

A Concert of Harmonious Voices

Review of

Soul Searching: The Journey of Thomas Merton

Edited by Morgan C. Atkinson with Jonathan Montaldo

Collegetown, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008

208 pages / \$19.95 paper; \$39.95 cloth (with DVD)

Reviewed by **Gregory J. Ryan**

Just when readers of the *Seasonal* might think there's nothing more to learn about Thomas Merton, along comes *Soul Searching: The Journey of Thomas Merton*. This book is just one part of the complete *Soul Searching* experience. The documentary DVD first came out on December 10, 2006. In 2008, *Soul Searching* was released in a stand-alone paperback edition and in a hardback edition with the DVD tucked inside. The upside to this is that there is something here for everyone at different price-points. The downside is that if you already have the DVD and want the hardback edition, you have to buy the book/DVD package. (When I asked the publisher about buying the hardback separately since I already had the DVD, the company representative said I should consider donating my copy of the DVD to our parish library and buying the new book/DVD set.) The DVD makes one want to buy the book; the book makes one want to buy the DVD. A win/win situation if ever there was one.

“The Firewatch” epilogue at the end of *The Sign of Jonas* is certainly one of the most celebrated passages in all of Thomas Merton's writings. In it, he writes about listening to choirs of millions and millions of living creatures surrounding his monastery on that hot July 4 evening. In *Soul Searching*, Morgan Atkinson invites his readers to listen to a “choir” of voices as they sing about Thomas Merton (8). Though he says he interviewed thirty people for more than sixty hours for the documentary (2), we hear just twenty-four voices in Atkinson's book-choir. (I hope we will eventually hear from the others.) Their voices not only blend well together, but each one is a soloist in his or her own right. Since so much material had to be omitted from the sifted-down one-hour documentary DVD, there is a great deal of leftover original material to sing about in the book.

Atkinson first sketches in for us why he came to work on this project. Like anyone who appreciates Merton, he was touched by Merton's writings through various decades and stages of his life – stages when he was “searching” for meaning. When he began this project he knew that he wanted Merton to be the main voice that the audience/readers hear. In the Introduction Atkinson explains, “I wanted to complement this with the thoughts of a mix of people who would not simply praise the good monk and great writer but would help present the complexity of this man. I wanted a variety of voices, a Merton choir” (8). In a marvelous and harmonious way, he has done just what he set out

to do, dividing the work into four main parts: “The Young Merton in New York”; “Gethsemani”; “Opening to the World”; and “Points West . . . and East.” The interviews flesh out each section with “significant issues of Merton’s life” (11) during that time period. Part One aptly begins with “New York City Serenade,” quoting Merton: “New York, you are mine! I love you” (15). Throughout the book we listen to reflections on schooling, writing, religion, communism, monasticism, asceticism, teaching, nature, solitude, letter writing, inter-religious dialogue, love and loss, Asia, his legacy after his death, and more.

The scholars, of course, are able to weigh in on all of the phases of Merton’s life, many of them having already written or edited their own book-length studies of Merton. But of particular interest to readers, I think, will be the comments by Merton’s fellow monks (John Eudes Bamberger, James Conner, Maurice Flood, Paul Quenon) since they lived, worked and prayed with (and mourned for) their Father Louis. Though they have all previously gone on record about Gethsemani Abbey’s most famous monk, they still have new stories to tell: humorous, touching, and surprising. Others who knew Merton personally (Daniel Berrigan, Richard Sisto) or by correspondence (Colman McCarthy, Rosemary Radford Ruether) offer fresh insights and recount stories that they tell here for the first time. Merton oral histories have been done before, but Atkinson’s work is so successful and deeply satisfying that one wishes he had been able to sit down and apply his interviewing skills with others, both inside and outside the monastery, who have unfortunately passed away, such as Abbot James Fox, Father Flavian Burns, Robert Giroux, Robert Lax, and others. I hope he will do so with Merton friends who are still among us. This *Soul Searching* project should continue and expand.

Atkinson was very ably assisted in editing this book by Jonathon Montaldo – who himself is also a member of the choir. The book is not merely a transcription of the DVD, but contains much new material, as was mentioned above. Since people do not normally speak in finely crafted sentences and well-formed paragraphs, it’s not easy to edit their words accurately and in a way that flows naturally on the printed page and remains true to their intent. So it’s only quibbling to point out that some small verbal tics and mistakes occasionally get through. For instance, “On the other hand” occurs twice in one paragraph on page 177 (how many hands can a person have?) and “if you will” occurs twice in two very nearby paragraphs on page 180. On page 192, “Colman McCarthy” is given as “Coleman McCarthy.” Even so, I recommend this book without reservation to newcomers, old-timers and everyone else in between.

In *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Thomas Merton encouraged us not to be wallflowers, standing on the sidelines watching the dance of life taking place before us. Instead, he invited everyone to join in the General Dance. This soul-singing choir of Merton friends, monastic colleagues, and scholars, along with their talented choirmaster, has given us the “Halleluja Chorus” of recent Merton studies. But, as enjoyable as the performance in this book may be, audience members should not be content just to listen to the Atkinson choir. They should leave the concert hall and go back to the source, the jazz-loving songwriter who wrote the original score, and spend time listening to Merton himself – and singing along. Then, turn even Merton off and listen in silence to the One Voice who sings in each of us.