

A DIRECT GLIMPSE OF MERTON

Review of

Thomas Merton

A VOW OF CONVERSATION: JOURNALS, 1964-1965

Edited with a Preface by Naomi Burton Stone

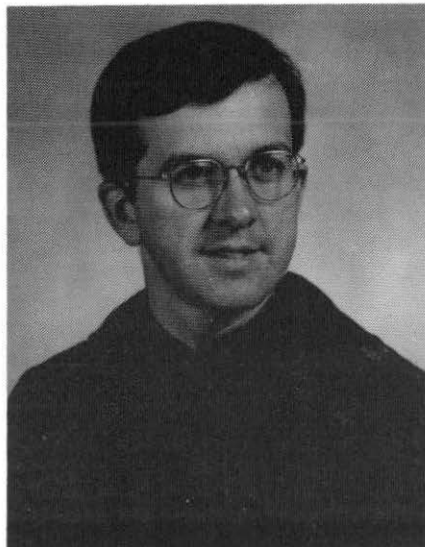
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Reviewed by **Thomas McLaughlin, O. S. B.**

Finally, we are able to read an edition of the journals of Thomas Merton for 1964-1965 which he had edited and prepared in 1968 and which was originally scheduled for publication in 1971. The entries are a direct glimpse into the mind and soul of Merton as he makes the step by step transition from the cenobitic to the solitary life. The important relationship between Merton and his Abbot, Dom James Fox, is clarified by these entries. Merton found him perplexing and unpredictable at times. Undoubtedly, Merton would have been a special kind of challenge for any abbot. Naomi Burton Stone had written to Merton that he had learned to complain without being bitter. Still, monastic readers may wince at some of the author's characterizations of Dom James, of the decision-making process in the Order, of inconsistencies in treatment of monks and so on.

Despite this, Merton emerges as self-critical, aware of his own struggle with obedience, aware that he may be a victim of his own self image. Merton is also aware that he is not typical of the "average" Gethsemani monk who may well be quite content with the lively liturgy, well organized work, a "big, lively, booming, swinging community." He wishes to carve out a space for those who feel a special call to solitude and contemplation, these would eventually include Dom James himself. The journals are published this year, only a year after the death of Fox.



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In terms of his own spirituality, there are many passages which stress “realized eschatology” and related themes: living in the present moment, the beauty and simplicity of ordinary chores (a Zen theme), and nature as a mediation of the divine, as epiphany. The absolute gratuitousness of God’s gift to us is a constant and familiar theme. He opposes this explicitly or implicitly to the grinding out of virtues and the traditional emphasis on overcoming disordered appetites. Merton believes that the latter tasks have often become an end in themselves instead of a needed starting point. He is concerned that the monk develop a strong internal sense of his own authenticity. Existential themes are blended with Chuang Tzu poems, the Psalms, Flannery O’Connor and news of the Vietnam war in a unique synthesis. Merton will use this varied input to question the real meaning and witness of obedience, hastening to underline that obedience is not a work by which one earns justification before God. There is a concern that structures and reassuring routines can become a substitute for encounter with God.

Merton confirms the traditional teaching that life in the hermitage, “the single-handed combat,” throws the monk back on his own resources and self-discipline, heightening consciousness. Even dermatitis attacks and small distractions can seem like temptations and testings. “Solitude is a stern mother who brooks no nonsense . . . merely to fool around with it brings awful desolation.” Merton often records feminine images which appear in his dreams. The *persona* is frequently a consoling figure. These passages would certainly reward a sensitive analysis. Many of the questions which Merton is asking are appropriate and not unusual ones for a person in mid-life, especially at a time of monastic renewal, the important “return to the sources.”

The journals are a mirror of the intellectual currents and often heady optimism of the Church in the mid-1960s as they filtered through to Merton. There are interesting remarks on Bultmann, Camus, Sartre, Jaspers, on reports of Vatican II deliberations and schemata, on nuclear weapons, South American poets, and other items which caught his panoramic interest.

We see the love and genuine solicitude of the novice master for the candidates making their way to and from Gethsemani in those years. The hermit himself, relieved of formation duties, admits to extremes of consolation and desolation, obedience and protest, freedom and a feeling of imprisonment in his new way of life. There are also a variety of painful ailments which he seems to take in stride. The joy of friendship with visitors, sometimes too many visitors, is an important part of Merton’s witness and of his stability.

Readers will find a very human, fallible, irascible, complex, yet grateful Merton in these journals. The index is well done, as is the preface by Naomi Burton Stone.