

The Holy Spirit Imparadises: A Mystical World Community of Souls

Review of
The Paradise Man: According to Thomas Merton
by Linhxuan Vu
Las Vegas: Rushmore Press, 2021 (second edition)
146 pages / \$17.99 paper

Reviewed by **Jonathan Montaldo**

Paradise is not the final goal of the spiritual life. It is . . . only a return to the true beginning. It is a “fresh start.” The monk who has realized in himself purity of heart, and has been restored, in some measure, to the innocence lost by Adam, has still not ended his journey. He is only ready to begin.

Thomas Merton, *Selected Essays* 63

Linxuan Vu – or Fr. Peter Dat Tien Vu – is a priest and Cistercian monk, who received a Masters of Divinity degree (1993) and an MA in theology (1997) from the Dominican School, Graduate Theologian Union in Berkeley, California. After years being sub-novice master at Thien Phuoc Cistercian Abbey in Vung Tau City, Vietnam, he served since 2013 on the chaplain team at the Retreat House of Assumption Abbey in Ava, Missouri until appointed in 2018 as superior of Our Lady of Grace, a new Cistercian monastic community in Aptos, California.

Fr. Peter’s book is a teaching of three chapters: “Union with God”; “Union with the World”; and “Union with Humankind.” The works of Thomas Merton are his principal resource. Each chapter defends his thesis that only Jesus is the “Paradise Man.” He alone fulfills God’s mandate to witness that the Divine Being and Creator has chosen to love the world by sending the “Paradise Man.” The Holy Spirit provides grace, the energy to imparadise human beings with hope for an eternal future in which All are One with the Father.

The author’s use of his Merton resources is exemplary. He weaves Merton’s texts into his commentary with dexterity and ease. A large choir of other authors are present in this work: Theresa of Avila, Basho, Nikos Kazantzakis, Dorothy Day, Fyodor Dostoevsky and Mohandas Gandhi, to name only a few of the varied voices he conducts with facility. All his citations are well orchestrated, and not a pastiche of quotations. He integrates his citations into his commentary so that they resonate with one another, hearts speaking to hearts “in a kind of music of friendship” (Merton). His citations alone are reward enough for reading the book.

Jonathan Montaldo is former director of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University, former president of the International Thomas Merton Society, and editor of numerous Merton works, including *Entering the Silence*, the second volume of Merton’s complete journals.

The tone of the work is pastoral, as he avoids the “clear only if known” fallacy in technical writing (“I take for granted the reader knows what I know”). He manifests a mastery of catechetics. He appends, in addition to endnotes and a good Merton bibliography of his sources, a glossary of theological terms relevant to the text for the lay reader. Taking nothing for granted, he provides a glossary of information gleaned from Wikipedia on his text’s “other voices” – including Abraham Lincoln’s. He then ends with nineteen questions that allow the reader or community of readers to appropriate his book’s themes.

The “Questions for Discussion” section could benefit from revision. Here, but hardly elsewhere, the author creates questions that require a deep knowledge of a semantic field of the terms he uses; for example, “Through the Sacrament of the Eucharist, how do I experience God’s immanence and God’s transcendence?” The last of his nineteen questions, “Have you ever met in your life anyone who lives and acts as a Paradise Man?” provoked my sardonic response: “I have met a few women with high degrees of purity of heart, but no man who ‘lives in paradise’ has ever crossed my path.”

While his brief but spirit-mentoring book is admirable, inspiring and eminently useful, I urge a Third Edition that recasts his text in inclusive language. While he often avoids exclusivity, his use of the term “paradise man” creates problems within his text that hides his manifestly inclusionary theological perspectives, evidenced in his conclusion: “We are all paradise people . . . we just need an act of awakening which Meister Eckhart called a ‘breakthrough.’”