

but it is no mystery that after reading this volume we can say with some degree of certainty that the Trappist monk found in India and in Asia what he had been obscurely seeking for decades in his own spiritual quest in the West. This is another way to say that the central message of this book lies in the simple affirmation that we can find our true selves in the otherness of a foreign culture or religion by sharing a spiritual affinity that may be foreign to dogmatic followers in both traditions. As the Second Vatican Council recognized, the wisdom found within these Asian traditions is valid. Why? The Spirit blows in mysterious ways. Sometimes it comes from the West, sometimes it comes from the East. And Merton is well known for having built a great spiritual bridge with every religious tradition that he encountered, no matter how problematic some of their followers found their disputed theological questions. This final *Fons Vitae* volume will become a great addition to any collector of books on interfaith dialogue and comparative mysticism. Keep it on your shelves, even if you are not ready to read it in its entirety. As Merton did, you may discover its personal significance at different points along your life's journey.

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HILLIS, Gregory K., *Man of Dialogue: Thomas Merton's Catholic Vision* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2021), pp. xviii, 297. ISBN: 978-0-8146-8460-3 (paper) \$24.95.

It may come as a surprise to no one that we are living in an increasingly polarized world, particularly in the United States. It's quite common to see people being very selective with whose opinions they consume (whether by reading, listening and/or watching) and cutting out friends and even family members who do not fit their idea of what is "right" behavior or thoughts. As the increase of echo chambers seems likely to continue (regardless of one's beliefs), many people might ask: what use is there in dialogue? Who should or should not be dialogued with? Gregory K. Hillis' new book *Man of Dialogue: Thomas Merton's Catholic Vision* makes an excellent case for Thomas Merton's Catholicity and how Catholics and other persons of faith can learn from him how to dialogue by embracing the uniqueness of their respective traditions.

Hillis' book begins with an introduction (1-14) that serves two primary functions: to inform readers of his own relationship with the writings of Merton and to make the case for identifying Merton as a Catholic. Hillis' engagement with Merton's work stretches back over twenty years, and by personalizing his relationship with Merton, Hillis identifies the importance

of self-understanding, discerning one's vocation and personal growth as key characteristics of how readers can understand Merton's writings during the latter's lifetime. As Merton grew older, his thought changed from being "more insular" to "turning his gaze in a more sustained way toward the world as well as to other ways of thinking" (4-5). Hillis points out that these two periods of Merton's life reflect the importance of his Catholic identity:

in order to understand Merton, we need to understand more thoroughly how his thought was intertwined with his identity as a Catholic priest and emerged out of a thorough immersion in the church's liturgical, theological, and spiritual tradition. We shall see that his vision of a church characterized by genuine encounter and dialogue, a church that actively works for justice and peace, is one that developed in conversation with the church's tradition, not against it. (10)

Readers of Merton know that the corpus of his works is vast and concerned with many different subjects; for those who are new to Merton, Hillis discusses nearly all of Merton's popular published works, along with his novitiate conference notes, private journals and letters. The introduction concludes with summaries of chapters that deal with topics as diverse as Merton's conversion, liturgy, his understanding of the priesthood, his Marian devotion, racism and his relationships to Eastern religions. Hillis closes the chapter with an astute observation that "Merton drew upon that tradition as he called upon the church to be characterized above all by generous love in imitation of Jesus Christ" (14).

In the opening chapter (15-54) describing Merton's conversion story (or perhaps more accurately conversion stories), readers come to understand that Merton's time at Columbia University brought his first major exposure to Catholicism. Merton's searching through theology and philosophy reveals an important concept known as *aseitas* or aseity. Hillis identifies Merton's reading of medieval philosopher Étienne Gilson and the importance of aseity as follows:

the concept of aseity stipulates that God is completely other – completely different in being – than the created order in that God exists without cause. Existing as completely other than us, God transcends all our conceptions, all our ways of describing who God is. God is not an object within the universe. God transcends the universe as one without cause who gives existence to that which exists. Merton immediately understood from this concept that everything he thought Catholics believed about God was untrue because the God he thought

Catholics worshiped is a being that simply cannot exist. (19)

This recognition of God's limitless nature affected Merton deeply and, subsequently, affected his devotion both to the Eucharist and to a burgeoning calling to the priesthood. Hillis explores how both times spent before the Eucharist in adoration and on a trip to Cuba served as primary catalysts for Merton's ultimate decision to enter consecrated religious life. The Eucharist, the Body and Blood of Christ, was becoming an important part of Merton's spirituality, and Merton's trip to Cuba and mystical experience in the Church of Saint Francis in Havana made him realize that the Eucharist is also understood as "a manifestation of God's love, a love that went beyond intellectual knowledge" (41). This understanding would go on to ground Merton's priesthood, his time as a novice master, and his later relationships with others from different faith traditions.

After returning from Cuba (and suffering doubts concerning his vocation), Merton made a critical decision: "he was going to live out the monastic life as fully as he could while living in the world. . . . He adopted a semi-monastic life, spending long periods of time in solitude and in prayer" (44-45). Hillis further expands on how once Merton finally arrived at Gethsemani, his devotion both to the Eucharist and the liturgy deepened: "a life centered around the Eucharist, around the liturgy that manifests that generous love of God, is a life that takes one out of one's self in generous love toward others. It is, in other words, a life dominated by love" (47). While not all persons are called to the life of being a priest and consecrated religious (as Merton was), Catholics especially are called to have the Eucharist as the source and summit of faith. The liturgy (particularly the Mass) is one of the highest expressions of Eucharistic faith, but as Merton's conversion and early experiences show us, a generous love for others is also something that comes from recognizing God's presence in the Eucharist, a truth that Hillis' book makes clear.

Hillis writes of how before his deeper turn to the world (and his expression for love through justice), Merton showed his love of others during his ten years serving as a novice master at Gethsemani (79-112). This role required Merton to give "regular classes (referred to as conferences) on theology, church history, monasticism, as well as on numerous other topics. The novice master also met individually with each novice to provide spiritual direction as the new monk oriented his life to the monastic schedule and discerned whether he was called to be a monk" (79). For Merton, being novice master would have been important for two primary reasons; first, this figure would be responsible for helping monks learn through both heart and mind. Novices would need to learn

many aspects of doctrine, morals and philosophy while also being tasked with attempting to understand the presence of God in their life. This role required one to be intelligent, pastoral and understanding of what novices could be experiencing as they transitioned from the laity to monastic life.

Second, as Hillis' book also details, Merton served as novice master during one of his several vocation crises: whether to stay at Gethsemani or to become either a Carthusian or Camaldolese hermit. The latter move would likely have resulted in Merton having to move to Italy *and* having a greater focus on solitude and contemplation (or so Merton thought: cf. 81-86). Despite these challenges, Merton's role as a novice master, spiritual director and teacher could be summarized as "to give space for the Spirit to work, recognizing the dignity and uniqueness of each person and of the work that God was going to do in them" (92). This approach would later serve Merton well in the second half of his life as he turned more to the world.

In dialoguing with others, Merton would have been confronted by persons who would ask him many different questions about his views on life, on Catholicism, on how to grow closer to God and on social injustice. These are subjects and issues that many struggle with today. What makes Merton remarkable is the genuine effort he put forth in loving others; one of his largest critiques of the Catholic Church (likely a critique that could still be levied today) is that "The church looks far too much like the world and so has ceased to become a countercultural witness to another way of being, to God's way of being. The Church focuses on power, authority, and obedience, as if these were the only things that were to characterize the Body of Christ" (260). The Body of Christ is an entity that stretches across thousands of years of history; it includes numerous nations, ethnicities and world cultures. Its representation can best be described as a paradox; how can the Son of God become incarnate in a human body? How can victory over death be won by a crucifixion? How can persons be supported when many systems decry their very humanity? Merton was not alone in his attempts to answer these questions; indeed, these matters and many like them are questions that likely will confront humanity perpetually. However, to answer these questions, the church can and should be countercultural. It cannot rely on what is popular or what is forced (regardless of one's political persuasion) to be an arbiter of truth. Rather, it is something that is determined on love of the good for all persons. For Merton, this was a paradox: he embraced the belief that the Roman Catholic Church embodied the fullness of God and was the best way for humans to come to know God. However, this did not mean that Merton thought that other religions did not have value or allow

persons to encounter God differently.

As already noted, one of the primary ways that Merton approached others in his life was by understanding the importance of dialogue as needing to be grounded both in the Eucharist and in genuine love of others. Those currently living in an increasingly polarized time can and do question whether dialogue is something that should be important. We might ask ourselves how we can discuss with those with whom we disagree; for Hillis, an important way of viewing dialogue is “to engage in the decidedly otherworldly and countercultural activity of approaching the other from the standpoint of love. It is to seek to transcend the limitations of selfish individualism that characterizes a fallen world” (237). If we are to work to see a better world with the hope of better things to come once our time on this earth has passed, then we are required to sacrifice our own egos and desires at the door. We are required to embrace our differences and do the difficult work to embrace those with whom we might vehemently disagree. As Merton understood and as Hillis illustrates in *Man of Dialogue: Thomas Merton’s Catholic Vision*, this is the cross that we must bear today and in times to come.

Anthony Nuccio

OYER, Gordon, *Signs of Hope: Thomas Merton’s Letters on Peace, Race, and Ecology*, Foreword by William Apel (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2021), pp. xix, 275. ISBN: 978-1-62698-430-1 (paper) \$30.00.

The word “hope” is like a dark room in which one sits, waiting. One is waiting either for a light to come on or for someone to walk in through a door. What one is waiting for is a delivery of meaning; and then, maybe some help in figuring out what to do with that meaning. One may tire of waiting and go outside looking, not necessarily for the meaning, let alone the thing itself, but for at least some signs pointing in what might be, we hope, the right direction. Gordon Oyer’s *Signs of Hope* is an encouragement to live in this world, not leave it. It is not a book for tourists; it is a book for folks who would like to live in the deepest depths of an interrelational world. The very thought seems to be enough to scare some people to death, which is why Oyer turns to the letters of Thomas Merton as a way to identify signs of hope that are expressible, readable, relatable.

Many readers of *The Merton Annual* are likely already familiar with Oyer’s earlier book, *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest*,<sup>1</sup> which won the 2015 “Louie” Award given by the International Thomas Merton Soci-

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1. Gordon Oyer, *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest: Merton, Berrigan, Yoder, and Muste at the Gethsemani Abbey Peacemakers Retreat* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014).