

## Witness to Freedom

Review of

*In Praise of the Useless Life: A Monk's Memoir*

By Paul Quenon, OCSO

Foreword by Pico Iyer

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Reviewed by **Gregory K. Hillis**

In a chapter entitled “Problems and Prospects” in his posthumously published volume *Contemplation in a World of Action*, Thomas Merton writes about the ongoing task of monastic renewal after the Second Vatican Council, particularly within cloistered monasteries devoted to the contemplative life. This account leads him to a discussion of the purpose of monastic life and the relationship of the monk with the world. Merton thus argues that monastic life has a prophetic character to it “in the sense that he is a living witness to the freedom of the sons of God and to the essential difference between that freedom and the spirit of the world” (9). Monasticism manifests to the world what it could mean to live a life that is structured around a fundamentally different logic than that which governs the world. It is a life that is not predicated on condemning the world, but is one that recognizes the limitations of the world’s logic of “usefulness” and its understanding of the purpose of existence. The monk has left the world not to abandon the world, but to live a life that is fundamentally *other* than that lived in the world. “The monk is not defined by his task, his usefulness,” Merton writes. “In a certain sense he is supposed to be ‘useless’ because his mission is not to *do* this or that job but to *be* a man of God. He does not live in order to exercise a specific function: his business is life itself” (7).

I am not sure whether Br. Paul Quenon had these Mertonian lines in mind when he set about writing *In Praise of the Useless Life: A Monk's Memoir*, but they encapsulate the vision of the monastic life that emerges from the book. A monk at the Abbey of Gethsemani and former novice of Thomas Merton, Paul Quenon is well-known to those in Merton circles. He is a regular attendee at the International Thomas Merton Society meetings and has played host to many Merton scholars and readers at the Abbey. He is also an accomplished photographer and respected poet who has published six books of verse. *In Praise of the Useless Life* is not, strictly speaking, an autobiography, although Br. Paul necessarily touches upon various events in his life both before and after he entered the monastery at age 17. Rather, the book provides for the reader fascinating snapshots of one’s monk’s experiences at the Abbey of Gethsemani, all of which, taken together, provide a compelling account of the meaning

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and purpose of the monastic life in a world that, perhaps increasingly, has difficulty comprehending why anyone might choose such an existence.

The book contains chapters about the transformative practice of chanting the psalms, about how monastic life at Gethsemani allows Br. Paul to see and experience nature in ways that go beyond the often superficial approaches by which most of us encounter the outdoors, and about how the contemplative life nurtures his poetry and photography. Br. Paul also chronicles a week at Merton's hermitage in the heat of summer, and follows this with a description of the various hermits who have lived at Gethsemani over the years.

Of most interest to Merton scholars and readers will be the two chapters Br. Paul devotes to Merton. In the first (23-40), he writes about his experiences of having Merton as a novice master. Before he entered the monastery, Br. Paul had read *The Seven Storey Mountain*. He was already intrigued by the monastic life, and Merton's autobiography further fostered his interest. However, upon entering Gethsemani, it was not until a month after his interview with the novice master that he learned that this was in fact Thomas Merton. In the chapter on Merton as novice master, Br. Paul provides for us some insights into what Merton was like as a teacher and as a spiritual director. In the novitiate conferences Merton did not, according to Br. Paul, delve deeply into the political issues about which he wrote in depth. He would touch upon his own opinions about racism and nuclear war, but primarily focused his attention on those matters that would be of primary concern for the formation of monks. Merton treated the novices as equals, and this, Br. Paul writes, "bred self-assurance and confidence" (26). As a spiritual director, Merton was, according to Br. Paul, "mostly nondirective" (30). He did not provide for the monks formal instruction on meditation, but encouraged them to understand that spiritual growth would happen simply by leaning in to the monastic life of prayer and work. During times of personal spiritual direction, Merton occasionally interjected his own observations or insights, but primarily, as Br. Paul writes, "what I got was space to breathe, to be myself, and to develop at my own pace" (30). Br. Paul touches upon Merton's "enormous capacity for nonverbal communication" (30), his playfulness in the choir, his personal concern for Paul as he transitioned from the novitiate to the professed monks' side of the monastery, as well as his concern about Paul's relationship with his family, particularly his sister. For those of us who only know Merton through his writing, Br. Paul gives us a unique insight into what it was like to have a one-on-one relationship with the man.

The second chapter on Merton (109-18) goes into Merton's death and what it felt like to experience this tragedy as a monk at the Abbey of Gethsemani. Br. Paul recounts how Fr. Matthew Kelty, another well-known monk at the monastery who was close to Merton, waited beside the highway on the day of Merton's departure, hoping he would be able to say goodbye. When it turned out that he was too late to meet the car, Fr. Matthew broke out in tears with the sudden realization that he was not going to see Merton again. Br. Paul recounts that, upon learning of Merton's departure, he immediately went up to the hermitage and sat on the floor of the porch. He learned of Merton's death after the midday meal when Fr. Flavian Burns, then abbot, walked to the reader's microphone and announced that an accident had happened. Remembering that Merton had once told the novices to pray the penitential psalms for him when he died, Br. Paul went into the church and prayed them more intensely than he had ever done before or since. Time seemed to stand still during the week between Merton's death and the arrival of his casket at the monastery; Br. Paul likened the feeling

he had during that week to the days after President Kennedy was assassinated. And when the casket finally arrived and the funeral mass began, Paul broke down in tears, unable to sing during the procession of the concelebrants. The chapter as a whole is moving, and in it, as was the case in his chapter on Merton as novice master, there are small details – Fr. John Eudes Bamberger putting his hand to his lips and then touching the casket as it was lowered to the ground and Fr. Raymond Flanagan, another monastic writer who disagreed often with Merton, energetically shoveling dirt onto the casket – that make for compelling reading.

However, as interesting as these chapters on Merton are, the real value of *In Praise of the Useless Life* is the way in which Br. Paul subtly but persuasively demonstrates the value of the monastic life, a life he characterizes as one that is “radically a life of play” (5), lived in gratitude simply for the sake of being. The book is not an apology for monasticism. Br. Paul does not appear to be overly interested in trying to convince others of the value of a life to which he has devoted sixty years. Rather, poetically and playfully, he gives readers insight into the logic of the contemplative life, and in the process, enables those of us in the world to recognize the limitations of an existence focused simply on accumulation. In his last conference with his novices before becoming a full-time hermit (*Essential Writings* 67-72), Merton characterized such an existence as one dominated by care, describing it as follows: “A life that has nothing but a straight line towards the grave and a lot of little circular lines to forget the grave as you travel towards the grave is a life of care, and it is a life of ever-increasing care and it is a life of frustration and it is a life of futility” (68). Such a life of care – which Merton describes as the “fears, reflections, regrets, and anxieties” (69) that can preoccupy us – has a tendency to make the world opaque to such a degree that we are unable to see God shining through it even though God is manifest everywhere in everything, “in people and in things and in nature and in events” (70). But to live in the present moment completely abandoned to God by putting away all care, Merton says, allows for the world to become transparent to God. Br. Paul was among those who heard Merton’s words that day, and *In Praise of the Useless Life* demonstrates that he took his novice master’s words to heart.