

Stimulating Encounters

Review of

The Merton Annual: Volume 16

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Reviewed by **John Berger**

In *The Monastic Journey* Thomas Merton wrote, “Life is made of encounters. A true encounter stimulates questions and answers. When you meet an interesting stranger, you find yourself alert and curious” (224). In military jargon, an encounter is a skirmish, an engagement with the enemy, a small battle. That’s definitely not the kind of encounter Merton had in mind or the kind of rich engagements presented in Volume 16 of *The Merton Annual*, with its theme “Lay Spirituality, Merton and Contemplative Life beyond the Monastery.”

Editor Victor Kramer begins the conversation with a review of recent hopeful happenings fulfilling what Merton so prophetically saw: “The contemplative is for all persons. . . . Catholics are clearly profiting from links to Buddhists, to Jews, to Muslims and to other Christians” (7). Kramer then joins with Glenn Crider to introduce why Thomas Merton is such a compelling figure to so many (13) by discussing Merton’s transcribed remarks “About Contemplative Life Today”: “It [meditation] cuts across all kinds of denominations. It doesn’t matter whether you’re Catholic or Muslim or whoever you are” (15).

The yearning for a deep spiritual life is embedded, and frequently hidden, in every human being. However, asking someone at an initial introduction to “Tell me about your hidden desire for a deep spiritual life” may not be the best way to begin an encountering conversation. Beatrice Bruteau in her essay “Eating Together: The Shared Supper and the Covenant Community” suggests a better alternative. When we get beyond treasuring our descriptive differences, then we can truly encounter all God’s children – share our goods, material and spiritual – and have a good life and promote the cosmic dance (23). When we stress our shared humanity, we can all sit down to a shared supper, happily eating together (25) – encountering and growing together!

Frank Tuoti echoes this melody of recognizing and minimizing our differences in his contribution “Contemplative Prayer: Antidote for an Ailing Generation.” Tuoti offers a history of centering prayer from the ancients to Merton, who wrote: “Prayer begins . . . with a ‘return to the heart,’ finding one’s deepest center” (30). Only at our deepest center, stripped of our descriptive differences, can we truly encounter our neighbor and our God. Next is Keith Egan’s fine essay “Harvesting Seeds of Contemplation,” a delightful history of Merton writing the pamphlet *What is Contemplation?* in April, 1948, beginning the harvest which ripened into *The Ascent to Truth, Seeds of Contemplation*, and *New Seeds of Contemplation*. Daniel Carrere, a Trappist currently at Gethemani, holds a

doctorate in psychological and philosophical anthropology. He engages us in “Standing before God: Merton’s Incarnational Spirituality” which grounds Merton’s theology in the desert fathers, St. Augustine, and the Gospels. To know God, to grow in contemplative prayer, we must know ourselves and, as Merton writes in *The New Man*, finding oneself is not an easy task (63).

We next meet David King, former graduate assistant to Professor Victor Kramer, and currently Director of the Freshman Learning Program at Kennesaw State University. In his essay, “Merton’s New Novices: *The Seven Storey Mountain* and Monasticism in a Freshman Seminar,” Professor King brings to the conversation his experiences in teaching *The Seven Storey Mountain* to pragmatic and motivated [for careers, jobs, and status] incoming freshmen.

The next conversation is “From Faith to Joy: Studying the Church and Thomas Merton: An Interview with William Shannon.” Fr. Shannon, author of the fine Merton introductory text *Something of a Rebel* and other significant works on contemporary spirituality, was interviewed by Christine Bochen and Victor Kramer in August, 2002. Shannon, ordained in 1943, identifies with Merton’s observation, “Of all ages in which to be a priest, I cannot think of a better one than this” (86). Shannon reflects on how his thinking has changed in his sixty years of ministry. Fr. Shannon and Fr. Louis share a confrontational stance to the Church they both love – the right of dissent, the right to disagree, without which there is no growth. Fr. Shannon concluded the interview by saying “To understand the rights of conscience, we rely on something so dear to Merton’s heart, the prodigal mercy of God” (110). To our delight and growth, Shannon builds on Merton but he is very much an original theologian with much to offer.

We next encounter Dennis and Patricia Day, founding members of the Associates of the Iowa Cistercians (AIC) (112). Their contribution, “The Associates of the Iowa Cistercians Sowing New Seeds of Contemplation,” recalls their grounding in the Rule of Benedict as an invaluable guide for living a Christ-centered life: “the Rule speaks as significantly to those who live outside monasteries as it does to those inside” (114). The fifty men and women of the AIC have rewarding relations with the Trappist Abbey of New Melleray and the Trappistine Abbey of Our Lady of the Mississippi, both south of Dubuque, Iowa. These professed Cistercians indeed are following Merton’s suggestion that monks and nuns should “teach the ways of prayer to those living outside the cloister” (117). Lay Cistercian groups are not numerous. They should be. The people and the times certainly need the gifts the monks and nuns offer. Another lay group of eleven members meets monthly in Denver, Colorado. Directed by Sr. Rose Annette Liddell, SL, they reflected on the theme of “lay spirituality” by responding to seven questions. Fred Eyerman edited their thoughts in “Thomas Merton Has Influenced Our Lives” (129). In meditating on Merton’s balancing of action and contemplation, Fred said that what always struck him about Merton was his ability to keep a foot in both worlds. “Merton was able to hold these two poles in creative tension” (133). These lay people are the folks we work with. They are not the vowed religious within the monastery walls but the worshipers next to us in the pews. Merton is their spiritual catalyst.

Philosophy professor and author, James Somerville, with his wife Beatrice Bruteau, founded Schola Contemplationis, a center for fostering interest in the contemplative life (274). In his succinct contribution “Merton as Voluntary Prisoner,” he writes, “Thomas Merton, until the last year of his life, was something of a ‘prisoner of the Abbey of Gesthemani.’ . . . But as Merton buffs know, locking him up did not prevent him from acting in the world, through letters, conversation with important visitors, and by his books” (148). Jens Söring, inmate 179212, has served seventeen years

of his two life sentences for double murder. In his six-part essay, “The *Kenotic* Convict: A *Divertissement* on Contemporary Contemplative Spirituality in its Social Context,” he writes, “the contemplative process . . . requires us to reach out, as Jesus did, to the downcast and despised in particular” (153-54). Söring challenges us again to take our contemplative spirituality and fulfill it in works of charity as Merton realized in his epiphany at Fourth and Walnut: “I loved all those people!”

William Apel, Professor of Religion at Linfield College in Oregon, contributes “Mystic as Prophet: The Deep Freedom of Thomas Merton and Howard Thurman.” Dr. Apel introduces us to two men who never met. Apel lets us know what they would have talked about. Thurman, the black theologian: “The basic consideration [of the mystic] has to do with the removal of all that prevents God from coming to himself in the life of the individual. Whatever there is that blocks this, calls for action” (173). Merton, the white Trappist monk, responds in *New Seeds of Contemplation*: “And if you allow yourself to remain in silence and emptiness you may find that this thirst, this hunger that seeks God in blindness and darkness, will grow on you and at the same time, although you do not yet seem to find anything tangible, peace will establish itself in your soul” (175).

Gail Fitzpatrick-Hopler is the President of Contemplative Outreach Limited. Her article, “The Spiritual Network of Contemplative Outreach Limited,” traces the twenty-plus year history of the growth of interest in centering prayer. Sr. Pascaline Coff is a Benedictine Sister who founded Osage Monastery, a monastic ashram in Eastern Oklahoma, in 1980. Her beautiful essay, “The Universal Call to Contemplation: Cloisters beyond the Monastery,” defines the sacred practices we must make our own as we build and live in our inner monasteries (205). She invites us to focus on the commonality of our seeking, the commonality of the wisdom we have received from the desert fathers and mothers, and our commonality as human beings in praying and seeking peace.

George Kilcourse, Jr, co-editor of the *Annual*, offers the final encounter, “Merton’s ‘True Spirit’ or a Calculated ‘Official Pedestal’?” He reminds us again that anyone who puts Merton on a pedestal, makes him into a cult hero, and genuflects to him, misses the monk’s true spirit and engages in what Merton most railed against, idolatry and illusion.

The *Annual* also includes reviews of eight contemporary works which deserve full discussion. Titles reviewed are: *Survival or Prophecy? The Letters of Thomas Merton and Jean Leclercq*; *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*; *The Thomas Merton Curriculum*; *The Way of the Dreamcatcher*; *Sacred Companions: The Gift of Spiritual Friendship and Direction*; *The Nonviolent Moment: A Spirituality for the 21st Century*; *The Strangest Way: Walking the Christian Path*; *Healing Our Violence through the Journey of Centering Prayer*.

This collection offers a banquet of ideas, rich, rich encounters. Just as Merton found Asia to be going home to a place “where I have never been,” *The Merton Annual* offers fine conversations with friends we may have never met.