

Corresponding with Grace and Honesty

Review of

A Focus on Truth: Thomas Merton's Uncensored Mind

By Patrick W. Collins

Foreword by Jonathan Montaldo

Collegetown, MN: Liturgical Press, 2021

xvi + 197 pages / \$19.95 paper

Reviewed by **Gregory J. Ryan**

Early in Thomas Merton's writing career as a monk at the Abbey of Gethsemani, the distinguished English author Evelyn Waugh counseled the young monk to concentrate his considerable talents on the craft of letter-writing. To Merton's credit he did just that, while also honing his skills as a poet and essayist, as well as a dedicated journal-keeper. Over the years, Merton received a number of influential guests at the monastery and later at his hermitage, to discuss a wide-range of interests. Though isolated in the hills of Kentucky, Merton, through his vast correspondence with more than 2000 people, was able to influence others outside the monastery and, perhaps just as importantly, to *be influenced by them*.

Those who have been following the "Merton industry" through the decades are familiar with Fr. Collins's thoughtful and important work spreading the "Gospel of Fr. Louis" through lectures, articles and retreats – not to mention music! In *A Focus on Truth*, he has identified ten topics that were important to Merton and to his correspondents as found in the five published volumes of Merton's letters. The major differentiator between this book and a number of others that tackle Merton's letters is that Collins identifies ten topics that were on Merton's "uncensored" letter-writing mind and treats the letters within each topic in chronological order, allowing us to see these "stories" unfold over the years from beginning to end. Collins stitches together his own observations with appropriate passages from Merton's letters which range from a few sentences to a good number of paragraphs. The ten topics include Truth and Conscience (1-14); Spirituality (15-51); Liturgical Renewal (52-60); Church Authority (61-79); Ecumenism (80-91); Priesthood (92-101); Being a Hermit (102-34); Interreligious Dialogue (135-54); Monastic Renewal (155-72); and the Church (173-95). There is something here for everyone.

Merton's fruitful correspondence with theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether is well known, especially since both sides of that correspondence have already been published in *At Home in the World: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Rosemary Radford Ruether* (Orbis, 1995). Their respect for each other grew as they challenged each other's thoughts on the validity of monasticism and

Gregory J. Ryan and his wife Liz wrote and illustrated the children's book, *The ABCs of Thomas Merton: A Monk at the Heart of the World* (Paraclete Press, 2017). He facilitates the local ITMS Chapter at St. Rose Parish, Belmar, NJ. A Benedictine oblate, he also leads a weekly Christian meditation group there (GJRyan@WCCM.org).

eremitism in today's world. Merton's letters to Ruether give us perhaps the most "bare bones" picture of Monk Merton (as Collins frequently calls him) that we get in any of his letters. "My hermit life is expressly a *lay* life. I never wear the habit except when at the monastery"; and later in the same letter: "as far as I can see I am a tramp and not much else. But this kind of tramp is what I am supposed to be. This kind of place is where I am finally reduced to my nothingness and have to depend on God" (122).

As an example of a less well-known correspondent, we find an important exchange with Linda Sabbath sprinkled throughout several of the chapters. Sabbath was a co-founder of the R. M. Bucke Memorial Society for the study of religious experience at McGill University in Montreal, Canada. She was an important resource for Merton on meditation, mind-expanding drugs and varieties of religious experience, especially in the Eastern traditions. Chapter 7, "On Being a Hermit," touches on Merton's relationship with the student nurse identified here only as "M." Collins perceptively points out that Sabbath was among the first people with whom Merton shared something about the crisis he was going through in the spring of 1966. Without dealing with the affair explicitly, Merton instead wrote about the sacrifices and challenges of the solitary life, including fixing his own meals among other daily chores. "All is not simple and easy in the solitary life, but the thing about it is that the trials make sense and one sees that one has to go through them and put up with them, and one tries to meet it all in a constructive sort of way. So it is work to do" (118) (see Merton's letters to Sabbath in *The Hidden Ground of Love* 516-33).

Though longtime readers of Merton's letters will already be familiar with Jean and Hildegard Goss-Mayr, A. M. Allchin, Ludovico Silva and others, some of the identifying descriptions of these people within Collins's text are a bit thin at times. A list of correspondents at the end of the book could have provided more detailed descriptions. An index of those names would also allow the reader to locate correspondents of interest. A helpful bibliography is included. Instead of footnotes, Collins cites in the text the year of the quoted passage as well as the page number and title of the volume of letters it comes from. Perhaps not surprisingly, most excerpts, by a large margin, come from the first and longest book of Merton's published letters. By my count the number of Merton passages in Collins's book is as follows: *The School of Charity* (5), *The Courage for Truth* (8), *Witness to Freedom* (10), *The Road to Joy* (26) and *The Hidden Ground of Love* (330).

Fr. Collins has performed a valuable service for new Merton readers who might otherwise be intimidated by the five published volumes of letters. They will find this book to be a helpful introduction and it will whet their appetites for more. For those who are "old hands," Collins brings a laser focus to these ten truths in Merton's life and letters. We can all hope he might do the same with Merton's journals.