

A Life and a Work in Progress

Review of

*Reading Thomas Merton and Longing for God in Haiti:
Learning Wisdom in the School of My Life*

By Gerard Thomas Straub

Ft. Pierce, FL: Pax et Bonum Communications, 2022

xvii + 359 pages / \$20 paper

Reviewed by **David J. Belcastro**

This book, as its lengthy title suggests, consists of three related areas that offer the reader an opportunity to follow the author's reflections on memories and readings through three hundred and forty-eight pages of text. The first area is the author's life and work. Gerry Straub is a married secular Franciscan, who gave up a New York career producing films to serve the poor in Haiti. (Films and publications are noted at the outset of the book.) The second area is readings, Merton readings in particular. Quotations from Merton and many others are scattered throughout the book, and six study guides regarding Merton and the contemplative life by Jonathan Montaldo (identified as the author's "study partner") are attached at the outset of six chapters. The third area is the author's learning experience resulting from his reading of Merton in Haiti. His reflections are of a personal nature in accordance with the genre of a journal.

With regard to his reflections, Straub explains, "As I read Merton in Haiti and in numerous other slums around the world, I felt as if he had kidnapped me. I couldn't escape, couldn't put down whatever Merton book I was reading" (xvi). Eventually, he came to see Merton as a spiritual director that could assist him in his search for God and has worked to articulate that process:

Channeling my fascination with Thomas Merton into a publishable book has been a long, lonely journey. In May 2000, I had a flash of inspiration to write a book about Thomas Merton and Saint Benedict, in which the ancient and modern monks would function as surrogate spiritual directors. My hunch was that Saint Benedict and Thomas Merton could help me satisfy my hunger for a deeper relationship with God. (24)

Here is an example of Straub's reading of Merton. In a chapter entitled "Merton and Me, Wearing Pants" and reflecting on Merton's prayer that begins with the memorable words: "My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going," he writes:

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So many things flash before my mind as I read the words of that prayer. Up until the last few years, I had no idea of God's will for my life, but I felt whatever it was, I knew I had done many things that couldn't possibly be in harmony with God's will, countless little acts of selfishness, endless moments of unloving behavior. Mine has been a messy, imperfect life, littered with missteps and mistakes. In 2015, I felt I was supposed to be in Haiti. Merton's prayer goes on to say that if he continues to strive to do God's will lead him down the right road, even if he knows nothing about it. . . . I have taken great comfort from those honest words. (26)

Comments regarding the book, as found on the back cover, focus on Straub's remarkable life and his relationship with Merton. Paul Quenon, Trappist monk of Gethsemani Abbey, believes that "Merton would be pleased and humbled to know he accompanied Gerry Straub into the most appalling circumstances of Haiti, and to afford throughout such hopeless daily experiences encountered here with bald honesty and raw faith." Jonathan Montaldo, Merton scholar and author of the book's introduction as well as of the accompanying study guides, observes and points out that "Merton has mentored Gerry Straub's spiritual exercises of remembering, of being awed by, and obeying the commands of God's love." Gueric Heckel, Trappist monk and Director of St. Francis Retreat Center at Mepkin Abbey, believes that if Merton were alive he would have read Straub's book and "Gerry's witness of the power of contemplation and action as a beacon of hope in our dark world would have mentored Merton on how faith in action can triumph in biding over despair and violence."

I agree with Montaldo, Heckel and Quenon that Straub is a remarkable person whose life story of conversion and commitment in challenging, sometimes harrowing circumstances is indeed remarkable, and I believe that a book regarding his life, work and spiritual formation is worthy of publication. With that said, this most recent version of the manuscript, begun in 2000 and finished in January 2016, was in need of significant editing. A review of the author's account of writing the book may provide an explanation as to why additional editing is advisable.

Regarding this publication, Straub writes:

The three incarnations of the Merton–Benedict book are up nearly two thousand pages. What doomed the three books was that each of them focused too much attention on the external events of not only my life, but also the troubled times in which I lived. I was trying to filter the events of my life and the events in our society that either confused or infuriated me through the prism of monastic spirituality. Each version of the book grew fatter and fatter, but they were lean on the kind of spiritual substance for which I hungered. Much of this fourth attempt was written as I rode out the trauma of the global pandemic while stranded in Haiti. (25)

Straub realized that previous drafts were too long for publication and that his reason for writing this book was obscured by extraneous material. He succeeded in reducing the two thousand pages to a more reasonable length and thereby refocused this edition on his personal spiritual journey. However, he simply did not go far enough in reducing its length or in clarifying its message. I believe he was, to some degree, aware of this. Toward the end of the book, he describes the book as a "crazy, soap opera-esque journal" (297). This, I believe, is an honest description of five distinct and

unrelated sections, consisting of random reflections, with Montaldo's study guides unnecessarily attached. Straub also knew that the book in its present form requires a kind of reading that would work with his crazy, soap opera-esque presentation. In an opening section entitled "A Friendly Warning before Reading My Book," he writes:

I want to offer you something to think about before you read any further. As you read this book, the book is reading to you. That might sound strange, but think about it for a moment. Anytime you read a text, be it in the bible or a poem or a novel, the text is actually inviting you to enter into a different world, to move beyond the limits of yourself. . . . My point is: allow this book, which is heavily sprinkled with Merton's words and the impact they had on me, to open up for you new vistas of understanding. Read it with more than your eyes. Read it with your broken heart. Read it with an open mind. (xvi)

Here is a book that could, if carefully edited, offer an interesting contribution to Merton studies. To be of interest to Merton readers, the book has to be further revised with the reader in mind, i.e. less "crazy-operatic." To be of interest to Merton scholars, the book would need to clarify how his particular approach to reading of Merton adds insight into Merton's writings, i.e. an existential reading of Merton. Setting all this criticism aside, I will end on a more positive note. While reading a book, I often become curious about what was going on in the mind of the writer while writing, the paragraphs that were cut, the lines that were revised. This is not the case with this book. Everything and more is there for the adventurous reader to sort through.