

## A Panorama of Personal Perspectives

*Thomas Merton: Insights and Interviews*

An Anthology Drawn from 35 Years of *The Merton Annual* (1988-2022)

Volume II

*Interviews: A Thomas Merton Oral History*

Edited by Glenn Amorosia

Introduction by David Odorisio

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Reviewed by **Aaron K. Kerr**

A significant fact of this publication is that the thirty-four interviews included here are assembled in a single volume with a five-page index, making it a valuable tool for research as well as a rich reference source for biographical understanding, both of Merton and the interviewees. Interviews appeared in *The Merton Annual* from its first volume in 1988; two were conducted as early as 1980, just twelve years after Thomas Merton's death. With two appendices – one a list of the interviews' original publication date in *The Merton Annual* (551-52), and a second one, a brief history of the *Annual* (553-54) – the volume amplifies the journal's role in the development of Merton's place in church history. For, as American Protestant historian Martin Marty said in his 2010 interview: "The first thing with any great person, and I can say we are talking about a great person, is the generation after him has to kick over the traces, like with Albert Schweitzer, Karl Rahner and Hans Urs Von Balthasar. Then you start selective retrieval. You take those things that were half finished and you have that younger generation work out the implications" (501).

The volume has three parts, which mirror somewhat Fr. Louis' development as a monk and a writer. The first part (1-167), aptly entitled "Gethsemani Encounters," includes interviews with members of his monastic community, those with whom he lived, prayed and worked for more than a quarter century. Notable in this first part is the range of interpersonal connections between individuals in the community. All the interviewees were taught in some capacity by Thomas Merton, whether as novices or scholastics, and some speak candidly about Fr. Louis as their director and as a spiritual master.

Part Two, "Interviews with Other Religious" (169-340), provides the reader with details of Thomas Merton's evolving participation in worldwide Catholic monasticism, monastic renewal and engagement with the Second Vatican Council, as well as the rising tide of adaptations to modern culture. The reader listens in on conversations about renewal that are seeking to explore

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the contemplative heart of monastic life. Part of those tremors of change led to openness between men and women religious, a development that these interviews illuminate through autobiographical testimony from sisters who are Cistercian, Carmelite and Loretine.

The last sixteen interviews comprise Part Three: “Interviews with Friends and Scholars” (341-550), including Ad Reinhardt, Douglas Steere and Hildegard Goss-Mayr among the former, and Anthony Padovano, William Shannon and Victor Kramer among the latter. I would suggest reading the volume front to back, not skipping around to interviews that may seem to be of interest. David Odorisio’s introduction (xix-xxx) is especially helpful in the way it provides short contextual portraits of each interview. Moreover, the first two parts provide a rich, layered and nuanced context for this third part, which exemplifies what seems to be a consensus about Merton’s significance and relevance – his genius and humility meant that his hospitality, encouragement and disciplined curiosity struck a very strong chord in the areas of philosophy, justice, peace, race-relations, art, poetry and all the rest. But none of these friendships and the intellectual and emotional discipline it took to foster and sustain them would have been possible without Fr. Louis’ commitment to his monastic vocation, the granular details of which are discussed in the first two parts of this volume.

For five-hundred-some pages, the voices of the interviewees seem to echo and resonate with each other, giving to the reader variations on some themes. First, Fr. Louis was both a good monk and a good friend to those outside the monastery. In the logic of institutional Christianity, being “good” at both would lead to multiple tensions and dogmatic reactions from both secularists and Catholics. But in the logic of Trinitarian life, these tensions are resolved and Merton comes across as an integrated, joyful evangelist, a humble priest longing for the salvation of the world.

Secondly, Thomas Merton was a human being with a gregarious slant – a slant that was straightened and balanced by becoming a monk. The witness from almost all of these interviews is that he was curious about others, and strongly desired to hear from them, learn from them and provide for them a loving, truth-telling presence. He was present to people in a way that made them open and at ease.

Finally, and perhaps most important for those of us who are seeking to live authentically in this age, Merton was participating in an apostolic way; he was initiating, moving, developing, and promoting conversations. That means that, in the monastery at least, he wasn’t a stand-out, a celebrity or a fragile figure; his gregarious intellect and joyful voice lent itself to other voices. The study of Merton is a study of communities of mutual reciprocity, and these interviews give to us a community of witnesses and conversations of which we are now a living part. For me, these interviews represent a call to embody the discipline, faith, openness and love that Thomas Merton actualized in his holy life, a life totally dedicated to God and neighbor.