

THE SPRINGS OF CONTEMPLATION

Review of

Thomas Merton

SPRINGS OF CONTEMPLATION:

A RETREAT AT THE ABBEY OF GETHSEMANI

Edited by Jane Marie Richardson, S.L.

With an introduction by Mary Luke Tobin, S.L.

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Abbot Flavian Burns once remarked that Father Louis could give a conference/ chapter talk “every day of the week.” Indeed, it was well known at Gethsemani that Merton was an engaging and even entertaining speaker, prone to new insights and hot topics. His public lectures were always well attended, even when optional. Fortunately, many of the conferences were taped in the later years. Still, gifted and inspired as he was, Merton would wonder sometimes in his journals whether he talked too much, too long, or too glibly. This self-scrutiny was typical, but there can be no doubt that Merton derived enormous energy from the act of teaching. One need only listen for a few minutes to any of the tapes to perceive this.

The Springs of Contemplation grew out of two retreats — “non-workshops” — given by Merton at Gethsemani in late 1967 and mid-1968. The audience in each instance comprised a group of contemplative nuns gathered unofficially and informally to discuss issues of mutual interest in their communities and in their personal lives. This book is the transcript of the two retreats. Whether or not Merton comes across well in transcription has been debated by Merton *aficionados* from the beginning. Obviously, he will not be at his literary best, prose and poetic stylist *extraordinaire* that he was. However, due to the technical nature of some of the audio material, transcription is perhaps the best way of making these materials available. Having heard the particular tapes transcribed for this book, I feel the present alternative a happy and successful one. Of course, one misses the bouncy, breezy mirth with which Merton could handle even the most serious matters, but the “feel” is here as well as the humor, and will be readily experienced by anyone who has heard Merton on tape. But enough about technical matters and on to context!

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Photo by Ephrem Cole, O.C.S.O.

I always got the impression that of all the myriad things that interested him, Merton liked talking about the contemplative/religious life best. It seemed, for good reason, the area where he was most comfortable, most experienced, and the area that truly engaged his deepest energy. This energy can be felt on every page of the book. Merton could talk about war and peace, race and social justice, even literature, with enthusiasm, but when he talked about contemplative religious life he did so with passion. One of the most valuable things about this book is the evidence of Merton's lifelong care and concern for the religious/monastic quest which is not always recognized and sometimes eclipsed by his monumental contribution as a Christian humanist in the more obvious social order. I maintain, and have for years, that Merton's greatest and most lasting contribution will be in the area of his own vocation — the quest for true identity and ultimate happiness in each person's unique call. This book is proof of that perception.

It appears that Merton could be conversant on any topic. Recently, a friend of mine confided that he was writing an article entitled "Thomas Merton and the Color Orange." I found this revelation enormously amusing, and decided to play the following game. Start with the phrase, "Merton and the . . .", open a thesaurus or dictionary, run the finger down the page, stop at a word, announce it, and then speak extemporaneously for two and a half minutes on the topic! (A great time passer at gatherings of Merton scholars, novice masters' meetings, General Chapters, etc.) Running the finger down the list of topics offered in this book is a satisfying experience. Thus we encounter presence, silence, communication, prophecy, alienation, language, collaboration, penance, and celibacy. Also discussed are community, contemplative reality (and the changing forms of contemplative community), Zen, yoga, the feminine mystique, vocation, contemporary prophetic choices, respect for each person, diversity in community, asceticism and results, honesty in choosing life, and union with God.

A word about the structure of the book. First and foremost Merton is in dialogue with the sisters. They ask a question, make a comment, and he develops it. So these are not your usual dry pre-packaged-read-off-the-paper retreat conferences. These are lively exchanges on gut issues. Merton will sometimes use a text, but before long he is off on his own developing and exegesis in an intriguing way. This book will appeal to religious, especially contemplative religious, as it often deals directly with questions concerning them. Especially interesting and informative are Merton's insights on the place of women and the feminine in the modern church and society. He also expounds on the issue of sexuality in general and this helps expand and focus the issues involved. The questions of women's ordination, the ordination of married men, and priestly celibacy are also addressed. The book will also appeal to all who are interested in the prophetic aspect of Merton. Here he raises his voice, not only on religious and ecclesiastical issues, but on social and political ones as well. Often in these discussions Merton is at his feisty best as he lashes out at the ridiculous in the church and society. But here, too, is compassion, charity, mercy, understanding, and joy.

To Jane Marie Richardson and all who helped bring this practical and prophetic work to light, we owe a debt of appreciation and gratitude. Merton's shared reflections result in a kind of collective spiritual direction. In his discussions with the sisters a new vision is formed, using insights and experiences from both sides. The pooling of experiences and reflections results in new discovery. One must register complete agreement with Mary Luke Tobin when she says in her introductory comments, "So well did Merton discern — nearly twenty-five years ago — the impact of culture and events on our time that I believe we have not caught up with him yet." This is a nifty little volume, compact and handsomely produced — and, one must add, handsomely priced. All who enjoy Merton in his element will benefit from this book as it witnesses yet once more to a loving and concerned human being trying to be who he truly was.