
Brother Ramon, S.S.F.

SOUL FRIENDS:

A Journey with Thomas Merton

London: Marshall-Pickering, 1989

311 pages — £5.99 paperback

Reviewed by **Valerie M. Lagorio**

This is an extraordinary book, written by an Anglican Franciscan monk who, as the title implies, is Merton's soul-friend, "someone who could discern and interpret the profound meaning of my own life, not only as a Christian, but as a human being" (p. ix). He intends the book to be "an appreciation, both theological and contemplative, by a monastic brother of another communion, who appreciates not only the awe and mystery of a vocation to prayer and love in God, but who appreciates with Merton, the simple, funny, precarious and loving humanity of which we are both a part" (p. xi). And Brother Ramon retains this holistic approach to Merton throughout the work, and also expresses his awareness of Merton's mistakes and human vulnerability for "Merton would not thank me for making him an idol" (p. ix).

Like *The Cloud of Unknowing*, *Soul Friends* is directed toward an audience immersed in the progressive spiritual life, the capacity for which resides in all humankind, but it will be of particular interest to those following a monastic vocation, or contemplating an eremitic one. Brother Ramon's book is not primarily concerned with individual spiritual guidance. Rather, it is an exploration of Merton's life and writings as they concern his contemplative journey to the Gospel, to the world of humankind, and to created order; and then the author relates Merton's spiritual pilgrimage as it parallels his own, which, by the book's end, is about to begin a new chapter of the contemplative pilgrimage into complete solitude. As Brother Ramon only heard Merton's name in 1968, the year of Merton's death, his knowledge is largely drawn from his writings, as evinced by the numerous substantiating quotations from over twenty-seven of Merton's books, and from his own close experiential identification with Merton's evolving vocation and deepening spirituality, an identification which enables him to see his own life in the mirror of Merton's.

In discussing the early Merton, Ramon turns to Merton's essay "The Cell," which deals with knowing one's false self, and which Ramon considers his "most important piece of theological/ spiritual writing" (p. 28). Ramon then develops this dichotomy between the false and true selves, the difficult but rewarding search for one's real and authentic identity in the *apex mentis*, Merton's employment of image theology as a guide to the summit of spiritual consciousness, and the mandatory rejection of materialistic goals for deep spiritual values, the latter of great import in Merton's insistence upon the need for contemplation-in-action and a prominent presence in today's world in the interests of social justice, political honesty and human equality (p. 134).

Another interesting polarity which Ramon discovers in Merton and himself is that of the evangelical and contemplative dimensions of the nature of the Gospel and of the spiritual life, which provided Merton with penetrating insights into the Reformation, and is of such import in interdenominational and ecumenical theological cross-fertilization (p. 138 ff.).

After positing Merton's insistence that "true Christian contemplation must enter into the riches of an orthodox theological foundation" (p. 147), Ramon devotes a good portion of his and Merton's spiritual biography to the influence of the Eastern Fathers on Merton in such matters as: the synergistic participation of the Spirit of God within the spirit of humans (pp. 87-88) resulting in the divinization (*theosis*) of humans (p. 90); human's need for *metanoia* (repentance) on their pilgrimages (p. 97); Christ as cosmic mediator and savior, invested in the Irenaean concept of recapitulation (p. 147); and the ancient tradition of *apokatastasis* (universal restoration), which also links Merton with Julian of Norwich (pp. 152-157); the immanence of God as *panentheism* (p. 160); St. Maximus' *Theoria Physike* or the perceiving of the inner *logoi* of created things, through the synergism of nature and grace, which affected Merton's contemplation of the cosmos as created order as the game of God in which all participate (pp. 171-179).

As one would expect in a book on Merton, Brother Ramon devotes much attention to Merton's dialogue with Eastern spiritualities, based on his belief that "the Church did not have a monopoly on Christ, but that the grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit was manifest universally among all peoples, cultures, and traditions" (p. 187). While Merton held that fellowship increases at the contemplative, rather than the dogmatic, level, since it is conducive to an interpenetration of understanding, reconciliation, and dialogue, Ramon is careful to point out that he rejected the

possibility of any syncretistic synthesis (p. 190). Merton's pioneer work in inter-faith dialogue is bearing rich fruit today, especially with the activities of the North American Board for East/ West Dialogue and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. Brother Ramon's chapter on "The Eastern Contemplative Traditions" is movingly complemented by his sections on "Taoist and Desert Father," elucidating the influence of these two traditions on Merton, and "Intellect and Intuition," which outlines Merton's fourfold agenda "for a renewed Christian contemplative life which embraces all that is best in all of the great spiritual traditions, earthed quite concretely in our common humanity" (pp. 215-219).

Brother Ramon's account of Merton's dynamic spiritual odyssey ends with Part V, which is comprised of his personal evaluation of Merton as an ongoing guide and friend. It is not only a recapitulation, but also an encomium to Merton as a monk, dedicated to monastic renewal, as a contemplative, as a spiritual director, as a prophet/ reformer, as an ecumenist, as a pioneer in East/ West dialogue, as a Christian, as a teacher, as an author, and as a human being. Merton, according to Ramon, never achieved the vocation of complete solitude, owing to his gregarious lifestyle, delight and ability in communication, and the compulsive nature of his writing (pp. 283ff.). Yet, he pointed the way to others, including the author, who has written this book to bear "witness to the wordless dimension of contemplation for all the people of God" (p. 310), and who fittingly ends with Merton's well known prayer which begins: "My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. . . ." (p. 311).

Terry Tastard

THE SPARK IN THE SOUL:

Four Mystics on Justice

London: Darton, Longman & Todd / Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1989
124 pages — £5.95 / \$7.95 paperback

Reviewed by **Stephen J. Hotchen**

When I began reading this short work by Terry Tastard (124 pages), I was curiously aware of a certain antagonism in part towards it. It was an