

# A Small Disagreement with Fr. Basil Pennington...

## What Is Thomas Merton's First Book?

by **John E. King**

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Perhaps a better question would be - Does it matter if we agree on which of the humongous Merton canon is NUMBER ONE? Well, Fr. Basil Pennington raises the question again in the 'Welcome' to his current book on Merton - *Thomas Merton: My Brother*, which also contains a re-issue of his article "Father Louis' First Book: *A Spirit of Simplicity*." Ordinarily only bibliographic folk have much interest in identifying a volume as 'first book.'

This response is grounded in a continuing interest in building up a clear record of Merton's writings as well as identifying factual 'errata' about Merton and his publications that regularly show up on the written and media record. Some of the 'errors' are simply 'typos,' some clearly matters of dispute or interpretation and some are sloppy research. Pennington's assertion appears to be one of the second category. I have to admit that my gut reaction was to place it in the last category when I first read the 'Welcome' section of his new book. I have concluded that that position he takes is one based on his interpretation of the 'writing and publishing record' as well as the vagueness associated with establishing the criteria for a 'book' . . . (There is a 'sloppy' error in the 'Merton Chronology' on the bottom of page 17 where Merton is placed in Arizona when he really went to New Mexico; this error is a repeat error from Fr. Basil's earlier book about Merton - *Thomas Merton: Brother Monk*).

Fr. Basil's article on *The Spirit of Simplicity* presents his rationale for labeling that book as 'the first.' He thinks that the final essay as well as the selection, translation and comments on the material by St. Bernard constitute a major work worthy of the title - book. Most Merton students have not read this article since it was previously printed only in *Studiosorum Speculum*, the 1993 Cistercian Publications volume in honor of Louis Lekai. This idea is a continuation of a thought Basil raised in earlier articles, "Thomas Merton and his own Cistercian Tradition" (Pennington, 1989) and "Like Father, Like Son" (Pennington, 1992). Part of his position is to summarily categorize *Thirty Poems* (published in 1944) as "hardly considered a book." It certainly has less pages than some of the Merton pamphlets, it is not much longer, page-wise, than many of his essays, but was it published as a book?

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The Pennington thesis hinges on rejecting the case for assigning ‘first book’ status to *Thirty Poems* and making the case for primacy of *The Spirit of Simplicity*.

So, first of all, who thinks or asserts that *Thirty Poems* is really the ‘first’ book by Merton in spite of Fr. Basil’s dismissal. At least six sources of rebuttal of Fr. Basil’s contention are readily available:

#### A. The Publisher of *Thirty Poems*:

New Directions certainly thought they were publishing a book. Here is some of the information printed on the dust-jacket of the next volume they published of Merton’s poetry (*A Man in the Divided Sea*),

“When New Directions first published the poems of the young Trappist monk Thomas Merton, the praise of good critics in all parts of the country was so wholehearted that the *edition* was exhausted within a few months.

Now we are proud to present a new and larger collection of verse by this fine poet. His earlier *volume*, THIRTY POEMS, is reprinted in full, and to it is added a large selection of new work on religious and metaphysical themes, written since Merton has been a monk, together with a group of earlier poems dating from the period before he entered Our Lady of Gethsemani Monastery in Kentucky.

Typical of the critical comment on Merton’s *first book* was the judgment . . .” (Merton, 1946)

#### B. Reviewers of *Thirty Poems*:

Reviewers thought it was a book as evidenced by at least seven *book reviews* cited in Merton bibliographies and at least two more found in an early MA thesis on Merton’s poetry. The reviewers use language such as this quote from *Commonweal*:

“The first ten lines (of the poem ‘The Flight into Egypt’) are probably the finest in the entire *book*.” (Lowell, 1945)

Louise Nicholl also said, “The poems set first in the *book* are sometimes marked with difficulties of meaning . . .” (Nicholl, 1945).

The obvious conclusion is that independent reviewers considered this to be a ‘real’ book deserving of a ‘book review’.

#### C. The Merton Bibliographies:

*Thirty Poems* is listed as ‘certainly’ a book or pamphlet in all of the published bibliographies. Breit and Daggy, Dell’Isola, Nelson, Ahearn and Imos all place the publication as the chronologically ‘first’ book of Thomas Merton.

D. Books about the life and writings of Merton:

Michael Mott, the writer of the 'authorized' biography notes the following: "*Thirty Poems* by Thomas Merton . . . appeared on November 20, 1944. It was Merton's *first published book* . . . The *book* attracted readers and notice." (Mott, 1984) p. 224

Other writers confirm Mott's assertion:

Woodcock (1978) says, ". . . according to Merton, about half of the *Thirty Poems* which formed his first published *book* in 1944."

Sr. Therese Lentfoehr (1979) notes, "In 1944, *Thirty Poems* was published, and then in 1946 a second collection, *A Man in the Divided Sea* saw publication; the first *book*, already out of print, was included as an appendix to the new volume."

Jim Forest (1991) asserts, "His first book, *Thirty Poems*, was published by James Laughlin of New Directions in 1944." p. 88

Msgr. William Shannon (1992) follows suit with, "In November 1944 Merton received a copy of his first published work, *Thirty Poems*. . ." p. 134

E. What antiquarian booksellers say: Two catalog entries from recent sales catalogs provide a consistent position:

1) Elizabeth Evans of By the Way Books describes *Thirty Poems* in Catalog 16 (Evans, 1996) as "Merton's first book" (entry #105).

2) Terry Halladay of the William Reese Co. cites *Thirty Poems* in this manner, "First edition, first book . . ." (William Reese Catalog - 1996).

F. What Thomas Merton says:

Merton says the following about *Thirty Poems*:

"*The Seven Storey Mountain* . . . It is a good job of printing, and . . . with *Thirty Poems*, the only respectable *book* I have written." (Montaldo, 1996) p. 217

"As soon as a religious writes a *book* and gets it published, the rumor starts traveling around: 'he has left the monastery, you know!' It began with me as soon as I had published *Thirty Poems*." (Montaldo, 1996) p. 306

He lists *Thirty Poems* on the hand-drawn scale of evaluation of his books (probably done the year before his death). He ranks thirty books, including *Thirty Poems* but not including *The Spirit of Simplicity*. He ranked *Thirty Poems* as 'better' on his scale. (cf. *Thomas Merton: A Pictorial Biography*)

The evidence seems conclusive - credible sources, including the author, contend consistently that *Thirty Poems* is in fact a book (and, if so, then chronologically the first book).

Secondly, at least one other book (according to the major bibliographies) was published before 1948. It included all the poetry of *Thirty Poems*, much more material and is titled - *A Man in the Divided Sea*.

Why then does Fr. Basil pass over *A Man in the Divided Sea* as a 'real book.' He does not say in the article or new 'Welcome.' It must clearly be 'only' another book of poems. This is an answer that awaits Fr. Basil's commentary since he has not addressed the issue.

Finally, what can be said about *The Spirit of Simplicity*? A review of the book itself is in order since few students of Thomas Merton have handled the actual book (it was not widely circulated since the Abbey of Gethsemani published it as part of a series of books which never fully materialized). The volume opens with a six page 'Foreword,' one of more than thirty such prefatory essays Merton composed that are used to introduce somebody else's work. Merton then translated the 75 page document (Part One) entitled "The Spirit of Simplicity," including between page 62 and 63 a series of sepia pictures of 'typical' Cistercian architecture. Part Two includes a total of 29 pages of commentary by Merton on 26 pages of translations of selected texts from St. Bernard (as listed in the table of contents) (this part of the volume was subsequently reprinted in *Thomas Merton on St. Bernard*). The volume's final offering is a three page concluding essay by Merton. So, there are 101 pages of translation and 35 pages of introduction, commentary and conclusion along with a series of pictures with no commentary (16 pages of pictures).

Merton comments on the publication of this volume, "Reverend Father very much likes the *pamphlet* on *The Spirit of Simplicity*" (Montaldo, 1996). Indeed, he had already said as much in the 'Foreword' to the volume, "This report, which comprises the first half of the present *pamphlet*" (Merton, 1948).

Some commentators on Merton's writing do not even mention *The Spirit of Simplicity* or only do so in the context of an early example of his translating ability or as an example of his prefatory essay style (King, 1993).

Mott does not even include the volume in the text or bibliography for his *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, the authorized biography of Merton.

Other biographers who do not mention it include Monica Furlong, Cornelia and Irving Sussman as well as Ross Labrie.

The problem of lack citation could be explained by either the failure of this volume to be widely circulated, as it was not a commercial publication (only printed in small quantities by the monastery) or by the fact that all the bibliographers have minimized the 'Merton content' and emphasized the translating effect. The bibliographers regularly place this among the 'translations.' Other than Dell'Isola mentioning that Merton provided a 'commentary' - 3 pages - (Dell'Isola fails to note that Merton wrote the foreword and commentary

on the translations of St. Bernard), this volume is viewed as a translation effort, first and foremost. Breit and Daggy (1986) follow Dell'Isola and indicate Merton as providing 'translation and commentary.' They do include the three page conclusion as part of table of contents but do not indicate the 'foreword' or 26 pages of commentary on St. Bernard's material.

## Conclusion

What is Merton's first book? The evidence clearly indicates *Thirty Poems* while rejecting *The Spirit of Simplicity*. This conclusion comes in spite of the Pennington thesis. The weight of evidence overwhelmingly points toward a slim volume with a 1944 publication date entitled *Thirty Poems*. The commentaries and final essay in *The Spirit of Simplicity* clearly indicate Merton's ability to tease out salient materials from the medieval writings of St. Bernard so Fr. Basil certainly does a service to Merton students by pointing out these 'hidden' commentaries and their value to a reader today. The value of Merton's analytic skill with medieval texts should never obscure his ability to reflect poetically on a wide range of topics. This reflection, even in thirty small poems, really is worthy of the accolade - 'first book.'

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<sup>1</sup> Evans, Elizabeth. *Catalog 16* - By the Way Books; Spring 1996; Sacramento, CA.

<sup>2</sup> Forest, James. *Thomas Merton: A Pictorial Biography*; 1980; Paulist Press, New York.

<sup>3</sup> Halladay, Terry. *William Reese - Spring 1996 Catalog*; New Haven, CT.

<sup>4</sup> King, John. *A Semi-Hidden Merton: Contemplation and Action in the Prefatory Essays*; 1993; First Kansas Merton Conference.

<sup>5</sup> Leatfoehr, Therese. *Words and Silence*; 1979; New Directions, New York.

<sup>6</sup> Lowell, Robert. *The Verses of Thomas Merton* (a book review); 1945; in *Commonweal*; June 22.

<sup>7</sup> Montaldo, Jonathan. *Entering the Silence*; 1996; Harper Collins; San Francisco.

<sup>8</sup> Merton, Thomas. *A Man in the Divided Sea*; 1946; New Directions, New York.

<sup>9</sup> Merton, Thomas. *The Spirit of Simplicity*; 1948; (a translation); Our Lady of Gethsemani, Trappist, KY.

<sup>10</sup> Mott, Michael. *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*; 1984; Houghton-Mifflin, Boston.

<sup>11</sup> Nicholl, Louise T. *Modern or Medievalist*; in *The Saturday Review*; March 23, 1946.

<sup>12</sup> Pennington, Basil. *Thomas Merton: Brother Monk*; 1987; Harper & Row, San Francisco.

<sup>13</sup> Pennington, Basil. *Thomas Merton and his own Cistercian Tradition*; 1989; in *Review for Religious*, vol. 48.

<sup>14</sup> Pennington, Basil. *Like Father, Like Son*; in *Bernardus Magister*; 1992; Cistercian Pub., Kalamazoo.

<sup>15</sup> Pennington, Basil. *Thomas Merton: My Brother*; 1996; New City Press, New York.

<sup>16</sup> Shannon, William. *Silent Lamp*; 1992; Crossroad Pub., New York.

<sup>17</sup> Woodcock, George. *Thomas Merton: Monk and Poet*; 1978; Douglas and McIntyre, Vancouver.