

Introduction

Solitude Leads toward Apostolate in and for the World

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A common theme present in much contemporary scholarship about Thomas Merton and a striking pattern woven into this volume of essays is an awareness of the paradoxical fact of both spiritual ascent and descent along with a sense of the transcendent. At the same time this is an awareness of the immanence of God's presence within the very fragments of a world constantly changing. This is a rhythm pulsating at the core of all genuine monasticism. Such a dual awareness is always at the heart of all solitaries who seek beyond themselves.

This gathering of essays about Thomas Merton continues patterns introduced in preceding volumes, and especially in volume 6 (1993). There we selected essays that reflect his importance, not only as a monk and writer who was aware of the importance of monasticism and contemplation for himself, but as a fundamental cultural need which has meaning for all persons. Merton's life and writing, therefore, reminds persons in varied circumstances of a continuing need for solitude, yet also of the call for building connections with others. The studies selected here have grown out of various contemporary currents that have generated realizations about balancing contemplation and action—always a combination that persons have to keep working on diligently to achieve. With this in mind, it seems especially fitting that we have been able to include in this volume the earliest known essay by Merton in relation to this subject. The Merton Legacy Trust has generously allowed this unpublished essay to be included here, and we are appreciative of this permission, which allows

us to continue our tradition of printing unpublished, or obscurely published, primary Merton material.

This draft essay by "Thomas James Merton" was focused upon the lay apostolate at a time when laypersons were often, more or less, expected to remain quiet. Yet clearly what this premonastic Thomas Merton articulated in his 1941 article remains of value for monastics, for all seekers, indeed for all religious persons today. We also recognize a half century later that the needed balance of contemplative and active threads in life, woven into an integrated whole, may be even harder to accomplish in 1995. The thrust of many of the pieces included in this gathering reminds us, as one of the contributors to the review-symposium included here explicitly suggests, that we must remember (by way of Richard of St. Victor) in relation to Merton's developing thought that "[a]scent is followed by descent. Escape from the world is followed by return to the world."

Merton's heretofore unpublished essay about the lay apostolate remains of value for many reasons. As its editor, Patrick F. O'Connell, wisely speculates, this early essay contains embedded at its core the seeds of Merton's own inevitable involvement with apostolic Christianity and therefore with our larger world. It is that continuing involvement throughout his monastic career as a commentator, and later as a catalyst, that allows him to remain of considerable interest to many different readers today, and especially to those who live beyond the confines of a monastic enclosure. One of the continuing paradoxes of Merton's writing is that it makes clear that separation and solitude experienced within an enclosure bring one's focus right back to basic issues about the world.

The General Meetings of The International Thomas Merton Society (1989, Louisville; 1991, Rochester; 1993, Colorado Springs) have clearly demonstrated the living connections between solitude and action. These connections have been sustained at meetings that are extended moments when hundreds of persons gather to recognize Merton's value for an enormous range of readers and seekers. This is manifested by scholars with specialized interests (and sometimes extremely specialized topics of inquiry), but also in the range of readers for whom Merton lives as a model for spirituality. The Society meetings allow this diversity of persons to meet, discuss, and appreciate Merton in a variety of ways. The five papers, revised here from presentations at the 1993 meeting, reflect Merton's wide appeal to laypersons

and specialists. Value is derived from careful and specific analysis of Merton's themes and language, but also other values are exhibited because of the common enthusiasm for a monk who will not remain isolated.

One of the principal features at the 1993 meeting was the sponsorship of a "Springboard" address by William H. Shannon about Merton's "Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude." This key examination of the need all persons have for solitude first appeared in Merton's *Disputed Questions*. Shannon's examination of this fundamental inquiry by Merton stressed Merton's understanding of the need for balance of solitude within a framework that must adequately integrate solitude into a still larger life. Shannon's presentation stimulated many response papers and considerable discussion. Both of the revised papers chosen for inclusion here, by David Belcastro and Patrick Eastman, provide ways for contemporary readers to become attuned to Merton's complex and developing attitudes concerning solitude, but also its dangers. We are, therefore, reminded of a basic need to embrace a world beyond the one that may seem to exist in individual separateness.

Three additional papers that have grown out of the 1993 I.T.M.S. meeting are included here. They are about Merton as a critic who absorbed much that was in the air because of "New Critical" tendencies in the 1930s; about his awareness of and uses of rhetoric and his personal development of rhetoric in the 1950s; and, finally, about his own successful development of images about the self in his later poetry, especially in the 1960s. In their concentrated ways these three examinations remind us that Merton remained a careful user of language throughout his career and that he was able to absorb traditions well and then to build beyond any simple mirroring. Merton's job, we see, was always to bring tradition into line with the present moment. In this regard he was constantly building on insights he absorbed in key sources, in T. S. Eliot, for example, who stressed an ideal of an extinction of personality. But Merton was also learning because of his monastic career that it was also (paradoxically) through an awareness of selfhood that one builds fresh insights and learns to forget about the self.

Each of these scholarly examinations provides paradigmatic patterns that might well be extended to other parts of Merton's canon. He was a lifelong critic who absorbed other critics; a rhetorician who

finally sensed he must rely upon his own personal rhetoric; and an original poet who found self through a systematic forgetting of self, as I have argued in a recent article in *Cross Currents*.

Another valuable group of essays included here comes out of the 25th Anniversary Thomas Merton Symposium-Celebration, held at St. John's University in New York in October 1993. These diverse pieces are further reflections of contemporary commentators' recognition of Merton's continuing skill at absorbing traditions but also in moving on. In papers at that meeting Merton was investigated as a cultural critic. Merton embraced the monastic life but not just for himself, rather for others too, and thus he had to be a critic of culture. Appropriately, at the opening address for the St. John's University meeting (not included in this volume), Mary Jo Leddy talked insightfully about Merton's concerns with community and about related questions in contemporary society as various experiments in today's communities evolve and change. Her comments, which were built on Merton's insights, help remind us of the need to move on and to adapt: new "Catholic Worker" Houses; a *Sojourners* community in Washington, D.C., reacting to changing political needs; Leddy's own involvement in Romero House in Toronto, a residence for refugees.

In a parallel vein, the keynote address by Robert Morneau and a response by Sandra Schneiders extended reflections about Merton's gifts for today's audiences. Robert Morneau stressed Merton's poetic abilities, and rightly so, as his fundamental way of revealing the spiritual *for others*. Interestingly, the response to this analytical talk by Sandra Schneiders emphasized the complexity of Merton's poetry but also the equally important—and very simple—fact that he "was a man of prayer." Both of these addresses, included here, are, finally, manifestations of Merton's prayerfulness. We sense that it was prayer that made his best poetry. We also sense that Merton's poetry often remains unread, perhaps because of contemporary culture's haste and concern for the expedient, which makes it unprayerful.

The sophisticated study of the eight poems that make up Merton's "Freedom Song Cycle" by Patrick F. O'Connell (also derived from a presentation at St. John's) is further proof of the nature of Merton's ability to build on his love of tradition (here, especially the Old Testament) while doing so in ways that make it necessary for him to speak with an immediacy about the contemporary era. These are songs of urgency about the Civil-rights movement of the mid-1960s. They

are poems that are successful precisely because they move beyond stereotypes to suggest a universal dimension of compassion for all persons who have been ignored and who are struggling for justice. These songs are, paradoxically, about how the true self is formed (with others) when the "false self" is forgotten. One learns, Merton reminds us, and in so doing learns to inspire and teach others.

Another example of Merton's continual reaching out, and how his reaching out through friendship lives into the present moment, is the interview conducted for this volume with Ron Seitz. Seitz knew Merton in the later years of the monk's life, and in our interview Seitz explains how his memory and knowledge of Merton has been carried over into his own writing. (This *Annual* also contains a review of Seitz's recent book, a "memory song" about Merton.) We suspect that there are many others who knew Merton well, especially in the final years of his life, persons who were also changed by his presence. We hope to identify more of these persons and continue the interview process, which has been an ingredient in all previous *Annuals*. Thus the influence of others, like Seitz, via Merton, such as Mary Luke Tobin (vol. 2) and Jack Ford (vol. 6) will also be documented.

The bibliographical review-essay for 1993 by fellow editor George Kilcourse surveys major work by, and related to, Merton during the preceding year. This essay is not meant to be a catalogue of all items written about Merton. (Such an inclusive list is found in the quarterly *Merton Seasonal*.) In the *Annual* bibliographical review-essays, which will be rotating year by year in authorship among the editors of the *Annual*, we plan to be speculative. It is hoped that as trends in scholarship are noted, we may alert readers and that then further scholarship can be built upon insights accomplished by others and reported upon here.

Similarly, it should be noted that the books chosen for review in volume 7 are not only books by, or about, Merton. As in immediately preceding volumes we have attempted to choose books for review that demonstrate that Merton's concerns live on into the present moment. Thus, appropriately, Glenn Hinson's work (represented in vol. 6 through his study of Douglas V. Steere) is further represented in the review included here of his recently edited collection of essays about ecumenical spirituality. Hinson (just as Ron Seitz) literally learned from Merton in an ecumenical setting when he was invited to come with his students to Merton's Mt. Olivet retreat in 1960. The fruit of

that work is now being manifested in the continuing ecumenical work of Hinson and others. Similarly, Kathleen Norris' *Dakota* is also reviewed here because it so clearly strikes chords that would resonate for Merton. We are reminded that there are many approaches to basic spiritual questions, and that persons from many different backgrounds continue to raise questions that today parallel Merton's prophetic interests, not the least of which is the common theme that holds this volume together—the need for balance and alternation between genuine solitude and a genuine reaching out.

With that in mind, we have also chosen to include a review-symposium in this volume about the recently published study *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ*, written by one of our editors. This book is also the subject of a review-symposium in another journal, *Horizons* (Fall, 1994). The diversity of enthusiastic approaches to Kilcourse's study helps us to see that Merton's prophetic concerns, yet sometimes enigmatic expression of those concerns, live into the present era. As Merton matured, above all he was perhaps less sure of definite answers, but his awareness of Christ, the Church, and his compassionate concern for others with their diverse traditions alerted him to the contemporary scene. Through his sustained attention we are made more aware of the presence of God in a shattered world. All the participants in this review-symposium stress an awareness of the surprising presence of the divine in a world sometimes only to be beheld in fragments.

The reviews and review-symposium for this volume were ably co-coordinated by Michael Downey. As is the case with volume editorship of the annual and with bibliographical review essays, each year's duties are rotated on a three-year cycle among the editors. We hope this rotation of responsibility provides a freshness of insight year by year for each of these major tasks.

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