

# **The Continuing Tradition of Prayer and Continuing Social Awareness Sustain the Vision of Thomas Merton**

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## **I**

We are pleased to include scholarly articles in this volume of *The Merton Annual* which have developed from presentations given at the San Diego General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society. Two pieces from that meeting are plenary addresses by priests who were clearly influenced by Merton. They establish a tone which rings well in our ears and hearts as we continue to assimilate the wisdom of the monastic tradition which reminds all of solitude, and paradoxically also calls us to testify as concerned for others throughout the world. We are one family.

The two addresses which were given by Dom John Eudes Bamberger, O.C.S.O. and by John Dear, S.J. might seem to stand at opposing poles of some theoretical range of possibilities. These men are quite different in age, background and presentation. Yet in fact, both overlapped in their definitions of concerns about the manifestation of the love of Christ for all. Both of their talks interpret Merton's sustained work as prophetic and in each we see clear examples of the continuing work of Thomas Merton infusing today's Christian consciousness. We are pleased to include these two addresses along with a short introductory commentary by Dewey W. Kramer, one of the founders of The International Thomas Merton Society. Her comments focus on the nature of the meeting in San Diego in 2005 and also clearly emphasize Merton's continuing importance. These talks set the tone for the San Diego Meeting. Other principal speakers, Sister Jose Hobday and Jim Wallis, along with Rabbi Michael Lerner, extended similar themes. All those speeches challenged us to see that Merton (as monk, as contemplative, and as writer) was no recluse. Both of the pieces by Abbot John Eudes Bamberger and John Dear wake us up. In her introductory note, Dewey Kramer places the two addresses

by Bamberger and Dear in the context of the San Diego meeting with its emphasis upon our social awareness.

## II

In the following section, including ten scholarly articles edited by Professor David Belcastro, we observe even more influence and usefulness. David Belcastro, as the subsection editor for the articles which have developed from oral presentations, provides a rationale for the selection and arrangement of these papers along with his focused comments. Truly we can see Merton's vision is being furthered. It is a vision both traditional and revolutionary. We see the same patterns in the remembrances written about John Wu who became Merton's good friend.

When I look at the many pieces which feed into this volume which have come out of the General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society in San Diego, it brings back both good memories of that meeting and of the many persons I met there—many of whom made presentations, submitted them as revised essays and then revised these papers for this book. Still others who have attended many of the ITMS meetings were there simply to learn and to celebrate.

The ten carefully expanded essays which have developed from the presentations at the ITMS San Diego Meeting open up many possibilities for renewed thinking about Merton. Being grounded in a "Spirit of Simplicity," as the essay by Dekar reminds us, led Merton rather naturally to the engagement of his Cold War Letters. Developing the habit of raising questions while still an undergraduate, this continuing mode of inquiry by Merton is affirmed in the two essays by Harford and Herron. Confronting how one is to be engaged in the contemporary world, yet remaining grounded in tradition, the essays by Hunter and Miller demonstrate that Merton's engagement always remained rooted in Truth. The good of society remains at the base of Merton's impulses, whether he is writing about peace and war or about non-violence. We are thankful to be able to include these essays which examine the myriad aspects of Merton's conscience as it is overflowing into our consciousness of the present moment. War, Hatred, Ecological Awareness, as examined in these essays, are subjects grounded in a continual seeking of God.

Similarly, in the interview which Glenn Crider has conducted with James Finley, we see still further immediate contemplative connections with Merton and contemporary society. I was privileged to meet Jim Finley first at a Conference about Merton as Contemplative held in Atlanta in 1980. That day, February 28, 1980, sparked many subsequent events—further conferences, papers, the establishment of two reading groups (one “Catholic” yet ecumenical, the other “Episcopalian” and socially engaged) as well as a meditation group. Also at that same conference of 1980, when Jim Finley spoke of his friendship with Merton, another one of the speakers was Fr. Tom Fidelis (Francis) Smith. Fr. Tom Francis, now the Retreat Master at Conyers Cistercian Monastery of the Holy Spirit, a daughter house of Gethsemani, has provided us with some commentary about a letter which Merton wrote to him in 1963 when Fr. Smith inquired about prayer. Smith’s annotations, provided decades later, also stand as more proof of the continuing influence and usefulness of Merton. Somehow Merton cultivated a gift for suggesting connections both with the traditions of the past while prophetically suggesting how these very connections could lead into the future.

In 1980 Jim Finley spoke at the Atlanta conference which I had organized. That meeting was held at Georgia State University and called “Contemplation for Urban Man.” Michael Mott, then a faculty member at Emory University, was there, along with Sister Elena Malits, C.S.C. of St. Mary’s, Notre Dame. That conference has in its influences radiated outward to men, women, Catholics, Protestants and non-believers. We must assume that this has been the pattern over and over as more connections are made by scholars who recognize Merton’s prescient abilities and it will continue to be the pattern.

Daniel Adams, another of this volume’s contributors, spent a semester at Columbia [Presbyterian] Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, but I was unable to meet him during that time. He is the author of a valuable Cistercian Publications book about Merton and the Protestant tradition. Now while I have still not met him, he is serving as a theology professor in Korea. Adams has provided us with a study of Merton and a Korean visionary who in terms of *Zeitgeist* see in similar ways. What we are again reminded of by Adams is that Merton will not be kept in conventional boxes of classification.

In the revised lecture included here by Robert Ellsberg, one of the Annual Thomas Merton Corpus Christi Memorial Lectures, at the church of Merton's Baptism, we see the direct influence which both Henri Nouwen and Merton have had upon the thinking of Mr. Ellsberg, a prominent Catholic Publishing House editor. He is someone who cherishes that influence. He also is someone who makes his daily work part of the tradition to which these two writers adhered.

Still other parts of this volume reflect Merton's importance world-wide in other ways. This is most apparent throughout all of the varied book reviews which we have included. His seeds so carefully planted truly make us aware that, as John Eudes Bamberger has written, Merton is a "prophet of renewal." In John Eudes Bamberger's recently published book about Merton and monastic renewal we see the distilled wisdom of Abbot John Eudes' wisdom of years of observation and prayer. Above all, in Bamberger's study we must be reminded that no monastic, no spiritual seeker, no prayerful person can ever function well abstractly.

John Eudes Bamberger's *Thomas Merton: Prophet of Renewal*<sup>1</sup> is a work of wisdom which delineates the articulation of the gifts of prophecy which Merton perfected in his sustained vocation, a life of prayer and writing. Bamberger is adamant about the importance of the breadth of Merton's study from Cassian and Augustine to Eastern writers like Chaung Tzu, whom he translated, along with the early Cistercians St. Bernard of Clairvaux and Aelred of Rievaulx, all of whom prepared Merton to articulate words for the significance of the contemplative essence not in the abstract, or as limited to the life of a cloistered monk, but rather as a fundamental ingredient already in all lives often so covered up by the multitudinous activities which so many individuals are compelled to take on within contemporary society.

Merton's study brought him to a simplicity of wonder, expressed in myriads of ways (in journal, poetry, essay, correspondence) which is both Catholic, rooted in the resurrection of Christ—the eschatology of his living presence, and a gift also mysteriously open to other ways of preparation (through Taoism or Buddhism). For the gift of wholeness which the Creator has already miraculously given is given to all.

When we see this fact, as Bamberger does so well, suddenly we see that Merton's powerful insights about our need to live in

the knowledge of the love of the merciful Creator leaps into our consciousness and demands a turning toward compassion. Many persons who already subsist easily in God's mercy—individually or in corporate reactions—can forget their inherent appreciation of and need for the contemplative. They need this simple message. So many of the pages included here confirm such insights.

Always each of us deals with persons—and with persons in and of particular places. This is a key, the simplest key to the balance of life so frequently stressed within the Benedictine Tradition. This is also the key to the enduring success of the vision of Merton who building in the Benedictine manner of obedience and stability created a vision which goes beyond the cloister to embrace all open thinkers and seekers—Christian, secular, hopeful—all concerned about the world.

### III

Once more I must thank all who have made this particular book a reality. David Belcastro is to be especially thanked for his steadfast contributions in helping select and edit the scholarly papers which make up The International Thomas Merton Society subsection. Many others have done considerable work to bring this ITMS-sponsored volume to fruition. We thank John Wu for his "vignettes" which fit so well within this context. Again, I am appreciative of the work which Glenn Crider as Production Manager has done consistently and well. He has this year also assumed responsibility not just for production, but also for doing the interview included here, as well as assuming the primary load of coordinating the book reviews.

We do not provide a stipend either for our contributors for their essays or to our book reviewers. These persons do what they do as a "labor of love." We especially thank them, as we also thank the Officers and Board Members of ITMS who have now officially endorsed the value of *The Merton Annual* and now support this publication as an ITMS project. I also thank Gray Matthews of the University of Memphis, Department of Communications, who has written this year's Bibliographic Survey. This job used to rotate among *The Merton Annual* editors. During the past years it has become the rotating responsibility of different ITMS members.

Our Board of editor members doing their work as referees; ITMS officers and Board Members; Patrick F. O'Connell (the edi-

tor of *The Merton Seasonal* assisting us with suggestions); and still others including the publisher Gray Henry, along with the continuing support of The Merton Legacy Trust, represented by Anne McCormick, have all contributed to the formation and success of this book. It is truly a community effort of *ora et labora*.

## Notes

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1. John Eudes Bamberger, *Thomas Merton: Prophet of Renewal* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2005).