

A HEALTHY LEGACY

Review of

THE LEGACY OF THOMAS MERTON

Edited by Brother Patrick Hart

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—Reviewed by **Rob Stone**

This collection of twelve essays, most of which first appeared in the quarterly journal *Cistercian Studies*, stands in the tradition of two earlier volumes: *Thomas Merton/Monk A Monastic Tribute* (1974; enlarged 1983) and *The Message of Thomas Merton* (1981). Both of these earlier collections were also edited by Brother Patrick Hart.

Half the essayists (Lawrence Cunningham, Patrick Hart, Victor Kramer, Jean Leclercq, Elena Malits and Gordon Zahn) are luminaries in the field of Merton studies. The balance of the essays were penned by people who are perhaps less well-known (Michael Casey, Joseph Chu-Cong, Hilary Costello, Timothy Kelly, Dorothy LeBeau and Mary Schneider). The contents are arranged in alphabetical order by author's last name, save Timothy Kelly's essay.

The collection opens with a wide-ranging introduction by Patrick Hart, who addresses Merton's concern for grassroots monastic renewal, monastic formation, solitude and silence. His other contribution to this volume, "A Monastic Exchange of Letters: Merton and Leclercq," charts the evolution of the correspondence between two monastic giants of our age. Through time the topics they discussed evolved from rather abstract considerations of monastic life to Merton's personal concerns about solitude and aspirations toward eremitical life.

Six essays explore aspects of prayer and spirituality in the life of Thomas Merton. Michael Casey's "Within a Tradition of Prayer" argues against a popular misconception that Tom entered Gethsemani as a spiritually mature person who gradually outgrew the Christian monastic tradition as he turned toward the East. Rather, while the rigors of monastic life occasionally seemed to deny contemplation, monastic tradition and Merton's avid reading of a wide variety of monastic treatises influenced him for the rest of his life. Casey cites ten factors which shaped Merton's conception of prayer, among which were silence, self-knowledge and indifference to prayer techniques.

Lawrence Cunningham ("High Culture and Spirituality") also writes about influence on Merton's spirituality. He states that intimate knowledge of 20th century modernism's starkness and lack of adornment equipped Merton for dialoging with the victims of alienation. At the same time, modernism's process of "paring away" or "grinding down" to the bare essentials held great appeal to the eventual hermit.

"The Solitary Life," by Dorothy LeBeau, describes Merton's quest to live that life from his earliest days in Gethsemani. Biblical, patristic and monastic writings served both to deepen his understanding of and desire for solitariness, which would result in a transforming union with God. Hilary Costello ("Pilgrim: Freedom Bound") asserts that Merton did not die at the "right time" (i.e., before his interest in Eastern religions caused him to abandon his Christianity). Instead, the monk perished just as he began to discover and articulate the common ground of contemplative experience in all religions.

In "Sources and Signs of Spiritual Growth" Elena Malits defines Merton's penchant for autobiographical writing as the source for appropriate metaphors he used to describe his life. For example, from 1946-52 Merton struggled with his dual identity of would-be contemplative and world-famous writer. The metaphor of "Jonas," approaching his destiny "in the belly of a paradox," enabled the monk to express the inner turmoil he experienced in living his vocation with this conflict. Gordon Zahn ("The Spirituality of Peace") delivers solid support for placing the prophet's mantle upon Merton's shoulders. Zahn lists principle components of the spirituality of peace: the perceptions one has of God; of the proper relationships between God and the believer (thence between believers); and of the ultimate purpose and goal of those relationships. These components resonate with Merton's spirituality.

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Rob Stone lives in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where he is a Bible and book buyer for a wholesale distribution company and a free-lance writer. He wrote an introduction to the recent Liturgical Press/ Fortress Press reprint of *Opening the Bible* by Thomas Merton.

The literary Merton is treated in articles by Victor Kramer ("Poetry as Exemplification of the Monastic Journey") and Jean Leclercq ("A Coincidence of Opposites"). Kramer's essay is perhaps the most technical in *The Legacy of Thomas Merton*, with its intention to "raise questions about Merton's poetry as a reflection of the interior journey a monk makes within the setting of a contemporary Cistercian atmosphere." Kramer convincingly employs examples of poetry from four broad periods in Merton's monastic life to show his maturation from an overly pious novice to a joyous, tolerant hermit at his death. Fr. Leclercq points out the common factors in the lives of Merton and Jacques Maritain, which are evident in their writings: They were both contemplatives with an eye for social action, were "marginal" men, and were successful in reconciling the interior life and commitment to the outside world.

Mary Schneider explores Thomas Merton's "Ecclesiological Development." Once again, the emphasis is on his evolution: from a rather narrow-minded new Catholic who rejected "the world" out-of-hand to a person who believed that the Church should be open to it without uncritically accepting its values. Merton's religious framework also underwent a transformation as radical as his revelation on the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville in 1958, as he realized that the channel for conveying Christ's grace to humankind was wider than the tradition he chose in his conversion.

The remaining essays to be discussed from this collection were written by two Trappist monks, Joseph Chu-Cong ("The Far East") and Timothy Kelly ("Epilogue: A Memoir"). Instead of being academic reflections on dimensions of Merton's thought, these essays witness the effect his good humor, contradictions and enthusiasm for living had on two ordinary people. It goes without saying that the legacy of Thomas Merton cannot be contained in a single volume of articles, but the variety of interests expressed in *The Legacy of Thomas Merton* is ample witness to its good health.

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