

## A Virtual Pilgrimage in Word and Image

Review of

*Thomas Merton's Gethsemani: Landscapes of Paradise*

Photographs by Harry Hinkle

Essay by Monica Weis, SSJ

Foreword by Patrick Hart, OCSO

Introduction by Jonathan Montaldo

Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005

xvii + 150 pages / \$29.95 cloth

Reviewed by **Morgan Atkinson**

It is a highlight of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. A young Thomas Merton is struggling to decide if he should “leave the world” and join the Trappists. Praying in a grove of trees on the campus of St. Bonaventure College, Merton suddenly imagines he is hearing the bells of Gethsemani beckoning from hundreds of miles away. The oft-cited passage has such impact because it vividly captures the depth of Merton’s call to the monastic life as well as the power of this place Gethsemani. Now, there is a new book that lures a reader much as those bells called Merton in 1941.

*Thomas Merton's Gethsemani: Landscapes of Paradise* is an evocative book of photographs memorably wed with a remarkable essay. Much like the call of those mysterious bells, these two elements, image and word, combine to tell the reader a great deal about the depth of Thomas Merton’s monastic life and his love affair with the land of Gethsemani. A team of Merton masters has collaborated on this much-anticipated project. Harry Hinkle has done a first-rate job of photography and Monica Weis’ accompanying essay is yet another worthy contribution from her to understanding more deeply the complex man that was Thomas Merton. Br. Patrick Hart’s Foreword, coupled with Jonathan Montaldo’s Introduction, set the stage well and stand out in their own right.

The book’s cover photograph sets the tone. A classic shot of the Abbey of Gethsemani’s bell tower shrouded in mist, it showcases the majesty of the land and the great church. It also speaks powerfully of the mystery of the monastic life. In this photograph are essential elements that nurtured Merton for all his 27 years at Gethsemani – the church in which he prayed and the woods that transfigured the depths of his being. After an image like this a reader can’t wait to open the book and see what other treasures are within. I was so enthused when I got my copy that I wanted to see it all, immediately. Flipping quickly through page after page, rarely stopping more than a few seconds, I was treated to what Jonathan Montaldo calls a “virtual pilgrimage” to Gethsemani and the land surrounding it. What a satisfying variety of photographs! Landscapes from all seasons, each beautifully composed, subtly compelling in rich black and white tones. Mixed with these panoramas are detailed

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close-ups of both the monastic life and nature's simple splendor. Some of the images are seemingly prosaic, others are sublime. Wouldn't Merton say more or less the same about life at Gethsemani?

The first quick look done, I put the book down. For what it's worth it passes that test too. The book looks great on a coffee table! Beautifully printed by the University Press of Kentucky, every aspect of the book reflects care and concern. This project was the brainchild and passion of John "Zig" Ziegler, an editor now retired from the Press. I would think he is proud.

In my second look I read Br. Patrick Hart's Foreword. Surely he's written hundreds of these sorts of things yet he still manages to bring fresh insight to a subject for whom he has done so much to stimulate and sustain interest. Among his observations he writes that the book is like "accompanying Merton in his solitary hikes in the woods" (vii). Following this cue I take far more care as I consider each image a second time. Stop, study, soak in the essentials. One of the captions quotes Merton from *The Sign of Jonas*: "[D]elight begins to overpower me from head to foot and peace smiles even in the marrow of my bones" (29). Some of these images can have that power. If one has been to Gethsemani the photographs are much like seeing good friends, though you are sometimes surprised (and pleased) to see them in a new light, from a new angle. Harry Hinkle says he likes simple, quiet, solitary places. In Gethsemani this artist finds an accommodating palette and he makes good use of it. Br. Patrick tells us his style is reminiscent of Merton's. It seems what they share is a fine sense of composition, a reverence for their subject matter and an ability to find great beauty in the so-called ordinary. Time and again Harry Hinkle shows us that God is indeed in the details. If one has not been to Gethsemani or really isn't that interested in Thomas Merton the images should still have appeal. They provide a subtle study of nature and of a distinctive way of life. It makes you want to go Gethsemani, either for the first time or the hundredth. A product of my times (and my work), I tend to look at pictures first, but spending more time with each page I become aware of how well chosen are the captions. They provide a straightforward description of the image and are usually accompanied by a passage from Merton's writing, sometimes a journal entry, sometimes excerpts from poetry, always serving as a vehicle to move more deeply into the images.

Each of the word contributors alludes to a journey or pilgrimage. Jonathan Montaldo's artfully written Introduction urges the reader to find within the book reason to move forward on his or her own pilgrimage. Monica Weis' essay assists with this challenge by taking one on a trip into Merton's heart. It is a rich ride mixing graceful writing, scholarship and a passion for the subject. Like Hinkle she offers great vistas and enables one to see them in stimulating ways.

One of my favorite features of the book is at the very end, inside the back cover. There's a map detailing the geographic area around the Abbey and best of all for Merton readers the locations he refers to in his writing are pinpointed. The knobs, the hollows, the hermitages and more are there. This book informs and satisfies all the way to its end. In interest of full disclosure, I am not a credentialed critic of fine arts photography, but I have tried to capture elusive images at Gethsemani, among other places. Mr. Hinkle has done his job admirably. And Monica Weis has put a very handsome frame on his images. With each of the five chapters of her essay the reader gains greater appreciation for and understanding of Thomas Merton. She enables us to understand what Hinkle helps us see – Thomas Merton, his natural surroundings and what his interaction with the natural world meant to him. The result is a book whose power resonates much like those bells of Gethsemani.