

# Introduction: A Simplicity of Wonder: Merton's Honor for the Particular Extending Outward

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## A Geography of Success and Failure

My successes are never my own.  
The path to them was prepared  
by others.  
The fruit of my labor is not my own.  
For I am preparing the way  
Toward the achievements of others.

Nor are my failures my own.  
They may spring from the failure  
of another;  
Yet failures are often compensated  
by another's achievement.  
Therefore, the meaning of life is

Seen only  
In the complete integration  
of my successes and failures  
With the achievements and losses  
of my entire generation,  
My own society, and time.<sup>1</sup>

Like life itself, moving in a rhythm which allows flexibility as all things supporting life grow, evolve, change, life in a family or monastery or in any institution moves in cycles. It is not surprising that a publication like this *Annual* should also reflect cyclical change. The project of an annual collection of Merton scholarship has been part of my life now for almost two decades. In 1985-1986 the concept for such a book emerged and the original editors thought it would attract longer manuscripts. This volume will be published in 2004, and at that time Volume 18 (2005) should be well on the way toward completion.

What I have come to appreciate as I have watched this cycle develop each year is the complexity of each year's book and the many talents needed to bring it to completion. One is reminded of constant interconnections. Myriads of people contribute to each volume and thereby become like separate stars illuminating aspects of Merton's life's work which keeps revealing itself to us in still more ways. The work of the International Thomas Merton Society has become part of this developing pattern.

It occurs to me that as the many essays were refereed and refined for earlier thematic collections in volumes of *The Merton Annual* (Vol. 12, Monasticism; Vol. 14, the Feminine; Vol. 16, Spirituality) in each of these instances Thomas Merton's rootedness in particular places and a sometimes paradoxical desire to be elsewhere was often demonstrated in many fascinating ways, and thus, is fundamental to his life's journey and to the challenge of the spiritual life which calls us to see the whole. Therefore, the choice of theme for the 2003 Vancouver ITMS General Meeting which emphasized Merton's fascination with geography and his love of particular landscapes inevitably was a topic which could draw a wide range of commentators. Merton's own early global peregrinations are well known. His later imaginative journeys, triggered by constant reading and poetic imagination, became ever more crucial to his own widening spiritual development as he matured and thereby grew in compassion for all persons and places as animated by God's presence.

The grouping of articles which has developed from presentations at the 2003 Vancouver ITMS General Meeting demonstrate how Merton embraced all. He could draw well on his absorption and blessing of a particular landscape and love of place to then build toward a personal, theological, or spiritual point of view which always became cosmic, yet also reminds us of Christ's participation in our world. Edited by Professor Lynn Szabo, these articles could stand as a small book. They refract the insights which Merton drew from pondering the relationship of his love for experiences of the particular in relation to his own unfolding affirmation of humankind's connection with, and responsibility for, the entire globe brooded over by God.

## II

These ten scholarly essays were refereed and chosen as the most representative pieces which developed from a meeting which generated many different methods to examine Merton's paradoxical

love of place. They often simultaneously manifest a desire for and glimpses of the transcendence of place. Necessary detachment, Merton teaches us, allows then a development and a widening in spirit, yet a spirit always still rooted in the particular.

Thomas Merton's developing global concerns and his definite disappointment with cultures which are destructive of the particulars of any place, or person, is clearly a recurrent passion revealed in these essays because of these passionate concerns. It is appropriate that as Merton's spiritual life unfolded and developed he became more appreciative of each dimension of the local, more appreciative of every unique individual and moment. It also seems especially appropriate at this moment (as *The Merton Annual* moves into a new and, we think, broader phase of inclusion of more persons involved in its writing and editing) that our unpublished Merton manuscript should be an excerpt from his *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*. Truly, Merton's love for God made it imperative that he think as widely as possible, indeed, globally. Patricia Burton's editorial note and detailed article both clarify why this text still speaks to us today. I am very pleased that after we decided to publish this chapter, arrangements were made for the entire Merton manuscript to be published by Orbis.

We are also extremely appreciative of the thorough and complete index which Patricia Burton has also made for Volumes 1-16. This will make it easier for scholars to pursue topics earlier investigated by other scholars in preceding volumes, but now perhaps forgotten. Over and over, Merton reminds us, our hidden roots sprout seeds of contemplation yet not to comfort us, rather to extend outwardly to the wider world of God's presence.

Still additional parallel connections beyond Merton's Abbey of Gethsemani, or even the United States, are reflected both in the interview included in this volume with Donald Allchin and in the bibliographic essay prepared by David Belcastro. The interview, which I arranged in 1998, is with Rev. A.M. (Donald) Allchin, Anglican priest, friend of Merton, and ecumenical scholar. It shows how Merton was constantly building connections. This interview was conducted in Atlanta, Georgia just after Fr. Allchin participated in a conference at Emory University about "Merton and Ecumenism."

Allchin's interest in the Orthodox Church, American culture and Catholicism have continued to form his consciousness which is open to the wider world of religion. He stands as a model of

someone who learned from Merton and as a model of someone who, in being open, can teach others to remain open to God's manifestations. It was not an accident but rather a providential moment that Allchin and Merton should have been together on the very day of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s death. All three of these men witness to global visions. Such a wideness of vision is what also unites many Merton scholars.

Many of the persons who are mentioned in this introduction possess that global vision. The major gathering of articles derived from the ITMS General Meeting in Vancouver reflect an overall theme which emphasizes global awareness too. Members of the ITMS Publication Committee (Monica Weis, Bonnie Thurston, Patrick O'Connell, and the current ITMS President, Erlinda Paguio) have all contributed supportive ideas which have helped this new series of *The Merton Annual* to develop. I thank them. I thank other members of the Board who expressed wishes for further ITMS collaboration with *The Merton Annual*. I also thank Bob Toth of The Merton Foundation and Gray Henry at Fons Vitae Publishing for their courage to push this volume through.

Even more significantly, I am especially thankful of the careful and sustained work done by Lynn Szabo, Patricia Burton, Glenn Crider and David Belcastro—without whom the farewell postscript in Volume 16 would have, indeed, been the end. I am quite happy to see that my hopes for a new cycle of *The Merton Annual* have materialized. David Belcastro's analytical bibliographical study of recent writings by, and about Merton, is yet another reminder of our continuing need to keep rereading "misreadings" so that we can perceive more ways to see beyond ourselves and into the local with more appreciation of what is beyond us, never to be fully understood, but celebrated.

### III

Someone, I am reminded, once told Walker Percy he must be "Benedictine" and in his reply, included in *Conversations with Walker Percy*, he agreed there was some truth to such an assessment. He agreed that a recurrent pattern in the Benedictine rhythm includes an alternating building up, then cultural change and always diminution followed by renewal. This, too, apparently happens with all life. Once Fr. Louis commented that until someone has experienced a particular place throughout the rhythm of its seasons, one cannot fully know that place. He is right, and interestingly what I now realize is that Merton's mystical quest ultimately included his endorsement and prayer for all persons in all places.

An additional acknowledgement needs to be made. I was fortunate to be a research scholar at the St. John's University Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research during the academic year 2003-2004. So was another one of our contributors in the year preceding. This introduction, therefore, and one of the Vancouver essays were both written at an Institute which has as its goal, encouraging ecumenical seekers. Therefore, Merton's love of the local extending outward triggered another thought as I prepared the introduction. This thought is about the mysterious intersections of place and time which should make every moment and every place a providential moment, revealing a unity. I recall three such intersections which I am sure have now led to this book's flavoring of articles, essays and book reviews which will, in turn, stimulate others: 1) Memphis, March, 2002 when I gave a talk there on Merton and Civil Rights, sponsored by the Memphis ITMS Chapter; 2) Louisville, June 2002 at the ITMS Board Meeting; 3) Vancouver, June, 2003 at the ITMS General Meeting. All of these were times when various members of the ITMS thanked me and encouraged me to continue to seek ways to keep *The Merton Annual* published.

Interestingly, one of the very persons whom I had met in Memphis was also in Vancouver, Paul Dekar. Earlier, as I was preparing to spend the year at St. John's Institute of Ecumenical and Cultural Research I learned that Dekar was already on sabbatical there and studying Merton. Later that year, when I arrived at the Institute, I learned that Dekar and I had both been assigned the same apartment. Chance perhaps, but provident. I was then quite pleased when in late fall, 2003, I received Dekar's submission which ties together so well with the broad vision of Merton and his wonder about all places and his respect for all persons. The knowledge that our particular years at this Institute were nurturing for both of us suggests the Benedictine rhythms of "prayer and work," as rooted in the particular, keep blooming into an awareness and respect for all persons and cultures.

#### IV

As Volume 17 of *The Merton Annual* goes to press, I emphasize that I cannot be other than grateful for the many persons who shared the editorial work which has allowed this book to be fashioned as it is. A year ago it seemed probable that the preceding volume was perhaps the last. Now I see that we have moved into new opportunities for Merton investigation. When we first started

refereeing manuscripts for Volume 1 (1988) there lingered an element in the Merton work being done then of, if not the hagiographical, at least an almost unquestioning attitude about Merton's work. In the period which has followed, many significant questions have been introduced by critics and commentators, especially in Volumes 12, 14 and 16, where we gathered essays about Merton as a monastic; in relationship to the feminine; and about his influences upon contemporary culture. In all of these categories we found Merton's work serving not just as unquestioned influence, but rather as a catalyst for action and thinking. This has largely been the work of ITMS members. Now with the involvement of ITMS presenters who have fashioned their papers into articles and with the work of four new editorial contributors (Szabo, Belcastro, Burton and Crider) we have actually changed the way *The Merton Annual* functions.

Here we have pieces gathered, edited, indeed, written by a range of persons—most of them active in the International Thomas Merton Society—something not capable of even having been dreamt in 1986 when *The Merton Annual* started, and indeed not exactly what I (and others) hoped for as *The Annual* unfolded with many good developments in Volumes 6 through 16, while its editors were still hoping for articles which would be reflections of a wider range of cultural and critical commentary. This has still not yet happened. The fact is, as has been pointed out in earlier editor's remarks, Merton readers and commentators remain within a fairly narrow spectrum. This often ITMS-encouraged mode of ecumenical investigation is clearly reflected throughout all of *The Merton Annual's* preceding volumes.

Merton is loved; he is a prophet; but we also now see that his writings, in fact, serve well as a reflection of the thinking and changing public face of the Church—no longer just adulatory acceptance—but rather a loving embrace of the fact that the Church, with its collective and ongoing spiritual journey stands as both Incarnation and as a continuing contemplative prayer with each moment always a potential movement “towards crisis and mystery.”

A year ago it was impossible to imagine the contents for this volume. Now, in retrospect, this “inexorable” moment is clear, and because of the generous contributions of many, more of Merton's mystery shines. Volume 17 stands as proof that many people were

waiting in the wings to help. When we ponder Merton's expanding love of the cosmos and all its particular beauty we know, as Robert Faricy expresses it,

The risen Jesus' presence permeates everything: it shines at the heart of all things all around us. Teilhard [de Chardin] writes, 'Christ is physically active in order to control all things . . . . He ceaselessly animates, without disturbing, all the earth processes. The universal influence of the risen Jesus' love extends not only to every human heart but to the heart of the world and to every single part, every atom and molecule, every rock and breeze. His love holds all things together and moves them forward'.<sup>2</sup>

This volume exists as testament to Merton's affirmation of the continuing unity we affirm as persons and of the presence of God's grace working within our generation.

## Notes

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1. Variation on Merton's "Success and Failure" from *No Man is an Island in Blaze of Recognition: Throughout the Year with Thomas Merton: Daily Meditations*. Selected and edited by Thomas P. McDonnell (New York: Doubleday, 1983) p. 103.
2. Robert Faricy, *The Lord's Dealing: The Primacy of the Feminine in Christian Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988) p. 25.