

Celebrating the Lenten and Easter Seasons

Review of

Lent and Easter Wisdom from Thomas Merton

Compiled by Jonathan Montaldo

for The Merton Institute for Contemplative Living

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Reviewed by **Genevieve Cassani, SSND**

“[C]ontemporary, universal and one hopes, cogent,” are words written by Thomas Merton in the “Author’s Note” to describe the essays and addresses on the liturgy in his 1965 book *Seasons of Celebration*. In Jonathan Montaldo’s Preface to *Lent and Easter Wisdom from Thomas Merton*, compiled for The Merton Institute for Contemplative Living, we learn that all of the selected readings were taken from this one volume, a book of low-light intensity among the large and well-lit body of Merton’s writings. Yet it is no surprise that some forty-plus years later these selections still have value and speak a universal message to our fragmented global condition, as well as to our wounded hearts. In the first selection, Ash Wednesday, Merton describes Lent as “not a season of punishment so much as one of healing” (2). I have often used this quotation to explain choosing some way to live the days of Lent that would not feel like a punishment, only to find wisdom in the fact that God’s healing grace is not exactly easy to accept and comes at a cost, too, for a stubborn and hardened heart.

The combination of brief reflections from *Seasons of Celebration*, passages from Sacred Scripture, prayers, and questions that form a springboard for personal journaling is the recurring format in this book that begins with Ash Wednesday and moves us through to the Second Sunday of Easter. Part I (1-97) focuses on the Readings for Lent and Part II (99-115) on the Readings for Easter. There is more than enough well-chosen material to companion you on the Lenten journey.

The Introduction is especially beneficial, for it broadens the view of the Lenten season as associated with baptism by asking us to consider how Lent is a process, a journey that marks more than a passageway through time, by taking note of “the essential experiences of the journey . . . for a full appreciation of what is being celebrated” (x). Merton journaled extensively; Montaldo encourages journaling; if readers are timid about writing, he has composed thoughtful, challenging questions, with a variety of responses. One option is to choose a mantra (91) or to name “life’s true ‘patron saints’” (83). Reflecting and writing on personal experience helps chronicle one’s spiritual growth through the journey from Lent to Easter, to note the movement “from one point of view to another or, perhaps from one interpretation of life to a different interpretation” (x). Journaling can be the tool that allows us go below the surface to the place where Montaldo says, “everything is allowed to go” (viii), in order to discover the wisdom that awaits you.

Refreshingly direct, the prayer for each day brings Merton’s thought and the accompanying Scripture passage together in language that is unpretentious and real, personal and communal, petitioning for whatever is needed to be a faithful and responsible follower of Christ.

Genevieve Cassani, SSND has been the longtime Mission Effectiveness Coordinator for the School Sisters of Notre Dame in St. Louis. She served on the Program Committee for the ITMS Fifth General Meeting. In January 2008 she begins a sabbatical year after fourteen years of work for justice, peace and the integrity of creation.

As a companion for Lent, the texts in *Lent and Easter Wisdom from Thomas Merton* emphasize the positive, celebratory aspects of self-denial, fasting, penance and ascetism, all of which are *for* something: namely an “increase of spiritual energy and life,” as Merton says (14). What readers using this guide can look forward to, is that from Day 1 through Day 54 they will be challenged to grow more deeply as followers of Christ, those who journey from the captivity of darkness into God’s “admirable light.” Making the journey with Merton from Lent through Easter, readers can gain the wisdom of knowing in a new way, that Lent is, beyond a doubt, a Season of Celebration.