

## Spirituality and Everyday Life

Review of  
*The Merton Annual*, Volume 10 (1997)  
 Edited by Victor A. Kramer  
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Reviewed by **Wayne Simsic**

This volume of *The Merton Annual* certainly strikes a nerve. The editor, Victor Kramer, in his comprehensive introduction informs the reader that many of the articles were chosen to show the connection between the monastic tradition and lay spirituality. In an undergraduate class I teach on the spirituality of Thomas Merton, students, once they perceive the richness of the monastic tradition which nourished the development of Merton, wonder how that tradition and Merton in particular relate to their own spiritual struggles in a secular culture. Their questions, of course, are a microcosm of a greater interest today in the ways spirituality can be integrated into daily life. Because of its relevance this volume of *The Merton Annual* should be of interest to many.

Two chapters (out of three) from an unpublished manuscript, *The School of the Spirit*, anchor the volume. In this work Merton reflects on contemplation and the contemplative life for all. Br. Patrick Hart notes the difficulty that Merton had in writing *The School of the Spirit* and his eventual abandonment of the project. Indeed the writing style seems to reflect Merton's labored efforts and may remind some readers of another, closely related work, *The Ascent to Truth*. Merton began writing *The School of the Spirit* about two years after *The Seven Storey Mountain*, with its post-conversion enthusiasm, and it is obvious that his view of the "world" is beginning to change. He writes in his journal at the time, "My complaints about the world in the *Mountain* and in some poems are perhaps a weakness" (*Entering the Silence: The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 2, p. 283). As a result, we find that, in spite of its limitations, *The School of the Spirit* introduces us to seminal reflections on the relationship between contemplation and the world.

The opening triad of essays, particularly Patrick O'Connell's "'What I Wear is Pants': Monasticism as 'Lay' Spirituality in Thomas Merton's Later Life and Work," provide the groundwork for the volume. O'Connell makes a genuine contribution with his carefully researched and engaging account of Merton's recovery of the lay origins of monasticism and his insightful discussion of the "lay" dimension of the monastic charism, namely, "to resist the temptation to equate one's identity with one's role, one's worth with one's status, the meaning of one's life with one's office . . . the rejection of all idealized

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projections and socially acceptable images of oneself, including even the image of monk”(43). Especially helpful are the examples of Merton living the “lay” dimension as a hermit, enjoying ordinary rituals and fully aware that he shared the life of the Spirit and had the same responsibility to his spiritual path and the human community as everyone else.

Wendy Wright’s reflection, inspired by the monastic charism, explores the contemplative dimension of family life, especially in the rhythms found around the table and in the thick of human interaction. Beatrice Bruteau grounds the contemplative in a eucharistic cosmos with the reminder that we are all kin, that life-sharing goes beyond church doors and engages us more and more deeply in the world.

The next series of essays explores Merton’s poetry as an expression of his incarnational vision. Alan Altany traces the development of Merton’s poetry from language that reflected the dichotomy between profane and sacred to language that expressed the sacred at the center of the profane. Most valuable in this essay is the examination of *Emblems of a Season of Fury* as a work that tries to hold together the opposing sides of Merton’s vision: sacred and profane, poetic and religious. Emily Archer uncovers the common ground between Denise Levertov and Thomas Merton – their concern for the renewal of language and the way it led them both to a commitment to community and to transfigure the world. I particularly like the way she develops the definition of poet as prophet in discussing both Merton and Levertov. David Cooper celebrates the transformative effects of a friendship by introducing us to the letters between Thomas Merton and James Laughlin (founder of *New Directions* publishing). This fascinating essay may entice readers to search out the collection of correspondence edited by Cooper, *Thomas Merton and James Laughlin: Selected Letters*.

The final series of essays, testifying to the “lay” character of the monastic charism which does not let the monk retreat from the world but rather leads him to challenge it and its structures, focuses on Merton’s own sense of vocation. Claire Hoertz Badaracco portrays Merton as a voracious reader who was therefore able to confront the cultural masks of his times, not unlike contemporary women writers. Bradford Stull identifies the real Merton as the author of theo-political essays, writing that was especially provocative because of an accomplished use of metaphor. David Joseph Belcastro discusses Merton’s dialogue with Camus and its importance for Christian dialogue today. Mark O’Keefe’s carefully researched essay examines the point that the true self, grounded in God, necessarily says “yes” to humanity. Johan Seynnaeve compares the life stories of Merton and the American Carthusian Thomas Verner Moore, and outlines Dom Moore’s influence on Merton’s desire to be a Carthusian, concluding that Merton’s involvement in monastic renewal eventually quenched his thirst for a Carthusian vocation. John Wu, Jr. reminds us that it was Merton’s identification with the poverty of Christ that led him to a passionate commitment to social change, his battle with the “sea of fire.”

This volume includes the first in a series of interviews with scholars who have made valuable contributions to Merton research. Jonathan Montaldo conducts a captivating interview with Anthony Padovano that traces Padovano’s scholarly interest in Merton, explores some of Padovano’s own works, and examines subjects such as the relationship between theology and biography. While describing lay and clerical spirituality Padovano says: “When you reach the real (self), you are always connected to everyone else. The empirical (self) is divisive: it’s the surface of reality. So one might say there is a clerical

and a lay spirituality as long as one stays on this empirical level. But when one journeys to the inner heart of things, it doesn't matter. . ." (298). This is an apt summary of this volume of *The Merton Annual* and brings us full circle to the initial essay by Patrick O'Connell.

The *Annual* concludes with George Kilcourse's review of books and articles by and about Merton which appeared in 1996. Kilcourse highlights the collection of letters exchanged by Czeslaw Milosz and Merton between 1958 and 1968. Six book reviews follow including book reviews of the *Merton Journals* (volumes 2, 3, and 4).

Reading this issue of the *Annual* reminded me of Raimundo Panikkar's intriguing reflection on the monastic charism in his work *Blessed Simplicity: The Monk as Universal Archetype*. He argues that the monastic charism is grounded in our humanness. Readers should easily find resonances throughout this volume that prod reflection on the relationship between the monastic charism and their own human adventure. I would hope that this volume of the *Annual* will prompt further discussion of the relationship between monastic theology and spirituality and contemporary Christianity. We need to hear more of how the wisdom of the cloister translates into the world at large.