

## Letters of Kindred Spirits

Review of

*Compassionate Fire: The Letters of Thomas Merton & Catherine de Hueck Doherty*

Edited by Robert A. Wild

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While it may at first sound crass, one could say that Thomas Merton, Catherine Doherty and Dorothy Day represent something of a mid-twentieth-century, North American “holy trinity” of Catholic social justice (not to discount Daniel Berrigan and others). Icons each in their own right, few people are aware of their interconnectedness, reciprocal inspiration and occasional correspondence during their venerable careers. Robert Wild, the postulator of the cause for canonization of Catherine Doherty and a priest of the diocese of Buffalo, has edited a collection of the correspondence between two of these great figures: Merton and Doherty. It is safe to say, as Robert Wild notes well, that, “Catherine de Hueck Doherty is not as well known as Thomas Merton” (ix). It is nice to get to know Doherty better through her relationship with Merton.

Catherine Doherty is best known for her work in founding, first, Friendship House in Toronto during the Great Depression of the early 1930s and, later, Madonna House in 1947. She was born in Russia in 1896 and immigrated to Canada in 1921 via Finland and England during the revolution. A decade later, Doherty responded to the call to “Catholic Action” issued by Pope Pius XI in the mid-1920s that energized the laity to engage in new ministries and approaches to evangelization. After beginning her ministries in Canada during the early 1930s, she opened a Friendship House in the Harlem section of New York City in 1938, providing food, clothing and shelter to many homeless and the disenfranchised of the day. The Harlem project was particularly unique in that it was the locus of early civil rights work, promoting justice and fighting racial discrimination. The Friendship House movement quickly spread to other large cities across the United States. Within the decade Doherty began to seek official recognition from the Church for her growing apostolic organization. This eventually led Doherty to leave Friendship House to found a new rural apostolate called Madonna House located in Ontario, Canada. There her work continued to flourish as many laypeople and ordained clergy worked together in dedicated service for others.

Merton first met Doherty when she spoke at St. Bonaventure College (now University) in 1941. Merton was a young professor of English and in the process of wrestling with his own vocational discernment process. Inspired by her presentation, Merton went to Friendship House in Harlem for two weeks that summer. When Doherty returned to St. Bonaventure the same year to

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give another presentation, the two met up again. The experience of meeting Doherty and visiting Friendship House dramatically shaped the future Trappist monk in a marked way. It was also the beginning of a long-lasting friendship of mutual inspiration and admiration.

Wild provides for us in one volume both the correspondence between Merton and Doherty as well as a helpful Introduction and Afterword. Merton's letters to Doherty are nothing new to Merton scholars and enthusiasts alike; they first appeared in *The Hidden Ground of Love* edited by William Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985). However, the letters of Doherty to Merton alongside Merton's correspondence is something new. Additionally, the chronological arrangement of the letters provides for an insightful glimpse into the development of their relationship and response to the events of their lives in a powerful way. Wild organizes the letters into three parts by decade, and also includes the text Doherty delivered during her daily "Spiritual Reading" session at Madonna House on the day following Merton's death.

What emerges from this collection is a captivating view into a relationship of intimacy and friendship the likes of which we rarely glimpse. From the earliest correspondence Merton is open and forthright about his struggles in discernment. He continues to feel called to ordained priesthood, yet has preemptively concluded that such a possibility remained out of reach given the recent experience of "rejection" from the Franciscan friars. Doherty responds to Merton's concerns and questions with loving support. Additionally, Doherty is assertive in her affirmation of Merton's vocation as a writer long before he was a published author of some celebrity status. It is obvious that Doherty played an instrumental role in the spiritual support of the young Merton, both in terms of his ultimate religious vocation and in his outward and creative expression as a writer.

The letters are exchanged with varying frequency. The content, although differing as circumstances change over the course of some three decades, always remains interesting and engaging. Even the seemingly mundane matters of business occasionally addressed (for example, an exchange in December 1941 about Merton's earlier expressed intention to donate a car to Friendship House) shed light on the everyday nature of the life of Thomas Merton and Catherine Doherty.

Overall, the exchanges between these great giants of twentieth-century North American Catholicism are nothing less than heartwarming. The reader is given a front-row seat in the theatre of their lives, which reveals a close-up of their struggles and triumphs alongside the consolation and challenge each friend offers the other. Most touching is the deeply affectionate tone that the letters express. Take for example this opening line from Doherty's response to Merton in her letter dated November 15, 1964: "It has been a long time since I have written to you, but then speech is not always needed, on paper or otherwise, for people who love one another" (80). While Merton is more reserved in his written affect and expressions of intimate friendship in his letters to Doherty, his candor in subject matter displays a trust that reflects the special quality of their relationship, even if, as Wild has noted, the extent of Doherty's influence on Merton remains largely unknown. Themes relating to his vocation, to monastic life, peace and justice concerns, and the desire to live a hermit's life were shared with Doherty. Doherty echoes the transparency, sharing, for instance, the challenges of establishing new apostolates, working with volunteers and new members of the Madonna House community, and her own struggles with prayer and spirituality.

Perhaps the most interesting part of this volume is the inclusion of both Doherty's letter to then Abbot Flavian Burns in response to his telegram announcing Merton's death, and her subsequent

talk given to the Madonna House community. The letter to Fr. Flavian is brief, but summarizes well Doherty's view of Merton at the time of his death. She writes, "The world has lost a great man. Monasticism has lost a great man. But all of us, and I say this in all simplicity of heart, have gained a saint" (89). Her talk, given the next day, is also brief and allows the reader to get a "snapshot" image of a nearly thirty-year-old friendship as Doherty simply recounts her experience of Merton over the years. In the Afterword following the text of Doherty's talk Wild takes up the question of what influence Doherty might have had on Merton. A question not easily answered, Wild suggests that it is precisely in Merton's encountering Doherty as a *saint*, that is, someone "really *in love with God*" (99), that his life – like so many others that knew her – was deeply affected, inspired and changed.

One should not be misled by the size of *Compassionate Fire* – while short in length its value is great. The only aspect of this book that deserves some constructive critique is the lack of additional analysis by Wild in the Introduction and Afterword. These two sections of the text could serve the reader better if they had been expanded with additional biographical and primary source material beyond the letters themselves and the few *Seven Storey Mountain* references already included. That said, the volume is a welcome addition to any Merton scholar's or enthusiast's library. Likewise, those inspired and moved by the life and work of Catherine de Hueck Doherty and her Madonna House apostolate will perhaps find a new friend in Thomas Merton.