

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

London: Marshall Pickering, 1989

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

Ramon describes himself as “a child of the evangelical tradition, continuing to grow in catholic maturity” (p. 138) and in his book he views Merton from this background, that is from an evangelical monastic background. Ramon has divided his book into five sections, beginning with a largely biographical section looking at the early Merton up until his solemn profession, then moving on to look at Merton’s evolution and development as a monk and writer. The next section examines Merton’s understanding of contemplation, followed by the fourth section, called “Wider Horizons,” which looks at some of the themes of Merton’s writing which Ramon has found particularly stimulating. The book concludes with a personal evaluation in which Ramon looks at Merton’s influence on his own life, theology and vocation and attempts to indicate the implications of Merton’s life and teaching for himself and his reader — though the personal evaluation is not confined to that final section but is spread throughout the book.

As can be seen from that breakdown of the book and also from its title, this is quite a personal study of Merton. Ramon’s own view of the book is worth quoting: “This book is not a biography, an academic exercise, an anthology or a eulogy of Thomas Merton. It is an appreciation, both theological and contemplative, by a monastic brother of another communion” (p. xi). Ramon sees Merton as a pilgrim. He looks at Merton’s journey and shares with the reader the way that it has influenced his own journey. B. H. Hawker said that Merton had written down a map of his journey and we use a map to help to guide us through our journey, and it is something of this that Ramon is sharing in this book. It is at this level that Merton has most greatly influenced Ramon, in, as he says, “setting me free from the modes and limitations of thought that had been laid down by my own tradition” (p. 263). Ramon has moved from lay-preaching and group leadership in his teens, into busy hospital work, through university to the ministry, to university chaplaincy work, and membership in the Society of St. Francis, including some time in recent years spent living as a hermit, moving from an evangelical tradition into a much broader catholic Christianity which now includes inter-faith dialogue.

The personal approach to Merton that Ramon has undertaken does not contribute anything startlingly new to Merton scholarship, but writing from his Anglican perspective he has highlighted some of the important areas of ecumenical thought about which Merton wrote. Ramon sees Merton’s approach to other traditions as one of listening for truth and love and then responding within the same context.

Two sections I found of particular interest in *Soul Friends* were Ramon’s chapter on Taoist and Desert Fathers and his section on Merton’s photography. It was in the former that I found Ramon’s enthusiasm for Merton most clearly in evidence and the freshest. In concluding this chapter he states that it was the immediacy of the Taoist and Desert Fathers that most attracted Merton and, I think, Ramon captures some of that immediacy in this chapter. His section on Merton’s photography was also very good though, since John Howard Griffin’s *A Hidden Wholeness* has never been published in England and is no longer available in the United States, many readers, being unable to see the pictures for themselves, will not be able to share Ramon’s enthusiasm.

Ramon’s book, especially with its extensive use of quotations, will serve as a good introduction to Merton for new readers and hopefully many will be enthused by Ramon’s own enthusiasm for Merton. Readers of *The Merton Seasonal* may find Ramon’s personal approach to Merton and his ecumenical perspective interesting. Otherwise I think they will find Ramon merely repeating what has been said before by others.