

Sacramentality, Self-Discovery, Sanctity

Review of

*Becoming Who You Are: Insights on the True Self
from Thomas Merton and Other Saints*

By James Martin, SJ

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Reviewed by **Arlene Montevocchio**

In *Becoming Who You Are: Insights on the True Self from Thomas Merton and Other Saints*, James Martin, SJ joins a growing collection of literature dealing with the theological exploration of vocation. Though the increased interest in this topic is due, in large part, to the Lilly Endowment's million-dollar awards to Christian colleges and universities to develop initiatives in ministerial formation, careers for the common good, and discernment of personal and professional callings, such exploration has always been normative to the Christian tradition. Martin's slim volume, developed from a lecture given in 2005 at Corpus Christi Church in New York City, illustrates the search for the authentic self in layperson's terms and provides an accessible overview of the shared tensions faced by spiritual giants Thomas Merton and Henri Nouwen, whose birthdays the lecture commemorated. Both men sought to find a balance between restlessness and domesticity, action and contemplation, fame and anonymity in order to become closer to God. Martin's comparisons are accurate and engaging, claiming that "In their lives and in their writings, both Merton and Nouwen sought to be themselves before God. . . . [T]he lifelong process of self-examination and self-criticism and self-revelation had a point To use some of their favorite terminology, it enabled Merton to become his 'true self.' And it enabled Nouwen to become 'God's beloved'" (57). Though the men were different in intellect and the ways in which they lived out their callings, readers were ultimately drawn to their shared ability to be honest. "The flawed, wounded writer is appealing" (52), Martin explains.

Though the bulk of the book centers on Merton and Nouwen, Martin moves to other canonized and contemporary saints, including Saints Ignatius, Francis, and Thérèse of Lisieux, Mother Teresa, Dorothy Day and others, claiming that "The unity in the lives of the Christian saints rests on their commitment to Jesus Christ" (79). Echoing *Lumen Gentium*, the Vatican Council *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, Martin reminds us that we are all called to be saints from the moment of baptism, that grace is the first fact of our lives, that "The universal call to holiness is an invitation to be ourselves. . . . an invitation to remember the sacramentality of everyday life and to realize the great goal that God has set for us: *sanctity*" (87-88). In addition, Martin takes up the question of Jesus' self-knowledge, using basic Christology as "the central metaphor for the Christian life" (70) and the vocational journey – Jesus as "the truest self" (70). Though this point ties the theological theme of the book together, Martin's references to other saints seem unnecessary after

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the analyses of Merton and Nouwen, both of which could have benefited from greater detail.

While Martin's work is not new, it is nonetheless refreshing. As a Jesuit priest and an associate editor of *America* magazine, Martin mixes spiritual musings with a concrete journalistic style, creating an illuminating look at what it means to find self and God. The writings and example of Thomas Merton were of utmost importance to Martin's own vocational call to leave the corporate world and join the Jesuits: "Here was a man, roughly my own age, who had struggled with the same things I did: pride, disappointment, confusion, doubt, sadness, loneliness. More important, here was someone who seemed to have found an answer to discovering who he really was. As I read his story, Merton's journey became, in a way, my journey" (15). Martin will be included among a growing list of respected religion writers who take seriously the question of authenticity, including Robert Ellsberg and Paul Elie. Their literary and spiritual pursuits have seen some intersection in recent years. Ellsberg quotes Martin in *The Saints' Guide to Happiness: Everyday Wisdom from the Lives of the Saints*. Martin references Elie's work, *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage*, in *Becoming Who You Are*. And Elie recalls Ellsberg's description of Dorothy Day in *The Life You Save May Be Your Own*. These three writers view the same theme and make it new through the lenses of different spiritual guides. For Martin, it is primarily Merton. For Ellsberg, it is primarily Dorothy Day. And for Elie, it is primarily Flannery O'Connor. All three spiritual guides and all three writers ignore our culture's insistence that "All we need to do is to be other than who we are" (31) and recognize that "One's personal brand of holiness becomes clearer the more the true self is revealed" (23). In *Becoming Who You Are*, James Martin, SJ gives every serious seeker and committed Christian a way to live into the truth of our own existence.