

REVIEWS

Thomas Merton

THE SCHOOL OF CHARITY:

The Letters of Thomas Merton

on Religious Renewal & Spiritual Direction

Edited with an Introduction by Brother Patrick Hart

Preface by William H. Shannon

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Reviewed by **Jonathan Montaldo**

Whether for reasons of the heart or for affections of the intellect, whether traumatized by the certainties of *The Seven Storey Mountain* or engaged by the ambiguities of the zen-toned *Day of a Stranger*, with varying degrees of emotional and critical intensity readers continue to be seduced and constrained by Thomas Merton's presentation of himself and his experience. Merton himself suggested the existence of "two Mertons," corresponding to his writing's appeal to two separate audiences: one traditional and spiritual, who preferred his early testaments; the other radical and poetic and more attuned to his later cables. The first audience freeze-framed Merton's constructed image of himself as a "hard-line strict observance Trappist" and judged his writing's progress to issues of social justice and national politics as a threatening diminution of his monastic commitment. Merton's second audience, present to his writing specifically for its social and existentialist themes, tended to regard his monastic life as a youthful aberration, a romantic accident, a mistake he was outgrowing. This audience would criticize Merton's option for a solitary life as a copout from a practical commitment to solving the world's problems. The underlying criticism common to the view of both audiences was that Merton was failing to live in the ideal categories of his published thought. By temperament enthusiastic for the passing idea or person, by intellect peripatetic

and open to diverse influences, Merton toward the end of his life realized he had placed himself, as he wrote to Patrick Hart, "in an ideal position to please nobody" (p. 350).

Merton's bifurcation of his appeal to only two separate audiences is, however, facile: there are a "legion of Mertons" as there are individual readers. But during his life and especially since his death, Merton's writing provides much bait to insure his readers catch a perspective of his consciousness of the gulf between the monk and the writer, the Cistercian and the Zen man, the hermit and the social activist. To read Merton is to be forced to navigate between polarities, and since, as Merton knew, "all uncertainties are intolerable" (p. 191), readers move toward a Merton with whom they are most ideally comfortable. Merton is either "monk" or "radical humanist," but not successfully *secundum quid* both.

The gathering of documents in *The School of Charity* provides the occasion for readers to reconsider a Merton "in the middle of things," and to conjecture, in the midst of these letters' both apparent and real contradictions, ambiguities and equivocations, the presence of Merton's specific center of gravity. Ostensibly a segmentation of Merton's letters on religious renewal and spiritual direction, *The School of Charity*, by the felicitous editorial decision to present the letters chronologically rather than by correspondent, is transformed into a Merton journal which chronicles in the main Merton's relationship with his monastic community at Gethsemani, a relationship which remains to this day neither fully understood nor appreciated. In the pages of *The Merton Annual 1* (pp. 347-351) in 1988 John Eudes Bamberger asserted "we do not yet understand very adequately the life of [Merton's] community during his years at Gethsemani, nor the life of Dom James Fox, his abbot for most of his monastic years What is needed is a serious study of the community of Gethsemani during these years, as well as a biography of Dom James." *The School of Charity* is neither of these, but appearing as it does at the literal and perhaps metaphorical center of the projected five volumes of selected Merton letters, this volume does invite attention to the specificity of Merton's embeddedness at Gethsemani, an attention needed before Merton is totally abstracted from his roots and is completely iconized as "transcultural monk" and "universal man" a la A. Reza Arasteh. In the perspective I choose to review it *The School of Charity* is a brief for understanding Merton's consciousness of his monastic vocation, his contribution to the renewal of religious life in the late twentieth century, and the tenor of his efforts to direct others, each within the context of a lifetime of struggle against idolatry.

I. THE "ONLY REAL CITY IN AMERICA" & THE "DISEASE OF ABSOLUTES"

I just have to be myself, to be faithful to His grace, not worry about useless questions, and not want to have a "label" which places me in the eyes of the world, in any spiritual category whatsoever. . . . And if I am tempted to think that I am not in my place, well, it is precisely what He wants. For if one is solitary, one is in "exile" with no place that is really his own.

(To Gabriel Sortais, pp. 81-82)

From his first letter in *The School of Charity*, where he creates an icon of Gethsemani as "that city which is set upon a hill" (p. 3) — he declared Gethsemani to be the "only real city in America" in his autobiography — to the volume's last letter in which he confesses he is "homesick for Gethsemani," though Gethsemani is now simply "the gang" (p. 417), Merton's life-quest for the "right place," the "ideal solution," the "absolute encounter" with himself as he is and God as God is, is central to understanding Merton's monastic vocation. His problems with his vocation — his stability at Gethsemani the most prominent — proceed from his having early made an idol of Gethsemani and of his place within it. In a letter to Augustine Moore concerning the problems of novices, Merton encapsulates his own early struggles:

1) They come in with the jitters in the first place. 2) They come in with a false notion of the monastic life . . . cling to the idea that they have to be something exalted and brilliant . . . 3) Many run into a conflict between ideals and facts. 4) Many try to force their way to sanctity by sheer strain.

(p. 58)

No matter to whom Merton writes in many of these letters and no matter on what specific point Merton criticizes himself as a monk or Gethsemani as a monastery, he consistently holds himself and his monastery to an absolute standard. The "disease of absolutes" was a continuing intellectual problem (p. 191), causing him told and untold anguish, "the personal anguish of traveling a road on which there is a great danger of illusion" (p. 52). This anguish was shared, one can only say conceivably, by those who dealt with Merton on a more than superficial basis both within the Gethsemani community and within the larger community of his correspondents. Merton's correspondents probably often advised him to "relax." His abbot and his monastic colleagues probably spoke of "the Cross," another way of saying "what else did you expect?" And it is no great wonder that Merton regarded his monastic vocation as a call to greater solitude as it is easier to entertain absolutist positions alone rather than being forced to live daily with different absolutist positions held by others.

This judgment is, of course, unfair: it exaggerates and simplifies Merton's motives for the sake of making a point (Merton was himself adept at just such levels of discourse). But it is most unfair when one realizes that Merton was aware and conscious of the ambiguity of his quest for the ideal, if not from the beginning at least from the publication of his autobiography when he became "famous." Amidst the anguish and ambiguities of his less than ideal life at Gethsemani Merton would consistently return to a central intuition by which he understood his vocation:

... the realization that there are problems that one doesn't have to solve. One only has to live in the midst of them, to stay with them, and find God Himself in the mystery which they engender. That has plenty of consequences — a fuller acceptance of Gethsemani and of God's will, without any lessening of desire for solitude. (To Dom James Fox, p. 80)

As he matured in his monastic life, Merton was healthy enough, given grace enough, to realize there could be no "institutional solution" for him, no ideal Gethsemani: "I am realizing more and more that my big task is within myself" (p. 112).

II. THE ROLE OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION: "MAKING THE MONK FROM THE INSIDE OUT"

Very simple and basic facts of the monastic life, such as work in direct contact with nature, solitude in a primitive setting, etc, would provide realities which alone can offset the mental doubts that plague the young monk. The problem is in the mind. As long as the monastic life is too mental and too juridical, and too abstract, it will breed doubt by the very fact that it foments a certain kind of thought. No matter what one may do with the liturgy, ... with observances, or work, or anything else, as long as the monk is encouraged to constantly reflect on himself and be aware of himself in his "role" as monk, he is going to be encouraged to question that role, and his vocation, and its validity. Perhaps the less we are aware of ourselves as monks, the better chance we have of being real monks.

(To Peter Minard, p. 262)

Not just in spite of, but because of Merton's intimacy with the contradictions at the heart of the always muddled "middle way" between the ideal and the real, the letters in *The School of Charity* evidence his practicality in providing spiritual direction to others. Merton did not become a spiritual director easily. Finding his own self-consciousness and solitude with his own thoughts more congenial, his appointment as the director for the young scholastics proved at first an unsettling experience to the "born absolutist":

What embarrasses me most is the duty to direct the students' souls. Since my thoughts are directed to persons concrete and known, and not to the

rather hypothetical reader, I find in it more distraction and contention, and I unwittingly lack fidelity to my particular grace, by endeavoring to adapt myself too much to the tastes of others. There is here, as everywhere, a danger of artificiality, of falseness. (pp. 53-54)

By "my particular grace" Merton means, of course, his vocation to solitude. But his tenures as director of the scholastics and later as master of novices were actual turning points in his happy fall from a too cerebral conception of the monastic life to the common human ground of that life incarnated in the problems, as well as the joys, of others. After experience he could write with some perspective on himself: "For me, it is a quite comforting office, the one of Father Master. I like this work very much, and the novices — and all the same I had always feared such an 'activity,' thinking it would essentially ruin my famous 'contemplative life'" (p. 103).

If in the letters in this volume where Merton is offering requested direction the essence of his approach were to be distilled, it manifests itself in his advice to Sister L., who wanted to transfer to the Trappistines:

But I seriously doubt whether it is practical to go on hoping to become a Trappistine. Such great obstacles seem to show, in actual fact, that this is not God's will for you . . . You must be practical and not let your hopes become a vain escape from the actual responsibilities of the life where you find yourself at the moment. I would therefore accept the difficulties of your present situation as God's will. (p. 129, italics added)

Merton understood by hard experience how humanly easy it is to idolize greener pastures, "other gardens," and thus, at least mentally, evade the present task and the community in which persons find themselves. He never actualized for himself a transfer to the Carthusians or to the Camaldolese or to Solentiname for many reasons, but primarily in the end he stayed at Gethsemani for the most essential and primitive monastic reasons. He agreed with Aelred Graham that "[t]he earliest "commitment" of monks was apparently a promise, made among cenobites, that they would not abandon their work-group. In other words, they undertook to stay with the people with whom they were engaged in a common job" (p. 182).

Much more than a pragmatic surrender to "things as they are," Merton realized the importance of stability in the monastic vocation. He did not agree with Flavian Burns that the solution for those who wished to become hermits was a transfer to another community because:

. . . a man is not ready for solitary life until he has been able to renounce his own tendency to plan his life, and has completely committed himself to his community in a spirit of total faith . . . and the faith will not be deep enough if it cannot be faith that God can and does act through the monk's own community . . . If a monk always has at the back of his mind the proviso that he will one day take off and go somewhere better for a

"higher life," he will never in practice make this surrender and this act of faith, and consequently if he does move, he is likely to lose everything, which is quite frequent . . . Naturally this is all ideal and in practice some may have to go elsewhere perhaps (where????). (pp. 206-207)

Merton had the wisdom and the taste for ambiguity to regard what appeared the expression of a person's essential individuality (by a decision to fulfill their personal deep attractions and desires) as simply "institutional idolatry" in disguise. Any place is the right place if only one is right inside. Trading one robe for another is potentially meaningless. Giving up one label only to replace it with another could eventually prove absurd. As many of Merton's colleagues transferred to other communities or to the lay state, often enduring the suffering which attends "answered prayers," Merton would stay where he was and direct others, if they had the stomach and the faith, to do the same. He wrote Aelred Squire: "For my own part I have no need of further changes — except in myself" (p. 311).

III. RELIGIOUS RENEWAL AS *CONVERSATIO MORUM*: RADICAL TRANSFORMATION IN THE SPIRIT

Thus let this be the burden of my thoughts and their conclusion: I see clearer than ever that I am not a monk, still less a Cistercian monk, and that I have no business making statements that directly affect the conduct of the Cistercian life (except to try to help my novices live without going nuts immediately. I leave them to go nuts when they get to the juniorate.) With this unpleasant clarity I expect to try to live for a few more years, hoping that I will not go nuts myself. This, I think, is about the best I can hope for. It sums up the total of my expectations for the immediate future.

(To Callistus Peterson, 8-4-64, p. 225)

I am, by the grace of God, a monk. A monk of the twentieth century, with his difficulties, which nevertheless are not those of the "young." I am completely convinced of the value of monasticism, and of *traditional* monasticism. (The thing is to understand the "tradition.") I am even more convinced of the role of monasticism in today's world. A prophetic and even charismatic role.

(To Ignace Gillet, 9-11-64, pp. 234-235)

Merton's biographer, Michael Mott, has noted that Merton has suffered at critics' hands by being quoted out of context. Admittedly, the usual critic will quote only what bolsters the critic's argument. But, as the previous two volumes of letters proved, *The School of Charity* with even more clarity (note the chronological proximity of the above quotes) illustrates that Merton wrote empathetically to the context of his correspondents and adjusted his expression and content accordingly. For the hapless critical reader of Merton there are so many contexts, so little time. Without

having lived through the *aggiornamento* at Gethsemani and without having tasted its specific “tears,” a judgment from the bleachers upon the dynamics and quality of that renewal is, as Merton would say, “trash.” These letters do, however, make certain points about Merton’s relationship to changes at Gethsemani quite clear.

One symptom of chronic Mertonophilia is the tendency to regard Merton as the only swan in a pond of ducks. He was the most famous Cistercian, but far from the only intelligent and creative monk at Gethsemani, in his Order, or in larger monastic circles, who participated in the attempt to renew monasticism. By his own admission from 1965 onward Merton was “out of it” (gladly) and into his “third novitiate” at the hermitage. *Contemplation in a World of Action* and *The Monastic Journey*, posthumous gatherings of his considered and more reflective thoughts, remain *loci classici* to read Merton in passionate and reasoned defense of all he believed best in monasticism. That he could, as he does in some of these letters, criticize bitingly the muddle of experiments and changes at Gethsemani only reinforces his maturity in refusing to idolize “programs” and “institutions” at the expense of “persons” and “communities.” Merton’s response to renewal in the monastic life was double-barreled: a “for” but also an “against.” He felt the need for change, even radical change, but despaired of tinkering with institutional structures as the catalyst for such change, “the great overemphasis on monastic institutionalism” (p. 192):

I think there is a temptation to think we can change ourselves by changing the institution. But it’s also true that no amount of change in the institution will matter if we do not grow and change ourselves. And I think the crucial thing in all this reform is the deepening of *faith* in the individual monk. This will mean to a great extent placing his hopes and expectations in God and not in men, in the Holy Spirit and not in laws.

(To Columba Halsey, p. 249)

The late sixties and early seventies were years of deepening uncertainty and insecurity for those living an institutional religious life. Though Merton welcomed this insecurity as necessary to a life of real faith, he drew back as with each wave of new enthusiasm aspects of the life he held dear, like Gregorian chant, would be washed overboard, and as a new communal chattiness drowned the old emphasis on silence and solitude. But Merton was not in the end inflexible: he accepted these changes as adaptation to real human needs. What he could not change were his radical, because primitive, ideals in his conception of the monastic life.

In the long run, it seems to me that the monastic life is ordered to the radical transformation of the one called to it, in and through his common

life with his brothers in Christ: the most complete *metanoia* (*conversatio morum*) ideally ending in complete openness to the Spirit of Love and complete surrender to that Spirit. Which of course could mean all kinds of things: eremitical solitude, pilgrim life, preaching to people of utterly different faiths (or dialogue with same!), works of mercy

(To Julian Rochford, p. 365)

It should be taken for granted, though some still fight it, that Merton's accidental death in Bangkok will make forever ambiguous any attempted interpretation of what he would have done and where he would have been had he lived beyond December 10, 1968. Would he have eventually exclausted himself from Gethsemani? Would he never have left Asia, become a Buddhist? While I agree with Patrick Hart that the answer is no, I would qualify Hart's assertion that "the truth of the matter is established beyond doubt in these last letters from Asia" (p. xiii) by noting that the truth of the matter is established in *all* these letters in *The School of Charity*. Merton's consistent emphasis on stability, of being incarnated within a tradition, of changing one's heart rather than one's place, should leave no doubt as to his specific center of gravity in all his spiritual journeying, his love of the place and the brethren, Merton's Gethsemani:

I certainly feel great love for my brothers and it is a strong consolation to see them and be with them. It is a very great joy to remain dependent on the community and to feel that I will never have to sever my bonds with my monastic family. I consider this *most important*. It is almost the most important thing about the vocation to solitude for a monk, I believe. The grace of belonging permanently to one's monastic family is irreplaceable.

(To Andre Louf, pp. 278)

IV. IN PRAISE OF EDITORS

Editors are seldom praised directly as they efface themselves behind their authors. But Patrick Hart in this third volume has not only continued the high standards set by his colleagues William H. Shannon and Robert E. Daggy, but has taken certain risks in choosing to present his selection of letters chronologically. The sense of these letters having been selected and arranged thematically is overwhelming. *The School of Charity* is much richer in a weave of themes and sub-themes than this slanted review would suggest: the continuing correspondence between Merton and Dom Jean Leclercq, Merton's participation with and consciousness of contemplative women and their specific needs as they renewed their communities, his criticism of American monasticism (the monasticism in every nation) as too culture-bound, and much more. These thematic interweavings have been

handled deftly by Hart. The danger is that he risks being accused of over-direction, perhaps even whitewashing. There are numerous examples throughout the letters which evidence that Hart did not surrender to either of these temptations: Merton is “allowed” to contradict himself within pages, as I have shown above. The rather bracing obsequiousness Merton exhibits in passages of letters to his Abbots General and Merton’s descent into a “yes, Jesus loves me” mode, not frequent, *Deo Gratias*, and confined to the early letters proves that Merton’s editor has served him well and presented him as he was.

If there is a disappointment with *The School of Charity*, it is with the total congeniality of Merton’s letters to Dom James Fox. While I believe the time has come for readers to come to terms with Dom James and stop casting him as the villain in our hero’s story, I cannot believe the letters collected here are the only letters extant *intra- et extra-muros* between Merton and Dom James. Perhaps I am simply wrong. Perhaps neither Dom James nor Merton were archivists of their written exchanges. Perhaps much of their written communication involved “conscience matter” which has either been destroyed or is justly unpublishable. Or perhaps Hart realizes that a more complete presentation of their correspondence should await a more intense study of their important relationship. The biographer of Dom James Fox and thus of Gethsemani is waiting in the wings. Is it not time for that biographer to come forth?

For those readers who have chosen to partake selectively at the Merton banquet and read only primary documents, two more volumes of letters are to come. Then, after 1993, the project to publish Merton’s journals — there is a vast amount of material excluded from the already published journals — will begin. And then there are his conferences, his letters not included in the five volumes of selected correspondence, his working notebooks. The publishing of primary Merton material could last well into the twenty-first century. And there will still be voices asking why all the fuss? And there will still be no definitive answers to the question: just readers continuing to be seduced and constrained by Merton’s world, taken in, and then left alone by Merton to discover their personal geographies for themselves. For the great question to be answered, fellow reader, is not “Who was Thomas Merton?” but rather “Who are you who read him?” Thomas Merton, Louis of Gethsemani, has moved on and is uncatchable in our gunights. We must not mislead ourselves, as we debate and decipher Merton’s message and its meaning, into believing the target we seek is something other than the shape of our own hearts as our own hearts

really are. But then, who is it who so facilely makes assertions such as these? Humility in the face of the deeply human temptation to fashion idols is clearly endless.

Thomas Del Prete

*THOMAS MERTON & THE EDUCATION
OF THE WHOLE PERSON*

Birmingham, Alabama: Religious Education Press, 1990
195 pages — \$14.95

Reviewed by **Patrick F. O'Connell**

Thomas Del Prete's book on Merton, a version of his 1987 doctoral thesis at the Harvard School of Education, provides both less and more than its title promises. While the ostensible focus on education is actually subsidiary and occasionally somewhat forced, the work is a competent, often quite insightful, discussion of some major aspects of Merton's thought.

The author's efforts to explore the relevance of Merton's writings for education are hampered, as he notes in his introductory chapter, by the fact that there is relatively little material which addresses the topic explicitly. What Del Prete does manage to find, particularly a 1968 response to a college student's inquiry concerning Merton's educational views and the essay "Learning to Live," written for a volume celebrating Columbia University and reprinted in *Love and Living*, provide the "two fundamental ideas" (p. 9) for the study. In his letter, Merton points out that education should go beyond "imparting knowledge" to "the formation of the person" (p. 13; focus of the second chapter as well as the source of the book's title); the essay, discussed primarily in Chapter 3, reflects on the role of the university, and of the education process in general, "to help the student to discover [him or her] self: to recognize [him or her] self, and to identify who it is that chooses" (p. 31).

Del Prete writes that he will not limit his discussion to Thomas Merton on education but will expand his purview to Thomas Merton and education (p. 8), but in fact the themes of holistic personal formation and