

# PRAYING WITH A SEASONED TRAVELER

Review of  
Wayne Simsic

**Praying with Thomas Merton**

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Reviewed by **Jane Marie Richardson, SL**

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Thomas Merton spent his first twenty-five years like a ship without a rudder, the last twenty-five like a pilot rarely off course. Since then, he has served as faithful guide and beacon to countless readers and seekers, men and women increasingly on the lookout for signposts to God. Merton's power to influence the heart, mind and soul of people yearning for the experience of God in our troubled world shows no sign of letting up. Indeed, the inspiration of Merton abounds in growing numbers of conferences, talks, retreats, study groups, ecumenical gatherings, books and articles, all attesting to the depths of his understanding of our basic, shared humanity.

Most of us journeying to unknown places are glad to learn from those who have gone before us, people who know more than we do. Seasoned travelers are able to point out special places tucked away in unlikely areas. It is no small part of Merton's genius to lead us in just this way. Having delved deeply into the hidden recesses of the human heart, he has left us a legacy of light illuminating that inner terrain of the spirit which grounds all that anyone of us does, says and becomes. With uncommon clarity and appeal, he communicates to us what he has discovered, opening up avenues of potential wisdom that we might otherwise have missed.

It is especially, then, as tested teacher in the realm of faith and prayer, in the sheer art of living with informed awareness, that Merton makes inroads into the lives of people everywhere. However ordinary Merton may have claimed to be ("Thank God, thank God that I **am** like other men, that I am only a man among others." **Conjectures of a Guilt Bystander**, p. 156) he was, and knew himself to be, endowed with extraordinary gifts of nature and grace. He worked hard to use these gifts well. And he succeeded. The fruits of his labor now belong to the whole human community. No wonder that he continues to inspire new and stimulating efforts on the part of those who have come to know him through his works.

Wayne Simsic, author, teacher and retreat director, is one of these persons who has come to know Merton. His familiarity with the Merton corpus is well attested to in this recently published slim volume. We are offered a kind of basic meditation text for "praying with Thomas Merton." Through the use of selected passages, drawn from a wide variety of Merton sources, Simsic has created a compact **vade mecum** for those who want to drink yet again from this monk's springs of contemplation.

While Simsic's own comments, questions and interpretations are filtered through the lens of Merton's spiritual vision, he nevertheless allows his own gifts, experience and methodology to come into play. Simsic

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knows that, however compelling and eloquent Merton's words may be, their real value lies in eliciting the reader's inner conversion and growth, in effecting, with the help of grace, new openings to God and the neighbor in our own lives. The power of Merton's writings lies not simply in Merton, insightful and persuasive as he is, but in the power of the truth itself that he is able to write about with such simplicity and luminosity, the power of that truth which is the very Spirit of God.

While Simsic's work serves well as an introduction of Merton to new readers, he still manages not to repeat other efforts. Nor does he let his readers forget, any more than Merton does, that prayer requires time and effort: "[Solitude] involves answering a call at the center of the heart, a call to listen to the voice of God, to hear and pray, not later, but now." Simsic knows that prayer is serious and costly if we pursue it honestly.

This book offers genuine encouragement to those who want to become more comfortable with quiet prayer, more aware of God's presence in all of life, more intimate with God, more willing to meet and serve Christ in others. We are reminded that "we can all receive the gift of contemplative experience if we are true to God's call and grace on our own pilgrimage." Simsic explores key Merton topics such as the true self, the role of solitude and the quest for freedom, the service of others, the oneness of all human beings, and the person of Christ. However familiar one may be with these and other themes of Merton's writings, their freshness endures as Simsic draws out his own reflections about them and, in his own way, coaxes the reader to become personally engaged and committed to the consequences of communion with God.

Specifically, this book consists of a succinct but substantial introduction to the life and spirituality of Merton, followed by fifteen chapters each devoted to a particular theme. Every chapter begins with a brief presentation emphasized in Merton's writings, followed by pertinent biographical input on Merton, then a carefully selected passage from one of his works, and finally, reflections and suggestions in which the author draws out implications and poses questions based on all the material that has preceded. An original opening and closing prayer, including some appropriate scriptural text, frames each chapter.

The suggestions put forward by Simsic to develop points made in the meditations include different kinds of journaling and listings, related and appropriate readings, ways of relaxing through music and nature, and some guided imagery. His questions and considerations are designed to help readers probe their own experience and lead them into deeper prayer. Simsic, like Merton, wants to help his readers become more aware of their own deepest reality and of God present and working in their midst.

These are the building blocks of this modest book. "How-to books" often risk over-simplification. This is not the case here, although the book is simple and unassuming in style. I found this simplicity a plus. The author never loses sight of what he is about. He keeps his writing clean, his language inclusive and himself unobtrusive. Clearly, he respects both Merton and his readers. He has pruned his work and left some tasty nuggets. At the same time, he is well aware that contemplative prayer is an eminently personal undertaking, that each of us prays as we are and as we can. Each of us is, in some sense, our own prayer. From this perspective, Simsic does well to keep his focus, not primarily on Merton, but on the one who would learn from Merton. He also seems to have understood these other words of Merton: "I just don't feel like spinning out a lot of words about God and Prayer. I feel in fact immensely poor and fallible, but I don't worry about it. I just live" (**Springs of Contemplation**, p. 323). Prayer is a way of being alive. That means being alive, not only to what is happening in our own small worlds but aware and attentive to what is happening to people all over the globe, especially to those in pain. True prayer flowers in compassionate action.

Given the sheer quantity and quality of Merton's writings, the selection of some lesser known or perhaps less quoted passages might have heightened the value of this work. At the same time, Simsic has chosen deservedly loved and proven passages and has treated them with intelligence, care and appreciation.

True to Merton and the gospel, he will not let his readers forget that only when prayer is wedded to service, only when being open to God includes being open to the neighbor, is it authentic. This relationship is life a **yin** and **yang** of human and spiritual growth, of Christian life itself. Recognizing this fact suggests that Simsic has been reading and “praying with” Merton for a long time.

Before concluding this review it may be useful to mention the editor’s forward to Simsic’s book, which is one of a series subtitled **Companions for the Journey**, all inspired by the life and writings of outstanding Christians. Carl Koch speaks of the joys and gifts of companionship as they are described in various passages of scripture, especially in the life of Jesus. He recalls for us how Jesus’ disciples knew him especially “in the breaking of the bread,” **companis**. This book turns out to be a reliable signpost, a good “companion,” for those with a journey to make, those on their way to a lasting feast.

One final word: in spending leisure time with this book I realized once again how incredibly fruitful are Merton’s insights, how wonderfully adept he proves to be in putting us in touch with our heart’s deepest desires. It is always a joy to pray with Merton, to let his spirit warm and prod one’s own, to feel the inner juices flowing as he points the way. Contemplation leads to an ever-growing awareness that when we pray at all we pray with each other, we pray with people of good will everywhere, we **know** the unity we believe in. Indeed, we come to see that there is only one prayer going on all the time in all of creation. And we enter into it. We are grateful to the author for yet one more invitation and opportunity to join in the “cosmic dance” of prayerful praise, even as we know so much work remains to be done before the celebration can really begin.