

Cultivating the Seeds of Merton's Hope

Review of

*Seeds of Hope: Thomas Merton's Contemplative Message /
Semillas de Esperanza: El Mensaje Contemplativo de Thomas Merton*

Edited by Fernando Beltrán Llavador and Paul M. Pearson

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Reviewed by **Marilyn Sunderman, RSM**

Hope, one of the theological virtues in the Christian tradition, is intertwined with faith and love. Rooted in hope, faith expresses itself in love. In his entry on “Hope” in *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*, Patrick O’Connell discusses Thomas Merton’s understanding of the meaning of Christian hope as a divine gift that has both paschal and eschatological dimensions. According to Merton, hope discovers life in the midst of death experiences and seeks fulfillment in the completion of God’s Kingdom of love. Those who in faith embrace a loving lifestyle contribute to the development of the Kingdom in the here and now.

Seeds of Hope: Thomas Merton's Contemplative Message is a bilingual compilation of scholarly papers presented at a 2006 conference in Avila, Spain. This conference marked a watershed moment, since it was the first time that scholars and participants gathered specifically to discuss the theme of hope in Merton’s life and writings. In various ways, the contributors to *Seeds of Hope* elucidate Merton’s treatment of this theme.

In “Thomas Merton and ‘the Great Feast of Christian Hope’” (1-16), conference organizer and co-editor Fernando Beltrán Llavador focuses on hope in relationship to the Paschal Mystery. He stresses that, for Merton, the heart of Christian hope is Christ’s resurrection, which testifies to the truth that out of the ashes of a horrific crucifixion experience emerged the possibility of new graced life for all of humankind. Beltrán also makes note of the fact that Merton viewed the nexus of contemplation and love in action as a means of contributing to the advancement of the hoped-for future fullness of God’s Kingdom.

His co-editor Paul Pearson, in “Emblems for a Season of Fury: The Art of Thomas Merton” (17-31), reflects upon Merton’s calligraphy and pen and ink drawings as art that provided a message of hope during the darkness of the inhumanity of the Cold War, racism in the United States, the Vietnam War, and the unleashing of the atomic bomb by the United States during the last century.

Francisco R. de Pascual, OCSO utilizes the anchor as a symbol of Christian hope and asserts in his essay “The Secret Hope and the Hoped for Secret: Keys for Life” (33-45) that Merton anchored his hope in God’s love that creates each person as an *imago Dei*. Additionally, de Pascual stresses Merton’s conviction that true prophets proclaim the possibility of hope in the midst of evil and injustice and do so through calling people to deeper conversion to Gospel values that include mercy, peace, justice and

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self-giving love.

In “Thomas Merton as a Living Bridge Linking Christians East and West” (47-59), James Forest focuses on Merton’s attraction to iconography in Orthodox Christianity. For Merton, icons are windows on the Divine and entryways into the Kingdom. His contemplation of icons of Christ enabled him to experience, in an intimate way, the indwelling of the glorified, risen Christ. Although Forest makes no direct reference to hope in his essay, he implies that Merton’s devotion to icons was a vehicle of hope that was integral to his spiritual journey.

Sonia Petisco Martínez analyses some of Merton’s poems that treat the theme of conversion from the false to the true self in her essay “‘O Sweet Escape! O Smiling Flight!’: Commentaries on a Selection of Poems by Thomas Merton” (61-79). As this author indicates, this transformation entails dying to egocentrism and rising to a life of loving others, which includes social activism. What is missing in this fine analysis of Merton’s poetry is any explicit reference to the theme of hope that is axial to *Seeds of Hope*.

Cristóbal Serrán-Pagán y Fuentes provides a well-developed comparative study of the theology of hope in “Seeds of Hope in Times of Crisis: Saint John of the Cross and Thomas Merton” (81-100). Both of these mystics proclaimed the hope-filled message that, through engaging in transformative social, political and religious acts, human beings contribute to the growth of God’s Kingdom on earth. Merton and John of the Cross lived out this message by devoting their lives to building a peaceful, just and loving society.

In “‘A Realm of White-Hot Faith’: Thomas Merton on Islam in Spain” (101-21), Bonnie Thurston discusses Merton’s extensive acquaintance with Islam, including the work of the rationalist Ibn Rushd (Averroes) and the mystics Ibn Arabi and Ibn Abbad. Thurston asserts that, without leaving Christianity, Merton’s engagement with Islam was part of his journey toward transcultural integration. Merton’s hope was that others would realize the value of learning from the study of non-Christian religions such as Islam.

In her essay “Hope as an Unexpected, Incomprehensible and Total Gift: Reflections on Merton’s Life and Writings” (123-40), Erlinda Paguio offers deep insight into Merton’s persistent monastic dream of becoming a hermit and the eventual realization of that dream after years of hoping against hope that his innermost desire to live the solitary life to its utmost degree would be fulfilled.

James Conner, OCSO highlights Merton’s 1958 Louisville, Kentucky, awakening in which he realized that he was one with all people in Christ in his article “Thomas Merton: A Monk of Compassion, A Man of Paradox” (141-54). Such a hope-filled experience of compassion purified Merton and prepared him for deeper union with God.

Seeds of Hope is an important contribution to scholarly Merton studies. Perhaps this very enjoyable volume of well-researched and well-written essays will prompt others to continue to explore the theme of hope in Merton’s writings, especially in relationship to Merton’s study of and interest in other religions such as Judaism. The volume is available for a donation of \$25 from the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University; for further information and an order form, see www.merton.org/seeds.htm.