

An Invitation to Merton's Birthday Party

Review of

*We Are Already One: Thomas Merton's Message of Hope –
Reflections in Honor of His Centenary (1915-2015)*

Edited by Gray Henry and Jonathan Montaldo

Foreword by Paul M. Pearson

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Reviewed by **Michael Carhart**

This voluminous and gorgeous volume is an exercise both in remembrance and commemorative thinking. These remembrances of over one hundred contributors gather around the birthday celebration of beloved author and spiritual friend, Thomas Merton. The cover of the book features a beautiful portrait painting of Merton, and in the middle of Merton's chest, nearest to his heart, the title of the book is written in golden letters: *We Are Already One*. And by the time the reader leafs through this massive volume, there can be no doubt at all that they will remember these golden words of Merton's.

But the hour is one of celebration. And so many of Merton's friends, both past and future, have managed to show up to offer their testimonies on behalf of Merton's legacy. In order to tell readers how a relatively unknown name like mine made it on the "guest list" of this party, I would like to guide the reader along the brief bypath of my story. When I was first asked to write a review for this book several months back, I will frankly (and very shamefully) admit that I had no clue who the majority of the contributors were in this volume. Actually most of them were entirely faceless to me (save for one or two exceptional individuals). Recently – as many of you may already know – the International Thomas Merton Society (ITMS) gathered for its Fourteenth General Meeting on the first weekend of June at Bellarmine University in Louisville, Kentucky. I happened to be lucky enough to attend this momentous occasion, thanks to a generous Daggy scholarship that I received from the ITMS. While I was at the conference, I managed to talk with and hear from many of the contributors of this volume.

When the conference finally came to a close and I headed back home, there at my desk waiting sat my copy of *We Are Already One*. The book now had a face that looked very familiar to me. You cannot imagine how difficult it is to read reflection after reflection and not know who it is that you are reading. It is like going to a party without ever going inside and then later reading the transcriptions collected at the party. Now that the volume had a face, many faces, the stories easily drew me in with pleasure.

The writing style of the contributors is multi-dimensional. Some authors speak exactly as they write and I felt like I was back at the conference sipping red wine and hearing groups of people

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discuss their Merton stories. Others in the volume tended to take a more personal approach. And paper suited them best for this task, for their stories are ones that belong hidden among the many others. All the reader has to do is leaf through the masses in order to find them, solitary and alone, and strike up a conversation with them.

Overall, I was very impressed with the writing style of the contributors involved. Many of them managed to keep what is strictly unique about them and yet humble themselves enough to allow us readers to feel comfortable entering through the door of their reflections. Whatever style I happened upon, I felt wholly comfortable and very much invited to join in.

What is so precious about the book is reading the personal stories and anecdotes of episodes where Merton featured prominently in the lives of others. He often shows up in miraculous and mysterious ways and inspires people in unimaginable ways. I am thinking particularly of Peter Savastano's reflection, as he paints us his bleak childhood in this volume, and in the midst of so much suffering and pain, Merton's writings wind up providing an unbelievable amount of solace in his life. It is the beginning of a friendship that has lasted through many long years. How many of us can say that we have honestly been able to preserve a friendship that lasted as long as the one we have had with Merton?

Stories like these provide the heart and soul of this volume and it is the strength of these contributions that justify the book's very existence. Hearing how one man can make a bridge between so many strangers is always a great source of cheer to me. And many Merton readers who are not sure whether they should continue their readings of Merton will find these stories to be a beacon of light and a source of encouragement for them.

I do, however, have a few jarring criticisms that I must confess to feeling as I read through this volume. I found some writers to be merely serving their own agendas and using Merton as a platform to do so. With these types of writers, there was quite a bit of self-promotion and plenty of patting on the back to be found throughout the volume. (I write this in a somewhat somber tone as I listen to Franz Liszt's moving *Liebstraum* No. 3 in A Flat, S. 541.) This can be somewhat disheartening to read for someone coming to celebrate Merton's life. All this stands to prove is that writers can really bend and twist Merton to serve their own desires and whims.

Something else worth noting, and I realize that this is a birthday celebration, so I do not want to spoil this evening's party, but I cannot help but think that all the writers took a highly optimistic view on Merton's thoughts and life. The man was, after all, quite wonderful, but simultaneously stubborn and arrogant and highly flawed as a human being.

When I remember my own Merton experiences, I fondly recall hating him five or six times before I ever began to love him, and even then, later on I would proceed to hate him all over again. There is no way I can join in on this celebration without the company of a few libations and a scandalous mouth that says a few hateful things on behalf of Merton. He would have wanted it that way. Any sort of posturing he would have called out himself.

If we are all friends attending his party, then we should feel open enough and really be honest with ourselves. Our life is often filled with ups and downs and Merton's certainly was as well. Because this is so, our readings of Merton can be filled with anger, hate, love and the whole mixture of emotions which sway us human beings in various directions.

Let us not forget his advice – “we are already one” – but let us also equally not forget that we sometimes are not.