Perceptive Perspectives in Sacred Places

Review of
The Merton Annual, Volume 38
Edited by David Golemboski and Bernadette McNary-Zak
Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2025
302 pages / $19.95 paper

Reviewed by **Michael Smoolca**

The essays in the latest volume of *The Merton Annual*, consisting principally of revised versions of presentations from the ITMS Nineteenth General Meeting, held in Denver in June 2025, range widely – from monastic renewal to aesthetics, from ecological belonging to political resistance. Yet they converge around a shared intuition: the sacred is not elsewhere. It waits beneath the surfaces of our fractured world, inviting us into the practice of attention. Wendell Berry's line, quoted in the introduction, becomes the interpretive lens for this volume: "There are no unsacred places; there are only sacred places and desecrated places" (5). Desecration does not erase the sacred; it obscures it. This idea becomes for me the thread that weaves together these essays. Each contribution calls us to attend more deeply to the sacred in our landscapes, our communities, our inner lives and our historical moment – to perceive what remains present beneath what has been veiled. Seen through this lens, the volume becomes more than a collection of academic studies. It becomes a set of spiritual invitations, each one opening us to the deeper work of contemplative seeing.

David Golemboski's introduction, "No Unsacred Places" (5-9), frames Merton's spirituality of place as a sacramental encounter rather than a static location. In *Day of a Stranger* [41], Merton writes, "Up here in the woods is seen the New Testament: that is to say, the wind comes through the trees and you breathe it" (6). This is not metaphor but contemplative perception – attention attuned to the "germs of spiritual vitality" hidden in the ordinary. In his article "Seeing the World Anew" (144-57), Daniel Horan extends this insight through Bonaventure's notion of *speculatio*, a contemplative "seeing" that transforms daily life into a practice of attuning ourselves to the divine presence within and among us. For Merton, the hermitage was not an escape from the world but a training ground for perceiving it more deeply and truthfully.

In "The Sacred City of the World" (158-80), Ethan Vander Leek places Merton in dialogue with Indigenous understandings of land, particularly through Merton's reflections on the ancient Zapotec city of Monte Albán. Here, the self emerges as relational, embodied and rooted in the land – a self that discovers identity not by withdrawing from the physical world but by entering more deeply into relationship with it. Merton's spirituality, he claims, resonates with Indigenous traditions in which land and nature exist in deep interrelationship with human life.

Michael Smoolca is a spiritual director, supervisor, biospiritual focusing teacher and companion, and longtime centering prayer practitioner and teacher. Thomas Merton has been a guiding influence for decades in his teaching and practice. He has facilitated groups on Merton's writings, offered workshops on Merton's themes and for more than ten years has coordinated the North Central Connecticut Chapter of the International Thomas Merton Society.

Two additional essays – María Guadalupe Zorrilla's "Water, Wood and Wonder" (200-13), a comparison of Merton and Argentine author Sergio Bongiovanni, and Gordon Oyer's reflection on "Relating to Place as Property with Merton as Guide" (214-34), carry this theme into ecology and ethics. Zorrilla shows how both writers treat nature as active presence, a participant in human identity and a shaper of morality. Drawing on ecocriticism, she proposes that both authors see that modern estrangement from nature underlies many of our social and psychological ills. Using Merton to critique American notions of property, Oyer maintains that land ownership must be understood not as dominion but as a mutual obligation, a theme consistent with Merton's ecological consciousness and critique of consumerism. For Merton, belonging to a place entails responsibility to it. Together, these essays reveal a Merton grounded in place and ecology – one who teaches that the sacred is always local, always particular, always waiting to be noticed, and that our noticing must mature into humility, reverence, relationship and restraint.

Daniel DeForest London's "Rewilding Prayer" (181-99) explores the wilderness – both exterior and interior – as a site of *parrhesia*, fearless and unguarded speech before God. London highlights moments in Merton's life and writings where he prays with Job-like frankness, accusing God of silence or abandonment. These moments become acts of spiritual courage, revealing that wildness is not the opposite of prayer but can be seen as its birthplace. In the silence that follows his protest, Merton hears something unexpected: not answers but birdsong; not explanations but wind in the trees; not a system but a Presence. London's essay suggests that the wilderness is not a place of exile or escape but a place of encounter, where lament becomes a doorway into deeper communion.

A pair of the conference's general session presentations, Julia Prinz's and Kevin Burke's "Aesthetics of Resistance" (122-43) and J. Matthew Ashley's "Merton, Tracy and the Uncanny" (101-21) probe Merton's relationship to art, beauty and the fragmentary nature of modern experience. Prinz and Burke place Merton in conversation with the visual artists Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee and Käthe Kollwitz, showing how art becomes a mode of truth-telling in times of political violence and moral distortion. Kandinsky's "inner strength of sight" (126), Klee's "Ecce," a haunting drawing of Christ with a shrapnel crown, and Kollwitz's portraits of grieving mothers become companions to Merton's own anguished search for clarity as he re-engaged the crises of the 1960s. Their essay argues that to see truthfully is already to resist the forces that deform perception – propaganda, nationalism, technological rationality and the seductions of power. Ashley brings Merton into dialogue with theologian David Tracy's notion of the uncanny – the unsettling recognition that we are not fully at home in the world. He argues that Merton's journals, especially *Woods, Shore, Desert*, embody the fragmentariness Tracy identifies. Merton offers not a system but shards of insight, shining fragments through which the sacred breaks into view. His later writing reveals a spirituality attentive to the fractured nature of the modern world, where grace still breaks through what feels disjointed and estranged. Together, these essays portray a Merton willing to face the world's brokenness without surrendering to despair. To attend to the fragment is to glimpse the sacred within it; to remain awake in the uncanny is to refuse illusion in favor of a deeper, more demanding truth.

Several essays turn toward monasticism—its renewal, its crises and its future promise. Taken together, they reveal monastic life not as a relic of the past but as a living threshold where new forms of community, resistance and contemplative presence can be imagined and embodied. Patrick O'Connell's study of Merton's "Open Letter" on Schema XIII (72-100) – the draft of what would

become *Gaudium et Spes*, Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World – shows Merton fully engaged with the Council's moral horizon. Schema XIII sought to address the urgent social, cultural, economic and moral questions of the twentieth century: war and peace, human dignity, culture, economics, marriage and family, and the Church's role in a rapidly changing world. Merton's concern, as O'Connell demonstrates, was not that the Church might fade into irrelevance but that it might drift into complicity – especially in the nuclear age. He insists that the Church must speak from the Gospel's eschatological horizon rather than from the logic of deterrence or political convenience. For Merton, renewal begins with recovering the courage to name the truth, especially when that truth is costly.

Merton's own essay, "The Council and Monasticism" (10-31), accompanied by O'Connell's introduction, shows Merton wrestling with the meaning of religious life in a post-Christian world. He rejects both nostalgia and naïve progressivism. Authentic renewal, he argues, must be experiential, communal and rooted in the living Spirit – not in juridical structures, inherited forms or romanticized medieval ideals. Monastic life must remain porous to the world's suffering and open to the Spirit's unpredictable movements. Also comprised of primary source material with a monastic orientation is "Thinking with the Thoughts" (32-71), a selection of Merton's conferences to his novices focused on the traditional themes of "the Passions, Spiritual Combat and Patristic Anthropology," selected, transcribed and introduced by David Odorisio.

The volume's final essay (235-56) – by Ed Murphy, Sophia Park and Megan Way – carries these themes into the present through an exploration of "new monasticism." Reading Merton's final talk in Bangkok as a summons for our times, they imagine forms of contemplative life capable of resisting capitalism, nationalism and institutional rigidity. Their essay, weaving in Murphy's own journey from Vietnam to a calling to activism, reflects on what monastic values might look like today: simplicity, solidarity, contemplative depth and a commitment to justice.

Taken together, the essays in this edition of *The Merton Annual* – along with Bernadette McNary-Zak's bibliographic survey "An Invitation to Life" (257-65) and eight reviews (266-90) – reveal a larger pattern of recovering the sacred beneath what seems desecrated. This collection presents Merton as a guide for an age of fragmentation such as ours. Among other things, he teaches us to see the sacred in place; to pray our wildness; to resist through seeing truth; to discern through fragments; to renew without nostalgia; to belong without possessing; to hope without illusion. This volume does not present Merton as a figure of the past. It reveals him as a companion for the present – one who sees deeply and, from that seeing, speaks with clarity, tenderness and a prophetic voice to the crises of our fractured times. What emerges is a Merton who still invites us to live awake – attentive to the sacred, honest about our brokenness, and courageous enough to imagine a more humane and contemplative way of being in and perceiving the world.