

Merton Distilled and Applied

Review of

30 Days with Thomas Merton – Words of Contemplation and Hope

Selected and edited by Connie Clark

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32 pages / \$2.95 paper

Reviewed by **Michael Brennan**

Through the years, small books have appeared that draw upon the wisdom of Thomas Merton as an aid to deepening one's spiritual life. The "Bridges to Contemplative Living with Thomas Merton" series, published by Ave Maria Press in 2010, is probably the most scholarly, wide-ranging and ecumenical effort. There are several offerings titled *Praying with* or *On Retreat with* Thomas Merton from such well-known authors as Basil Pennington, Anthony Padovano and Esther de Waal, as well as an amazingly comprehensive *Pocket Thomas Merton* (Shambhala Pocket Classics) edited by Robert Inchausti.

Twenty-third Publications has produced *30 Days with Thomas Merton – Words of Contemplation and Hope*, a 32-page pocket-sized booklet that taps into eight of Merton's best works. Structured like "Bridges" but limited to a very brief Merton quotation (usually one sentence), a passage from Scripture, a Prayer and a suggested Action, *30 Days* offers readers a distilled approach to Merton that some may find too glancing to be meaningful. But the booklet's editor, Connie Clark, makes no pretense of profundity, saying in the introduction, "Here you will find a few small drops from the deep well of Merton's extraordinary and paradoxical complexity and simplicity" (1). The booklet is oriented toward Christians, without the ecumenical and interfaith dimension found in "Bridges," though its message of "Contemplation and Hope" is open to all.

While the "Bridges" series is designed with group discussion in mind, *30 Days* is for individual reflection. The selections are culled, mainly, from the early Merton, with eight from *No Man Is an Island* (1955), five from *Thoughts in Solitude* (1958), and four each from *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948), *New Seeds of Contemplation* (1961) and *Life and Holiness* (1963). All the material is very accessible. A few selections are truncated, including the opening one on "The Interior Life" (#1) from *The Seven Storey Mountain* and the entry on "Nature" (#12) from *Conjectures of Guilty Bystander*, which reads: "How absolutely central is the truth that we are first of all *part of nature*" – whereas the full quotation continues, "though we are a very special part, that which is conscious of God."

All the Scripture passages will be eminently familiar, and the prayers are simple and direct, each one echoing the Merton passage at the top of every page. One example: the page headed "Living"

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(#19) begins with the statement: “The spiritual life is first of all a life. It is not merely something to be known and studied, it is to be lived” (*Thoughts in Solitude*). The Prayer reads: “Lord, sometimes I admit that my prayer is just words, repeated over and over. Sometimes my thoughts are far from my prayer. Sometimes my actions have neither prayer nor thought. Help me gather it all in. Make my spiritual life one with my active life. Make my prayer real, my thoughts real, and my actions real. I ask all this in your holy name.”

While these passages reflect a contemplative Merton, the closing “Action” component invites the reader to apply Merton’s words to one’s life. In this respect, it challenges the reader to go deeper. For example, the Action in the section on “Tension” (#26) suggests: “I will roll up my sleeves and find a new way to experience new life, whether by planting seeds, helping a new parent, supporting a shelter for unwed mothers, or just getting some good earth beneath my fingernails.” The Action in the section on “Charity” (#22) suggests, “I will say a quiet prayer for the first random stranger I encounter today.” One is reminded of Merton’s words in *The Seven Storey Mountain*: “My mind goes back with great reverence to the thought of those clean, ancient stone cloisters, those low and might arches hewn and set in place by monks who have perhaps prayed me where I now am.”

The 4"x6" softcover booklet sells for \$2.95 and, according to the publisher, was issued “in celebration of the 100th anniversary of the birth of this influential spiritual leader.” As a snapshot introduction to Merton, *30 Days with Thomas Merton – Words of Contemplation and Hope* may be of particular interest to parishes, retreat centers and ITMS chapters. It may well pique the curiosity of the spiritually hungry and inspire them to explore further the Merton books that are the sources of the brief but pithy selections encountered here.