

A Compassionate Transparency

By **Jonathan Montaldo**

Thomas Merton's future readers will prize his private journals because of what I judge as their compassionate transparency. By writing journals he consciously undermined any attempt by readers to construe him as guru or saint. He bluntly warned off devotees: "don't build on a mud pile like me!"¹ But Merton's gift to readers of his journals is the artful way he discloses himself so that a reader appropriates his confessions as both mirror and window. Like Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, when elaborating on his private trials and joys Merton consciously communicates a resonance between his commentaries on his inner experiences and those of his readers. Merton discloses himself in a way that invites intimacy: when he writes of himself, his readers realize: "me, too." Furthermore, his journals function as a window into his non-resolution of the tensions between his competing desires, between his public and private disclosures of his self-identity. Merton's art of confession and witness is a portal through which readers can examine the contours of their own deepest questions about what it could mean to be more alive and expansive human beings. Merton's journals are an act of communion with others; he mentors daily practice of a contemplative way of living. Be silent. Be at home in your natural environment. Study outside the boundaries of your experience. If I can do it, you can do it, too.

The transparency of his faults to his readers, his sensitivities to criticism, his desire to have his voice heard, his criticism of others, all the manifestations of his weaknesses, allow readers to "take the cure" for a romantic caricature of the spiritual life in general and the monastic life in particular. As much as a reader can extrapolate Merton's spirituality as it embeds itself in his journals, his way of being religious in the world is intended for maturing adults who have their own scars to remind them that God isn't in heaven and all isn't right with the world. Merton's attestations that he did not always know where he was going, that his faith in God was nourished by grave doubts, that, no matter what he did or prayed, he would in the end have to wait upon a mercy he could not give to himself – these elements of his professed religious life are more consoling to adults than any pietistic, childish bromides offered in self-help books or Sunday sermons.

Merton's gift for autobiography communicates a lived theology. He could attract new readers as time moves on, but who knows? My prejudice is that others to come will find in Merton's journal writing the presence of a mentor, counselor, even a friend. Why should anyone who continues to engage current readers so passionately, readers who like his books but more love him, not always have the potential for bending a few ears who are prepared and need to hear his voice?



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1. Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994) 242 [4/28/1968 letter to Bruce L. Carriker].

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