

BROTHER MONK IN COLLECTED ESSAYS

Review of

M. Basil Pennington, OCSO

Thomas Merton, My Brother:

His Journey to Freedom, Compassion, & Final Integration

Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 1996

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Reviewed by **Joan Combs**

Some days, all people seem divided into three sorts: those who knew Thomas Merton well during some stage of his life; those who can claim to have met him; and the rest of us. Merton certainly documented his own life well enough, and a wealth of his previously unpublished writing is finally appearing in his personal journals. The first two of seven volumes — *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation/ The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume One 1939-1941*; edited by Patrick Hart, OCSO and *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer/ The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume Two 1941-1952*; edited by Jonathan Montaldo — have already been published. As M. Basil Pennington points out in this new volume of collected essays, however, Merton “was in fact a very private person” (p. 195). Those who knew Merton well or who at least met him can sometimes fill in the gaps in Merton’s writings for the rest of us, providing understanding or context or details of events that Merton left out.

While better known to some for his inspirational works on centering prayer and meditation, M. Basil Pennington has written or edited several books and many articles as well about Thomas Merton. Pennington has previously documented his relationship as fellow monk with Father Louis in more detail in *Thomas Merton, Brother Monk: The Quest for True Freedom* (San Francisco, 1987). In this newly collected volume of essays, he explores different aspects of Merton’s personality. The author points out that the collected essays range in scope from the personal to the scholarly (page 9), but it is clear from even the most scholarly of the articles that Pennington is someone who knew Thomas Merton during some of Merton’s crises. Pennington’s understanding of Merton’s personality development and maturation process during those times is his gift to us in this volume. His constant reliance on lengthy quotes from Merton rather than the authority of his own memories, however, tends to limit the audience for this book to serious students, scholars and fans who already know Merton through his own writings.

In a brief “Welcome,” Pennington describes his reaction to receiving a postcard from Merton from Asia just moments before learning of Merton’s death. He then reminisces about his first meeting with Merton at Gethsemani. In the short “Introduction” which follows, Pennington discusses Merton’s famous experience at Fourth and Walnut in Louisville. He contends that:

It is necessary to see all that Thomas Merton wrote before and after this experience in the light of the absence or the presence of it . . . a very profound shift in consciousness had taken place, and it radically affected the course of his development and orientation (page 13).

Pennington makes two puzzling references to the experience, one placing the incident “at the corner of Maple and Fourth” (page 84), while the other notes that the street names are now “Fourth and Ali Mohammed” (page 13). The street name was changed to honor Louisville-born boxer Muhammed Ali. Such references could be confusing to those same “Merton pilgrims wandering down Fourth in search of the famous corner” whom Pennington so aptly describes.

In these essays, Pennington writes about events spanning Merton’s entire life and he covers an astonishing range of themes in Merton’s publications. The book contains several essays which present illuminating commentary on one or another aspect of Merton’s work, life, or personal development. Such essays are useful to someone already familiar with Merton who is beginning his or her own research. For example, “Thomas Merton and Byzantine Spirituality” traces this theme across all of Merton’s writings. Undergraduates may need a reference work on Greek terms in theological writing and in Merton’s works to appreciate this essay fully. The use of a different typeface for the lengthy quotes from Merton’s work might make the book a handier reference for scholars.

Merton readers anxiously awaiting each new and forthcoming volume of the personal journals may be interested in Pennington’s own essay “The Merton Journals,” which he calls “Merton’s journaling history.” Similar essays illuminate “The Circular Letters” and “Father Louis’ First Book: The Spirit of Simplicity.” Pennington’s “Thomas Merton and His own Cistercian Tradition” is quite useful as a guide for finding Merton’s scattered writings and sources of reading on various Cistercians. In another essay Pennington compares Merton to Bernard of Clairvaux.

As a teacher, I read “Thomas Merton — An Educator for Our Times” with great interest but was disappointed to find it contained more about methods of sacred reading and centering prayer than about Merton’s pedagogy. Greater riches to inspire my own teaching were to be found in Pennington’s essay on Merton as a spiritual director, “The Spiritual Father: Father Louis’ Theory and Practice.” A very brief essay on “Growing into Compassion” also may be interest to teachers or spiritual directors trying to understand their own students’ personal growth.

The recent death of W. H. “Ping” Ferry lends urgency to the hope that other Merton friends will write their own memoirs. As Ron Seitz in *Song for Nobody* shares details of Merton’s being a monk among lay people, one wishes also to know more of Merton’s being a monk among his brother monks. Thus, it is a little disappointing when Pennington delivers less in this volume of “sharing my memories of Tom” and more of “my sense of him drawn from our meetings, correspondence and his many published and unpublished writings,” especially since he promises to do both. Still, there is much of interest here to students of Merton’s work, and several essays that are welcome finds.