

Instructing the Next Generation

Review of

A Thomas Merton Curriculum

Edited by Terrence A. Taylor

Louisville, KY: The Thomas Merton Foundation, 2002

85 pages / \$150 three-ring binder

(Student Workbook: \$14.95)

Reviewed by **Jeffrey T. Kiernan**

Thomas Merton corresponded with young people throughout the course of his monastic life. For example, in 1949, shortly after his ordination, he wrote to the Heart of Mary High School (Mobile, Alabama) students in Sister Marialein Lorenz's class to thank them for the letters, essays, and presents (amice, corporal, purificator, and finger towel) they had sent him. When he said his first Mass on Friday, May 27, 1949, Merton wore the amice and used the other gifts. Much later, in January 1964, Merton wrote to a high school sophomore, Jim Frost. Among other things, he advised Jim "that in reality life is good and a wonderful gift, and the more you put into it the better it is. But you must really grow up to be free, and truth loving, and sincere all the way with yourself and others. Don't live on illusions. You don't have to, reality is right there in front of you, and it is better than any illusion." What comes across in these letters (which can be found in *The Road to Joy*, along with numerous other letters to young people), is Merton's warmth and genuine affection for his correspondents. It is quite obvious that he felt it more than worthwhile to correspond with them.

In the same vein, it is fitting and worthwhile that Terry Taylor (until recently Assistant Director of The Thomas Merton Foundation) and his team have created *A Thomas Merton Curriculum*. It is fitting and worthwhile in the sense that it is essential that young people in the twenty-first century be introduced to the life and work of Thomas Merton. Many of Merton's topics resonate with young people, especially the themes of spirituality, identity, purpose in life, and social justice. The curriculum, part of a broader Foundation project, "The Thomas Merton Scholastics Program," addresses these topics more than adequately. While primarily designed for, and tested in, high school settings, it could be readily adapted for use in college as well. The team members (Mike Domzalski, Tom Dubai, Carole Goodwin, Barbara Hennessy, Fr. George Kilcourse, Karen White, and Dan Zoeller) have a wealth and variety of experience that served them well in their labors to create this curriculum. In my view, the most important "ingredient" of their experience is that most of them are or have been "in the trenches" of high school teaching and/or youth ministry for years. This is an asset that evidences itself in many ways in the curriculum.

The curriculum is contained in a binder that has eight sections that are entitled: Introductory Materials; Prior to Class 1; Class 1: Biography; Class 2: Spirituality; Class 3: Social Justice; Class 4:

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Dialogue; Follow-up; and Photos and Art. Paul Wilkes' "Merton: A Film Biography" is also included. The film is suggested for use in the first class. I believe, however, that it, or segments of it, could be woven into other classes. Of course, the heart of the curriculum is the class sections. Each section includes background information for the teacher on the topic, goals, objectives, a list of enclosed educational materials, suggested in-class activities, sets of discussion questions, and suggested homework activities in preparation for the next class session. For example, background information for the second class ("Spirituality") contains ideas on contemplation from Teresa of Avila to Merton to Parker Palmer. Suggested in-class activities include one to process a homework assignment related to students' trying to find a quiet place for 15 minutes of silence. Also available for this class are overhead transparencies of various definitions of contemplation and of Merton's essay "Learn To Be Alone." These can be used in a variety of ways. (A total of seven sets of overhead transparencies are provided for use in various curriculum topics.)

A prime example of the high school teaching and youth ministry experience of the curriculum's creators is in the "For the Teacher" section of the second class. Christine Bochen, who edited *Thomas Merton: Essential Writings*, is quoted from that volume as pointing out that "Merton's message is simple: it is possible to experience God, to awaken to and become aware of God's presence. And in doing so, it is possible to become real and whole, to become truly oneself." Young people today – as always – are hungry and thirsty for authenticity in themselves and their relationships with others. The curriculum's addressing this hunger and thirst as a prime focus is extremely valuable. Furthermore, such a focus is a natural way to begin to explore social justice issues. Of course, this is something Merton himself did so well.

The fourth class, "Dialogue," is devoted to inter-religious dialogue and the mutual enrichment that can flow from such dialogue. This class is designated as "optional" in the curriculum, but it is not explained why. I see it as essential and would hope that other teachers would also. I also hope that this fourth class might be expanded in any revisions of the curriculum. In today's world, Merton's insights in this area are invaluable.

As with any "ready-made" curriculum, teachers need to be willing to do the work to adapt it to their particular teaching situation. Make-up of the student population (especially the various faith traditions that may or may not be in it), class size, ability levels of students, length of individual class periods, and the teacher's own background (or lack thereof) in the life and works of Merton are all factors that need to be carefully considered as a teacher moves toward using this very rich curriculum. I believe many, many teachers would (gladly!) need to use more than four class sessions to achieve the most fruitful results. The curriculum would be enhanced by an expanded introductory section where more "Merton basics" would be provided, or at least the suggestion should be provided that those unfamiliar with Merton read some key works before using the curriculum. There is an excellent list of further readings in the "Follow-Up" section. The list includes two books that those new to Merton would be well-advised to read: *Living with Wisdom* by Jim Forest and *Something of a Rebel: Thomas Merton, His Life and Works, An Introduction* by Father Bill Shannon. For the neophyte teacher of Merton, such suggestions would be better placed "up front" as well as in the "Follow-Up" section.

In August 1966, Merton wrote to Gloria Sylvester Bennett. She had been one of the students in Sister Marialein Lorenz's high school class who had sent him letters and gifts in 1949. She had now written him about some civil rights issues. Merton's letter stated, among other things, that "I have a real need of accurate information. And will always be glad to hear from you, and to send you anything of mine that can be of service." The creators of *A Thomas Merton Curriculum* have provided us with much "accurate information" about Thomas Merton and have been of great service. Let's hope that many teachers and students will benefit from their work.