

One of “Tom’s Guardian Angels”

Review of

Called to Service: The Untold Story of Father Irenaeus Herscher, OFM

By Kathy Petersen Cecala

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Reviewed by **Thomas T. Spencer**

To readers of *The Seven Storey Mountain* he will always be remembered as the happy, bespectacled Franciscan librarian at St. Bonaventure College who, when first introduced to Thomas Merton, repeatedly called him “Mr. Myrtle.” This humorous introduction marked the beginning of a lifelong friendship. Merton’s time at St. Bonaventure was brief, but Irenaeus Herscher, OFM quickly became an important person in Merton’s life. He was a mentor, and Merton’s close friend Bob Lax referred to him as part of “Tom’s Guardian Angels” at St. Bonaventure. He, along with Fr. Philotheus Boehner, Fr. Thomas Plassmann and others, would do much to assist Merton on his personal and spiritual journey at a critical time in his life.

Irenaeus Herscher will always be linked with Merton, but as Kathy Petersen Cecala demonstrates in *Called to Serve: The Untold Story of Father Irenaeus Herscher, OFM*, that is only one chapter in a life dedicated to Franciscanism, scholarship and academia. Born Joseph Herscher in Strasbourg, France, he immigrated to New Jersey with his family in 1913. Entering the Franciscan novitiate at the age of 18, he was ordained a priest in the Order Friars Minor in 1931, taking Irenaeus as his name in religion. Assigned to teach St. Bonaventure College, he soon became assistant librarian, earning a bachelor’s degree in Library Science from Columbia University in the process. In 1937 he assumed the position of head librarian, overseeing the new Friedsam Library on campus. In 1939 he had his well-documented meeting with Merton, who came to the library with Bob Lax and Ed Rice in search of scholarly books.

Part of the “Untold Story” Peterson tells is Herscher’s little-known career as a Franciscan scholar and writer, and professional librarian. He published countless articles and bibliographies on Franciscan history, while also writing frequently for professional publications such as the *Catholic School Journal*, *Catholic Library World* and *Library Journal*. For a brief while in the late 1940s he achieved national notoriety when he circulated a prayer entitled “The Bride’s Prayer”; he did not write the prayer, but through his direct and indirect agency it was published by over 2,000 newspapers in the United States and overseas and resonated with readers far and wide. As head librarian for over thirty years he worked tirelessly to promote the library and the university, while enlarging the library’s collections. His many contacts with benefactors proved beneficial. His

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friendship with a local, wealthy oil man, T. E. Hanley, led to a substantial donation of paintings and rare documents and books. Cecala puts to rest the false impression some held that Herscher was simply a “slightly dotty, absent-minded cleric” (69).

Merton scholars will find the author’s treatment of Herscher’s and Merton’s relationship informative. Much of the story is already known from Merton’s own autobiography, but Cecala provides additional insights. When Merton died in 1968 Herscher was presumably the only member still on the University staff or faculty who had known him personally. Consequently Irenaeus soon became a sought-after source for Merton’s time at St. Bonaventure. He enjoyed telling stories to anyone who would listen and, as the author notes, he worked very hard at keeping the legend of Thomas Merton at St. Bonaventure alive, sometimes “embellishing” the facts and falling prey occasionally to “literary invention.” The large pasture among the woods overlooking the campus allegedly was a spot where Merton used to walk on his many hikes around the hills of Allegany and Olean. It was a university tradition that students hike there at least once before their graduation. There is no conclusive evidence Merton ever walked there, but Irenaeus is credited with the story’s invention and its designation as “Merton’s Heart.”

Following the publication of *Seven Storey Mountain* and Merton’s emergence as a prolific and popular spiritual writer, Herscher realized the future literary and historical significance of his friend’s papers and manuscripts. Merton left some papers and journals, along with much of his personal library, with Irenaeus when he departed for Gethsemani in 1941, including a draft of his unpublished novel “The Labyrinth.” As they corresponded over the years, Irenaeus collected from Merton other manuscript material and articles the author was happy to send. This provided the foundation for a significant Merton archive at the university that still exists today. Merton, on the other hand, sometimes relied on Herscher when he needed something for his research and the librarian gladly obliged. On one occasion he asked Irenaeus to edit out of one of his yet unpublished journals (January 3, 1941) a remark he thought might be interpreted as “uncharitable.” On New Year’s Day, 1966 he wrote Irenaeus stating he had been given permission to set up his own hermitage. He asked him to send him an article in the *Antonianum* he had read at St. Bonaventure twenty-five years earlier on how to set up a hermitage. In addition, Herscher’s friendship with Bob Lax and Naomi Burton Stone, Merton’s literary agent, also resulted in the Friedsam Library obtaining their valuable papers. Herscher was responsible for making St. Bonaventure one of the more significant repositories for Merton research.

Cecala’s work is part memoir. She knew Irenaeus well when she was an SBU student and library worker, and she is perceptive in capturing his character and personality. He was quiet, humble, unassuming and at times almost shy, yet he enjoyed people and when engaged was affable and witty. He was optimistic, kind, gentle and helpful. In one letter Merton told Herscher “I have not forgotten your willingness to go out of your way to help others.” Most of all, he was trusting. Merton relates in *Seven Storey Mountain* that Irenaeus was little concerned with “red tape” or the security of the library’s holdings, noting how “with reckless trust” he abandoned the shelves to Merton and his friends with no limit on the books they could take. He describes signing only “a vague sort of ticket.” Twenty-five years later the library still operated more on the code of trust and honor than formal security procedures such as a burglar-alarm system or library guard. That changed in October 1968 when two students attempted to stay in the library after closing

to dramatize the library's vulnerability to theft, especially the priceless artwork that adorned the library reading room. Although Irenaeus still maintained the chance of theft was remote, security did become more rigorous following the incident.

In February 1970 the university president requested Herscher's resignation as head librarian, citing mandatory retirement guidelines in the faculty handbook. Cecala feels there may have been more to the story and notes what she sees as the university's shift to become more non-sectarian. She also states that some school officials were concerned with Irenaeus's "forgetfulness" and "spells of bad health." If he was upset about his removal, he did not say so publicly, stating only it was time to "make room for new blood." He remained as librarian emeritus and continued to be active in the library and the community until his death in 1981.

Alumni of St. Bonaventure and those interested in the history of the university will find Cecala's book worthwhile. The story of Irenaeus Herscher's life is also the story of St. Bonaventure and she provides many anecdotes and details relating to the college and university during Herscher's tenure as head librarian and afterward. One story of interest is the creation of a university retreat center located in the hills a short drive from campus. Herscher wanted the retreat center named for Merton. He was extremely disappointed when the administration decided to name it Mt. Irenaeus, and Cecala details well his disappointment.

A few minor errors bear correcting, although they do not detract from the quality of her work. The uprising over intervisitation of dormitories and the burning of a campus storage barn that she describes (110) occurred in the fall of 1970, not 1972. This reviewer is grateful for the kind words describing him (123), but to set the record straight, he spent many wonderful hours in the Friedsam Library but never was employed a reference librarian. He did write a tribute to Irenaeus in 1983, but the beautiful words contained in the lengthy single-spaced quotation are not from that tribute, but from the *Provincial Annals* (Holy Name Province) (123). Only the last part of the quotation, on Irenaeus's influence on Merton's vocation, is from this reviewer's tribute.

Called to Serve is an enjoyable read. It was obviously a labor of love for the author. She documents well Herscher's relationship with Merton, his significant achievements, and his important contributions to St. Bonaventure University. In doing so she captures the essence of his personality and the many virtues that endeared him to so many, including Thomas Merton.