

A Mutually Enriching Relationship

Review of

Thomas Merton and Thérèse Lentfoehr: The Story of a Friendship

By Robert Nugent, SDS

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Reviewed by **Christine M. Bochen**

In his introduction, Robert Nugent expresses the hope that readers will enjoy “listening in” (xxiv) to the conversation between Thomas Merton and Thérèse Lentfoehr, SDS. I have, and I am certain that others will as well. Drawing on a correspondence that spanned twenty years (November 3, 1948 to November 21, 1968), Nugent constructs a very informative and readable narrative of their friendship. Although Lentfoehr had written to Merton about his critical review of the anthology of Marian poetry she had compiled, entitled *I Sing of a Maiden*, their exchange of letters began after she wrote to him praising his best-selling autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. His response: “No book written by me could possibly be that good” (39).

A selection of Merton’s letters to Lentfoehr was first made available in *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, edited by Robert E. Daggy, and excerpts from these letters are included in *Thomas Merton: A Life in Letters*, edited by William H. Shannon and myself. These selections and excerpts represent just a small portion of the more than 200 letters which Merton wrote to Lentfoehr. In addition to incorporating material gleaned from the vast body of Merton’s letters, Nugent includes excerpts from the heretofore unpublished extant letters and postcards from Lentfoehr to Merton. These number only a dozen. It is curious that although Lentfoehr saved the letters she received from Merton (except for the few letters in which Merton wrote of his relationship with M., the woman with whom he fell in love in 1966, which Lentfoehr purposefully destroyed), she did not preserve copies of her own letters to him. Nevertheless, from the few letters and notes of hers that we do have, her writings and lectures, newspaper reports and the like, as well as from Merton’s responses to her letters, Nugent concludes that “we are able to garner a substantial picture of what she wrote to him” (33). Nugent brings to his reading of the correspondence a thorough knowledge of Merton’s life and work and also of Lentfoehr’s, even though he confesses that he has not read all of her published poetry.

As Paul Pearson notes in his Preface, Merton’s friendships with men such as Robert Lax, Edward Rice and James Laughlin have been “well documented” (xv), while his friendships with women have not. This is just one reason why this book is especially welcome. Another reason is that Nugent demonstrates in a compelling way how significant letters have been and are in deepening our

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understanding of Merton's life and writings. Furthermore, Nugent introduces Sr. Thérèse Lentfoehr to readers, like myself, whose knowledge of Lentfoehr was largely limited to general impressions. Thérèse Lentfoehr was an accomplished woman in her own right. She was, Nugent tells us, "among a recognized and acclaimed group of Catholic poets of a certain historical period and literary taste" (xxi). Her poems appeared in such "prestigious publications" (5) as *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *America* and *Commonweal*, and MacMillan published several of her books of poetry. Lentfoehr taught in a number of Catholic institutions including Marquette University and lectured at such universities as Fordham and Georgetown where she was for a time poet-in-residence. While people who knew her described her as "a free spirit," her determination and persistence were very apparent – especially where Merton was concerned (34).

Thérèse Lentfoehr was Merton's first archivist – determined to sort, catalogue and preserve Merton's work. When she died in 1981, she owned "the single largest private collection of Mertoniana that included the corrected typescript of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, fragments of his novitiate journals, notebooks and journals used in *The Sign of Jonas*, numerous draft of poems, most of his conference notes as master of scholastics . . . and master of novices . . . and an extensive collection of his mimeographed articles inscribed to her" (19). After much deliberation and some machinations, she decided to bequeath her collection to Columbia University. Lentfoehr was also a tireless typist, adept at deciphering Merton's handwriting (not an easy task). In fact, she became "something of a personal secretary" and thus, Nugent suggests, "the first outsider to get a glimpse of his inner life reflected in the journals" (19). At Merton's urging, she corrected typing and spelling mistakes as well as "unclear statements and unintelligible expressions" in his class notes and manuscripts (19).

Lentfoehr was also "a popularizer" (22) of Merton's work and his "self-appointed publicist" (62) as well as his defender against critics of his writings. She gave lectures, arranged exhibits and taught classes on Merton during his lifetime as well as after his death – emerging as one of Merton's earliest interpreters. Her book, *Words and Silence: On the Poetry of Thomas Merton*, published in 1979 by New Directions, was the first book-length study of Merton's poetry. While Lentfoehr shared her reading of Merton with eagerness and enthusiasm, it was a reading that, as Nugent reminds us, was more laudatory than it was critical. Nevertheless, Lentfoehr herself considered and actually described herself as a "nationally known expert on the works of the Trappist writer Thomas Merton, especially his poetry, for it was through that mutual interest that we first came to know each other some thirty years ago" (xxi).

The flow of materials between them went both ways: he sent papers, manuscripts and books, and she "deluged" him with copies of her own books and articles (19) as well all manner of clippings she thought would interest him. She also sent him gifts and relics. With so many relics, Merton teased that she would turn him into "a walking Basilica" (69).

The organization of the book is well-suited to its purpose. After introducing readers to Thérèse Lentfoehr, Nugent develops the story of their friendship – chronologically and thematically – all the while setting their intersecting stories in the context of what was happening in their religious orders and in the Catholic Church. Chapter titles – "Early Years: 1948-1949," "Becoming a Sister: 1950-1954," "Difficult Years for Friends: 1955-1959," "Maturity and Growth: 1960-1964," and "The Final Years: 1965-1968" – reflect what was happening in each of their lives as well as in their relationship.

These twenty years were marked by challenge and change in their personal lives as well as in their communities, their Church, and, indeed, the world.

In addition to the “Preface” by Paul M. Pearson, Thomas Merton Center Director and Archivist, and Nugent’s “Introduction,” the book contains an “Afterword” by Carol Thresher, SDS, Provincial Leader of Lentfoehr’s religious community – the Sisters of the Divine Savior, six pages of photos, and a poem by Lentfoehr entitled “Song for a Marriage” which provides readers with a sample of her writing. Although most of the photos document moments in Lentfoehr’s life, there are also photos that record Lentfoehr’s visits with Merton: one showing both in full habit when they met in 1951 and three shots taken during a picnic on the monastery grounds on November 7, 1967. They met in person only twice, even though Lentfoehr had lobbied unsuccessfully for other visits over the years.

I am especially grateful for the ways in which reading Nugent’s book has enriched my own understanding of Merton. Merton’s friendship with Thérèse Lentfoehr is a lens through which I see Merton’s solicitude for his friend in her struggles in community and prayer; Merton’s openness in taking Lentfoehr into his own confidence, especially during the time of his relationship with M.; Merton’s frequent attempts to temper her enthusiasm and praise with understated lines such as “you are probably too enthusiastic” (48); his willingness to write to her about his own way of prayer as he did the late 1940s when he confessed “most of my own prayers are completely inarticulate. I walk around saying ‘Love!’ Or I just mentally keep slipping the catch that yields my soul to Love” (53); Merton’s words of spiritual encouragement that are ones we all need to hear at times: “You have to be the *person* God made you” (80), “His love is always with you” (81), “Do not fret” (83). In Merton’s letters to Lentfoehr, he commented on many topics that concerned him: on injustice, he wrote: “We are all getting more and more deeply involved in collective patterns of injustice without having the faintest realization of it” (102); on censorship, he lamented: “I wrote an article on solitude and anyone would think that it was an obscene novel, the way they landed on it” (105); on death, he professed: “The ‘I’ that goes from day to day is not an important ‘I’ and his future matters little. And the deeper ‘I’ is in an eternal present. If a door should open one day from one realm to the other, then ‘I’ (whoever that is) will be glad of it” (128). These are just some of the nuggets that I take away from this book.

But I also take away some unanswered questions about the meaning their relationship. It is clear that Lentfoehr’s friendship with Merton was central in her life and even the focus of much of her life’s work. But how important was their friendship to Merton? Not nearly as important as it was to her, I think. Why did Merton dissuade her when she wanted to visit him at Gethsemani? They met only twice in the twenty years that they corresponded. Yet he confided in her – even to the point of sharing something of his relationship with M. Their friendship remains for me something of a mystery and perhaps it will for other readers as well. Nevertheless, Nugent’s story of their friendship is well worth reading. We owe him a debt of gratitude for his meticulous research, engaging narrative, critical perspective, and above all, I think, for allowing Merton and Lentfoehr to tell the story of *their* friendship.