

Powerhouses at the Center of America

Review of

Hidden in the Same Mystery: Thomas Merton and Loretto

Edited by Bonnie Thurston with Mary Swain, SL

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Reviewed by **Monica Weis, SSJ**

When Thomas Merton wrote in his autobiography that the Abbey of Gethsemani is the “center” holding all of America together, he was not mistaken. Two powerhouses of prayer and spiritual renewal – the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani and the Motherhouse of the Sisters of Loretto at the Foot of the Cross – exist within 12 miles of each other; moreover, two of their inhabitants, Thomas Merton and Sister Mary Luke Tobin, continue to have a major influence on contemporary spirituality. Merton and Luke, as we come to discover in this collection of formal and informal talks and writings, possessed a similar vision of Church. One might say that theirs was a symbiotic friendship, such as Wordsworth and Coleridge enjoyed, in which comparable intellects stimulated each other as they grappled with the challenges and issues of the turbulent 1960s and the momentous changes in the Catholic Church.

Masterfully compiled by Bonnie Thurston and Sister Mary Swain, SL, with photographic guidance from Br. Paul Quenon, OCSO and Peg Jacobs, CoL, *Hidden in the Same Mystery* is a unique book about a unique relationship. Divided into three sections – one for Merton, one for Luke, and one for photographs of the Loretto property and its residents – this slim volume fills in some of the details about this amazing friendship, and offers readers another insight into Merton’s thinking about the concept of vocation and religious vows, the necessity of discovering our True Self in God, the importance of the Cross, and the nature of prayer. As Fr. James Conner, OCSO notes in his Foreword, referring to Bonnie Thurston’s research and keen insight, both Merton and Luke had a passion for their vocations, were intellectual equals, and were committed to working for peace and justice (vii). Fortunately for both of these spiritual dynamos, Sister Mary Luke’s presence as an official observer at the second and subsequent sessions of the Vatican Council and as a member of the planning commission that drafted *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)*, was beneficial. Luke was privy to cutting-edge conversations on contemporary issues and became a conduit of the Council’s thinking for Merton; in return, Merton was able to contact bishops and theologians with his own reflections on key issues (vii).

Part One, devoted to Merton, includes four talks and a letter to the Loretto novices, a letter to Mother Luke, and an essay to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the founding of the Loretto congregation. These interactions between October 1961 and May 1963 capture Merton’s voice

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as characteristically as do tapes of his conferences to the Gethsemani novices. His light wit and deceptive off-the-cuff remarks, however, are more than a pep talk to the Loretto young women preparing to make vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Indeed, embedded in his apparently casual language are rich nuggets of solid theology – insights about which Merton has obviously thought long and hard, but that now roll off his tongue as if they had just sprung into his imagination. Take for example, his comment on Deuteronomy 30:14 and Romans 10:6-8 about the Word being very near: “It is in our hearts, and that’s the reason you don’t have to ascend, because heaven is on earth. Heaven is in our hearts since Christ is in our hearts. . . . We don’t have to find Him because He comes to find us, you see And I suppose that is what the vows are. You make vows, but, actually, it is by your vows that He takes possession of you, and so it is more His work than it is yours, actually” (10). Merton is equally strong on the importance of ridding oneself of false illusions, and adamant that the sacrifices required by obedience are meant to help us discover our essential unity with God. He even feels free to share with the novices his reading of Julian of Norwich who, trying to resolve the contradictions of traditional teaching on sin, is told by Our Lord – in Merton’s colloquial retelling – “yeah, that’s true, but that is not the way it is while all this is going on I am doing something else.” To Julian’s query about all the souls in hell, God answers (in Merton’s words): “Mind your own business! You do not know what I am doing with all those people. How do you know they are in Hell? . . . I make all things well. I make all things come out right” (14).

On another occasion, again speaking to the novices, Merton focuses on the importance of praying where you are now – good advice for any Christian serious about developing a spiritual life. Merton cautions them to be wary of two stumbling blocks: “impractical idealism” that thinks it has all the angles worked out beforehand, and “a kind of passive realism” that does nothing. His advice is to acknowledge how we are right now before God who is planting seeds all the time: “He’s going to make [them] grow in His own way, and what I have to provide is the love and the assent and the submission that’s going to permit this to grow” (25). This talk concludes – understandably, considering Merton’s preoccupations with social justice issues – with a comment on how compunction for sin needs to include the social sin of the H-bomb, racial hatred, and war (30).

Part Two reprints an interview with Sister Mary Luke ten years after Merton’s death, an article on Merton and prayer written for *Praying* magazine (1984), and the first of two talks given at Nazareth College, Rochester, NY in 1990. (Note: a CD of this talk is available upon request from Fons Vitae). Readers will recognize multiple quotations from Merton’s talks to the novices and might find this repetition a bit tedious. On the other hand, consider this: Sr. Mary Luke was a woman “who got it.” She had listened carefully to Merton, engaged in fruitful dialogue with him, and integrated his wisdom with her own spiritual insights. To hear Luke share Merton’s thoughts on prayer is not to listen to a mere string of quotations, but to experience an affirmation of the truth both she and Merton had discovered.

Luke’s interview for *Interchange*, the Loretto Newsletter (49-53), explains how she first met Merton in 1960 when he arrived at the Motherhouse seeking a teaching job for his mentor Dan Walsh. It reveals too Merton’s dream of starting a center for creative exchange – a dream Luke brought to birth in Denver in 1978 (51). The article on prayer (54-62) reprises some of Merton’s best advice for

dealing with distractions and a plea to understand that prayer is really a process of “collapsing into God” (58). In her address at Nazareth College (63-80), Luke divided her reminiscences of Merton into three periods: early Merton who with his wide thinking was good at balancing paradoxes; the 1965 Merton who was carefully integrating his studies of Eastern mysticism with Christianity, notably the prayer of the heart, the Jesus Prayer, and the Rosary; and the traveling Merton who hoped for an opportunity to pray openly with all religions on his Asian journey.

While Merton scholars and aficionados know Luke as Merton’s faithful friend, one of the founders of the ITMS, and founder of the Thomas Merton Center for Creative Exchange in Denver, women religious of a “certain age” know Mother/Sister Mary Luke Tobin in her own right. As the Superior General of the Loretto Sisters from 1958-70, Luke was widely recognized as a prophetic leader. She was influential in the formation of the Conference of Major Superiors of Women and in 1964 was elected President of its evolved configuration, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR). As Benedictine Sister Joan Chittister noted at the fiftieth anniversary celebration of LCWR (2006), Luke was a “bearer of the vision.” In addition to her position as official auditor at the Second Vatican Council, Luke was involved throughout her religious life with issues of social justice. In the 1970s she was part of the social justice movement of Church Women United, an ecumenical group supporting justice, peace, and human rights for women. Her obituary in the *National Catholic Reporter* (Aug. 25, 2006) notes her support for the ordination of women, the struggles of the United Farm Workers, her opposition to nuclear war, as well as to unsafe mining and environmental practices at the Blue Diamond Mining Company. She took part in non-violent actions at the government’s nuclear arsenal in Rocky Flats, Colorado, the Nevada nuclear test site, and was arrested for civil disobedience at the Air Force Academy and in the Capitol Rotunda. In addition to inviting notable speakers to address the Loretto community (e.g. Sister Theresa Kane and Frs. Edward Schillebeeckx and Bernard Haring), she was an avid reader, keeping up on theology and current events. Never a mind at rest, Luke told me during our last visit together two years before she died that every day she read one or two pages of *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Orbis, 2002) and learned more about Merton and his life of prayer.

Taken together, this record of Merton’s and Luke’s interactions for the period of 1960-68, with supporting photographs, is a worthwhile read. Of particular value are the several forewords and introductions that reveal the history of land purchases by the two congregations and set the scene for weaving the lives of these two spiritual giants. Thanks to scrupulous editing by Bonnie Thurston, multiple footnotes identify scriptural and journal references and offer additional information about the context for these talks. Each entry is preceded by a brief head note describing the behind-the-scenes events that testify to the truth of this remarkable friendship in which Merton “laughed a great deal,” felt at home, and appreciated the “wonderful, salutary honesty of Loretto and of Mother Luke!” (7). Indeed, Merton and Luke were, as Merton says, “neighbors in a valley that is still lonely . . . both hidden in the same mystery of Our Lady’s Sorrow and Solitude in the Lord’s Passion” (3).