

Continuing the Conversation

Review of
The Merton Annual Volume 21
 Edited by David Belcastro and Gray Matthews
 Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2008
 300 pages / \$19.95

Reviewed by **Allan M. McMillan**

Volume 21 of *The Merton Annual* marks the debut of David Belcastro and Gray Matthews as co-editors, following in the footsteps of Victor Kramer. They and all the others who have made possible the publication of these many years of scholarship have also contributed to the ongoing conversation of those interested in the writings of Thomas Merton. Once the conversations begin, there is a need to keep them going so that the experience can be deepened and the matter expanded. Those who have written or lectured on Merton will tell you that it is next to impossible to quote his work briefly. Ideas flow so quickly one from another that in quoting some passages one is drawn into the connections of the next. As John Howard Griffin once said, “Thomas Merton’s art is grounded in this belief that at profound, often imperceived levels ‘everything connects’ – even apparent opposites” (*A Hidden Wholeness* 3). This volume of *The Merton Annual* picks up the many ideas that swirled around the central theme of the Tenth General Meeting of the ITMS (June 2007, Memphis, TN), “Wide Open to Heaven and Earth,” and connects us to the deep social concerns that flow from the interrelationship of contemplation, community and culture.

In Albert Raboteau’s stirring address to the opening plenary session of the ITMS in 2007, “Thomas Merton and Racial Reconciliation” (13-24), the reader will meet again Merton’s contemplative response to matters of race relations. Typically, the response dates back to Merton’s experiences at Friendship House in Harlem and his new-found understanding of the Mystical Body of Christ. Other connections trace his journey through the writings of James Baldwin and the understanding that the roots of racism are found in materialism, alienation, fear and violence, all of which are spawned in the sea of mindless mass consumption and an alienation of the person from their own true self. Raboteau recognized in Merton a prophetic apprehension of an option for the people of America – either a merciful *kairos* event or a dark hour of destruction and hate – and he balances this with steps toward a present and future time informed by contemplation, action and ongoing reconciliation.

Where the article by Raboteau is great for its national breadth and scope, the article by William Apel, “Terrible Days: Merton/Yungblut Letters and MLK Jr.’s Death” (25-32), takes us into the

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intimate sentiments of the correspondence between Merton, June Yungblut and her relationship with the family of Martin Luther King. Most precious is the sense that if Merton and MLK had met they would have found a shared brotherly connectedness not only inter-racially but as much again for all faiths in their call to live in the love of God.

John D. Dadosky reminds us in “Merton as Method for Inter-religious Engagement: Examples from Buddhism” (33-43) that Pope Benedict insisted (February 1, 2007) that inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue is not an option but a necessity for our time. This in turn opens the conversation concerning the variance of dialogue and evangelization. For the participants in dialogue, there is a felt need to maintain identity and this in turn proposes the appropriate methodology. For Thomas Merton, the methodology is “mutual self-mediation” or “friendship.” Dadosky applies his insights to the friendships that developed between Merton, D. T. Suzuki, Chadril Rinpoche and the Dalai Lama.

The next two articles pick up the conversation on the methodology of friendship by exploring the Franciscan influence on Thomas Merton. Daniel P. Horan, OFM and Timothy J. Shaffer lead the reader along wonderful paths of inter-faith dialogue according to the Franciscan charism of listening to “the voice of the stranger.” In ““Those Going Among the Saracens and Other Nonbelievers”: Thomas Merton and Franciscan Interreligious Dialogue” (44-66), Horan points out how Francis looked past the attitude of fear which dehumanizes the other and then urged peace and reconciliation by putting gospel values ahead of everything else in order to live vulnerably as a brother to all. The parallels between Merton and Francis are stunning in that both realized and embraced the truth that we live in a world of strangers. In “A (Not So) Secret Son of Francis: Thomas Merton’s Franciscan Lens for Seeing Heaven and Earth” (67-90), Shaffer shows how the followers of Francis influenced Merton by their teaching and example – most especially, through their restoration of the ancient form of eremiticism, enabling hermits to embrace abandonment to Christ through the inner poverty of “emptiness, nakedness and minority” (82). One wonders if Merton would have sought the hermit life and its concern for the strangers with whom we live if it had not been for the influence of Francis. Indeed, Francis and Merton enable us to view the world paradoxically as cloister and to be actively prophetic in our own vocations.

There can be no question that Thomas Merton had an affinity for art; that he absorbed the shape and form of art with astonishing alacrity. The next three articles invite the reader to explore not only the flood of artistic experiences Merton absorbed in his encounter with the craft of others but also the torrent of expression that flowed from his own person. Roger Lipsey’s “In the Zen Garden of the Lord: Thomas Merton’s Stone Garden” (91-105) guides us through Merton’s attempt at establishing a Zen Garden with the novices at Gethsemani. Merton’s success is a measure of the limitations of his resources both in materials and in source information concerning Zen gardens, but the photographs show a remarkable sensitivity to the project. The lines traced in the gravel of the garden, the seasonal changes that accentuate the lines and the serenity of the shadows cast by the larger rocks open pathways for the reader to understand why the statues of the dying Buddha and Ananda had such an impact on Merton when he visited Polonnaruwa, Sri Lanka.

Pamela Proietti takes the reader in a different direction in “Merton’s Reflections on the Christian Artist: Art as Doorway into Eternity” (106-16), showing the influence Jacques Maritain and William Blake had on the artistry of Merton. Proietti deals mostly with the philosophical narrative in Merton’s experience but she is also faithful to the intuitive dimension of his work, noting him one of the finest

commentators on religious art in our time.

In “Nurture by Nature: Emblems of Stillness in a Season of Fury” (117-49), Patrick F. O’Connell enters the conversation with a consideration of four poems from Merton’s final published book of short verse, *Emblems of a Season of Fury*. If the world can be seen paradoxically as cloister, then it should not surprise us that the world and the incidents of life have a sacrament-like quality for the Christian poet. Many of us who have found consolation in Merton’s spirituality, the call to justice in his view of the failed social fabric of the nations, and a compassionate response for the suffering, have labored with the images of his poetry. O’Connell’s gift is our blessing as he deepens the dialogue for those who love the poems of Merton and opens the dialogue for those of us who never learned enough how to read them. In his reflection on “Song for Nobody” he enables us to appreciate that “There is no listener who is not also a singer, for by letting go of a separate identity, by becoming ‘nobody,’ ‘no-self,’ one becomes ‘wide awake,’ aware of the song of ‘golden heaven’ which only ‘nobody’ can perceive, and joins this singing and this song. This is what happened to the speaker, and what is offered as well to the reader” (127-28).

This volume of *The Merton Annual* is rounded out with two sets of articles: the first on the connection between Walker Percy and Thomas Merton, the second on transformation in life leading more deeply into faith. As converts to Catholicism and as authors recognized for their faith, both Merton and Percy deal with similar issues on the fall of Adam and the return to grace, as John P. Collins shows in “The Myth of the Fall from Paradise: Thomas Merton and Walker Percy” (150-72); yet when they met, as Percy relates in his interview with Dewey and Victor Kramer (176-85), they were strangely silent, not because they had nothing to say, but perhaps because they had been in dialogue for some time. Silence can be recognition and approval.

Fred Herron’s article “‘Our Transformation in Christ’: Thomas Merton and Transformative Learning” (186-204) completes the cycle of experience, contemplation, and spiritual theology by offering insight into the praxis of reintegration and grounding that completes the cycle of transformative learning. Major transitions can be triggered by crisis or insight but on-going conversion is understood best by looking to the providential designs of God. In “Thomas Merton and St. John of the Cross: Lives on Fire” (205-13), Nass Cannon directs our attention to transformative experiences of the fiery presence of God as encountered by John of the Cross and the final integration and unity of the person in the writings of Thomas Merton. The conversations are not ended. The tantalizing quotes and comments of these authors suggest new directions and possibilities. When John of the Cross speaks of the Spirit and the Bridegroom, and Merton answers with his comment “Love sails me around the house. . . . I have only time for eternity which is to say for love, love, love . . . it is love and it gives me soft punches all the time in the center of my heart” (209), I found myself wishing that Cannon had quoted the full passage (see *Entering the Silence* 234), for it suggests a Chagall-like painting with blue skies, apple trees, Father Sub-Prior and even bulls in their pen.

In all, this volume of *The Merton Annual* continues the conversation faithful to Thomas Merton who (as pointed out by David Belcastro in his Bibliographic Review 2007) worried that conversation, like contemplation, was becoming a lost art (215). As long as we do not let his words fall to the earth, they will call us back to the integrity we seek in ourselves and in one another.