

# ICONOSTASIS FOR NOVICES

Review of

Charles J. Healey, S.J.

*MODERN SPIRITUAL WRITERS: THEIR LEGACIES OF PRAYER*

New York: Alba House, 1989

xii, 293 pages / \$10.95 paperback

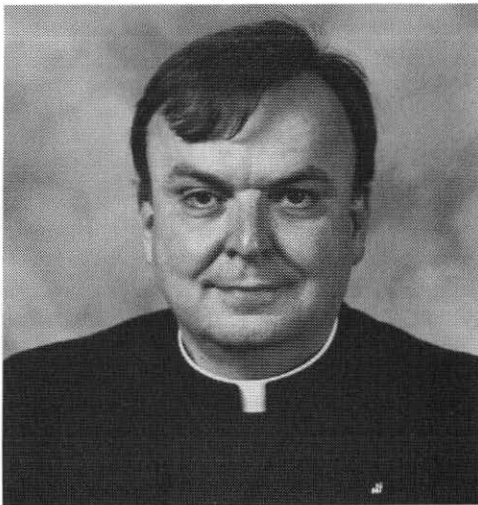
Reviewed by **Gary Young**, C. R.

Charles Healey has assembled a modest but striking iconostasis for novices who desire an expanded spiritual life through prayer. His book takes a forthright look at nine worthies who have bonded their humanity with divinity so excellently that one is not only unintimidated but eager to penetrate their spirituality. The author assures us that his text is a primer — no cause for disdain because beginners at prayer, and we are many, need such presentations of first principles. That this book results from a survey course is to the benefit of those who approach spirituality with common sense humility.

Healey's language is classroom clear and each section is well-organized. The surveys of each subject correspond with one another but own their separate meanings. The personalities studied line up with a simplicity so blessed that one is surprised at the depth of understanding achieved by reading. A practical suggestion: The mystagogia phase of the RCIA program could use this handy and inexpensive paperback to advantage.

Most of the writers featured are not alien to anyone the least interested in twentieth century spirituality. Columba Marmion was a bit of a surprise. I associate that apostolic Benedictine with a shelf of dusty books inherited from my grandfather. Thanks to teachers like Charles Healey, however, such legacies are rescued and re-framed to give the grandchildren a deeper sense of their spiritual identity. The dates of publication in Healey's bibliography of Marmion's works indicate the need for further study of his active-contemplative spirituality.

Marmion joins a very catholic group in this book including Chardin, Merton, Dorothy Day, C. S. Lewis, Abraham Heschel, Caryl Chessell, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and John Henry Newman. Ecumenists will be pleased with this interfaith syllabus. Feminists perhaps less so. (Only two chapters have



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female subjects.) It would be missing the spirit of this book to say that its author should have arranged equal rows of sexes.

Houselander deserves this updated appreciation and again we can be grateful to Healey for incorporasting the mystical quality of that great lady, who, like Dorothy Day, anticipated the great surge of theological reflection from the souls of modern women.

... because I am a woman involved in practical cares, I cannot give the first half of the day to these things, but must meditate when I can, early in the morning and on the fly during the day. Not in the privacy of a study — but here, there and everywhere — at the kitchen table, on the train, on the ferry, on my way to and from appointments and even while making supper or putting Teresa to bed.

Merton disciples will learn nothing new from the chapter devoted to him. In itself, it is a good introduction to Merton. No doubt, it was not Healey's intention, but here I want to pause and view Merton as a focus among these others. So much of the new spirit embodied in Thomas Merton seems to be in the convergence of the other souls found in this book. One enriched with the Merton legacy will recognize Teilhard de Chardin's evolutionary view constantly expanding the rapport between divinity and humanity. "... everything is sacred to the men who can distinguish that portion of chosen being which is subject to Christ's drawing power in the process of consummation." Merton echoes: "Whatever I may have written, I think it all can be reduced in the end to this one root truth: that God calls human persons to union with Himself and with one another in Christ, in the Church which is His Mystical Body." Marmion spoke to this idea well before: "All the holiness God has destined for our souls has been placed in the Humanity of Christ, and it is from this source that we must draw." Even Rabbi Heschel is in concert: "God is the center toward which all forces tend. He is the source, and we are the flowing of His force, the ebb and flow of His tides."

The range of Merton's reading and correspondence certainly provided him with influence from the others presented in his company by Healey. The author suggests this when he quotes Merton's assessment of Newman in the very last part of the final chapter:

When Newman was raised to the cardinalate in 1879 he took as his motto the expression "cor ad cor loquitur" ("heart speaks to heart"). This very aptly sums up his spirituality and prayer since they are characterized by directness, sincerity, and a very personal and concrete approach. His spirituality is also marked by a sense of oneness and harmony. Thomas Merton recognized this aspect in one of his journals, as he reflected on Newman's love for Clement of Alexandria. Noting Newman's love for music throughout his life, Merton observes that "all that was best, expressed itself for him, in terms of music, harmony, oneness, sound."

It is possible to compare Merton to Newman. And it is interesting to note Caryll Houselander's vision of Christ in a subway and compare it to the pre-monastic Merton's vision in Harlem and his later revelation at Fourth and Walnut in Louisville. The bumpy conversion of C. S. Lewis is comparable to Merton's and wouldn't these words of the don fit in the monk's mouth? "We may ignore, but we can nowhere evade, the presence of God. The world is crowded with Him. He walks everywhere incognito."

Those of us devoted to Merton realize that he never encountered great writers without being duly influenced, much like Newman. It is no wonder that Merton has assumed the kind of popularity enjoyed by Newman. To make Merton the integer of this assembly of spirits would be distorting. To say that the others created the mind of Merton would be just as silly. (It would, however, behoove Merton scholars to create a concordance of names and movements which affected him.) I apologize to Healey if I have made too much of Merton as a touchstone.

My final compliment of this book is illuminated by the passage of Healey's I quoted above. The tribute Healey gives to Newman may likewise be applied to his own style: direct, sincere,

personal, and concrete. He maintains an even analysis while remaining deeply attached to each of his subjects. Even if Merton is not a touchstone, Healey is a prism.

While serving as a fine survey of personalities, this study has a meditative quality that would serve a novice, a retreatant, or a passenger on a crowded bus. Sentences of aphoristic quality permit the reader to pause, to reflect, and to consider the unique movement of grace through each of the figures so effectively presented by Charles J. Healey in *Modern Spiritual Writers: Their Legacies of Prayer*.

Our relationship with God must be practiced, otherwise we shall not find the right note, the right word, the right language when He comes upon us unawares. We have to learn the language of God, learn it with effort, we must work at it, if we too would learn to converse with Him; prayer too must be practiced as part of our work.

— Dietrich Bonhoeffer

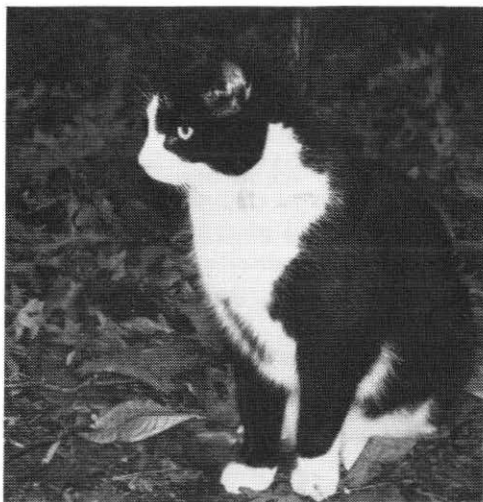
## TO THOMAS MERTON

by **Wilda Dockery**

In the stream of ordinary life  
I found a kitten,  
black and white,  
full of amber-eyed innocence,  
and called him Thomas Merton.

By day he goes on solitary journeys  
in the woods, contemplating  
chipmunks, birds, and squirrels.  
At night he shares community with me,  
curled and centered on my bed.

Whenever his feline rule of life  
requires him to arise  
at the monastic hour of three,  
he strokes my face and purrs,  
ready to greet the dark silence.



THOMAS MERTON  
“Greeting the Dark Silence”

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□ **Wilda Dockery** lives in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. She is currently at work on a thesis about Thomas Merton’s journal writing and is interested in the connections between Merton and Ety Hillesum. She writes: “I have a cat named Thomas Merton. I don’t think he’d mind, do you?”