

THE THIRD COLLECTION OF MERTON LETTERS

Review of

*THE SCHOOL OF CHARITY: THE LETTERS OF THOMAS MERTON
ON RELIGIOUS RENEWAL AND SPIRITUAL DIRECTION*

Edited with an Introduction by Brother Patrick Hart

Preface by William H. Shannon

New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990

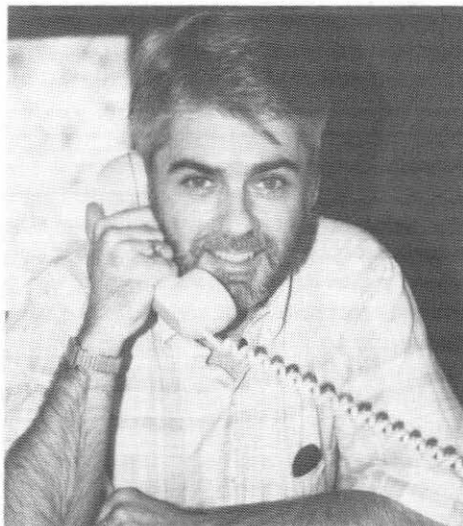
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Reviewed by **Michael Downey**

This volume is the third collection of letters in a series of five which includes *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns* (1985, W. H. Shannon, ed.) and *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends* (1989, R. E. Daggy, ed.). Under the general editorship of William H. Shannon, *The School of Charity* is to be followed by a collection of Merton's letters on literary subjects, edited by Christine M. Bochen. This is scheduled to be followed by a projected fifth and final volume of letters of a more general sort.

The letters in this volume are organized under three headings: The Early Monastic Years (1941-59); The Middle Formative Years (1960-64); and The Later Solitary Years (1965-68). Editor Patrick Hart has proven himself once again to be a master at his craft. In addition to judicious editorial skill, Hart brings to this volume a personal knowledge of its themes. Because he lived the monastic life prior to the Second Vatican Council, and has participated in the reform and renewal of religious life about which Merton writes in these pages, Patrick Hart, Merton's confrere and Gethsemani's liaison for those interested in Merton's life and writings, was well chosen to select and edit these letters.

□ **Michael Downey** will be Associate Professor of Theology at Gwynedd-Mercy College in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, after September 1, 1991. He is the author of *A Blessed Weakness: The Spirit of Jean Vanier and l'Arche* (Harper & Row, 1986), *Clothed in Christ: The Sacraments and Christian Living* (Crossroad, 1987), and editor of *That They Might Live: Power, Empowerment, and Leadership in the Church* (Crossroad, 1991). Editor-in-Chief of *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* (forthcoming, The Liturgical Press, 1992), his essay "Penning Patterns of Transformation: Etty Hillesum & Thomas Merton" will appear in *The Merton Annual* 4.



MICHAEL DOWNEY

Photo by Siobhan Reidy

The contents are discretely introduced, allowing Merton's own voice to ring through the pages. The first is a letter from the twenty-six year old "Tom" Merton to Frederic Dunne, then abbot of Gethsemani, providing an account of his previous life and conversion (a foretaste of *The Seven Storey Mountain*). The last, written on 8 December 1968 from Bangkok and addressed to Patrick Hart, tells of Merton's homesickness for Gethsemani. Readers will be delighted to find in the appendix a private vow which Merton made in 1952 never to serve as abbot.

One might wish that the content of the letters to which Merton responded in these pages had been made available to the reader — in which case we would not have a collection of Merton's letters, but something of a different sort. The significance of these letters on religious renewal and spiritual direction does not lie in the fact that they are addressed primarily to "religious" figures such as Benedictine Jean Leclercq, Loretine Mary Luke Tobin, Swiss clergyman Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Merton's own religious superiors. Rather their importance lies in the access they give to Merton as an essentially "religious personality." In these letters we find an ongoing struggle to integrate the four major strains of any authentic religious impulse: 1) an appreciation of the symbolic as disclosive of the ultimate; 2) the quest for union with mystery; 3) an appreciation for the ineluctable place of silence in the spiritual quest; and 4) the necessity of transformative human action as manifestation of God's redemptive love.

Merton was bound by religious vows and committed in a public way to the religious life in and through the Cistercian tradition. But it must be recognized that such a commitment is to a form of life which gives expression to a more fundamental religious impulse. When Merton wrote with such passion to his religious superiors in 1958, urging them to intervene in the case of Boris Pasternak whose life Merton judged to be in danger, his passion was fueled by a conviction about the religious impulse in Pasternak's work, all the more important in view of the forces which would squelch it. When he complains about the changes in the liturgy brought on by the reforms of Vatican II, it is because of the quintessential value which he associates with the symbolic and sacramental as disclosive of the divine. While urging new experimentation in forms of religious life, he prudently discerns that the religious impulse can and must be lived without the institutional supports of enclosure, rectory or convent. But he wisely counsels that it is exceedingly more difficult to do so when untethered from these supports.

In view of these observations it may be useful to suggest that the more helpful vantage for reading these letters may be the theme of obedience. It is now more commonly recognized that obedience, even and especially religious obedience, entails much more than carrying out the commands of a superior. It is now a commonplace that, etymologically, the term "obedience" means "to listen" or "to listen to." What courses through these pages is Merton's persistent struggle to attend to, to listen to, to discern and carry out the fundamental religious impulse in his own life and the lives of others, particularly when the institutional forms that are to support and sustain seem rather to thwart it. On this matter Merton both seeks counsel and gives it. The abiding concern in his own life as discerned in these pages is one of recognizing that authentic obedience to his call as a writer, through which his fundamental religious impulse was given expression, is indeed reconcilable with the canons of obedience of the institution in which he had formalized his religious commitment. These letters on religious life and renewal thus demand that they be viewed in terms of more foundational issues with broader implications. If read against this wider horizon, they will have appeal to many besides those interested in the renewal of institutional religious life in the Roman Catholic tradition and the art of spiritual direction.

This last point requires fuller explanation. It may not be as clear as it first seems that these letters are about spiritual direction. Though it is plain that Merton is both seeking and giving

counsel, he does not speak in any sustained fashion of that which we have come to recognize as “spiritual direction” in our own day. Is the subtitle of the volume misleading? I am persuaded that with the renewal of Vatican II, and with its mandate that religious communities retrieve the original charism of their founder, the Jesuits have done a splendid job at accenting the Ignatian approach to spiritual direction. But the Ignatian approach to direction, emphasizing the one-to-one encounter between director and directee, focused on the discernment of the interior movement of the Spirit and the need for making decisions in accord with these, is only one, albeit crucially important, approach to spiritual direction. There are, however, other currents of spiritual direction in the Christian tradition, found not only in the monastic approach to spiritual direction, but also in the letters of such figures as Catherine of Siena and Francis de Sales. This approach is expressed in letters and treatises that seek to provide simple yet prudent counsel in light of the day in and day out conundrums and struggles of one’s existence, finding therein the direction in which to chart one’s best energies. Indeed the simple sayings of the Desert Fathers are an expression of another approach to spiritual direction. And it is in this tradition, not that of Ignatius Loyola, that Merton stands.

This volume evidences the same omnivorous and restless energy readers find so savory in the writings of Gethsemani’s most celebrated son. When he turns his attention to the renewal of contemplative life in the modern world, his passion shimmers. Here the very heart of his being as a religious personality, and the demands of obedience to the fundamental religious impulse through his life as writer and monk come to the fore. And because these letters are at root a disclosure of Merton the religious personality in the more fundamental sense, *The School of Charity* will be of interest to those well beyond the pale of Roman Catholicism and the vowed religious life.

The volume is quite appropriately named. The school of charity is, of course, derived from Benedict’s rule. For the father of Western monasticism, it is the monastery itself which is to be the school of charity. But if obedience to the fundamental religious impulse is taken as the leitmotif of this collection of letters, then *The School of Charity* might be read with a clearer eye. For it is not the monastery or the life of the vows itself which guarantees that one will surrender to the redemptive love of God. Rather, as the inveterate writer of these letters would undoubtedly attest, it is in the risk of obedience to one’s deepest religious impulse that charity is learned.

