

Savoring “The Merton Prayer”

Review of

The Merton Prayer: An Exercise in Authenticity

By Steven A. Denny

Chicago: ACTA Publications, 2022

ix + 182 pp. / \$24.95 cloth

Reviewed by **Robert Grip**

English class may be the last time you thought about “close reading,” an analysis of the deeper message behind a literary work. But it’s a technique that has served author Steven A. Denny well in his book *The Merton Prayer: An Exercise in Authenticity*. Like so many prayers with which we are familiar, it’s easy to thoughtlessly recite them without thinking about what we are saying. Denny, an attorney and ordained minister, makes the case for not skipping through Merton’s best known, one-page prayer, that begins “My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going,” originally found in *Thoughts in Solitude* and reprinted in a wide variety of venues.

As Denny illustrates, “The Merton Prayer” is an illustration of Merton’s immersive knowledge of the Bible and his ability to interpret what’s being said for a (then) twentieth and now twenty-first century audience. In a series of 14 chapters, Denny dives deeply into each phrase of “The Merton Prayer,” tracing its origins to teaching found the Old and New Testaments. He uses photos to introduce the reader to what’s being discussed, uses “exegesis” or close reading to explore the meaning behind the message of the Gospels. He adds personal reflections (and a share of advanced English language lessons – when was the last time you heard of a “first class conditional sentence”?). Finally, in a section he calls “Turn It, Turn It, Turn It,” he invites the reader to contemplate each section of the Prayer, recalling the “story of a Talmudic rabbi whose students asked him, ‘Rabbi, how best does one study Torah?’ The rabbi responded, ‘Turn it, turn it, turn it. It’s all there’” (3-4).

Denny could have omitted his “Personal Stories” to make the book purely an academic exercise, but by including them, he invites his readers to consider the times they have tried and failed to follow the example of Jesus’ life, why and the reasons we should not be afraid, as found in Christian teaching from I John 4:18 (“perfect love casts out fear”) to St. John Paul II’s constant exhortation, “Do not be afraid.” This is a volume that should be read from cover to cover with time to savor each chapter.

There are a few minor factual errors in the book (like claiming Merton died immediately after lecturing to Buddhist monks in Thailand, when he had actually addressed Asian Benedictines and Cistercians there) or that he was accidentally electrocuted by a fan that fell into his bathtub (according to Michael Mott, author of the official biography *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, Merton

Robert Grip is a former President of the International Thomas Merton Society and retired television news anchor who continues to serve the ITMS by posting each session of “Tuesdays with Merton” on YouTube. His own most recent contribution to this series is entitled “Washington Watches the Monk II,” in which he updates his 1986 essay in *The Merton Seasonal* where he explored the question: “Did the U.S. government monitor the actions of Thomas Merton?”

had been taking a shower and may have reached for the fan as he stepped out of it [567]), but they do not detract from a book that has much to offer anyone who believes, to paraphrase Merton, that God will never leave you to face your perils alone.