

## Early Merton for Early Morning

Review of

*Mornings With Thomas Merton*

Edited by John C. Blattner

Ann Arbor, Michigan: Servant Publications, 1998

142 pages / \$14.95 hardcover

Reviewed by **Diane L. Kilgore**

On July 9, 1983, my 75-year-old father died. The inevitable realization occurred – I too will die. What then must be my purpose in life? The conscious journey had begun. I picked up a book at the local bookstore – *No Man Is An Island* by Thomas Merton. I didn't have the foggiest notion who Thomas Merton was. All I knew was that I felt like an island. The title seemed appropriate for my situation.

When I was 40, Thomas Merton introduced me to St. John of the Cross, who led me to the mystics. My grief crisis took me to the bottomless pit of despair, trying to make sense out of why my religious faith had failed me. There was no comfort, no hope, no path, no rationale – just raw emotion and my experience. Real or unreal, right or wrong, it was mine.

Passive contemplation, I believe, came as a gift from God. I suffered the “dark nights of the soul” so aptly described by John of the Cross. The discovery of Merton and his life experience validated my sanity amidst total chaos. Here was an individual to whom I could relate. The journey is not a straight line, ordered and non-messy as my Catholic upbringing would have me believe. It is unpredictable, uncharted, deep, mysterious and lonely. It is a personal journey.

Reading John C. Blattner's small book entitled *Mornings With Thomas Merton* brought me back to my 1983 conversion experience. One of a series of *Mornings with . . .* volumes (others focus on Mary, Henri Nouwen, Fulton Sheen and Thérèse of Lisieux) the book consists of 120 individually titled reflections and readings taken word for word from Merton's early works: 68 from *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 28 from *The Waters of Siloe*, 9 from *The Sign of Jonas*, and 15 from *No Man Is An Island*. Each selection is annotated at the end of the book, giving its source and page number.

These excerpts compiled by Blattner capture Merton's own passionate conversion experience when he realized his shortcomings, his sins, his rebellion, his shadow side, his sufferings, his need to renounce materialism and attachments – all the universal aspects of the psyche one can describe about one's own conversion and/or spiritual journey.

Selection 94, for example, entitled “Traveling and Arriving,” extracted from *The Seven Storey Mountain* (419), summarizes the journey and Merton's own struggles: “The life of

each one in this Abbey is part of a mystery. We all add up to something far beyond ourselves. We cannot realize what it is. . . . In one sense we are always traveling, and traveling as if we did not know where we are going. In another sense we have arrived. . . . We are traveling and in darkness. But we already possess Him by grace, and therefore in that sense we have arrived and are dwelling in the light.”

Blattner’s inclusion of six photographs enhances his book, particularly the 1915 picture of a laughing Tom held by his mother, Ruth Jenkins Merton. His resemblance to her is unmistakable and almost eerie – the same broad nose and penetrating eyes. It is a picture I had never seen. The jacket of the book depicts a small, more familiar, picture of Merton in a contemplative pose.

Blattner’s selection does reveal the essence of Merton’s life and thoughts in the early years of his Gethsemani experience quite successfully. However, I had a difficult time allowing the book to lead me to a more intense devotional life, which is a goal expressed by Blattner. The reflections and readings lack a sense of spontaneity because the bulk of the material simply consists of rather lengthy passages spread over several consecutive entries. Many of the topics tend to build on each other, which leaves the reader with the story of Merton’s life rather than drawing one to reflect on theological and/or philosophical questions about one’s own spiritual life.

For example, Selection 49, from *The Seven Storey Mountain*, which begins, “Hopkins was writing to Newman, at Birmingham, about his indecision,” simply picks up abruptly where Selection 48 left off. Thus if used, as recommended, as a daily reading, this passage would do little to conjure up a spiritual or devotional experience for the reader. Something is missing.

A less mechanical arrangement and/or a more consciously thematic selection of the readings might have contributed more to the editor’s goal and challenged his creativity. Perhaps a scripture reference associated with the topic or question of each reading would evoke a more personal and spiritual response to the readings and so assist in achieving the stated purpose of the book to deepen the reader’s own spiritual life.

The editor never explains his rationale for limiting the selections to these four early works, one of which, *The Waters of Siloe*, Merton’s history of the Cistercian order, is a rather odd choice for a collection of devotional excerpts. Including no material from the last thirteen years of Merton’s life, the period most readers would consider his most fruitful and creative, seems rather odd, and may have more to do with obtaining reprint permissions than with intrinsic merit. (The four books used were all published by Harcourt, Brace, which never issued another Merton volume after *No Man Is An Island* in 1955, other than the 1962 anthology *A Thomas Merton Reader*.)

In a book intended to be used at the beginning of the day, I find many of the readings lack that dynamism toward rebirth and/or rejuvenation often associated with the early hours. It is at times heavy with the deep daily struggles of the younger monk, summarized in condensed form. While readings from Merton are never without value, this selection is considerably less rich and less helpful than it might have been.