

# FRANCISCAN COMMENTARY ON THOMAS MERTON

Review of

Albert Haase, OFM

*Swimming in the Sun: Discovering the Lord's Prayer  
with Francis of Assisi and Thomas Merton*

Cincinnati, Ohio: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1993

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Reviewed by **Patrick F. O'Connell**

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At the First General Meeting of The International Thomas Merton Society in 1989, I sat down for lunch at a table already occupied by a young man I had not previously met. In the course of conversation, I mentioned that I had just given a presentation on "Merton, the Franciscan," and that I had done a doctoral dissertation at Fordham on St. Bonaventure. It turned out that my companion, Albert Haase, was himself a Franciscan doing a doctoral dissertation at Fordham on St. Bonaventure, under the same mentor as myself, and was, as he put it, "probably the only person outside your committee who has actually read your dissertation!" (not true, actually — my loyal and long suffering wife proofread, though I think she did skip over the Latin parts). In the course of a leisurely walk around the Bellarmine campus after our meal, I found this Franciscan Mertonist to be a delightful, insightful and engaging personality. He was currently a very successful itinerant preacher, much in demand, as he himself put it without a tracing of boasting or self-consciousness, because of his "gift of being able to explain important theological concepts in terms people in the pews can understand and respond to." But he was already wondering what he would do when he completed his studies, and I wasn't completely surprised when I saw him at the next ITMS meeting, two years later, to learn that he had volunteered to be part of the first Franciscan mission back to China. He is now living and teaching in Taiwan.

I am pleased to report that *Swimming in the Sun*, which combines Haase's interests in St. Francis and Thomas Merton and puts them in the service of a discussion of the Lord's Prayer as a central text of the Christian spiritual life, is as delightful, insightful and engaging as Albert [pronounced "Al-bare"] is in person. The eleven chapters of his book comment in accessible, informal style on each of the phrases of the prayer of Jesus, drawing on personal experience, theological training, and the wisdom of the Christian spiritual tradition, particularly Francis and Merton, to develop a compelling and challenging presentation of the essential elements of Christian discipleship. His approach is less systematic than homiletic, and obviously profits from the author's years of preaching and spiritual direction. It weaves into the discussion of the Lord's Prayer what Haase considers to be "the five most important components of personal spirituality: one's image of God; the present moment as the place of encounter with God; community; personal commitment to God's dream of peace, love and justice; and the practical importance of asceticism" (p. 1). One can see from this list why Thomas Merton, as well as Francis of Assisi, would be such an important influence and resource for the development of the book's themes.

Haase's dependence on Merton begins with the book's title, borrowed from a description of the

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Lord's Prayer in *The Sign of Jonas*, and continues with frequent quotation and discussion of Merton material. (I counted references to twenty-three different books and fourteen tapes as sources.) Even Merton's poetry is drawn on, with "Hagia Sophia" and "Macarius and the Pony" used to particularly good effect. More significantly, the author uses Merton's basic typology of the true and false self as a lens through which to view and appreciate the various petitions of the Lord's Prayer. He introduces this pattern in the opening chapter, in the context of his discussion of God as merciful "Abba," viewing the Prodigal Son story "as a parable about the seduction of the false self and the rediscovery of the true self" (p. 19). This paradigm continues to provide a framework for subsequent petitions, as when he writes, for example, that "the life of the person rooted in the true self is oriented for and by the final coming of the Kingdom" (p. 95), or that "Matthew's concluding petition, 'Do not subject us to the final test but deliver us from the evil one' is a prayer to renounce the kind of self-assertion, violent reaction and self-vindication that characterizes the agenda of the false self. It is a prayer to find my way back home, to the true self" (p. 197). This dynamic of transformation is seen to be operative in the basic message of the Gospel crystallized in the Lord's Prayer, and is recognized to be characteristic as well of Franciscan spirituality, which is present not only in the frequent quotations from Francis and the early Franciscan literature, but in the Christocentric, sacramental, life-affirming orientation of the entire book. Haase knows both his Merton and his Francis very well, and is able to integrate their insights into his own schema of spiritual development without any sense of awkwardness or strain because he has clearly appropriated and interiorized their visions so deeply.

The author also uses incidents and anecdotes from his own life to good purpose. In discussing the importance of naming in Chapter 4, for example, he recounts how his own first name came to be pronounced in the French fashion, as "Al-bare" (not so surprising in a New Orleans native, even one of Russian ancestry). He includes moving and powerful pages on the traumatic effects of his father's suicide, and the healing, both personal and familial, which took place slowly over the years of estrangement with his father's sister and business partner). He draws frequently and helpfully on his own experiences in preaching and counseling, and on encounters with people as far away as Nigeria and China (where his breviary in a hotel room prompts a conversation with a member of the underground Catholic Church there, and a tale of courage during the Tiananmen Square crisis). These personal reminiscences have the effect of rooting his observations and insights in lived experience, making it clear that theory has been tested and refined in the crucible of daily life and struggle, his own and others.

All the chapters are well done, though the reader familiar with Merton's work may on occasion miss a passage which seems particularly apt for one or another of the petitions: for example, Merton's powerful statement in "Blessed Are the Meek" that "the great historical event, the coming of the Kingdom, is made clear and is 'realized' in proportion as Christians themselves live the life of the Kingdom in their own space and time" cries out for inclusion in Chapter 5, "Thy Kingdom Come," and the following chapter, on "Thy Will Be Done," would have benefited from a discussion of the passage in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* about "the idea that you can choose yourself, approve yourself, and then offer yourself (fully 'chosen' and 'approved') to God, . . . the frenzied conviction that one can be his own light and his own justification, and that God is there for a purpose: to issue the stamp for confirmation upon my own rightness." But the quotations which are used, many quite familiar and others, particularly passages from the taped conferences, less well known, consistently contribute to the author's purpose of exploring the contemporary significance of the words of Jesus.

Though the style is informal and conversational, the material never becomes disorganized, and there is an evident progression into themes associated with deeper spiritual maturity as the book develops. The early sections include commentary on divine fatherhood (and motherhood, with brief references to Julian of Norwich, "Hagia Sophia," and Pope John Paul I) and human community, compassion and hospitality ("Our Father"), a discussion of divine transcendence and immanence ("Who Art in Heaven"), and reflections on

divine holiness and human humility (“Hallowed Be Thy Name”). The middle chapters, on “God’s dream” for the Kingdom, discerning the divine will with head and heart, and “becoming what you receive” by being nourishment (“bread”) for others, focus particularly on the social justice dimensions of the Gospel. The concluding chapters move from a discussion on seeking and attempting forgiveness to a description of the dynamics of forgiving, and the consequent healing of wounds inflicted by others’ sins, and culminate with a particularly effective final meditation on the redemptive power of suffering as a participation in Christ’s passion, featuring recollections of a moving conversation with a dying teenager and a brief but beautiful reflection on the “Canticle of Creatures” as Francis’s “resurrection song in the face of his own Good Friday” (p. 200), which points to the underlying paschal context not only of the Lord’s Prayer but of the whole vocation of Christian discipleship which the prayer expresses.

Some of the material might occasionally seem more suitable for oral than written presentation. For example, the frequently repeated references to the “pigpen” of the false self (from the Prodigal Son story) would likely evoke a smile when coming from the pulpit, but the image loses its freshness on the page after a while. Documentation, very thorough for the Merton and Francis material, is spotty to non-existent for other authors: the reader might be interested to learn the sources of material from Cardinal Basil Hume, the Cure of Ars, Meister Eckhart, St. Augustine, Anthony DeMello, Corrie ten Boom and others, who are quoted but not cited. But aside from the minor problems and a couple of inconsequential misstatements (*The Tears of the Blind Lions* was the fourth of Merton’s volumes of poetry to be published, not the fifth [p. 58]; “Six Love Letters” from *Eighteen Poems* should be “Six Night Letters” [p. 100]), the book is well written and well edited. The format, with its frequent subheadings and its “Points for Reflection” after each chapter, makes *Swimming in the Sun* especially suitable for meditative reading. Though it is not a contribution to Merton, or Franciscan, scholarship, it puts the contributions of such scholarship to the service of appreciating — and praying — the Lord’s Prayer better. Thomas, and Francis, would surely approve.