

Quiet Time with Merton

Review of

15 Days of Prayer with Thomas Merton

By André Gozier, OSB

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Reviewed by **Dan Kenneth Phillips**

For most of us Mertonites, if we admit it, there is a stirring compulsion deep within us that desires an extended period of time sitting under the tutelage of Thomas Merton. We would allow him to be the ultimate teacher as we would soak up the wisdom he has to offer. *15 Days of Prayer with Thomas Merton* is an attempt by André Gozier to give us over two weeks of time to spend in solitude and contemplation with Merton. The purpose of this work, according to Thomas M. Santa, CSSR in his introductory remarks, is to lead us “to a place where prayer is possible.” And he adds parenthetically, “perhaps this volume can help lead you to a deeper place, a more intimate relationship with the Lord.”

André Gozier, OSB, a French Benedictine monk known for his many publications dedicated to the spiritual life, to liturgy, to monasticism and to interreligious dialogue, begins with a brief chronology of key turning points in Merton’s life and a few additional notes about Thomas Merton, emphasizing especially the seeing-between-the-lines insightfulness we have all encountered as Merton speaks to our condition. “If you listen, you will hear things that will be said that perhaps are not written in this book” (Preface to the Japanese edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain*).

Gozier’s introduction emphasizes Merton’s influence on numerous persons worldwide and the paradoxes that are part of his existence. Merton, according to Gozier, “was a man of paradoxes: of words and silence; a contemplative involved in the fight for social justice, and a man of solitude who, by keeping himself in the background, sought to deepen the fundamental human experience. Ultimately, he was a man with only one goal: union with God and communion with humankind.”

15 Days of Prayer with Thomas Merton begins with the conflicts in Merton’s life. These Gozier calls signs of the “unsettled and restless self.” Examples include Merton’s conflict between being a Trappist and desiring to be a Carthusian, and his desire for absolute solitude while he plays classical music continuously in the hermitage. In his reflection section the author asks: “Can I freely communicate not only my strengths, my hopes, and my dreams, but also my struggles and those areas of my life that are not at peace?” It is a challenge to us to work on the conflicts in our own lives.

The second chapter deals with Merton’s conversion and draws us into the circumstances, events,

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and experiences in our own lives that have caused us to respond to God in a new way. The three chapters that follow relate to Merton's choice of vocation, his days as a monk, and the influence of saints on his life. This last is, to me, one of the most important chapters for it shows how Merton himself was not only challenged by the saints from the past, but how this gave him guidance in developing saintly qualities in his own life.

Other chapters relate to the influence of the Psalms on Merton, his vocation as a poet, his political positions, meditation and contemplation as a continuing source of strength for his life, his role as a spiritual master, his dialogues with other monastic groups, and his mysticism. In summary, Gozier has brought us face to face again with various and important aspects of Merton's life. He gives us reminders of important life-changing events in Merton's experience that somehow reach down to us and pique our spirits.

At times I felt the author did not quote Merton enough, especially during the opening sections of the book where he seems to be familiar only with *The Seven Storey Mountain* as a source for the early years. Gozier also includes quotations from many outside persons where quoting Merton directly would have seemed preferable. For a true sabbatical with Merton, *A Seven Day Journey With Thomas Merton* by Esther de Waal is more complete and instructive. But this addition by Gozier to the corpus of reflective (rather than scholarly) works on Merton again emphasizes the importance of Merton in our world and in our lives. Thomas Merton is a worthy traveling companion for us all.