

Artful Prayer / Prayerful Art

Review of

Dialogues with Silence: Prayers & Drawings

By Thomas Merton

Edited by Jonathan Montaldo

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Dialogues with Silence: Prayers & Drawings, edited by Jonathan Montaldo, opens wide the door to new insight concerning Thomas Merton the contemplative as evidenced in his personal prayers and pen-and-ink drawings that testify to his desire to deliver himself over to the silence of solitude. In *Thoughts in Solitude* Merton wrote: "There are few who are willing to belong completely to such silence, to let it soak into their bones, to breathe nothing but silence, to feed on silence, and to turn the very substance of their life into a living and vigilant silence" (101). *Dialogues* offers a glimpse of the fruit of Merton's surrendering to the solitude of silence in order that he might enter into the profundity of God.

In his introductory essay to this book, Montaldo employs fresh, crisp, and, at times, mystical-like language to reflect upon the written and visual expressions that constitute Merton's prayers and drawings. Montaldo's juxtaposition of the prayers and drawings on facing pages in *Dialogues* provides an entryway for the reader to join Merton in the human journey into God.

Merton's prayers in *Dialogues* represent some of God's multiple advents to Merton in the course of his monastic life. These prayers are the fruit of Merton's quiet listening for and to God. As Montaldo clearly states, they reveal Merton's "desire to return to the Father, to the Immense, to the Primordial, to the Unknown, to Him Who loves, to the Silent, to the Holy, to the Merciful, to Him Who is All" (xv). Various prayers in this book indicate Merton's desire to belong completely to God, i.e., to be emptied of all things in order to be filled with God. Merton prays: "For I will possess all things if I am empty of all things, and only You can at once empty me of all things and fill me with Yourself, . . . the Being in Whom everything exists" (27). Merton, a mystic at heart, sought to love God alone so that there would no longer be Merton but only God. Merton desired to be consumed in God's love. In one of his prayers, Merton states: "Draw me to You, O my God. Fill me with Pure Love of You alone" (45). For Merton, pure love of God means God loving God.

Some of Merton's prayers attest to his mystical encounters with God within the dialectic of darkness and light. For Merton, darkness is the passageway to God's light. Merton writes: "Now is the time to meet You, God, where the night is wonderful" (83). Experiencing God descending upon him in the night silence, Merton prays: "O God, my God, the night has values that the day has never dreamed of" (81). During his hermitage years, Merton found himself drawn more deeply into the

experience of darkness/light. From his hermitage, Merton prayed to God: “You have called me here in solitude to be Your son; to be born over again repeatedly in Your light” (125).

A number of prayers in *Dialogues* indicate Merton’s understanding of the role of the Ignatian principle of holy indifference in spiritual growth. For example, Merton prays to God: “If You allow people to praise me, I shall not worry. If You let them blame me, I shall worry even less. If You send me work, I shall embrace it with joy. It will be rest to me because it is Your will. If You send me rest, I will rest in You” (53).

Various prayers in *Dialogues* exemplify Merton’s nature mysticism. For Merton, nature is a canticle of praise of God. Merton prays: “Today, Father, this blue sky praises You. The delicate green and orange flowers of the tulip poplar praise You. The distant blue hills praise You together with the sweet smelling air that is full of brilliant light. The bickering flycatchers praise You with the lowing cattle and the quails that whistle over there. I, too, Father, praise You with these creatures, my brothers and sisters” (123).

Mary, the Mother of God, has a special place in Merton’s prayer life. In *Dialogues*, Merton requests that Mary, whom he calls the “Queen of hermits” (101) and “*Lady of Solitude*” (137) pray him into “solitude and silence and unity . . . in God” (135). Merton seeks to console Mary through Christ living in him, for as Merton writes: “He is my love for you *Ave Maria! Soledad, I love you*” (137).

Dialogues demonstrates that Merton had a real sense of the meaning of the communion of saints as indicated in his prayers composed for such persons as Robert Lax (157), Louis Massignon (163), the Sisters of Loretto taking final vows (165), and Sister Mary Luke Tobin (167). Merton expresses his sense of solidarity with others in God when he prays his “*Litany to Everybody*” (171). Likewise, Merton does so when he prays: “O God, in accepting one another wholeheartedly, fully, completely, we accept You, and we thank You, and we adore You, and we love You with our being, because our being is in Your being, our spirit is rooted in Your Spirit” (179).

Merton’s pen-and-ink drawings in *Dialogues* employ lines in a minimalist way. Using an economy of strokes, Merton artfully renders sketches of monks, the Virgin Mary, other women, the face of Jesus, the crucified Christ, flowers, churches, monastic buildings, fish-like images, patterned series of animal or blackened shapes, and a Zen-type circle that appears at the end of the book. Each drawing provides an aesthetically pleasing image that contributes to the contemplative mood of the book. According to Montaldo, Merton’s drawings of women reflect his “growing appreciation of women and the feminine in his life” (xvii). Perhaps by rendering these drawings, Merton was able to become more in touch with his anima and, thereby, experience the inner unity of his animus/anima.

Dialogues with Silence is a welcome addition to the plethora of publications of Merton’s writings. The book makes available, for the first time, a text that focuses specifically on Merton the prayer and sketch artist. By utilizing the principle of *lectio divina*, readers will be able to relish the richness of this work by entering, with Merton, into the silence that is solitude wherein one encounters the living God.