

Spending Time with Merton

Review of

A Year with Thomas Merton

Daily Meditations from His Journals

By Thomas Merton

Selected and edited by Jonathan Montaldo

San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2004

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Reviewed by **Patricia Hulburt**

Today is a perfect day to commune with Thomas Merton, because the sun is shining and the birds are chirping, and as I look out on Sail Bay here in Southern California, I can see ducks swimming, sailboats sailing, people strolling and I am thinking to myself how Merton would describe such a morning presumably in this winter month of January. He would say something glorious about this scene out my window and then give all due praise and thanksgiving to his God for its beauty.

Reading this book compiled by Jonathan Montaldo is such a treat due to his selections – it is almost better than another Merton biography. These meditations reveal so much of Merton's thoughts for the day, we can practically get inside his skin; he appears to be so honest and sincere. Another reason I chose today to write this review was experiencing a weekend with the Benedictine Monks up at Prince of Peace Abbey in Oceanside, California, where the bells toll for early Vigils, for Lauds, for Vespers and Compline in the evening twilight. I can easily visualize Merton's monastery bells ringing over the Kentucky knobs he is always mentioning, over the grounds he is walking in the early dawn of the day. Oh, I can see him clearly in his St. Anne's woodshed observing the wildlife there; he knows every species of birds, crawling creatures, sheep in the pasture; whatever he sees in the distance he has to comment on. It is marvelous to read everything that was going on in his mind during those hours working in the forest, or later on in his own hermitage. He even reveled in cleaning his house, preparing his small repast in the mornings and evenings, later saying Mass on his own Altar table. The reader has to be thrilled with him at each new event in his daily life.

Writing in these journals day by day has given us an unusual insight into this special friend of ours. When I experienced the Grand Silence up at the Abbey from Compline until after Lauds in the morning, I realized just a little what it must have been for Merton to keep silence all those years at Gethsemani. Fortunately, he had the innate ability to journal his thoughts, and the foresight to save them for posterity. These meditations in *A Year with Thomas Merton* are so filled with his real-life revelations of what it was like living in a Trappist Monastery. I am still filled with wonder and awe at his accomplishments considering what a brilliant teacher and philosopher he really was, yet remaining humble as he could be at the same time. After all he had chosen this vocation, and now had to make

the best of it striving all the time for peace and solitude, but at what price, I say.

Of course, this book was selected and edited by none other than Jonathan Montaldo, who I am convinced knows Thomas Merton better than anybody living today. He has written about him extensively and researched his every move. I believe he started reading Merton when he was only thirteen years old! I was twenty-five when I first read *The Seven Storey Mountain* – but his influence remained until this day. And speaking of influencing you, the reader, I would like very much to suggest more than several of these meditations for your perusal, but I hesitate to do it, because you must read them yourself and reflect on their beauty, their incredible insight into our human frailties, as well as our natural love for Merton's God, all the while being so thankful for such a Monk in our own time.

It goes without saying then, I loved reading this new book of Montaldo's and I recommend it without reservation to one and all. Perhaps you recall, as I do, one great politician commenting on the State of the Union speech years ago: "There's something for everyone in this speech" – he was being ironic, but I am not when I echo his sentiments today – January 20, 2005.