

MERTON FOR BEGINNERS

Review of

Jim Forest

*LIVING WITH WISDOM:
A LIFE OF THOMAS MERTON*

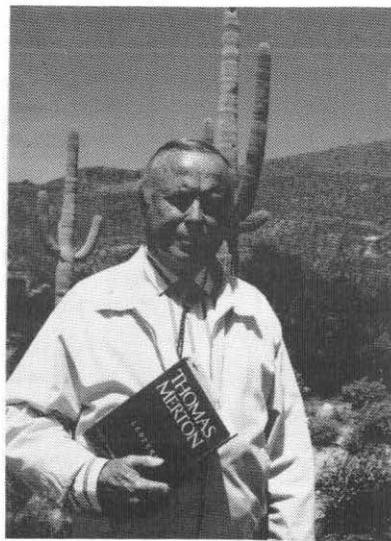
Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991
216 pages — illustrated / \$12.95 paperback

Reviewed by **Frank X. Tuoti**

This reviewer had two initial reactions to *Living with Wisdom*, both of which were negative. My first reaction, on hearing of a new book with the subtitle “A Life of Thomas Merton” was “Oh, no, not *another* biography of Merton!” Perhaps, however, the book would offer a few new “revelations” or some illuminating new insights into this complex, sometimes contradictory but amazingly graced Trappist monk. This is called “making the mistake of setting expectations!” As I read through the uncorrected page proofs of the book, I found nothing that was not familiar to me, nor any fresh insights into the man or the monk. At some point, I realized there was a problem. I was the problem. I was so close to the forest (no pun intended) that I could not only *not* see the trees, but could not appreciate the delectable leafy branches of the pages, nor see the gentle light which streamed through the timbers of the twenty-eight chapters.

For all these many years, I have been steeped in Merton, lectured on Merton, read virtually everything he wrote and everything that was written about him. Drenched in Merton, I had absorbed through books, articles and tapes and was brought to saturation levels by the talks and conferences at *ITMS* gatherings. I knew I had to force myself away from my own experience, and look afresh as one who knew little or nothing about the most famous Cistercian since Bernard of Clairvaux. Merton of Gethsemani, who was in my blood, needed to be drained from my consciousness.

Once the transposition was effected (neophyte for “expert”), *Living with Wisdom* took on a new charm and even fascination. I was discovering Merton anew. Soon, I would come to complete agreement with the succinct comment of Bob Lax on the back cover of the published book: “The best introduction I can think of to Merton, his life, his work.” Bob Lax had grasped what I had missed — this was an *introduction* to Merton and therefore, by definition, is written for



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an audience which might be termed “Merton beginners.” (Although to restrict the value of the book only to “beginners” would be eminently unjust.) *Living with Wisdom* is now the book I unreservedly recommend to those who ask me “how to get started” with Merton.

Living with Wisdom is a sympathetic, uncritical work by someone who knew Merton well, and who loved him. I find nothing to criticize in this, especially since there is a large corpus of dissecting, critical studies of Merton already extant. The photo on the cover of the book is almost worth the price of admission! Here is Merton “honkered down” over a book in his “first hermitage,” sitting in a small, open cubicle set on a pile of bricks — an old tool shed on the grounds of Gethsemani. Merton, who wrote so much on distraction and divertissement, appears oblivious to everything around him.

The 123 photos and plates which interlace the book’s 216 pages comprise a “book” unto themselves, the most profuse and varied proliferation of photos and illustrations ever to grace a work about Merton. Forty-nine of the photos are of Merton, by himself and with others, eighteen of famous personages or relatives or friends, fifty-six of places eventful in Merton’s life and seventeen plates and facsimiles. There is one photo of Merton (p. 11), age five or six, devilishly peering out behind a door in his Long Island home. Any future abbot who would have first cast his eyes upon this photo would have known in an instant that he would have his hands full!

From infancy to hermit, from the days of jolly old England to his riotous days at Columbia, from agnostic to convert, from English teacher to monk to his last days in Asia, the twenty-eight chapters of *Living with Wisdom* are written in clean, personal, highly engaging style. For someone not quite ready to bite off the official bible-size Michael Mott biography, *Living with Wisdom* is the biography to read, and to give.

Jim Forest strikes a poignant note at the end of the last chapter, “Jonas Overshadowed.” Here Merton’s personal effects following his death are enumerated and evaluated in an official document. Merton was “worth” ten bucks, that being the value assigned to a Timex watch that apparently kept on ticking. Everything else of Merton’s was marked “nil.” Ten bucks! For those of us who knew him — either personally or through his writings — his “worth” will continue to swell in the coming decades, and perhaps even centuries. To be touched by Merton is truly to experience a brush with Wisdom.