

## A (Not So) Secret Son of Francis

Review of

*The Franciscan Heart of Thomas Merton:  
A New Look at the Spiritual Inspiration of His Life, Thought, and Writing*

By Daniel P. Horan, OFM

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Reviewed by **Anthony Ciorra**

Daniel Horan's new book, *The Franciscan Heart of Thomas Merton*, makes a significant contribution in developing the breadth and depth of our understanding of his subject. This book surfaces the Franciscan influences on Merton's life, thinking and spirituality. Horan makes a strong case for the Franciscan influence on Merton and backs up his case with clear references to primary sources. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first attempt of an in-depth study of this topic. One walks away from the text with a deeper appreciation of two spiritual giants, Francis of Assisi and Thomas Merton.

It appears that this was a "labor of love" for Horan, who does a masterful job in tapping into the major thinkers in the Franciscan intellectual tradition and demonstrates how this tradition entered into Merton's mind and heart. Francis of Assisi, Duns Scotus and Bonaventure are the three major influences from the tradition that Merton references and develops in his writings and conferences. Horan brings us back to Merton's Columbia University days when his teacher and friend Dan Walsh introduces him to Scotus and later suggests that he join the Friars Minor when he was discerning a possible vocation to the priesthood.

Horan draws a clear parallel in the life experiences of Francis and Merton. He leads the reader to sense that there was a synergy between these two great men. They both had a deep conversion experience that was followed by a period of disorientation, as they would make a clear break with their former way of life. Both engaged in a spiritual and psychological struggle before making a vocational choice. The tension of constant growth and ongoing conversion would mark their lives. Their ability to live passionately as they embraced their questions makes them models today for the spiritual journey. It was "Lady Poverty" that led the way to a lasting transformation for both these men. A superficial reading of St. Francis would suggest that he was obsessed with material poverty. On a deeper level, his material poverty was symbolic of an inner poverty, a kenosis (an emptying of self) that led him to change often and to find God in new and unexpected ways. The Francis who wrote the *Canticle of the Creatures* is a different person from the Francis who abhorred lepers before his conversion. It was this same kenosis or self-emptying that became a recurring theme in

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Merton's life as he went through his multiple transformations. The Thomas Merton of *The Asian Journal* is a very different person than the Thomas Merton of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. It was their willingness to enter into ongoing conversion processes that destined these two men to become arguably the most significant spiritual figures of their times. We already know that Francis belongs to the ages and it appears that Merton will join him in that distinction.

When the idea of a religious vocation entered Merton's mind, his first impulse was to join the Friars Minor of Holy Name Province (to which Horan himself belongs). The author gives a clear and fair explanation of the saga that led to Merton's acceptance and then later rejection by the Friars. This major disappointment was a detour that providentially led him to accept a teaching position at St. Bonaventure College in 1940. It was at Bonaventure that Merton would make two important discoveries, i.e., the Franciscan Intellectual Tradition and the Cistercian Order. Here he would begin a journey of integrating his Franciscan and Cistercian impulses that would culminate in his life-long mission as a spiritual teacher for the ages.

At St. Bonaventure he lived in a Franciscan culture that nourished his spiritual and intellectual life. Fr. Philotheus Boehner, a noted Franciscan scholar and founder of the Franciscan Institute at the college, befriended Merton and introduced him to Franciscan texts, i.e., the works of St. Bonaventure, Duns Scotus and William of Ockham. These texts had a lasting impact on his personal life and are reflected in many of his published works and conferences. Merton also had a deep admiration for Fr. Irenaeus Herscher, the college librarian. Not only did Fr. Irenaeus give him access to the valuable library collection, but also became a role model as a genuine follower of St. Francis of Assisi.

Although Merton was not accepted into the First Order, he came into the Franciscans through the Third Order (today called "Secular Franciscans"). As a result of the relationships he formed with the friars at St. Bonaventure and his study of Franciscan texts, he was received into the Third Order in 1941. This not only solidified his rootedness in the Franciscan Intellectual Tradition but also nuanced his understanding of his recently found Catholic faith. In the subsequent months he continued to wrestle with his vocation as he considered a full-time ministry at Friendship House in Harlem. However, it soon became clear to him that he would enter the Cistercian Order at Gethsemani, Kentucky. He left St. Bonaventure as a member of the Franciscan family, referring to St. Francis as "my Holy Father, Francis." In the final two sections of the book, Horan cites specific texts that demonstrate how the Franciscan influence in Merton's writings is clearly seen. He correctly notes that Merton had a special attraction to Scotus that he demonstrates in his reflections on the true/false self and the centrality of the Incarnation. His understanding of St. Bonaventure, especially his *Journey of the Soul into God*, is reflected in his writings on contemplating the beauty of God in the created world. Merton's passion for peace and inter-religious dialogue is discussed in the final pages of the book. Horan shows Merton, not just borrowing from the Franciscan tradition, but developing it in a Cistercian context that makes application to contemporary issues. The maturity of Merton is seen in his later years as he embraces the social concerns of his day as well as turning to the East to expand his understanding of God. One can see Franciscan footprints blossoming in these issues that absorbed Merton's attention in his final years. Merton acknowledges this when he wrote in 1966, "I will always feel that I am still in some secret way a son of St. Francis. There is no saint in the Church whom I admire more than St. Francis" (xix).

Horan makes his case and he makes it well. If there are shortcomings, these are due to the limitations of time and space. I wish Horan had spent more time drawing parallels on the centrality

of contemplation in Merton and St. Bonaventure. I would also have been interested in Merton's Thomistic leanings and how he creatively embraces both Thomas and Bonaventure. If there is one thing that disappointed me it is that Horan does not discuss the mystical element, similarities and differences, in Francis, Bonaventure, Scotus and Merton. Maybe he might address these issues in his next book. In the meantime, I highly recommend this book and thank Daniel P. Horan, OFM for the contribution he has made to the scholarly research of Merton's life and legacy.