

Guidebooks for the Contemplative Journey

Review of

Bridges to Contemplative Living with Thomas Merton

Booklet 3: *Living Your Deepest Desires*

Booklet 4: *Discovering the Hidden Ground of Love*

Booklet 5: *Traveling Your Road to Joy*

Booklet 6: *Writing Yourself into the Book of Life*

Booklet 7: *Adjusting Your Life's Vision*

Booklet 8: *Seeing That Paradise Begins Now*

Lent and Holy Week

Edited by Jonathan Montaldo and Robert G. Toth

Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2007-2009

64 pages / \$5.95 paper (each)

Reviewed by **Michael Brennan**

Now that all eight booklets in the *Bridges to Contemplative Living with Thomas Merton* series have been published, along with a *Lent and Holy Week* edition, one can appreciate the overall vision and rhythm of the project. A small-group resource designed to promote “contemplative dialogue,” this collection constitutes an engaging program for entering into a mature and enlightened adult spirituality. Ecumenical in perspective while offering a “Prophetic, Radically Catholic, Contemplative Vision” (7.3), these 64-page pamphlets are packed with Thomas Merton’s insights and wisdom, augmented and amplified by other spiritual writers past and present. Parish directors of religious education, pastors and other church leaders will find this series an excellent place to begin working with adults whose Christian education ended in grammar school or high school. At the same time, those with a more extensive spiritual background will be captivated by the depth and richness of the texts. While ideal for small groups, with an emphasis on respectfully listening and sharing as opposed to problem-solving or staking out positions, the series can also be enjoyed by individuals.

Each booklet opens with an identical eight-page introduction that defines terms, offers guidelines and provides a short biography of Thomas Merton. Each is divided into eight sessions, and each session starts with an opening psalm, followed by an “Introduction to the Texts,” by authors Jonathan Montaldo, former ITMS president and currently Director of Bethany Spring, the Merton Institute Retreat Center, and Robert G. Toth, Executive Director of the Merton Institute for Contemplative Living. The introduction is followed by two texts per session: “Merton’s Voice,” an excerpt from his writings relating to the session theme, and “Another Voice,” a perspective from a diverse selection

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of mostly contemporary spiritual writers. Some are well known, like Dorothy Day, St. Edith Stein, St. Teresa of Avila and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Some come from other faith traditions, like Rumi, Sogyal Rinpoche, Simone Weil, A. Reza Arasteh and Stephen Batchelor. Every session, developed around a key aspect of Merton's spiritual worldview, concludes with six questions for reflection and dialogue. After these eight sessions, there is a selection of "Concluding Meditations" (appropriate to each booklet's theme), a bibliography, and biographical sketches of the various spiritual writers chosen for each pamphlet.

The first two booklets, *Entering the School of Your Experience and Becoming Who You Already Are*, were reviewed in the Fall 2006 *Merton Seasonal*. In Booklet 3, *Living Your Deepest Desires*, the authors remind us that we are "constantly being invited to go beyond our life's gated communities to embrace a wider union of love with all our neighbors" (19). Such imagery is typical of the editors' perspective. The heart of the third booklet's sessions is "Inner Work and the Struggle to Live Contemplatively" (3.5), in which prayer and "a continuous dynamic of inner renewal" (21) is essential. Pema Chodron's poignant "When Things Fall Apart" (45), Douglas Steere on how to listen discerningly to another, and Douglas Burton-Christie on the humility that marked the lives of holy ones in the desert (and reminds one of Mother Teresa's end-of-life misgivings about the depth of her trust in God) augment Merton's reflections on the deeper meaning of being born again and criticism of a life of "frantic activity" (38) that distracts us from seeking wisdom and inner meaning. "By healing the divisions in themselves they would help heal the divisions in the whole world" (38), Merton says of monks (and by extension recommends to us), a theme he embraces elsewhere in the series.

Discovering the Hidden Ground of Love, the fourth booklet, offers a wealth of insights on "Finding Our Own Souls" (4.5). Merton's description of the university as an essentially monastic enterprise is something we desperately need to recover: "The function of the university is . . . to help men and women save their souls and, in so doing, to save their society: from what? From the hell of meaninglessness, of obsession, of complex artifice, of systematic lying, of criminal evasions and neglects, of self-destructive futilities" (27-28). Other voices include French Orthodox theologian Olivier Clément, who writes, "Spiritual progress has no other test in the end, nor any better expression, than our ability to love" (38).

Booklet 5, *Traveling Your Road to Joy*, is summarized with these comments by the editors: "Living contemplatively is being mindful at all times that one has received an invitation to dine at the banquet of life wherever one finds oneself and no matter what is being served. The table of the Lord is always being spread for us. We need the courage to find our place at the wedding feast, to sit down, and eat our fill" (34-35). Merton's words include the poetic passage from *New Seeds of Contemplation* in which he tells of catching a "glimpse of the cosmic dance" (50) on a starlit night when the migrating birds of autumn descend on a grove of junipers and an old frog makes a solitary splash. This is followed by an Easter Sermon of St. John Chrysostom, which carries forward the banquet theme in joyful expressions of the rewards of living a Christian life.

Writing Yourself into the Book of Life, the sixth booklet, honors the vocation of writing by using it as a metaphor for embracing the contemplative life by speaking of "Shaping Our Life's Story Line: Choosing Our Destinies" (6.3), "Our Life's Cast of Characters" (6.4) and "Your Life's Table of Contents: The Outline of Your Vocation" (6.5). Merton speaks of his love of writing and

confesses, “The bad writing I have done has all been authoritarian, the declaration of musts, and the announcement of punishments” (16). A passage by Ira Progoff, the American psychotherapist known for his Intensive Journal Method, is particularly searing, as he touches on the existential nature of Holy Scripture and “how vast and self-replenishing are the resources of the human spirit” (16). Francis Kline, OCSO, speaks of how “We begin to notice a certain pliancy toward our neighbor. The imperiousness of a strong ego-intellect, so often a characteristic of youth, gives way to a tolerance and even deference to the opinions and judgments of others” (28). There is also a beautiful meditation by Montaldo on “Who Will Be Waiting for You?” (33) when the angels lead you into paradise, which complements a passage by Anthony DeMello in Booklet 2 that begins, “I imagine that today I am to die” (16).

Booklet 7, *Adjusting Your Life's Vision*, addresses the themes of non-violence, reconciliation and unity. Merton reflects on the Sermon on the Mount, saying “Christian hope and Christian humility are inseparable. The quality of nonviolence is decided largely by the purity of the Christian hope behind it” (21). This is followed by Gandhi: “If one has pride and egoism, there is no nonviolence. Nonviolence is not possible without humility. My own experience is that, whenever I have acted nonviolently, I have been led to it and sustained by the higher promptings of an unseen Power. Through my own will I should have miserably failed” (23). Also included is Merton’s yearning to unite within himself “the thought of the East and the West, of the Greek and Latin Fathers,” so that he might “create in myself the reunion of the divided Church, and from that unity in myself can come the exterior and visible unity of the Church. For, if we want to bring together East and West, we cannot do it by imposing one upon the other. We must contain both in ourselves and transcend them both in Christ” (27). The authors assert that the central task of contemplative living “is what Cistercian abbot John Eudes Bamberger calls an ‘inner remaking of the heart.’ Human beings have a vocation to become their truer and deeper selves” (52).

The last booklet in the series, *Seeing That Paradise Begins Now*, touches on insights of Sufism that Merton studied and that “confirmed an intuitive conviction of Merton’s that had guided his adult spirituality and its expression in his writing,” according to the authors: “loyalty to the truth of God’s fecundity demands continual transcendence of any vision of divine creativity that is limited to the aspirations of one particular historical period or group” (34). There are several passages from A. Reza Arasteh (*Final Integration in the Adult Personality*), who concludes, “It is significant that all Western and Eastern ways of attaining maturity in the adult personality have recognized as an essential quality the ability to become aware of multiple realities” (47). Merton’s closing words are these: “And if the Spirit dwells in us and works in us, our lives will be a continuous and progressive conversion and transformation in which we also, in some measure, help to transform others and allow ourselves to be transformed by and with others, in Christ” (51). In a wonderful coda, Merton’s fellow monk of Gethsemani, Matthew Kelty, OCSO, echoes the ancient prayer of St. Patrick as he recounts how Christ is with him in all the tasks of the day, culminating with: “I pray. I read. I suffer. With all of humanity, past, present and to come. In Christ. That being so, I share in some way with the total life of the whole earth, of the whole universe. I touch eternity and eternal life in God by the trivial things I do every day, in every breath I draw, every time I have a drink of water” (51-52).

Lastly, a special *Lent and Holy Week* edition touches on familiar Lenten themes of forgiveness, service, humility, prayer and discipline. “A disciplined human being is a liberated human being,” the

editors assert. “Merton urges us to train and discipline our mental and emotional faculties in order to deepen our capacities ‘for experience, for awareness, for understanding, for a higher kind of life. . . .’ This ‘higher life’ is lived in and for communities. This higher life provides us satisfactions more lasting than our habitual lives of consuming and spending” (19-20). Merton cautions that “False unity is the work of force. It is violently imposed on divided entities which stubbornly refuse to be one. True unity is the work of love. It is the free union of beings that spontaneously seek to be one in the truth, preserving and elevating their separate selves by self-transcendence. True unity admits the presence of obstacles, and of divisions, in order to overcome both by humility and sacrifice” (37). Among the other voices are Orthodox priest Alexander Schmemmann, who writes that “Perhaps without noticing it, we live in a climate of radical individualism. . . . And yet, the whole literature of spirituality emphasizes *obedience* as the condition of all spiritual progress” (32-33). He speaks of the need for laypeople to cultivate vows of prayer, obedience and acceptance as foundational to following Christ. Mother Teresa asks, “But do we know our neighbors? Do we know the poor in our neighborhood? It’s easier for us to talk and talk about the poor in far-away places. We are often surrounded by the sick and the abandoned. We are often among people who are despised, outcast, and depressed. We have many elderly whom we don’t even know. At times, we don’t even have the time to smile at these people” (38).

Sixty years ago, one became acquainted with the writing of Thomas Merton through *The Seven Storey Mountain* alone. Today there are a thousand places to make his acquaintance, but perhaps few are as comprehensive, accessible and nicely moderated as the *Bridges to Contemplative Living with Thomas Merton* series. The authors invite participants to “personal spiritual transformation for the sake of a more just and peaceful world.” They have designed a program that skillfully and gently presents Thomas Merton, together with a host of compelling “other voices,” as reliable guides on a lifelong journey of spiritual growth and renewal. These little guides are a big contribution to both Merton studies and his vision of ecumenical and interfaith harmony.

A Leader’s Guide and a Series Sampler can be downloaded from www.avemariapress.com. The booklets can be ordered directly from the Merton Institute of Contemplative Living at www.contemplativeliving.org.