

A VALUABLE BOOK

Review of

THOMAS MERTON: SPIRITUAL MASTER — THE ESSENTIAL WRITINGS

Edited with an introduction by Lawrence S. Cunningham

With a foreword by Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O., & a preface by Anne E. Carr

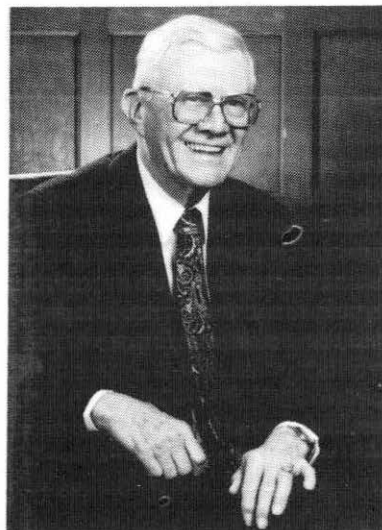
New York/ Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1992

437 pages / \$14.95 paperback

Reviewed by **William H. Shannon**

Merton books continue to be published with amazing frequency. This is a most valuable one. Though not included in Paulist Press's well-known series of Classics of Western Spirituality, it is similar in format to the books in that series: first, there is a fairly lengthy introduction to the writer whose works are being presented, then a sizable selection from those works. In this volume there is a brief foreword by Merton's former secretary, Brother Patrick Hart, an insightful preface by Anne Carr, professor of theology at the University of Chicago Divinity School, and finally, before one gets to the Merton selections, the introduction to Merton by the book's editor, Lawrence S. Cunningham, chair of the department of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

The introduction is a gem. The clean, crisp style that characterizes Cunningham's regular book notes in *Commonweal* is evident in the introduction. His writing has the simplicity of a good Cistercian monastery: everything is there that needs to be there and nothing more. He uses words carefully. He never overuses them. This has made it possible for him to get a great deal said about Merton in a mere thirty-six pages. I mention five points from this rich introduction that I found especially noteworthy. (1) At the center of Merton's spirituality is his monastic commitment: he saw reality with the eyes of a monk. (2) Merton's spirituality, rooted in the monastic life, cannot be understood apart from the many aspects of his life (his vocation as writer, theologian, social critic and bridge-builder between East and West) which both colored that spirituality and were affected by it. (3) As a writer, Merton quickly broke out of the mold of the scholastic theology he was required to study in preparation for the priesthood and began to write in the tradition of a



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contemplative and monastic theology which he found much more congenial to his temperament; and which, incidentally, most of his readers find more congenial to theirs also. (4) Merton stands "in the line of an entire tradition of twentieth-century seekers" who were able to experience and unite in themselves all that was best and true in the various religious traditions of the world. (5) Merton's influence continues to grow, because he managed to do what other distinguished spiritual writers of our century have not: he entered into the wider world of cultural discourse. This gives "a peculiar weight and a ring of authenticity to his words."

For the title of this collection of Merton writings, *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master*, Cunningham acknowledges his debt to Merton's last abbot, Dom Flavian Burns who, in his homily at Merton's funeral, described Merton as "the best of spiritual masters." He was "spiritual master" for Dom Flavian and for a generation of monks at Gethsemani. He has served, and continues to serve, as "spiritual master" for countless people outside the monastery, whose spirituality has been formed by what he wrote. "Spiritual Master," as Cunningham uses the term, is not the guru of Hinduism or the elder of Russian monasticism who exact total and unquestioning obedience from their subjects. Rather, Merton is the *magister*, the one who has "mastered" a doctrine and a way of life and is able by example and pen to share insights and offer encouragement to those who look to him for guidance in life's journey. Merton's role as "Spiritual Master" dominates this book and serves as the guiding principle for the selections Cunningham makes from his writings. It should be clear, therefore, that this book is not to be viewed as a "Merton Reader," offering brief samplings of the various types of writing Merton did in many different fields.

The guiding principle works also as a restricting principle, limiting the selections to those that present Merton in this role of "Spiritual Master." Yet one needs to add at once: "not unduly restricting," for Merton's wide interests, his boundless energies and far-reaching enthusiasms overflow almost any category in which one might want to place him. And there is an advantage in staying with this single category, namely with those writings which *ex professo* deal with the spiritual life and its implications: it allows for lengthier selections than would be possible in a general reader. The selections are full meals, not snacks.

The *Essential Writings*? Perhaps. Cunningham nowhere explains why he chose the adjective. I would probably have preferred a subtitle more modest and less evaluative, such as "Selected Writings" or "Representative Writings." But perhaps this is to quibble. Cunningham does tell us that, to bring a wider perspective to his choices, he sought advice from Merton experts and committed Merton readers. Without doubt, anyone who knows the Merton corpus will agree that the editor has made wise and judicious choices that live, reasonably well at least, with the rubric of "essential writings."

The selections are put into two categories: Autobiographical Writings (160 pages, six items: *The Seven Storey Mountain* and five journals) and Spiritual Writings (191 pages with twelve items). Each item carries a brief and helpful editorial introduction, clarifying its place in the Merton corpus and giving the reason for its choice. Here again Cunningham is at his best in offering insightful comments that give a context to each selection and suggestions for further reading. The editor makes an important point about the first category of selections: those that are autobiographical. Merton's "journals" in which we find so many of his fecund and enduring insights are not journals in the ordinary sense of printed versions of random notes jotted down on various occasions. To the contrary, they are most often carefully crafted rewritings of experiences recorded in his personal diaries and reading notebooks. That is why, for instance, *The Asian Journal*, for all the good work done by its editors, is markedly different from *The Sign of Jonas* or *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* or *A Vow of Conversation*. These latter are Merton's more

mature reflections on what he had written at various times under the inspiration of the moment. *The Asian Journal*, one must believe, would read quite differently had Merton lived to rethink many of the things he said about the East and the contacts he made there.

One might ask for what kind of audience this book is destined. Without question, it is an excellent book for someone who is making the acquaintance of Merton for the first time. It will, as the editor intends, whet their appetites for more Merton. It could also find a happy home with those who are well acquainted with Merton, but would find it most helpful to have in one volume a healthy selection of his writings on spirituality. This would especially hold for those who look to Merton as their spiritual master. A third type of audience that this book would especially fit would be a classroom of students or a study group who wanted to deepen their acquaintance with his writings on spirituality.

The book is pleasingly designed, the cover gracefully adorned with a Meatyard photograph. The publishers are to be congratulated for making this valuable contribution to Merton studies "financially friendly." In today's economy \$14.95 is a modest price for almost any 437-page paperback. It is a special bargain for this helpful and most welcome book of Merton readings.

A REVISED JOURNEY

Review of

Thomas Merton

THE MONASTIC JOURNEY (Revised edition)

Edited with a foreword by Brother Patrick Hart

Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1992

xi, 186 pages / \$12.95 paperback

Reviewed by **Jerome Machar**, O.C.S.O.

I am a recent convert to the monastic way of life, having professed in 1991. One receives a slightly different introduction to the person of Fr. Louis from those who actually lived with him in community. As one with "professional bias," I picked up Brother Patrick Hart's revision of *The Monastic Journey*. There is a blunt honesty in these pages which makes the monastic life believable and credible. This collection of reflections is a great resource for one who is seeking an introduction to the monastic life.

Having read some of the biographical works and heard some of the "inside stories" about Merton, some laughs and tears were produced by the reading of *Journey*. Merton always spoke out for the integrity of the monastic life, and this concern is found loudly and clearly in these pages. Fr. Louis also fought hard to see the return of the hermit life to the Cistercian Order. In the fact that he wanted to be a hermit, yet could not find it in himself to lock the door behind him, one finds encouragement to dream dreams, even if they may never materialize. The dream you have may become someone else's reality.