

## Expanding the Vision of Merton's Church

Review of

*Man of Dialogue: Thomas Merton's Catholic Vision*

By Gregory K. Hillis

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Reviewed by **Joseph Q. Raab**

Some of Thomas Merton's admirers dislike the Catholic Church, and some members of that Church dislike Merton. Such fans and foes alike often try to diminish or even dismiss Merton's Catholic identity – to distance him from the Church they either accept or reject. In *Man of Dialogue: Thomas Merton's Catholic Vision*, Gregory K. Hillis shows in persuasive detail the erroneous nature of such a move. On the contrary, Hillis presents Merton accurately as thoroughly and irrefutably Catholic, and the evangelizing effect this has compels those who would diminish Merton's Catholic identity to rethink their vision of Merton and of his Church.

In his "Introduction: Merton the Catholic?" (1-14), Hillis presents his question and reviews assessments from both Catholics and non-Catholics who find Merton's allegiance to the Church somewhat suspect. Having shown the relevance and persistence of the question, Hillis sets out to answer it by building a comprehensive portrait of this "Man of Dialogue." As a convert to Catholicism and an admirer of Merton (he even has a Merton tattoo!), Hillis avoids hagiography and presents an honest appraisal of Merton's struggles and gifts through a series of nine perspectival chapters.

The first four – "Merton the Convert" (15-54), "Merton the Priest" (55-78), "Merton the Novice Master" (79-112) and "Merton the Devoted Son of Mary" (113-39) – build a case for catholicity that goes far beyond suggesting a nominal or peripheral association; rather Hillis presents the Catholic contemplative tradition as *constitutive of* Merton's identity, especially centering the Eucharist in the monk's life – as a spiritual resource and as a call to unity and to more just human relations. These chapters reveal Merton's deep piety, and his dedication to his vocation which encompassed religious life, priestly ministry, teaching and writing. Even readers well-versed in the Merton corpus will find Hillis' coverage of familiar territory freshly illuminating. His treatment of Merton the priest reveals Merton's love of the Eucharist, but also playfully and humorously exposes Merton's ambivalence to the liturgical reforms of Vatican II (see 74-76). His portrait of Merton the novice master pulls together interviews from Merton's former students and incorporates a broad range of material only recently made available through the publication of Merton's novitiate

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conferences. Hillis reveals Merton's more than passing familiarity with the giants of the tradition (e.g., Cassian, Evagrius, Augustine, Aquinas, Bonaventure as well as the Cistercian fathers) to the extent that Merton stands solidly among them. Yet Hillis never allows Merton to evaporate into this heady atmosphere and he keeps Merton real, grounded and conflicted with all his contradictions.

The next five chapters examine more controversial facets of Merton's life and work. Chapters five and six explore Merton's prophetic positions regarding social issues of the 1950s and '60s. In "Merton the Advocate for Peace" (141-67), Hillis presents a fulsome picture of Merton's critique of the cold war, the nuclear arms race, and the limits of Catholic just-war tradition in the face of nuclear weapons. In "Merton the Opponent of Racism" (169-201), Hillis explores Merton's courageous and public support of the nonviolent black revolution, and his pastoral and private support, through correspondence, of Fr. August Thompson, a black Catholic priest from Louisiana. In "Merton the Lovestruck" (203-20) the brief but notorious affair with "M" becomes the focus. While he does not attempt to excuse any of Merton's adolescent indiscretions, and is not afraid, in the wake of #MeToo, to point out the problematic power differential between the famous monk and the much younger 25-year-old nurse, Hillis does try to understand the relationship in the context of a vocational struggle – one where monastic vows eventually prevail. In "Merton the Dialogist" (221-38) and "Merton the Pilgrim to the East" (239-80) Hillis highlights the monk's pioneering role in ecumenical and interreligious dialogues, and reminds the reader that it is Merton's capacity for dialogue, broadly speaking, that most eloquently expresses his Catholic spirit – for dialogue is for the sake of bridge-building, connecting, forming relationships, gathering into communion; and it is this "man of dialogue" that Hillis, and Pope Francis, want new generations to meet. Hillis concludes the book by asserting a succinct answer to his original question, "Merton the Catholic" (281-84). I wish he had used an exclamation point because the strength of his presentation deserves one.

This remarkable book accomplishes three notable feats. First, it offers of robust defense of Merton's Catholic identity against those who wish to minimize it, whether they be fans or foes of Merton. Second, it convincingly argues that Merton's "controversial" positions on war, race and religious pluralism are not departures from Catholic identity but profound realizations of it. Finally, in the process of achieving the first two, the book offers an insightful, engaging and comprehensive introduction to Merton's life and work that has an evangelistic effect. It challenges those who admire Merton but dislike his Catholicism to see the Church as Merton did, yielding a deep and broad vision of its beauty and light. Likewise, Merton's Catholic foes, if they decide to read the book, will be challenged in the very same way – to see the Church as Merton sees it – catholic enough to embrace and celebrate diversity, prophetic enough to challenge conventions and certitudes, and courageous enough to model non-violent yet active responses to injustice and war. To accept such a vision of the Church necessitates a reevaluation of Merton's story in it. His is not a cautionary tale about a path to be avoided by Catholics but an inspiring and exemplary one, as Pope Francis confirms – a model that all can learn from. A book achieving any of these could already be impressive, but the combination of all three makes it masterful.