

The Quality of Mercy Revisited

Review of

The Merton Annual, Volume 30

Edited by Deborah Pope Kehoe and Joseph Quinn Raab

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Reviewed by **Jamie Fazio**

Nearly a half-century after Thomas Merton's untimely death, the thirtieth volume of *The Merton Annual* serves as a wonderful reminder of why Merton continues to be enjoyed by new generations of readers. Containing biographical insights, numerous essays relevant to current social concerns and a number of reviews of recent publications, this volume will surely be well received by a wide variety of readers, from the most seasoned Merton scholar to those who are just discovering his writings. As co-editor Joseph Raab states in his introduction (7-16), this volume consists of contributions from or essays related to the theme of the June 2017 ITMS General Meeting that took place at St. Bonaventure University: "Overshadowed by Mercy: Pilgrimage, Prayer, Prophecy." For those members who attended the 2017 conference, this volume will bring back wonderful memories of that gathering, while providing a glimpse of the energy and level of scholarship at the conference for those who were unable to attend. This volume also serves as a testimony to the success of the Daggy Scholarship program, featuring contributions from five past Daggy Scholars: Cristóbal Serrán-Pagán y Fuentes (1999), David Golemboski (2005), Daniel P. Horan (2009), Ryan L. Scruggs (2009) and Maria Surat (2015).

The volume begins with articles that provide interesting insights into Merton's early life. Raab structures his overview around the three-fold subtitle of the 2017 ITMS conference – pilgrimage, prophecy and prayer. He uses each of these themes as a lens to view not only how Merton's time at Saint Bonaventure influenced his decision to enter Gethsemani, but also how they continued to play a role throughout Merton's life. He does this by weaving together insights from the numerous contributors to the 2017 ITMS gathering. Just as walking the grounds of the Saint Bonaventure campus gave conference attendees a greater sense of the environment that helped form Merton, so this volume provides the reader with many insights, allowing one to gain an appreciation for the personal narrative that was a part of Merton's discernment process during that informative time.

In "Letters to Pat" (17-28) – a short series of letters written by Merton to his then-girlfriend, Pat Hickman – editor Paul Pearson provides a new and unique insight into Merton's young adult life in his introduction and annotations. Written between June 9 and June 15, 1938, while Merton was with his friend Bob Lax in Olean, NY, these letters invite the reader to meet a young-adult Merton who was,

Jamie Fazio is the Director of the Center for Spirituality and Catholic Chaplain at Nazareth College, Rochester, NY. He is co-chair with Virginia Ratigan of the Daggy Scholarship Program for the International Thomas Merton Society, which provides grants covering costs for young people to attend ITMS General Meetings.

at the time, in love. Pearson states that while the letters “contain no new revelations about Thomas Merton” they do “provide us with a precious insight into the life and loves of the Merton of 1938” (20). These letters are also a reminder of the days before social media when young love was expressed in handwritten letters, instead of emojis, texts or tweets. Each letter begins with the endearing salutation of “My Darling” and continues on about various topics that were of interest to the young couple. One sees in the body of each letter the appreciation for the joy found in the routines of everyday life that would have such an impact on his latter days at the hermitage. The letters are a delight to read.

In “Thomas Merton: Gift of God for the Monks of Our Time” (29-40), his translation and annotation of an article by the Camaldolese monk and scholar Benedetto Calati (a contemporary of Merton who served as the Superior of the San Gregorio al Celio Monastery in Rome during the period 1951-1969), Donald Grayston provides an international insight – and critique – from the European monastic perspective. In this article, the reader encounters an evaluation of Merton by a fellow monk – albeit one from across the Atlantic Ocean – and overhears an Italian debate about “Merton’s value as a spiritual writer” (30). Grayston outlines Calati’s earlier criticism regarding the intentionality behind some of Merton’s books and his later reevaluation of Merton’s significance. For example, Calati comes to realize that “*The Sign of Jonas* was never intended be a treatise on contemplation or a synthesis of monastic theology: it is a diary” (31). Calati’s reflection on Merton’s new methodology of writing about contemplative practice and monastic life provides insight into the interior evolution of the role of the monk in a postmodern world. While Calati does go on to call Merton a “Gift of God for the Monks of Our Time” (34-40), his initial critique reminds the reader that Merton should not and does not represent the monastic charism for all who are called to such a vocation. Using Calati’s reflections, Grayston wonderfully creates a narrative timeline of Merton’s development as a monk discovering his vocation. He demonstrates how Merton’s insights not only provide insight into monastic life, but can appropriately be applied to life in general; they serve as guide for how a lay person can navigate as a contemplative in modern society.

The core of this volume consists of a series of wonderful reflections on Merton’s writings as they pertain to various conceptions of God’s mercy. The editors have selected articles that provide insight into some of the philosophical and theological sources that influenced Merton. They also provide examples of how his understanding of mercy caused him to respond to the social struggles of his time. In “The ‘One Merciful Event’: Thomas Merton on Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo*” (54-77), Ryan L. Scruggs begins this series by examining the influence St. Anselm had on the development of Merton’s doctrine of mercy. Quoting Merton from *No Man Is an Island*, Scruggs explains how Anselm’s influence resulted in Merton directly connecting God’s mercy with divine justice, stating that “God’s mercy makes it possible for us to give full satisfaction to His justice” (61). This direct correlation between mercy and justice is picked up by Daniel P. Horan in “*Kyrie Eleison: Mercy at the Heart of Thomas Merton’s Theology of Revelation*” (78-87), his contribution reflecting on mercy being the heart of Merton’s theology of revelation. Horan draws Merton into dialogue with Avery Cardinal Dulles and Pope Francis, bringing Merton’s insights into current times.

These articles are only two of many that touch upon the theme of mercy as it relates to Merton’s scholarship and his relevance when it comes to linking Merton with other thinkers, sources of inspiration and modern social justice issues. In “A Mysterious, Unaccountable Mixture of Good and Evil: Thomas Merton on Cooperation and Complicity” (88-101), David Golemboski offers an

excellent reflection on the need for contemplative grounding when engaging in social action. He references the suicide protest of Roger LaPorte and discusses Merton's reaction as an example of the paradox the contemplative ally faces when confronted with protest practices that may have a common desired result, but the means are contrary to a contemplative imperative rooted in nonviolence. In "The Mercy of God: Mary as a Mercy for Humanity and as the Mediatrix of Salvation" (102-16), June-Ann Greeley provides a view into God's mercy through the vocation of Mary, reminding the reader, and by extension the Church, that Merton was heavily influenced by Mary as an example of strength, determination and mercy. Cristóbal Serrán-Pagán y Fuentes puts forth the premise of a Carmelite influence found in Merton's readings of St. John of the Cross as a source of Merton's appreciation of the mystical experience in his article "Divine Mercy in Thomas Merton and St. John of the Cross: Encountering the Dark Nights in the Human Soul" (117-30).

One of the highlights in this volume is the publication of the keynote address given by M. Shawn Copeland at the Saint Bonaventure meeting: "The Watchmen and the Witnesses: Thomas Merton, Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Exercise of the Prophetic" (156-70). Copeland develops a dynamic and thoughtful comparison of Thomas Merton and Martin Luther King, Jr. Acknowledging that both men would never describe themselves as prophets, Copeland examines the lives and writings of Merton and King through the lens of prophets who are simultaneously "witnesses" and "watchmen." Copeland provides a splendid theological analysis of King and Merton as individuals who respond to the urgency of the challenging times in which they lived. She demonstrates how these two, while the particularities of their vocations differed, were both called to respond to God's invitation to action against bigotry and racism due to their being grounded in contemplative practice. Not only does she furnish insight into the past, Copeland does the reader a great service by explaining how Merton and King are complementary sources of inspiration for the challenges facing our world today. Five decades after the untimely deaths of both King and Merton, Copeland offers them as examples of how to counter the dualistic mindset that plagues our country and world. She reminds people of the imperative social mission of Christianity to promote justice.

Other contributions consider Merton's connections with Catherine de Hueck, Jacques Ellul, John Coltrane, Paul Evdokimov and James Baldwin, all in the context of mercy and its ramifications for pilgrimage, prophecy and/or prayer. The volume concludes with thirteen reviews of recent publications that touch upon the wide range of Merton's influence in the areas of ecumenism, the environment, the spiritual journey and peace and justice, including Monica Weis' *Thomas Merton and the Celts*, Jim Forest's *The Root of War Is Fear: Thomas Merton's Advice to Peacemakers* and Matthew Fox's *A Way to God: Thomas Merton's Creation Spirituality Journey*. The number of recent publications by emerging and familiar Merton scholars will be something of interest to read over the summer months!

This thirtieth volume of *The Merton Annual* is dedicated to the memory of two individuals who contributed greatly to the ITMS and to Merton scholarship. Dr. Nass Cannon was a long-time member of the ITMS, often published in *The Merton Annual* and *The Merton Seasonal* (including a review of the most recent previous volume of the *Annual*) and served on the Daggy Scholarship Committee for many years. His generosity and kindness helped the ITMS introduce Merton to a new generation of readers and scholars, including those whose work is found in this latest volume. Rev. Donald Grayston was awarded an International "Louie" at the St. Bonaventure meeting for his significant contributions both to the Merton Society of Canada and to the ITMS, including serving as

president of both groups. ITMS members who knew both Nass and Don can picture Don discussing jazz with Merton while Nass provides hospitality. These two recently departed ITMS members and leaders will be deeply missed.

Sales on Merton Books

The annual Orbis Books summer sale features reduced prices on nine books by and about Thomas Merton:

- Thomas Merton: *Cold War Letters* (\$10.00)
- Thomas Merton: *Essential Writings* (\$13.00)
- Thomas Merton: *Peace in the Post-Christian Era* (\$10.00)
- Thomas Merton: *Selected Essays* (\$10.00)
- The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (\$10.00)
- John Dear: *Thomas Merton, Peacemaker* (\$12.00)
- Jim Forest: *Living with Wisdom: A Life of Thomas Merton* (\$15.00)
- Jim Forest: *The Root of War Is Fear: Thomas Merton's Advice to Peacemakers* (\$15.00)
- Michael W. Higgins: *The Unquiet Monk: Thomas Merton's Questing Faith* (\$9.00)

To order online, see: www.orbisbooks.com/sale-catalog-2018; by phone: 1-800-258-5838; sale ends September 4, 2018.

Also, the annual Liturgical Press/Cistercian Publications summer sale features reduced prices on five items by and about Merton:

- Thomas Merton: *In the Valley of Wormwood: Cistercian Blessed and Saints of the Golden Age* (\$25.97)
 - Thomas Merton: *The Life of the Vows: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 6* (\$29.22)
 - Survival or Prophecy? The Correspondence of Jean Leclercq and Thomas Merton* (\$5.49)
 - Morgan Atkinson: *The Many Storeys and Last Days of Thomas Merton* [DVD] (\$16.25)
 - Morgan Atkinson: *Soul Searching: The Journey of Thomas Merton* [book and DVD] (\$12.48)
- To order online, see: www.cistercianpublications.org/Products?onSale=true; by phone: 1-800-436-8431.