

Micro-Merton for the Lost and Longing

Review of

Thomas Merton: Faithful Visionary

By Michael W. Higgins

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Reviewed by **Robert Grip**

Since 1948, Thomas Merton's life story has been told by many gifted authors, as well as by Merton himself. Many of these accounts could be described as employing a "macro-Merton" technique, examining his life from birth to death. Michael Higgins, however, has chosen to take a "micro-Merton" approach in his compact volume, *Thomas Merton: Faithful Visionary*. Higgins' work highlights the facets of Merton's life that might appeal to a new audience of readers not yet alive at the release of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, the spiritual upheaval of Vatican II, the anti-establishment wave that crested during the Vietnam War, or Merton's sad and ironic last trip home: the peacemaker in a belly of a military plane.

Drawing on research and interviews he conducted over many years, Higgins uses his considerable skill as a masterful story-teller and scholar to describe the "faithful visionary" he discovered through books, journals and, especially, reminiscences by the monk's contemporaries. Higgins describes Merton as "a bundle of contradictions; he was a visionary who sought a new balance, a new harmony, of the creative tensions that define us" (x). It is precisely for this reason that Merton appealed to millions around the world, and continues to attract readers and scholars today. Through his work, Merton was, and still is, one of *us*.

This book follows the example of Merton's prayer from *Thoughts in Solitude* and should appeal to those who feel lost ("I have no idea where I am going"), to those who question their vocations, either secular or religious ("I do not see the road ahead of me") and to those who sense "the spiritual longing of a generation" (29) ("nor do I really know myself").

Higgins divides Merton's life, appropriately, into seven chapters, highlighting Merton's physical and emotional journey through life: "From Prades to Cambridge"; "The Army or the Trappists?"; "Fixed but Restless"; "Abbot Problems"; "The Making of a Moral Prophet"; "Seized Love"; and finally, "Summoned by the East." This volume manages to distill the essence of Merton's life without losing any of its flavor. Higgins adroitly interprets the contentious yet symbiotic relationship between Merton and Abbot James Fox, and examines the fateful hospital visit that led to Merton's relationship with a young nurse that some scholars believe allowed Merton to see what had been previously obscured, "*that he had not allowed himself to be loved*" (Christine Bochen [90]).

Robert Grip is a past President of the International Thomas Merton Society. He has taught journalism for more than twenty-five years at Spring Hill College in Mobile, Alabama, and is currently on the Board of Directors of the Byzantine Catholic Seminary in Pittsburgh, PA. He has been a television news anchor at WALA-TV in Mobile for thirty years.

Faithful Visionary serves both as a good introduction to Merton for new readers as well as an opportunity for those who are familiar with his works to focus on the multiple and compelling turning points in his life.