

A Guide to Full Integration

Review of

An Invitation to the Contemplative Life

By Thomas Merton

Edited and with an Introduction by Wayne Simsic

Ijamsville, MD: The Word Among Us Press, 2006

144 pages / \$11.95 paper

Reviewed by **John P. Collins**

“My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me” (16). This oft-quoted Thomas Merton prayer begins the journey through a compilation of one hundred fifteen passages from the extensive Merton corpus in Wayne Simsic’s latest book, *An Invitation to the Contemplative Life*. Simsic, a seasoned writer and editor, unfolds a road map for us as we grapple with the subtleties of contemplative life and prayer through the writings of Thomas Merton, Trappist monk and writer. Simsic is a professor in the Religious Studies Department at Ursuline College in Cleveland who has also directed retreats examining the contemplative life through the works of several mystical writers. This is but one of the many spiritual books Simsic has authored or edited over the past fifteen years; among his publications are three volumes of the “Companions for the Journey” series, focusing on Thomas Merton, Meister Eckhart and John of the Cross.

In this book, Simsic takes a somewhat different approach from the more structured and directive style of his previous works. Following a brief introduction to each of the ten parts of the book, he presents for our reading and meditation selections from the diverse Merton canon. The sections include: “The Search for Freedom”; “The Contemplative Way”; “Turning Back to the True Self”; “The Person of Christ”; “Prayer of the Heart”; “Solitude and Silence”; “Love of Nature”; “Community Life”; “Work”; “Social Concern and the Call to Prophecy.” His selections are indeed thematic, and flow nicely from the brief introductory commentaries to each of the ten sections. Each passage is titled according to a key phrase from the selection. For example, the passage titled “Just Smell a Flower in the Garden” is prompted by the following line in the passage: “Better just to smell a flower in the garden or something like that than to have an unauthentic experience of a much higher value” (71).

Simsic has wisely selected through his finely tuned editorial skills some of the most provocative and poignant passages from the vast Merton repertoire of writings concerning the contemplative life and its relationship to work, community and social action. For those readers who favor a linear approach, following the progression of topics as presented in the book will certainly reap

dividends. The series of topics listed in the table of contents reveals a sequence from self or the individual to more communal themes. One will become more aware, for example, that if we perceive Christ's image in ourselves we will be on our way to uncovering the image in others. A more discursive approach to the book may accommodate the experienced Merton reader and Simsic's brief but lucid introductory commentaries for each part of the book will provide the necessary guideposts.

The general Introduction provides a spirited presentation of the familiar Thomas Merton chronology which heralds a major theme of the book, the search for one's true inner self, highlighted in a passage from *'Honorable Reader': Reflections on My Work*: "Christians themselves too often fail to realize that the infinite God is dwelling within them, so that He is in them and they are in Him" (35). The chronology is written in crisp clear language and is an excellent way to introduce the Merton biography to new Merton readers as well as providing discernable mile markers for veterans.

The search for one's inner self is an arduous road, indeed, especially when we are reminded of God's plaintive call to Adam after the fall from paradise: "Adam, where are you?" In a selected passage from *The Springs of Contemplation*, Merton reflects: "We experience in the contemplative life a manifestation of God, who asks us, 'Where are you?' and we realize we're not around. In other words, this question is a way of God reminding us that we are not where we ought to be, which is right in God. This recurs all through our life. God keeps calling us back with words like these" (37). Later, in a passage from *The New Man* based on Genesis 2:10, we hear from a fearful Adam: "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked. And I hid" (47). Therefore as we strip away the illusionary layers surrounding our "point vierge" we like Adam may come out of hiding to embrace God's everlasting love mirrored in our true self.

In his introductory comments to the "Solitude and Silence" section, Simsic explains to his readers that: "In our loneliness, according to Merton, we discover that God longs to be alone in us. God's gift is love – this is the reason we need to be faithful to solitude" (79). A place where he found silence, of course, was the hermitage and Simsic harvests a passage from Merton's journal *A Vow of Conversation* which captures the joy of his treasured abode: "Everything about this hermitage fills me with gladness. . . . I can imagine no other joy on earth than to have such a place to be at peace in" (91).

There is a recurrence of the paradisiacal motif or theme in Part 7, "The Love of Nature." Simsic includes a passage from *No Man Is an Island* in which Merton declares: "All nature is meant to make us think of paradise. . . . If we have God dwelling within us, making our souls His paradise, then the world around us can also become for us what it was meant to be for Adam – his paradise" (99). The nature section is brimming with effusive and splendid imagery reflecting God's creation and I was pleased to see an old favorite that Simsic quotes from *New Seeds of Contemplation*: "When we are alone on a starlit night; when by chance we see the migrating birds in autumn descending on a grove of junipers to rest and eat . . . [they] provide a glimpse of the cosmic dance" (100-101).

The front cover of this paperback features juniper trees with an image of a dormitory building in the background. The building is part of Our Lady of Gethsemani Monastery near Bardstown, Kentucky where Thomas Merton lived as a monk until he was allowed to live a more eremitical life in his beloved hermitage which "[filled him] with gladness" (91). The pathway imaged in the foreground leading to the hermitage blends into the sepia-toned grass and the juniper trees

hued with pale green coloring. This imaging is separated by a classic gold band and the upper section of the cover displays an episcopal red coloring suggesting a rich liturgical dimension informing the contemplative life. Disappointing, however, is the placement of lettering across the pathway, interrupting, in a way, a contemplative mood which was obviously the intention of the design. Also one might feel a bit misled by the cover as it strongly suggests the coupling of monasticism and the contemplative life, whereas Simsic points out in the Introduction “that we too can receive the gift of the contemplative experience” (12). Merton, of course, advocated the cultivation of the contemplative life “in the real world.” Simsic provides an apt selection from *The Inner Experience*: “It should above all be emphasized that for the married Christian, even and especially married love enters into his contemplation, and this, as a matter of fact, gives it a special character” (40). Occasionally, the text is punctuated with photographs of Merton and the header of the introductory page to each part of the book has a likeness of the pathway to the hermitage displayed on the front cover.

Through his masterful editing, Wayne Simsic has cut a wide swath across the vast body of Merton writings as he has mined passages from some twenty books in his samplings. Although one may search in vain for Merton’s memorable “sermon to the birds” in *Day of a Stranger*, the reader will find many old favorites as well as the discovery of new or perhaps long-forgotten gems that will help refresh one’s meditative experience. Indeed with the publication of this small volume we have some of the best of the Merton canon regarding the contemplative life which can guide our daily meditations whether it takes place within a monastic enclosure, a suburban home, a rural farmhouse or in an urban condominium or apartment. I have pointed to only a few selections of the ten parts of this book; each reader will make personal discoveries of favorite passages in spending many a meditative hour with this collection. Simsic concludes the book by taking us full circle from the prayerful supplication in the opening passage, “My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going” (16) to “the unitive way” in his final selection: “The finally integrated man is a peacemaker, and that is why there is such a desperate need for our leaders to become such men of insight” (140). Thus Wayne Simsic has taken us from “[seeming] to be lost and in the shadow of death” to an “integrated man,” a peacemaker, who has found his way through the “contemplative life.”