

REVIEWS

KEEPING A SPIRITUAL JOURNAL WITH THOMAS MERTON:

A Personal Book of Days

Selected and Edited by Naomi Burton Stone
Photographs by Catherine Hopkins
Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1987
Unpaged -- \$14.95

Reviewed by **Mary Luke Tobin, S.L.**

One of the entries in this newest offering from the writings of Thomas Merton is a selection Merton himself cherished from an early Christian writer. I quote it here to set a mood for savoring many delightful gems, mostly from the pen of Merton himself. " 'Not to run from one thought to the next,' says Theophane the Recluse, 'but to give each one time to settle in the heart.' " Allowing the thoughts in this journal to settle in the heart will be the pleasant task of the reflective reader.

The book's arrangement itself is pleasing. Each page begins with a carefully chosen quote from among the wide variety of Merton's works tapped for a selection. Also, each page has space for writing one's personal reflections beneath the quote. One can use the book year after year since the entries are not dated as in a calendar, but are divided according to days of the week. "Week One, Sunday," for example, heads the first page. All the sources are listed, and easily located in the front of the book.

The task of selecting more than a hundred choice passages from such a prolific writer as Thomas Merton is understandably difficult. Merton's range of interests was incredibly diverse. My own preferences would lean toward setting six or seven themes and grouping quotations around them. But that arrangement would perhaps lose something of the rich variety which the book manifests.

It is gratifying to note that many selections are taken from Merton's letters, as published in *The Hidden Ground of Love* (the first volume of his

selected letters). These quotes may be unfamiliar to many readers, and hence may entice a reader to a fuller acquaintance with the letters. Selections appear from a wide variety of Merton's works, including early and late publications. One beautiful quote, generously shared by the editor of the volume, Naomi Burton Stone, follows: "Don't worry about what kind of Catholic you will be What God wants is your heart."

I am happy to see that several selections appear from a little known work of Merton's, *Opening the Bible*. For example, Merton reminds us that "the prophets themselves protested in God's name, against the perversion of the word of God in the interests of sectarianism, nationalism, power, politics." And again: "There is nothing comfortable about the Bible Have we ceased to question the book and be questioned by it?" And "All through the Bible we find the groundwork of a theology of liberation and resistance, even in the historical situation of the Jews and of the first Christians."

The following are some selections which are appealing to this reviewer. Each reader, of course, will flag his or her special choices.

- On Trust in God:* Certainly we know all will be well, but the ways in which God makes it well are apt to be difficult for us.
- On Environment:* The same type of absurd logic that drives us to nuclear adventures is driving us to spray thousands of acres with something that does not effectively eliminate the insect we are getting at, but does eliminate the birds that otherwise would eat the insect we don't like. Very important.
- On Inner Change:* God takes our whole life, and transforms it from within, and leaves it exteriorly what it is: ordinary.
- On Being a Christian:* The first obligation of the Christian is to maintain one's freedom from all superstition, all blind taboos, and religious formalities.
- On Relationships:* You can see the beauty of Christ in each individual person, in that which is most each one's, most human, most personal to him or her, in things which an ascetic might advise you most sternly to get rid of.
- On World Change:* For the world to be changed, we ourselves must begin to change it. We must step forth and make a new kind of history. The change begins within ourselves.
- On War:* The great peril of the cold war is the progressive deadening of conscience.

On Prayer: We do not pray in order to receive just any answer; it must be God's answer.
Never was a deeply honest and simple life of prayer more necessary. It is about all there is left. But people don't trust God either.
My prayer is then a kind of praise rising up out of the center of Nothing and Silence.
The first essential step of a true life of prayer is freedom.

I expect this book to enjoy wide readership. Journal-keeping is a popular device today for many serious pilgrims in the search for spiritual growth. This book provides a means, not only for shaping one's daily reflection and for readjusting one's resolves from month to month, but also for meeting the challenge of Merton's profound thinking. The book will be much quoted.

In Merton's last years he enjoyed recording many of his ruminations on tape. Sometimes he would read a few lines of his own poetry, sometimes a revision of them, sometimes a favorite passage from his reading. On one of these tapes, Merton reflects that it might be better to allow varied rich, provocative thoughts to stand on their own as a sort of mosaic rather than weaving them into a contrived whole. A new understanding might then emerge from the very mosaic itself. In this book indeed one can create one's own mosaic; the unplanned-for personal insights derived from such a process await us all.

THE ALASKAN JOURNAL OF THOMAS MERTON

Edited with an Introduction by Robert E. Daggy
Isla Vista, California: Turkey Press, 1987
88 pages -- Limited Edition [140 copies]* -- \$175.00

Reviewed by **Lawrence S. Cunningham**

1968 was a year of travel for Thomas Merton. Besides the now famous Asian journey there were two other major trips: one in the Spring to

* New Directions will issue a trade paperback edition of *The Alaskan Journal* in 1989, approximately one year after the publication of the limited edition.