

EIGHTEEN POEMS: A COMMENTARY

—by **Anthony T. Padovano**

Editor's Note: Thomas Merton's *Eighteen Poems* was published in an edition of 250 copies by New Directions in 1986. It was printed by letterpress on Arches text paper at the Yolla Bolly Press during September and October of 1985. The edition sells for \$200. The majority of the poems were previously unpublished though a few were included in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*.

It is an intriguing book. *Thomas Merton: Eighteen Poems* is a publication of New Directions. This brief comment is not a review but a notice that such a book exists and that Merton scholars should be aware of it.

The poems were written in 1966 by Merton and entrusted to a friend, requesting that they be published after his death. The poems are love poems by Merton, two years before his death, to a woman he loved and who, it seems, enriched his life.

The story of this relationship has been told before, sensitively and compellingly. It is told by Merton himself in these poems, enigmatically and passionately.

Our reaction to these poems and the experience they celebrate may tell us as much about ourselves as they do about Merton. The love of a man for a woman is, for some, an anomaly if that man happens to be a celibate and a priest, a hermit and a mystic, a monk and a Cistercian. For Merton, there was no anomaly. There was a joy in another person and in love. Once more, Merton forces us to rethink our definitions, to test our priorities, to consider monasticism not as an expression of our own ideology but as a manifestation of life and a revelation of the human heart.

It is significant that Merton wished these poems to be published. It is consonant with the spirituality of the man that he wished to be honest about his life. The poetry, however, is also a celebration of the woman he loved. Honesty is not enough without love. To conceal this material is to be dishonest with Merton's life, something he would have rejected vehemently.

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Few things summarize Merton's life as easily as honesty and love. They are both here in these poems.

Merton tells us of the identity crisis the love relationship forced upon him. It was not a crisis about where God or Christ fit into his life. They were always central. It was a crisis about whether former definitions of monasticism and priesthood were perennially valid.

Merton reminds us, in a touching poem, that each of us is a question for which old answers cannot be sufficient. Every birthday has a theology of its own. In each of our biographies, theology is not merely applied to us but forced into new development. Each of us does not repeat the past but makes the present different.

Merton finds in Margaret, his nurse, a source of life and a touch of immortality. God did not make death, he reminds us with a refrain in one poem. He and Margaret are children who allow God to make love again with creation. God makes love as gently as a deer, in a tender liturgy of fire and worshipping hands, with solemn love and sacred music.

Merton is sad that he cannot be present when the eyes of the woman he loves first open to begin a new day. The wonder of these poems is that they are so specific and intimate. Love is betrayed when it becomes an abstraction.

Merton reminds us that the need we have for one another is more important than winning. In this, he witnesses in a new way to the bankruptcy of competition and power. There are hints of John Donne, another priest who writes about human love, in Merton's comment that two people can make a holiday together and that they bring light into the world for one more day. For Merton, he and Margaret are not an illusion or an evasion, clearly not a betrayal or a sin. Together they are holiness and wholeness. It is a mystic's witness to an eremetical relationship, hidden from the world, not because the relationship is not worthy but because the world is not ready to receive it.

In another poem, Merton telephones Margaret two hundred miles away and feels the distance keenly. She is gone when the phone call is done, almost into another country where people have no names and speak a language that has no vocabulary of love. Love sings no more in the wires when the call is finished. When lovers are apart, the world's song is muted.

Margaret has changed the planetary orbit of Merton's life but brought him nearer to the sun. They are together a midsummer secret, an endless May, a common presence. The chill of life is ended every cold grey morning with the warmth of wanting each other.

How shall we receive these poems and the love they bring us? Our response may be hesitant as we balance the individual's right to one's own life and charisma with the claims of communities and commitments to define us in ways we do not always choose. As we answer this question, we reveal our understanding of God and religious life, of human love and of creation itself. Merton invites us to rejoice with him. Are we receptive to the invitation?



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