

FACETS OF MERTON

Review of

GETTING IT ALL TOGETHER: THE HERITAGE OF THOMAS MERTON

Edited by Timothy Mulhearn

Introduction by Basil Pennington, O.C.S.O.

—Reviewed by **Mary Luke Tobin, S.L.**

The title, *Getting It All Together*, has a folksy sound, but, considering the wide-ranging interests and accomplishments of Thomas Merton, it is appropriate for the subject. Besides that, Basil Pennington, in the introduction, says, "It is my hope that this volume will invite many to choose Father Louis as a spiritual leader and to pursue with him that task of getting it together, which will lead to the full simplicity of God, the source of the unity . . . of the human family."

The four authors who contribute to this small volume deal with four particular areas of Merton's life and work, and bring together for us thoughtful insights from their individual perspectives.

In the introduction, Basil Pennington offers the theme of simplicity and integration as characteristic of Merton's work: "From almost any starting point, Merton can lead us along the way he knows by experience and to the full simplicity of integration."

I was glad to see a chapter on the Christology of Thomas Merton. George Kilcourse brings his own careful research and study to an important topic not often discussed by Merton critics. While preparing for a recent course which included Merton's Christology, I would have been delighted to have come across this necessarily brief, but informative, commentary on the pervasive Christology in Merton's work.

Kilcourse considers Merton's most significant volume for spirituality *New Seeds of Contemplation*, which was Merton's revision of his 1949 *Seeds of Contemplation*. Revisions of the earlier text are almost entirely reflections on Christ. "An enormous Merton transition is found in the summary chapter, 'The General Dance.' It summarizes the incarnational maturation in Merton's spirituality. The humanity of God resounds in these pages."

Kilcourse sees Merton's poetry as the climax to appreciation of Christ. Throughout the poems, Kilcourse discovers images of transformation. "Always the dynamic is that of incarnation, the full humanization of persons, and the earth process. Creation is worthy of God's Christ."

When one reads or views on film the last talk of Thomas Merton, given in Bangkok shortly before his death, one has a sense of Merton's eagerness to express many of his insights in that

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talk. Such a rush of ideas and impressions needs an explanatory commentary. Brother David Steindl-Rast has done an excellent service for all of us, filling in some of the gaps and helping us relate parts to the whole. This kind of expository assistance is invaluable for both newer and older Merton readers.

For example, Merton speaks of those who are on the social forefront of what is happening in our times. He sees a movement from selfishness and desire to real giving love. "Unselfishness," says Steindl-Rast, "is one of the essentials which Merton sees in confronting the monastic crisis. It is a great 'Yes' to reality, to love, the giving of oneself to life, rather than clinging and grasping."

Steindl-Rast considers that the focus on change led Merton to see a second essential of monastic life—transformation. The constant need of conversion led him to take a critical attitude toward the structures of monastic life. "In the future," Merton said, "we will not rely on structures."

Steindl-Rast concludes with a reflection that Merton spoke of a deep concept of contemplation which is liberation of the world. Here I believe that Steindl-Rast strikes a note greatly needed by those who struggle with the relationship between contemplation and action. He quotes Merton: "You can't just immerse yourself in the world and get carried away with it. If you want to pull a drowning man out of the water, you have to have some support yourself. If you're standing on a rock or swimming, you can do it. There's nothing to be gained by simply jumping into the water and drowning with him. You must be liberated from the world to liberate the world."

Steindl-Rast leads us through the maze of the many figures and images in Merton's final talk. I find it an invaluable guide.

I feel sure that Merton would have been delighted by the inclusion of a piece by his good friend, Amiya Chakravarty, with whom he spent time on his Asian journey. There is great charm in this unusual bringing together of threads of Oriental religions by one who writes out of rich experience. A lovely passage will illustrate this richness and the author's effort to put it into language that can be understood by Westerners. At the Vedanta Center, says Chakravarty, worshippers "realize that deep within the very structure of the atom, or the star, the infinitesimal as well as the infinitudinal, there is the handiwork of the Divine. . . We can see this in the face of an old woman, weeding in the field. She looks up, and we see her face lined with compassion, with kindness. A whole lifetime of service . . . has given this simple woman a spiritual beauty. . . The whole of her life is written there, and when we see that, passing through a village, we have seen the face of God."

Since silence and solitude were so essential in Merton's own teaching about contemplation, it is good to have an essay on "Thomas Merton and the Search for Solitude" by Richard Anthony Cashen, CP. Merton observed the narcissism of our culture, its existential anxiety, and the ensuing alienation. The only way out is to face and accept one's own solitariness and loneliness. Although this brings pain, it also brings possibilities. We are called beyond our familiar societal self, says Merton, to take responsibility for our own inner lives and so to become real persons. In this process, solitude serves as the medium, the atmosphere, the catalyst, the doorway, the path to true inner solitude. Cashen writes, "We have to develop some sense of solitude, some taste for solitude, if we want to discover who we are, and what God is saying to us. This is what Merton means by interior solitude: Being a whole person, having a relatively firm grasp on one's own identity, an inner togetherness, a sense of one's dignity as God's child."

This is an engaging little book inviting us to explore some of the many facets of the heritage of Thomas Merton. However, it was disappointing to me to note that no woman writer was asked for a contribution. This omission seems especially unfortunate in a time of acute awareness of the non-inclusion of women in so many areas.

Merton himself, I believe, would have remarked this loss. In the spring of 1968, this reviewer heard Merton encouraging women religious to bring their experiences and insights into the task of taking over the direction of their own lives. At that point, he was prodding nuns to read authors like Mary Daly (who had just published *The Church and the Second Sex*) to understand their own diminishment.

There are plenty of women who are Merton scholars who could have made a contribution to this book—Elena Malits, Monica Furlong, Rosemary Ruether, Naomi Burton Stone, Jane Marie Richardson, to name a few. A little research would have uncovered these names and those of other women Merton scholars. I believe readers would have profited greatly from their insights.