

## Fruitful Provocation

Review of

*Engaging Thomas Merton: Spirituality, Justice, and Racism*

by Daniel P. Horan, OFM

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Reviewed by **George Kehoe**

Equipped with the spirituality of a Franciscan, the training of a theologian and the field experience of a teacher and writer, Fr. Daniel Horan engages Merton in the lists of contemporary times to offer a guiding light in discerning Christian responses to difficult issues of violence and peace, prayer and reconciliation, marriage and holy orders, digital wasteland and spiritual renewal, systemic racism and a modern Pelagianism that naturally sets man atop a hierarchical heap of godless conformity. These topics are all touched upon in this collection of seventeen of Fr. Horan's essays that includes works from 2011 to 2022, with just three coming before 2013, the year Pope Francis' pontificate began. Indeed, evidence of a natural affinity among Horan, Pope Francis, Merton and the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) appears often throughout.

These essays have previously appeared in various forms in various places – several in either *The Merton Annual* or *The Merton Seasonal* – and are here expanded and organized as chapters under five section headings, each section containing either three or four chapters: (1) “The Continued Appeal and Significance of Thomas Merton” (1-25); (2) “Thomas Merton on Contemporary Christian Life” (27-89); (3) “Insights about Key Christian Virtues” (91-148); (4) “The Spirituality of Racial Justice” (149-203); and (5) “Social Justice and Ethics” (205-48).

Fittingly, the collection opens with the chapter “Seeds of Inspiration” (3-9), the content of which is largely derived from the homily Horan delivered during a liturgy marking the fiftieth anniversary of Merton's death in 2018. Testifying to Merton's timeless legacy, the chapter serves as an introduction to what follows: sixteen chapters situating Merton's work within a framework of the Vatican II call to “read the signs of the times” and to live amid them according to Christian values.

As Horan notes in his introduction, these essays are all concerned with Merton's writings on “racism, violence, and contemporary Christian living” and “take as their starting point the continued relevance and insight of Merton for our times” (x). Along with Horan's compelling commentary are abundant quotations and references to specific primary works, including not only those by Merton but also papal encyclicals and exhortations and Vatican II documents, as well as to the writings of an impressive roster of contemporary scholars and theologians. An impressive scholar and theologian himself, Horan deftly interweaves these texts within his own assertions and observations as he explores Merton's significance across an array of issues in a manner that is informative, enlightening

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and fruitfully provocative. It is this inspirational quality that, in the opinion of this reviewer, makes Horan's book an excellent resource for group readings and discussion settings.

Section One asks the question *Why Merton Matters?* Why should we continue to read and study and derive inspiration from Merton's work? Horan answers with three reasons: first is Merton's emphasis on the "importance of prayer and contemplation for all people" (12); second is the timeliness of Merton's social criticism and "urgent writings on justice" (12); and third, "the most significant reason" we should and do continue to "care about Merton today [is] his unabashed humanity" (13). As Horan says, "Merton's humanity on full display offers a refreshing model of Christian living that is honest" (7).

An important component of Merton's journey is what Merton calls "an apostolate of friendship" (23) in a letter he wrote to Pope John XXIII in 1958 and what Horan highlights in the first section of the book as he describes how Merton "continues to be a catalyst for relationship building, drawing together folks from various backgrounds, contexts, and social locations that find in his writings and thought something around which to build connections that might not otherwise have come to pass" (25). Merton is referring to the massive correspondence he maintained during his life that serves as testimony to a ministry of building friendships through letter-writing. As one of Horan's goals in publishing this collection is to keep the ministry of friendship vibrant, his essays are built to foster further study, deeper prayer, richer meditation and decisive action. His engagement with Merton shows us where and how we can work together on social justice issues – and why we should. And he calls attention to Merton's reminder that until "we recognize that we are members of one body and that we have vital obligations and responsibilities toward other members who live by the same life-principle, we will never understand the love of God" (*Life and Holiness* 48). This deep level of recognition, of keeping true Christian charity central to all things, is tantamount to nothing less than metanoia.

And so, what is the Christian way? Both Merton and Pope Francis proclaim it is the way of love, the radical path of love, and we travel the way together. As Pope Francis writes in his *Apostolic Exhortation Gaudete et Exsultate (On the Call to Holiness in Today's World, 2018)*, "We are never completely ourselves unless we belong to a people. That is why no one is saved alone, as an isolated individual. Rather, God draws us to himself, taking into account the complex fabric of interpersonal relationships present in a human community" (n. 6).

Section Two of *Engaging Thomas Merton* comprises three chapters, two of which are among the longest and earliest pieces written in this collection. In "No Spouse Is an Island" (29-51), Horan applies Merton's insights on marriage found in *No Man Is an Island, The New Man* and *The Ascent to Truth* to a "developing" spirituality of marriage that springs from Vatican II and includes the "notion that marriage provides the means by which spouses will become saints" (45) as it interprets marriage in a quickly changing society. In "Digital Natives and the Digital Self" (53-82), the longest chapter in the collection, Horan goes into substantial depth in analyzing problems of self-identity plaguing young adults dealing with the technological avalanche overwhelming today's world. Horan equates the *digital self* with the *false self* and describes how Merton's teaching on the true and false selves can aid the quest for self-understanding.

Section Three includes four chapters that enlighten readers on key Christian virtues, such as in "Kyrie Eleison" (83-103), which focuses on the Christian view of divine revelation and the centrality

of mercy in salvation and is a good example of how effective Horan can be in synthesizing materials from multiple sources. He proposes that “Merton’s writings on mercy offer us an underappreciated resource for theological reflection on the nature of divine revelation” (94).

In “Learning from a ‘Saint Next Door’” (105-14), Horan refers to Vatican II’s “universal call to holiness” and then explicates a comparative reading of Pope Francis’ *On the Call to Holiness in Today’s World* and Merton’s 1963 book *Life and Holiness*, reaching the conclusion that “in terms of their theology of holiness, Merton and Pope Francis are on precisely the same page” (114). Furthermore, “Merton is precisely the kind of non-canonical ‘saint next door’ Pope Francis describes” (106). Horan, Merton and Pope Francis all believe there are “far more saints than we typically count in the Church’s liturgical calendar. . . . the ordinary, everyday, largely anonymous people who strive to live their faith in love, thereby signifying participation in the divine life – that is, God’s holiness – to those they encounter. . . . These are people who are our companions on the pilgrim journey of faith” (114).

In “The Heart of Christian Discipleship” (115-28), Horan elucidates the meaning of “evangelical poverty” and concludes that “the kind of poverty that Christ calls his disciples to embrace is always at the service of relationship . . . it demands something of us out of a place of blindness, comfort, and complacency toward a realization of solidarity with others. This is what Jesus was all about; this is what the Gospels are all about” (118). This discipleship requires prayer, meditation and metanoia, that is, a sincere conversion of heart and change in life-style. It demands an awareness of the scourges of injustice and racism and other forms of discrimination and oppression. But how do we know what to do in any given situation?

In the landmark 1961 encyclical letter *Mater et Magistra* (nn. 218-19, 236), Pope John XXIII encourages the faithful to use the “look, judge, and act” (123) discernment model for evaluating the needs of our brothers and sisters and putting the Church’s teaching on social justice into practice. The encyclical states that the Church’s social teaching “rests on one basic principle: human beings are the foundation, the cause and the end of every social institution. That is necessarily so, for men are by nature social beings. This fact must be recognized, as also the fact that they are raised in the plan of Providence to an order of reality which is above nature. On this basic principle, which guarantees the sacred dignity of the individual, the Church constructs her social teaching” (nn. 219-20). The encyclical also includes a three-stage process for studying a problematic situation with the purpose of putting doctrine into practice by responding with specific action: “look” to assess the immediate situation; “judge” how Church social teaching may apply; and “act” with compassion and justice to provide relief (n. 236). Pope Francis encourages using the same model. Horan makes especial note of “the deep resonance between the wisdom of Thomas Merton and the spirit of renewal ushered in by Pope Francis as he embodies the call of the Second Vatican Council” (116).

Section Four contains three chapters devoted to the exploration of Merton’s “prophetic and prescient writings” (152) on the problems of racism in America. In “A Spirituality of Resistance” (151-63), Horan gives several reasons for Merton’s early recognition of structural racism in the 1960s, citing his wide-ranging and deep reading, his involvement in Christian nonviolent groups, and his disciplined contemplative prayer life. Horan does some penetrating analysis of Merton’s well-known essay “Letters to a White Liberal” in which he responds to Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” writing that even major national legislation such as the Civil

Rights Act of 1964 is not enough to quell the tide of racism. Merton believes problems will remain “as long as white society persists in clinging to its present condition and to its own image of itself as the only acceptable reality” (157). Merton predicts that if there is no solution, there will be violence, and he declares that to change course “We must dare to pay the dolorous price of change, *to grow into a new society*. Nothing else will suffice!” (158). Horan observes that Merton’s vision is grounded in Christian responsibility and that he was not only able to “recognize in King’s message of justice and peace the radical demand of the gospel that calls for *metanoia*, for conversion” (192), but to challenge “white Christians to examine their consciences and, in authentic evangelical style, to change their lives” (194). Horan goes deep in this section in his “discussions” with eminent scholars such as Derrick Bell, Jr., founder of critical race theory, Bryan Massingale and Kelly Brown Douglas.

Section Five presents three chapters on diverse topics, one on ecology, one on spiritual dialogue, and one on the poetics of nonviolence. In “All Life Is on Our Side” (207-17), Horan illustrates Merton’s growing awareness of the interconnectedness of all creation as he analyzes Pope Francis’ encyclical letter *Laudato Si’ (On Care for Our Common Home)*, which calls for a worldwide ecological conversion to express our love for God’s creation by saving the planet on which we live. Horan notes the influence Rachel Carson’s blockbuster book *Silent Spring* had on Merton’s “ecological consciousness” (208) as it exposed devastating agricultural practices degrading to the planet and predicted a bleak future if we didn’t stop mistreating Mother Earth. Horan also describes the Franciscan influence on Pope Francis, particularly through the life of the Poverello and the theology of Bonaventure, and he effectively uses John XXIII’s “look, judge, and act” discernment process in breaking down the scheme and power of *Laudato Si’*.

To engage Merton and the other voices we meet when we read Merton is to engage not only “the signs of the times” but the lives of our times as well, our own lives in the context of each others’ lives. In engaging Merton, we engage others who are radical in their orthodoxy, in their belief in the Holy Spirit’s work in the Second Vatican Council, and in their belief that true conversion of the heart toward loving God and neighbor – that is, genuine *metanoia* – requires, as Pope Francis writes, “the creation of a new mindset which thinks in terms of community and the priority of the life of all over the appropriation of goods by a few” (*Evangelii Gaudium – The Joy of the Gospel*, nn. 187-88).

One of Horan’s recurring refrains is to *keep reading Merton*, and he leaves no doubt about the validity and benefit of studying Merton and taking him as a spiritual guide. Of course, reading Horan leads one back to reading Merton and making new discoveries, even if it’s something one has read before.

In his 1962 essay “Christian Action in World Crisis,” Merton observes:

What is needed now is the Christian who manifests the truth of the Gospel in social action, with or without explanation. The more clearly his life manifests the teaching of Christ, the more salutary it will be. Clear and decisive Christian action explains itself, and teaches in a way that words never can. . . . We are at a point of momentous choice. Either our frenzy of desperation will lead to destruction, or our patient loyalty to truth, to God and to our fellow man will enable us to perform the patient, heroic task of building a world that will thrive in unity and peace. (*Passion for Peace* 84)

Destruction or peace? Which way do we turn? This is why we pray and why we seek spiritual guidance. Ultimately, what will safeguard Merton's position as a trusted spiritual guide is his stubborn quest for the truth. So long as faith flows from belief in a living God and in a Holy Spirit who is as active today as any day, and so long as true Christian fellowship remains afoot, Merton and Pope Francis will be present. So will Horan. And with their help, so will we all.