

“I AM HERE IN ANSWER TO SOMEONE’S PRAYER”

Review of

Thomas Merton

THOMAS MERTON IN ALASKA:

PRELUDE TO THE ASIAN JOURNAL:

THE ALASKAN CONFERENCES, JOURNALS AND LETTERS

Introduction by Robert E. Daggy; Preface by David D. Cooper

New York: New Directions, 1989

vii, 162 pages / \$19.95 clothbound - \$9.95 paperback

Reviewed by **Jodi Patterson**, O.C.D.

Thomas Merton spent two weeks in Alaska prior to his Asian sojourn. He was there at the invitation of the bishop, giving careful consideration to the proposal of establishing hermitages — for himself and possibly other Gethsemani monks. These two weeks have been largely overlooked if not altogether ignored in light of the Asian journey and its tragic outcome. In *Thomas Merton in Alaska*, however, this oversight has been corrected — although the book almost apologetically proclaims in its subtitle, “Prelude to *The Asian Journal*.”

The text is a collection of the monk’s Alaskan conferences, journals and letters. There are also a few photographs (only slightly better than what most of us take on vacation). The journals and letters were published last year in a limited fine edition by Turkey Press, and now New Directions has combined them with the conferences Merton gave to Precious Blood sisters, Diocesan sisters and priests while in Alaska. These conferences have been printed in *Sisters Today* and *The Priest*, respectively, but until now we have not had them together with the journal in one volume.

A most welcome addition to the Merton canon, *Thomas Merton in Alaska* is important for many reasons, not the least of which is Robert Daggy’s decision to transcribe Merton’s working notebook. This allows us to experience first hand the reac-



JODI PATTERSON

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tions, thoughts, and anticipation Merton felt during those days before Asia. In the face of the monk's freedom from the monastery, from his writing, from all by which he sometimes felt trapped, what becomes clear is his absolute commitment to God and to Gethsemani.

While one finds, as David Cooper states in the Preface, a Merton who is self-reflective and searching, he is at the same time completely un-selfconscious. The text is alive with vivid impressions and we glimpse, in a way one doesn't in *Woods, Shore, Desert*, for example, a Merton who is unguarded and almost childlike in his enthusiasm for everything he encounters, be it the majesty of the terrain, the friendliness of the people, bathroom graffiti, or the comics he reads in the Alaskan papers.

On his first full day in Alaska, Fr. Louis writes a poem entitled "Mosaic." This title may be appropriate for the journal as a whole. Each entry emerges like a richly textured tile, lovely in itself. When the tiles are placed in their setting, the entire image is one of uncommon beauty. Short and simple, each contains a poetic quality which reminds us that even in his jottings Merton's writing style is not only eloquent, it is rare.

Those looking for anything "new" on the subject of what Merton would have done had he survived the Asian journey will be disappointed. In fact, most of the entries and letters which refer to his future have been quoted elsewhere. What one does see, however, by reading the journal, letters and conferences as a whole, is Merton's total commitment to the monastic life, and to Gethsemani.

The second half of the book is taken up with the conferences Merton gave during the two week period. These talks once again remind us why Merton has remained such an important figure in the Church and society as a whole. While many see him as a prophet, it may be truer to say that he was simply a man completely devoted to the human and the divine, and that is why his writings touch us as much today as they did twenty years ago when he made these presentations. He addresses what is basic to us as human beings — and those qualities and problems are eternal.

The overriding theme of the eight conferences is that we are God's, and that our relationship with him is personal. While this sounds simple enough, anyone who tries to live it out knows the struggles and darkness inherent in building such a relationship. Merton, with candor and practical application, as well as philosophical, social and psychological commentary, strips away the apprehensions and excuses, developing his thesis into a treatise on how to live well humanly and spiritually — really one and the same.

These talks are by no means limited to religious, however. They touch each of us in our isolation and alienation, and urge us toward unity and integration. "If our life is really dedicated," says Merton, "to something other than God, then we are first of all alienated." Contemplatives (secular or religious) must keep "the fire of love burning in the world. For that they have to be fully unified and fully themselves — real people." In an age when society seems to be less and less tolerant of those outside the mainstream, we need to be reminded of the need for tolerance in religious communities and, one might add, the global community:

Respect individual differences and let each one do what is best for him or her and [do] not feel badly if nobody else is doing it We are too much hung up on the idea that everybody has got to be doing the same thing We are not used enough to the idea that several people can be right in different ways, and there can be different ways of being right.

Merton describes himself during one of the conferences as a man with a "complex self-contradictory temperament." But in the midst of all the contradiction is his single minded love of God. Paraphrasing from the Sufi tradition, Merton says, in "The Life That Unifies," that there is "the secret affirmation which God places in the heart, a 'yes' to Him. And that is God's

secret. He knows my 'yes' even when I am not saying it. My destiny in life — my final integration — is to uncover this 'yes' so that my life is totally and completely a 'yes' to God, a complete assent to God." *Thomas Merton in Alaska* goes a long way toward showing — in a manner different from but no less important than *The Asian Journal* — how, in those final weeks before meeting his destiny, the monk thought, felt and experienced integration with the God to whom his heart and soul so emphatically said "yes."

FROM A BROTHER OF ANOTHER COMMUNION

Review of

Brother Ramon, S.S.F.

SOUL FRIENDS: A JOURNEY WITH THOMAS MERTON

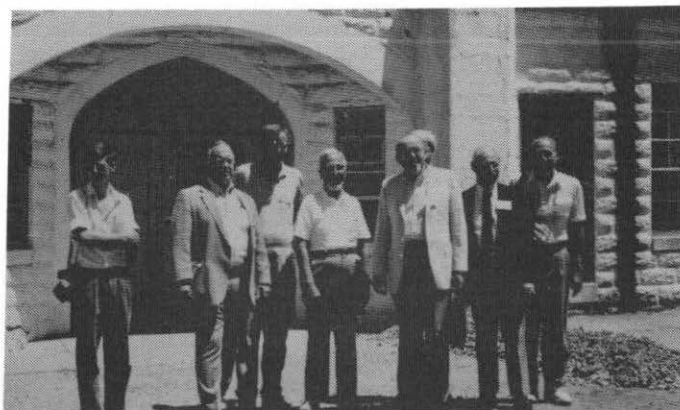
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ix, 311 pages / £5.99 paperback

Reviewed by **Paul M. Pearson**

Brother Ramon is a member of an Anglican religious order, the Society of St. Francis, and is at present the guardian of their house of prayer at Glasshampton, Worcestershire. His recently published book *Soul Friends*, subtitled *A Journey with Thomas Merton*, is probably the first major study of Merton by an English author since Monica Furlong's *Merton: A Biography* in 1980. From that point of view, Ramon's book fills a gap, as so many books published about Merton are not readily available in England.

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PAUL M. PEARSON (extreme left)
Outside Gethsemani with Other Participants
at the ITMS First General Meeting

Photo by Dorothy Bosch Keller