

Ordinary Life, Extraordinary Person

Review of

Remembering the Forgotten Merton

By William J. Meegan

Foreword by Christopher Pramuk

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Reviewed by **Jeffrey Kiernan**

In his preface to *Remembering the Forgotten Merton*, clinical psychologist William Meegan explains why he wrote the book. He states that he “was intrigued by John Paul [Merton], who managed to avoid the possible negative outcomes of the early loss of his mother, rejection by his father, being ignored by his brother, and the many other disappointments of his life.” He also states that he had a sense of awe at what he sees as “John Paul’s heroism during World War II” and that he sees John Paul as “a model of selflessness and deep spirituality” (xiii). Having explained his interest in Thomas Merton’s younger brother, Meegan then addresses the “more significant question [of] why anyone else would be interested in his story.” His answer is straightforward: “There is a little bit of him in each of us. By looking back at his life, we may find the inspiration to look forward in a loving way, as he did” (xiii). In the epilogue of the book, the author writes, “John Paul Merton lived an ordinary life and was an extraordinary person by *simply being who he was*. In doing so he lights the path for each of us to follow” (129, emphasis added). In the fourteen chapters between preface and epilogue, Meegan succeeds in detailing – and detailing is the right word – the experiences of John Paul which led to his unique development and ultimately to his death while serving in the Royal Canadian Air Force during World War II.

John Paul’s brother Thomas (not at all well-known during John Paul’s lifetime) became famous as a writer-monk in part because he explicated the importance of becoming aware of one’s true self and living out that true self – or, we might say, simply being who one is. One of many anecdotes that exemplify Thomas Merton’s being who he was is the following. In Ron Seitz’ memoir *Song for Nobody*, he describes a scene in Tommie O’Callaghan’s home after Merton’s friend Dan Walsh’s first mass. Seitz recalled:

After that special Mass, there was a reception at the home of Tommie O’Callaghan, a close friend to all of us. It was a cloudy afternoon, with Tom and the Abbot present (a day’s leave from the monastery into the city) to concelebrate the service,

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then afterwards to celebrate socially the occasion of this happy event with good friends and food and drinks.

The incident forever framed in my memory of that day is of Tom Merton, somewhat uncomfortable in the large living room, surrounded by a growing group of well-meaning admirers (all curious). Tom was being asked a wide variety of sincere questions (mostly of an ecclesiastical nature). And listening patiently, from time to time refilling his champagne glass and sipping it ever more rapidly to sustain his kind attention, he finally spread his arms as a gentle gesture of calling a halt to all of this, with: “Okay, okay, let’s hold a moment . . . this is all fine and good, but the real issue here is whether or not *God is in this room, here and now!*” Pausing, with arms still spread, a smile widening to a cheerful grin, eyes open with light (everyone caught, still, silenced with listening), “If you are in the truth of that – then all of these other concerns take care of themselves, eh?”

“Sure.”

And with that, Tom had graciously backed out of the crowded room with the neck of the large champagne bottle in one hand and an empty glass in the other. (*Song for Nobody* 22-23)

“The real issue here is whether or not *God is in this room, here and now.*” This idea of Thomas Merton’s – that God is always present in the circumstances of our lives – is foundational to his spirituality. The very human story that unfolds in *Remembering the Forgotten Merton* reveals that God was in all the various “rooms” that John Paul encountered in his brief life.

The lives of the Merton brothers’ artist parents, Owen Merton and Ruth Jenkins, are delineated in some detail, as are the lives of the boys’ grandparents. Of special note, of course, are the boys’ early years of childhood because of two circumstances: Owen’s unsuccessful career and the relatively early deaths of both Ruth and Owen. Ruth died from stomach cancer when Tom was 5 and John Paul was 2. The inability to adequately provide for the boys resulted in John Paul’s being raised by his maternal grandparents, Sam and Mattie Jenkins, in Douglaston, Queens, New York. It also resulted in the separation of the brothers since Owen (still hoping to be a successful artist) chose to keep Tom with him as he traveled to Cape Cod, Bermuda and various places in Europe.

Since the author is a clinical psychologist, it is certainly reasonable that much of the commentary on the events of John Paul’s life is seen through a psychological perspective. For example, in chapter 3, “A Life of Loss,” Meegan writes:

Recounting the life of John Paul’s father and brother in the years following his mother’s death gives clarity to the extent of the impact his mother’s death had on John Paul’s life and the family. The implications were profound. His would not have been a grief solely about the loss of his mother. His would also have been the sadness and confusion due to the cyclical loss and return of both his father and brother, without knowing why he was left or if they would ever stay with him. Vital and deepening attachments to both his father and brother failed to mature. (31)

While Meegan frequently implies and/or states that we cannot say with one hundred percent certainty what psychological effects events have on particular individuals, he does occasionally

seem to describe John Paul's behaviors and feelings with such certainty. This is so not only in the example above, but also in later instances when writing about, say, John Paul's relatively stable life in his grandparents' home, his academic problems at Cornell University, or some of his frustrations about military life. That said, the psychological perspective is, on balance, a quite positive part of the book.

While Meegan covers the various "adventures" of Owen Merton after Ruth's death and their effect or lack thereof on John Paul and Tom, and while he also covers Owen's own illness and death when John Paul was 12, the advent of World War II and John Paul's reaction to its circumstances form the core of the book. After all, the book is about John Paul Merton, not Thomas Merton. To state the obvious, it is unlikely the book would exist if John Paul's brother weren't Thomas Merton. This, however, serves to counter-intuitively reinforce a major conclusion of the book: John Paul, in living an ordinary life, became an extraordinary person by simply being who he was. As such, he can serve as a role model for us who live our own unique, ordinary lives and seek our authenticity.

John Paul took many paths as he searched for purpose and meaning. His time at Cornell University illustrates some of the blessings and challenges he encountered in his search. He formed some very solid relationships while at Cornell. His relationship with the Leonard and Rovene Miscall family nurtured him (see 66-67). They lived near Cornell and became a "second family" for John Paul. However, academically speaking, he was unfocused. Meegan points out that by "the end of the spring term 1940, John Paul had been at Cornell for . . . nine semesters, been on [academic] probation three times, and had ninety-nine of the 120 credits needed for a degree. He did not graduate; his transcript shows there was an 'honorable dismissal . . .' issued in June 1940" (67). Meegan wisely demonstrates that money was not a problem for John Paul since his grandfather Sam Jenkins had set up a trust fund for him to which he had ready access, especially after he turned twenty-one in 1939. This perhaps partially explains his lack of academic focus. He bought many things, including cars, rifles, fancy razors, microscopes, revolvers and flying lessons (see 69).

His trust fund also enabled him to travel to Mexico for nine months, returning to the U.S. in May 1941. He visited his brother in Olean, New York where Tom was teaching at St. Bonaventure College. They spoke of many things: Mexico, the war in Europe and America's becoming more involved in it, the aftermath of an earthquake, and Mayan ruins, to name a few. Significantly, they also discussed John Paul, who had been raised in the Episcopal Church, possibly becoming a Catholic (see 87, 89).

Even though John Paul had the means to purchase what he wanted and travel where he wanted, Meegan points out that his world was "falling apart with the loss of family and a failed bachelor's degree." Not only was his own world in turmoil, "but the world at large was in chaos. The war in Europe was intensifying." The Battle of Britain began in July of 1940. "The German Luftwaffe began the Blitz of London in September" of that year (69). John Paul decided that he needed to help the war effort. "Going off to war was not something he took lightly, but he was not going to wait for the war come to him. He dreamed of doing something that would give his life greater meaning. He had spent the last years in an aimless pursuit of whatever came next but had no idea which way the path would take him. This war had the effect of giving him a focus that had been lacking. It helped him realize the things that mattered in his life" (73). This effect and realization was not unique to John Paul. The journalist Chris Hedges critically and incisively explores this phenomenon in depth

in his book *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*. He writes, “Even with its destruction and carnage [war] can give us what we long for in life. It can give us purpose, meaning, and a reason for living. . . . It gives us resolve, a cause. It allows us to be noble” (3). This dynamic was operating in John Paul’s case, as it was in countless others at that time. “He had tried unsuccessfully to enlist in the United States Armed Forces. As sentiment in the country was not favorable for sending troops to fight in a foreign war in 1940, he and his like minded friends began to investigate a way to enter the military in some other country. The closest opportunity lay in Canada” (73).

As a member of the British Commonwealth, Canada had been at war with Germany since September 1939 and had programs for non-Canadian citizens to enlist in its armed forces. Because of the air war over Great Britain, there was great need of personnel for the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF). John Paul enlisted in September 1941, trained at several RCAF bases in Canada, and awaited his orders to join the RCAF forces in Great Britain. He had been promoted to the rank of sergeant. “Despite the recommendation of the recruiting officer in Toronto, John Paul had not qualified for training as a pilot. He was to become an air observer. . . . The air observer was the navigator and bomb aimer, responsible for guiding the plane to its target and making the decision to release the bombs” (78-79).

While on leave awaiting his shipping-out orders, John Paul visited his brother Tom at Gethsemani Abbey in July 1942. Tom had entered the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance, the Trappists, at Gethsemani in December 1941 and had been received into the novitiate in February 1942. It was a momentous visit for both brothers. John Paul received instruction in Catholicism in preparation for his baptism. He not only received instruction from Tom, but also from some of the other monks, including Father James Fox, OCSO, retreat master for abbey guests. (Six years later, Father Fox became the abbot of Gethsemani.) All this was with the approval of Abbot Dom Frederic Dunne, OCSO (see 95).

Meegan relates that during John Paul’s visit, Tom had time to reflect upon his past relationship with him and that he regretted the harmful things he had done. This reflecting and regretting did not, however, result in Tom’s fully coming to terms with his culpability. At this point in his life he “demonstrates his own very limited understanding of himself” and was “trying to find his authentic self” (97). Meegan also makes it clear that John Paul’s desire for baptism into Catholicism was not merely done to please Tom, but rather was a sign of his deepening interior spiritual life. Since the abbey did not initiate catechumens, the baptism took place on July 26, 1942 “at St. Catherine’s Catholic church in New Haven, Kentucky.” Tom was not able to attend. “The next day, in Our Lady of Victories Chapel . . . John Paul received the Eucharist at the abbey” (98) at a mass celebrated by Abbot Dunne, with Tom as altar server.

Meegan and Michael Mott, Thomas Merton’s official biographer, both attribute special significance to what happens just before this mass, but with different emphases. Before the mass, Tom notices that John Paul is kneeling in prayer by himself in the tribune or balcony of the chapel. Meegan writes that kneeling “in solitude usually comes from an inner desire to connect with God, and an awareness of the nature of our human condition in the presence of the divine” and that it “is an outward sign of an interior process at work, and in this case, suggests it may have not been the first time John Paul knelt in communion with God” (99). For Mott’s part, he writes that the brothers

were separated again, with John Paul kneeling high up in the gallery or tribune . . . and Merton lighting the lights of the altar. . . . Merton tried to make signs in the air to show John Paul how to find his way down. He couldn't shout, or even speak, and the gestures proved futile, only bringing back to Merton all the times he had gestured his younger brother away during [their youth] in Douglaston. Finally the novice master understood, and went to help John Paul find his way. The brothers were brought nearer and received Holy Communion. The Chapel of Our Lady of Victories was ever after a place for Merton where a greater mystery than reconciliation had taken place. Here, finally, he had been helped to help his brother. Before, they had been little more to one another than orphans of the same parents. (221)

Thus, for Tom, this was an experience beyond reconciliation with his brother and, for John Paul, it was a continuation of his developing interior life at a momentous point in his life – his entry into World War II.

John Paul left Halifax, Nova Scotia on a troop ship on August 7, 1942 and arrived in Liverpool on August 18. He was sent for additional training to a base in Upper Heyford, Oxfordshire. He was granted leave before training and decided to spend the time in London. In September, he met Margaret May Evans, a young woman in the Auxiliary Territorial Service, the women's branch of the British Army. They dated, fell in love, and John Paul asked her to marry him. Fortunately for us, a letter exists from Ms. Evans that gives us insight into their relationship, and into John Paul. Meegan's meticulous research allows us to learn from it. She wrote:

He was a most gentle man, with a wonderful smile and an air of complete serenity. He appreciated beautiful things I gathered he was a keen photographer and one who was interested in people and places. . . . We fell in love and it was only when John spoke of marriage I learned he was a Roman Catholic and he told me of his conversion John was so happy in his new faith but it posed a problem for marriage, as I was Church of England. I told him I would not change my faith in order to marry him but was willing to see the parish priest to ask if a dispensation could be arranged. (106-107)

A dispensation was obtained and they were married on February 23, 1943 in St. Laurence Roman Catholic Church in Birkenhead, Cheshire (see 108).

Following his additional training, John Paul (called Mert by his crewmates) was assigned to Royal Air Station Kirmington. He flew a total of thirteen missions with the 155th and 166th Squadrons before his fateful last mission. The missions were to lay mines in enemy waters and to do night bombing over enemy territory. The missions were flown in Wellington bombers, a twin-engine aircraft that had been first made in 1936 and of which over 11,000 were manufactured.

John Paul's bomber was part of the April 16, 1943 planned airstrike on Mannheim, Germany. The crew included Sidney Lupton (pilot), Roderick Lord (navigator), William Whitfield (wireless operator) and Eric Hadingham (rear gunner). The plane took off from Kirmington at night. It was part of a twelve-bomber formation. John Paul's bomber never made it across the English Channel. It experienced engine failure and crashed into the sea. Ultimately, only Hadingham and Lord survived the crash, though John Paul lived for several hours before succumbing to his injuries. Hadingham's

and Lord's accounts of the crew's time in the water serve as the basis for Meegan's perspective about John Paul's interior spiritual life manifesting itself in such horrific circumstances (see 113-14).

Before addressing John Paul's final hours and Meegan's perspective thereof, it is worthwhile to remember a basic theme of *Remembering the Forgotten Merton*: John Paul lived an ordinary life and was an extraordinary person by simply being who he was. Even a cursory examination of World War II reveals that there were millions of ordinary people, both military and civilian, who in their ordinariness contributed to extraordinary events. Limiting ourselves to the air war that John Paul was part of, there were hundreds of thousands of individuals. For example, in 1943, the year of his fatal mission, there were over 45,000 air crew members and over 120,000 ground staff in the British Bomber Command. This does not include the United States' 8th Air Force that was stationed in Britain (see Richard Overy's 2013 book *The Bombers and the Bombed: Allied Air War over Europe, 1940–1945* [120]). It follows that there would be thousands of losses. In 1943-44, the time period of John Paul's crash, Bomber Command suffered 6,000 crew members killed *from accidents alone* (see Overy 164). It is evident, to say the least, that John Paul's experience was well within the norm. Again, this reinforces the idea of ordinary lives being led by extraordinary people, people we can learn from.

Mert's surviving crewmates' account of the aftermath of the crash demonstrates his other-directed nature and the importance of his faith. After impacting the water, Hadingham and Lord had managed to get into the bomber's emergency dinghy.

[W]e heard shouts for help . . . and came upon JPM. He was supporting Jack Lupton who appeared to be unconscious. . . . this whilst he was critically injured himself. An act of extreme bravery and selflessness Mert was in the last stages of exhaustion being severely wounded about the forehead and unable to move from the waist down. I think probably his back was broken. . . . but it never occurred to him to let go of the pilot. [We soon realized that Jack Lupton was dead and released him into the sea.] [T]ogether we managed to get [Mert] into the dinghy. . . . he was lucid for a period and was aware of his critical condition. *Most of the time he had left was spent in prayer.* Shortly after the Bomb Aimer became delirious and about three hours later he died. (114)

On the evening of April 19, having given up hope of a quick rescue, Hadingham and Lord consigned John Paul's body to the sea. They reported that they had done so "in as Christian manner" as possible. He was twenty-four years old and had been married fifty-four days (115).

Tom Merton received a telegram from John Paul's squadron commander on April 27 informing him that that his brother was missing in action. He did not learn of his death until a few weeks later. His brother's crash was the impetus for Tom Merton to write his famous poetic elegy, "For My Brother: Reported Missing in Action."

In chapter 12, "Inspiration," Meegan offers his perspective and interpretation of the final hours of John Paul's life. It is based upon the crewmates' accounts and his own psychological and spiritual insights into those accounts. A key example of this follows.

John Paul held onto Lupton, refusing to believe he was dead, committed to saving him at all costs. . . . At the end of his life, John Paul's faith sustained and comforted him. In the dinghy . . . he prayed. . . . The energy released in John Paul in order for

him to rescue Lupton was more than the energy of his psychological makeup as a humble, optimistic, and caring person. It was more than the energy one gets from being a comrade-in-arms The source of his energy came from the deepest part of his soul – who God created him to be. (122)

While I choose to believe that Meegan’s insights here are valid, I also find it imperative to note that the person who can most accurately speak to John Paul’s motivations after the crash is John Paul himself. Whatever his motivations were, his actions spoke for themselves, and they spoke loudly.

In the epilogue of his autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Thomas Merton mentions that the “exceedingly tidy little volume, *Thirty Poems*” (410) had reached him in November of 1944. This is the first of his published books and included “For My Brother: Reported Missing in Action,” which also concludes the final main section of the autobiography. William J. Meegan has written a tidy, thoroughly researched and sourced narration of John Paul Merton’s life journey and search for meaning, purpose and authenticity. He succeeds in demonstrating that he lived an ordinary life and was an extraordinary person. Meegan is right to say that John Paul lights a path for each of us in that, we too, are called to lives of purpose, meaning and authenticity within our own circumstances. John Paul led by example.

Perhaps a fitting way to close this review is two brief quotations, one from Chris Hedges and the other from Thomas Merton. Hedges concludes *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* with a reflection on Eros and Thanatos, Love and Death. He writes that “love, in its mystery, has its own power. It alone gives us meaning that endures. It alone allows us to embrace and cherish life. Love has power both to resist in our nature what we know we must resist, and to affirm what we know we must affirm. And love, as the poets remind us, is eternal” (184-85). Readers of Thomas Merton will readily recognize the themes of meaning, purpose, authenticity and war and peace as paramount in his writing. As we know, John Paul died in war and as his crewmates remembered, he died in a selfless way. In the epilogue of *The Seven Storey Mountain* Merton writes, “there is only one vocation. Whether you teach or live in the cloister or nurse the sick, whether you are in religion or out of it, married or single, no matter who you are or what you are, you are called to the summit of perfection: you are called to a deep interior life perhaps even to mystical prayer, and to pass the fruits of your contemplation on to others. And if you cannot do so by word, then by example” (419).