

## A Guide Both Scholarly and Pastoral

Review of

*Thomas Merton's Paradise Journey: Writings on Contemplation*

By William H. Shannon

Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2000

307 pages / \$12.95 paperback

Reviewed by **Wendy M. Wright**

If a reader has never read a biography of Trappist Fr. Louis, *Thomas Merton's Paradise Journey* is not the place to begin. But for anyone familiar with the work and life of the monk from Gethsemani, this book is a wonderful, meaty companion. It is a study that is both helpful to understanding Merton's ideas and experience and a thought-provoking companion to one's own spiritual journey. *Paradise Journey* is a "substantial revision" of Msgr. William H. Shannon's 1981 *Thomas Merton's Dark Path: The Inner Experience of a Contemplative*. It focuses on the theme of contemplation as culled from the major literary works of Merton.

The focus on contemplation in this study is an important one. For the contemplative experience was central to Merton's thought, indeed, his life. It was, in Shannon's estimation, the explicit theme or the implied background for virtually everything that Merton wrote. He may have written willy-nilly on a thousand subjects but it is this one, which defined his life, that connects all the rest of his prolific penning. The new title reflects Merton's (very Catholic and very monastic) belief that the human story after the fall consists in an arduous journey back to the original paradisiacal divine-human unity by way of contemplative prayer. That journey takes us into our own depths to the discovery of our true self that is rooted in God.

*Paradise Journey* is wisely structured chronologically in four parts. It treats the early writings first (*What is Contemplation?*, *Seeds of Contemplation* and *Ascent to Truth*), then summarizes Merton's views on solitude and silence, those preconditions for contemplative awareness, in *Thoughts on Solitude* and "Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude." Next, it explores Merton's mature writing on contemplation (*The Inner Experience*, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, *Contemplative Prayer*, and *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*). The final section considers the "outer landscape of contemplation" and deals with the contemplative's relationship to the world that Fr. Louis so wonderfully discovered and lived in his last years.

The chronological exploration of the contemplative theme allows Shannon to diagram the developmental curve of Merton's spiritual itinerary. In the process, he helpfully informs the reader of events occurring simultaneously in the monastic milieu and in contemporary society. Mostly, he focuses on Merton's own thoughts as displayed in his prose. Merton's early ideas on contemplation are colored by his new convert's zealotry, his dependence on formal dogmatic definitions and his reliance on the works of Aquinas and John of the Cross. As he matures in contemplative practice, his

---

**Wendy M. Wright** is Professor of Theology at Creighton University and Director of the Creighton Center for the Study of Catholicism. She has served as president of the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality, and is the author and editor of numerous books, including *The Time Between: Cycles and Rhythms of Ordinary Time* (1999), *A Retreat With Francis de Sales, Jane de Chantal and Aelred of Rievaulx* (1996), *Sacred Dwelling: A Spirituality of Family Life* (1994), and *Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal: Letters of Spiritual Direction* (Classics of Western Spirituality) (1988).

ideas broaden and become more rooted in his own experience. Thus they tend to be less systematic and didactic and take on the lyric quality that has attracted many readers to his works. They also reflect his growing appreciation for eastern religion, especially Zen, and the writings of contemporary philosophy. Always, however, he remains rooted in the rich Christian tradition of contemplation that stretches from the desert fathers through the centuries in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches. Often he is able to bring fresh insights to his readings of these masters as he refracts their words through his own hard-won contemplative practice. Finally, Merton's thoughts on contemplation expand to encompass the world.

It is the fourth and last section of the book that contains most of the newness in this revised edition. In its earlier incarnation, Shannon dwelt mostly on the inner dimension of the contemplative path as Merton described it. But this revision corrects the full picture of the monk. It was only the early Merton who could turn his back so forcefully on "the world." As he grew and gained the expanding wisdom of his contemplative vocation, Fr. Louis was brought back to the world he had rejected. His eye was cleansed, his heart expanded and his vision focused. Having experienced something of the unitive experience, the discovery of his true self in God, he could perceive the fundamental union of all created beings. The pain and suffering of the world thus became his own. From his monkish vantage point as the "marginal man" he could speak prophetically to his fellow human beings.

Thomas Merton was, first and foremost, a monk. While in his later writings he expands his conception of the contemplative life to include Christian laity and persons outside the Christian tradition, he wrote from his own experience, and that experience (at least once he started writing about religious themes) was as a Roman Catholic monastic. Nevertheless, Shannon, urged on by Merton's own emerging sensibilities and his own pastoral sense, wants Fr. Louis' wisdom to be available to all and so one feels in reading *Paradise Journey* that one is personally addressed. There is much to consider here, much to feed one, much good advice and many wise admonitions. Merton is indeed a sound guide to the Christian life lived fully, deeply and intentionally – which is to say, he is a sound guide to a human life lived in consciousness of its own deepest truth. Msgr. Shannon brings him to the reader ably and compassionately.

There are only a couple of drawbacks to *Paradise Journey*. First, as fluently as Shannon leads his reader through the literary and interior pathways of Merton's evolving grasp of contemplation, he only sporadically gives us Merton's actual words. Instead he paraphrases and describes. This is helpful to the extent that it allows him to summarize ideas that in Merton's texts were not necessarily systematically developed. But when an actual quotation does appear, it reminds one of what is missing. It makes one ache a little to hear more of the pithy phrases and lyricism that the ear and eye associate with Fr. Louis' own writing.

Second, sometimes it is difficult to tell where Merton leaves off and Shannon begins and vice versa. Msgr. Shannon, a prolific Merton scholar and a man who himself drinks from contemplative springs of prayer as did the subject of his scholarship, explains Fr. Louis' thought with ease. But the scholar is also a disciple and reflections on the master's viewpoints blend seamlessly into commentary, the sources of which are not always clear. Is this what Merton said? Or is that what Shannon thinks?

In part, the blending of voices is a result of what is otherwise a lovely feature of the book, that it has a pastoral as well as a scholarly intent. Shannon writes as one who wants to represent Fr. Louis' ideas accurately and with developmental sensitivity. He also writes as one who knows that the book's subject – contemplation – is at the heart of a truly human life. He writes with such warmth because he wants to communicate the vision of a transformed perception that Merton explored so deeply and for so long. That is what makes *Paradise Journey* such a lovely book.