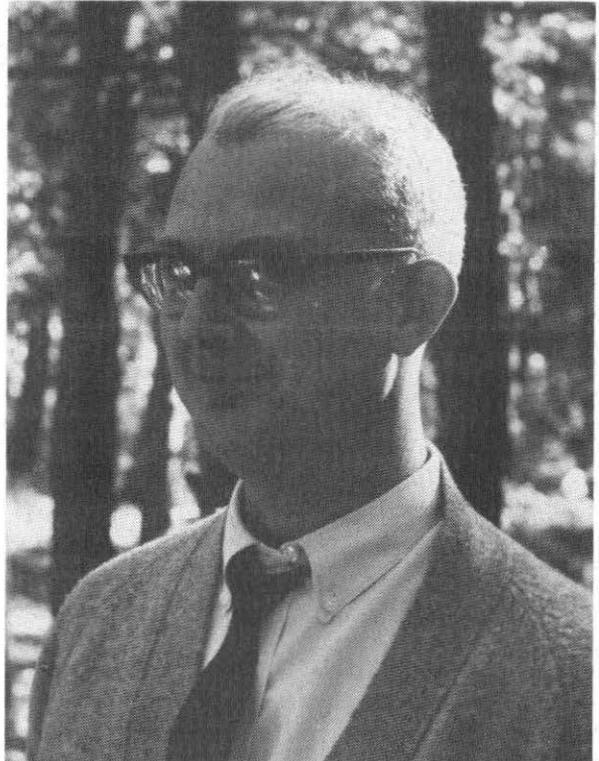
Walsh rejects the Boethian definition of person as an individual substance of a rational nature precisely because it is a definition. Essence may be defined but one may talk *about* person without ever exhausting its meaning. Person is not static but implies a process of perfection in love. Walsh sees personhood to be a share in the divine intimacy prior to conceptualization in God. Prior, Imperato indicates, means more intimate or more central.

Walsh also uses the polarization of individual as distinguished from person to illustrate the difference between collectivity and community. Collectivity does not unite people toward common goals even in the political arena. Community reflects both common goals and interdependence in attaining those goals.

For both Merton and Walsh the person is God expressed in the totality of His knowledge and love, that perfect image of God proceeding from the Trinity. Saying this and understanding this is quite different. Perhaps it is a matter of not simply understanding but becoming.

Imperato's book benefits from his personal encounter with Walsh and Merton while he was a monk at Gethsemani, as well as from extensive oral and written records. The book was a doctoral thesis and may well have benefited from some editing.\* The general reader may find some passages pedantic and distracting from the work's theme. Others may delight in the detail and extensive research.

What must be especially recognized is that Imperato has eloquently reminded us of the lasting and productive relationship between Merton and Walsh. In their final years together the world renowned monk and the too hidden teacher deepened their personal relationship in the God to whom they dedicated their lives. The benefits of their efforts continue.



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Photo by Thomas Merton

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\* *The Notion of the Person according to Daniel Clark Walsh and Thomas Merton* (New York: Fordham University, 1984): iv, 266p.