

BOOK OF MEDITATIONS

Review of

BLAZE OF RECOGNITION:

Through the Year with Thomas Merton: Daily Meditations

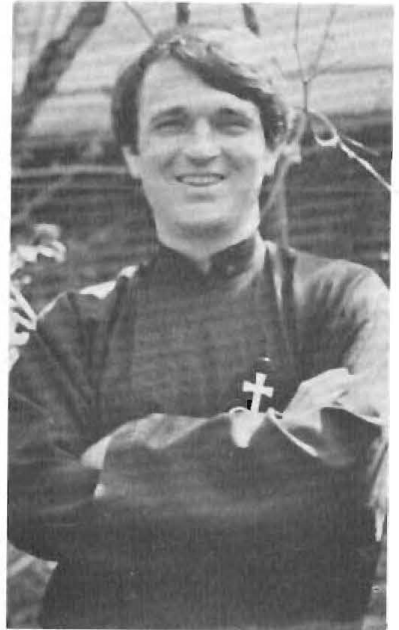
Selected and Edited by Thomas P. McDonnell

— Reviewed by **Paul Ruttle, C.P.**

This is a book of meditations selected from the writings of Thomas Merton. As such, it has a unique place among recent Merton publications. Over the past few years, the books dealing with Merton's life and writings, have tended to be scholarly investigations — theses or dissertations rewritten for the general public. Such treatment of Merton is valuable and more research remains to be done. However, *Blaze of Recognition*, edited by Thomas P. McDonnell, serves to remind us that much more than scholarship is needed to evaluate the legacy that Merton has left us.

Thomas P. McDonnell, an editor by profession, was a friend of Thomas Merton and he brings both of these factors to bear in this, his second Merton publication. Presenting the reader with a brief selection from Merton's writings for each day of the year, McDonnell has drawn from the full Merton corpus — from *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948) to the posthumously published, *Woods, Shore, Desert* (1983). The selections are taken from some twenty-eight Merton works and the result is a satisfying overview of the breadth and depth of Merton's insight.

In the Introduction, McDonnell stresses that it is when Merton wrote as a Cistercian monk and contemplative — with a contemplative's deep and abiding, and even sacramental love of the natural world — that we see the real contribution he has made to American literature. This is the true distillate of Merton. The idea of Merton's love of nature being sacramental is not new to McDonnell. In his first Merton publication, *A Thomas Merton Reader*, (Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962) he cites many passages that deal with the same theme.



PAUL RUTTLE, C.P.

Paul Ruttle, C.P. a graduate of Assumption College in Worcester, Massachusetts, and St. John's University in New York, did his master's thesis on Thomas Merton, titled "Buddhist Components in the Thought and Spirituality of Thomas Merton." He has conducted workshops and symposiums on Thomas Merton and is currently at Our Lady of Florida Passionist Monastery Retreat in West Palm Beach, Florida.

Happily for the reader, McDonnell includes more material than just the entries concerning nature. There are excerpts dealing with peace, justice and even some from Merton's Eastern writings which, I believe, greatly enhances the value of the work as a book of meditations.

It is precisely because this is a book of meditations that it is an excellent introduction to the works of Thomas Merton. The individual meditations for each day are quite brief, the longest being no more than a page. The brevity of the selections might well frustrate the reader if this was offered as a scholarly work. Rather the brevity of the selections bring out the brilliance of insight latent in each individual meditation.

The avid Merton reader will recognize many favorite passages while those new to the writings of Thomas Merton will, no doubt, be amazed to recognize a bit of themselves in them. In either case the reader will experience, in some sense, a blaze of recognition.

This is due not only to Merton's ability to describe in a personal and moving way what is common human and spiritual experience, but also in part to careful and sensitive editing. McDonnell has edited Merton's writings so artfully that he allows Merton's insight to remain fresh and uncluttered. And his arrangement of the material is done with imagination. For example the meditation for December 10th, the day Merton died, is a passage from *Conjectures of a Guilt Bystander*, in which Merton reflects on his own death.

While the material is arranged for daily meditation, the editor has supplied a heading for each entry, thus allowing the reader to identify the content of each article before reading it. An annotation at the end of each meditation indicates the particular book from which the selection was taken. There is no page reference, however — a fact which makes it difficult to locate the passage in the original context, should the reader decide to further pursue Merton's thought.

The beginning of each month is illustrated by a Merton drawing. Unfortunately, only four Merton drawings are reproduced. Each is repeated three times to cover the twelve months of the year. With the possible exception of the illustration of the Madonna and Child, all the drawings have appeared before (in *The Thomas Merton 1979 Appointment Calendar* and other publications).

To locate this book in the Merton corpus, I would say that it falls somewhere between the *The Thomas Merton 1979 Appointment Calendar* (ed. by Naomi Burton Stone and Br. Patrick Hart) and *A Thomas Merton Reader* (ed. by Thomas P. McDonnell). These meditations are more in depth than those scattered throughout the former of those publications but lack the fullness of the texts found in the latter.

Most authors and editors, presumably, try to produce a best seller which the reader is proverbially unable to put down. McDonnell has produced a book designed to be placed down and savored each day of the year. In Merton's own words: "The purpose of a book of meditations is to teach you how to think and not do your thinking for you . . . as soon as any thought stimulates your mind or heart, you can put the book down because your meditation has begun." (*New Seeds of Contemplation*). This book achieves just such a purpose.