

In My Ending Is My Meaning

Review of

Shaped by the End You Live For:
Thomas Merton's Monastic Spirituality

By Bonnie B. Thurston

Foreword by Paul Quenon, OCSO
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Reviewed by **Pauline A. Viviano**

Self-isolation during the Covid-19 pandemic has forced me to experience solitude in a way I had never done before. That in turn led me to my favorite expert on solitude, Thomas Merton, but in the mysterious way that God works, Bonnie Thurston's book *Shaped by the End You Live For: Thomas Merton's Monastic Spirituality* fell into my lap (actually into the mailbox) and brought me see Merton with new eyes. Having grown up with Merton in the 1950s and '60s, I took pride in my knowledge of Merton's thought, but Thurston's book enabled me to see more clearly and in greater depth what I thought I knew. I highly recommend this eminently readable book to those who are new to Merton, but even those familiar with Merton's thought will be rewarded with new insights and a deeper understanding.

The title of Thurston's book, and its subtitle, aptly identify its content. The first eight chapters focus on Merton's monastic spirituality by examining what led Merton to the monastery, how he was shaped by his monastic experience, and how that experience brought him to a deeper understanding of his relationship and commitment to Christ. In the monastery Merton lived in silence and obedience; he lived in community; he worked and prayed; and he learned to love. After his experience of the oneness of all humanity at Fourth and Walnut in Louisville, he began, in anticipation of Vatican II, to see a continuum between monastic spirituality lived "in the monastery" and a lay spirituality lived "in the world." There are not two ways to be Christian – the ordinary Christian (laity) and the spiritual elite (religious/priests/nuns). Rather, all Christians are called to holiness by virtue of their baptism (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* §40).

Thurston examines aspects of monastic life that play a role in the lives of all Christians: obedience, silence and solitude. She discusses the biblical roots of obedience and Merton's reflections on silence and solitude. Hearing and obedience share the same root in Hebrew (*shema'*); obedience follows upon hearing. From Adam and Eve to Abraham, for Israel and the

Pauline A. Viviano is a scripture scholar and Associate Professor Emerita of Theology at Loyola University Chicago. She received her doctorate in Biblical Languages and Literature from St. Louis University, and among her numerous writings are reading guides to the historical books of the Hebrew Scriptures in the *Catholic Study Bible* published by Oxford University Press and the commentaries on Genesis and on Jeremiah/Baruch in the Collegeville/New Collegeville Bible Commentary series. She is a member of the Chicago Chapter of the International Thomas Merton Society.

prophets, and most especially with Jesus, obedience plays a significant role in the biblical story. Obedience is grounded in hearing; silence is necessary in order to hear. Thurston summarizes Merton on solitude and then speaks of its importance in non-monastic communities and families. Our inner life becomes available to us in silence and solitude. Solitude leads to solidarity. As we let go of our diversions, empty ourselves and discover our true selves, we are led from within to a deeper and more authentic unity with others.

It can be frustrating to piece together what Merton has to say about prayer, for his pearls of wisdom are scattered here and there throughout his writings, but Thurston gathers together these pearls, giving us one of the best introductions to prayer in Merton that I have seen. She sets out five principles of prayer in chapter 7 and adds to these in chapter 8. For Merton, prayer is primarily a matter of attending to the presence of God in one's heart. It is communion with God here and now and is grounded in trust and in wanting God. Prayer is a gift; it comes by grace. It cannot be taught. Methods of prayer may be helpful, but prayer cannot be reduced to a technique. It is necessary in prayer to start where we are. Distractions are inevitable, but the pray-er should not give them energy by focusing on them: just let them go. A pray-er also needs to let go of self-consciousness. Prayer is not about the pray-er, but about God. Prayer involves emptying oneself before God, waiting for God, being receptive and surrendering to God in obedience. What bridges the life of the monk and that of the serious Christian is the recognition that one's spiritual life is not a "part" of one's life, but *is* one's life. We do not pray and then move on to other activities, but we must recognize that intentionally and potentially all of life is prayer. "The real purpose of prayer . . . is the deepening of personal realization in love, in the awareness of God" (109). Chapter 8 recaps and develops these insights into Merton's understanding of prayer, reiterating that what Merton says about prayer is not just for monks, but is accessible to all who want a more profound spiritual life.

Chapters 9 and 10 bring us to the title of the book (taken from Merton's *Thoughts in Solitude* 56), drawing out how our lives are shaped by the end we live for, just as Merton's life was shaped by the end he lived for. Merton's experience of the love and compassion of Christ is repeated again and again in the lives of Christians not attached to a monastery. Withdrawal from the world is not superior to engagement in the world; prayer is not the opposite of action. One withdraws from the world to be able to more fully engage the world. All are called to be the person God created each one to be (the true self) and not the person each becomes in response to the expectations and roles assigned by society (the false self).

In her conclusion, Thurston connects all that has been said of Merton's monastic spirituality and being "shaped by the end one lives for" by drawing upon questions that open and close the Gospel of John: "What are you looking for?" (Jn. 1:38) and "Whom are you looking for?" (Jn. 18:4, 7; 20:15) (see 127). What gives meaning to your life? What is your goal? In the silence and solitude that grounds our prayer we discover who we really are: we are a people longing for God. We can surrender to God by saying "yes" as Mary said "yes" to God, as Jesus said "yes" to God. God's "yes" is spoken in Resurrection, transforming Jesus' "yes" into an eternal "yes." Our "yes" draws us towards the reign of God and propels us to work towards its full realization.

I composed this review to function as an appetizer, meant to whet your appetite for Thurston's book. Her presentation of Merton's monastic spirituality and its implications for

Christian life outside the monastery sets before us a rich banquet. She allows Merton to speak for himself by the frequent use of direct quotation of passages from his vast array of writings, but she is an able guide through this material by her astute organization and explanation of Merton's thought. She helpfully provides an extensive list of primary and secondary sources so her readers can build upon the foundation in Merton that she has given them in this book. Merton was a monk, a writer, a poet, an artist, a photographer, etc. I discovered from the internet that Bonnie Thurston also can be identified by the many roles that she has lived and continues to live: writer, poet, professor, New Testament scholar, wife, widow, pastor, etc. It is my hope that someday Bonnie Thurston will tell her own story, her own spiritual journey. I want to know more of the woman who wrote this poem:

Beyond Word's Horizon

I came to love of God
through literature and languages.
I came by words to the Word,
loved both, though variously,
was brought to shores of silence,
set sail on uncertain tides,
set sail on becalmed seas,
set sail to surrender,
go west into unknowing.