

Wise Teacher, Fellow Seeker, Spiritual Friend

Review of
Peace Smiles: Rediscovering Thomas Merton
 By Fintan Monahan
 Dublin: Veritas, 2020
 120 pp./\$12.84

Reviewed by **Judith Valente**

For those looking for a quick but comprehensive overview of the biography and writings of Thomas Merton, Fintan Monahan has written a most companionable addition to this body of work. Monahan is bishop of Killaloe in County Clare, Ireland and writes as well of how Merton influenced his own spiritual development starting with his early days in the seminary, demonstrating once again that Merton's thought reaches across generations and beyond international borders.

The Foreword to *Peace Smiles*, written by Maire Aine Ni Mhainnin, describes *Peace Smiles* as a "reader-friendly and straightforward introduction to Merton's life and writings [and] timely reminder that Thomas Merton remains a compelling prophet for our times" (9). The book lives up to that promise. The title comes from a passage in *The Sign of Jonas*, written in the lead-up to Merton's ordination, where he writes, "So much do I love this solitude that when I walk out along the road to the old buildings, delight begins to overpower me from head to foot and peace smiles even in the marrow of my bones" (11).

Some of Monahan's most affecting passages are those in which he relates his personal journey to Merton's writings, something with which many of us can identify as we recall our own first "aha" moment of Merton discovery. "There is something about the delight that Thomas Merton felt in rambling around the grounds of his monastery's old buildings that speaks to my own sense of place and where I was when I first read about him," Monahan writes, adding that he was "deeply moved, even overpowered" by the *The Seven Storey Mountain*. "Looking back on that happy memory, I can still feel a peace that smiles in the marrow of my own bones. Back then, and ever since I have remained hooked on Merton" (15).

Monahan does a fine job of taking us through the early life of the man who eventually becomes a spiritual master. However, he doesn't just rehash elements that would be familiar to even the casual Merton reader. His exploration of Merton's life is perhaps most satisfying when he adds personal perspective, gleaned from his own efforts to live as a contemplative priest. Writing of

Judith Valente, former on-air correspondent for PBS-TV and former staff writer for *The Wall Street Journal*, is current vice president of the International Thomas Merton Society. She is the author of several spirituality titles including *How to Be: A Monk & A Journalist Reflect on Living & Dying, Purpose & Prayer, Forgiveness & Friendship* and *The Art of Pausing*, both co-written with Paul Quenon, OCSO, as well as *How to Live: What The Rule of St. Benedict Teaches Us about Happiness, Meaning and Community*, the memoir *Atchison Blue* and two collections of poetry. She is a lay associate of Mount St. Scholastica Monastery in Atchison, KS and lives with her husband, retired Illinois Judge Charles Reynard, in Normal, Illinois.

Merton's untimely death by accidental electrocution in Bangkok in 1968, Monahan muses: "I can only imagine what a second autobiography might have been like had Merton lived and had time to harvest a lifetime of monastic life, deep prayer and contemplation. . . . I speculate that the original seven would have been exceeded by the addition of many more storeys" (44). Noting the famous words that complete Merton's autobiography, "*Sit finis libri, non finis quaerendi*" ("This may be the end of the book, but not the end of the quest"), Monahan notes: "Such words are immortal and we should take them to ourselves as the compass by which we navigate the voyage of our own lives of faith" (44).

Monahan doesn't attempt to catalogue themes found in Merton's subsequent major books, such as *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, *Raids on the Unspeakable* and *No Man Is an Island*. Still, he manages to delve into Merton's major preoccupations, such as prayer, silence, solitude, the search for the true self, the writing life and nature. The book contains a delightful section on "Merton the Artist" (46-55) an aspect that sometimes receives short shrift in describing Merton's multi-faceted genius. Monahan points out that some of Merton's closest and most long-lasting friendships were with fellow students from his time at Columbia University who became celebrated for their creative work, such as abstract artist Ad Reinhardt, poet Robert Lax and writer Ed Rice. There is even an entertaining section on an all-black painting that Reinhardt offers Merton to send Merton in 1957 as a gift.

A chapter on "Social Issues: Then and Now" (76-83) makes good on Monahan's intent to show why Merton's writings remain as relevant as ever. The chapter correlates Merton's outpouring in the last decade of his life on the social issues of his day – including race, nuclear weapons, war and non-violence – to his famous 1958 Epiphany at Fourth and Walnut Streets in Louisville. It was there, watching a stream of passersby, that Merton experienced an intense intuition of his connection with his fellow human beings – one that not even the silence and solitude of his Trappist life could overcome. "It was like waking from a dream of separateness, or spurious self-isolation in a special world," Merton later wrote of that moment. The fact that we continue to grapple with the same issues that disquieted Merton in the sixties underscores why Merton's voice remains as prophetic as ever.

In a chapter titled "Living with Merton" (84-97), Monahan includes some recollections from those who personally knew Merton and adds to these his reflections on Merton's legacy within his own life. He quotes author and peace activist Jim Forest, whom Merton mentored, and who suggests Merton's enduring appeal springs from the fact that he is someone to whom most of us in some way can relate. "We recognize in him someone whose struggles with various demons (success, fame, sensual pleasure, the quest for greener pastures) are not hugely different from our own," Forest says (94).

Monahan concludes his book with an appetizer tray from Merton's writings, including poems and prayers as well as some of the well-known and lesser-known passages from his spirituality titles. There is also a fine bibliography at the end that will serve newcomers to Merton well, as well as those looking to add to their collection of books and articles by and about Merton.

Monahan ends with "A Poem for Merton" (120) that he penned, which is a fitting coda to a book that is essentially a long letter of appreciation for a wise teacher, a fellow seeker and spiritual friend:

Thomas,
The world claimed you as its own.
You allowed none but the angels to claim you.
You lie serenely entombed in your monk's habit:
At home.
Affirming what you always knew.

Sleep now Tom of the Anawim – hush-a-bye little one.
A lullaby of Kentucky guides you home.