

Merton as Guide for the Lenten Journey

Review of

The Way of Thomas Merton: A Prayer Journey through Lent

By Robert Inchausti

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Reviewed by **Chris McDonnell**

Thomas Merton's journey encompassed the turbulent period of the early and mid-twentieth century. Born in France in the early months of the First World War, he entered the Cistercian abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky just after the bombing of Pearl Harbor and was to remain there during the subsequent twenty-seven years. These were the years of Cold War strife and civil disturbance, of antiwar protest over the developing conflict in Vietnam. Within the Church, there was the tension of expectation with the calling by John XXIII of the Second Vatican Council. Much that was happening is reflected in Merton's voluminous writing as a monk, a person on the margin, an interesting place to be when writing or commenting on the nature of our changing society. Like Merton himself, all Christians are so often caught between a rock and a hard place, living our lives in a society yet having to be careful that we don't just accept societal values without careful thought and good judgment.

This challenge is reflected in Robert Inchausti's new book, *The Way of Thomas Merton*. Emeritus professor of English at California State Polytechnic University, he has already published three books on Merton and is well-versed in his source subject. His latest volume is subtitled "A Prayer Journey through Lent," and as such addresses the ever-present question: "What shall we give up for Lent?" but offers an alternative option: "What shall we *do* this Lent?"

This book is divided into nineteen brief chapters, each of which addresses an issue reflected in Merton's writing. They challenge us to think and to form an opinion stimulated by the outline offered to us. At the conclusion of each chapter are a number of questions (usually four or five) to assist in this activity. This structure gives the reader two ways of using the text: individually or collectively. Individually it can serve as personal reflective reading during the Lenten period, taking time to read a chapter and then to respond to the challenge of the listed questions or those other questions posited by our own interpretation of the chapter. Be in no doubt, this is not an easy read but demands the attention of the reader to the Merton quotations provided and to the author's reflections on them. Collectively, I think, serves as a more productive approach. A group of six or

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eight people might be formed with the charge to read and prepare three chapters each and then to lead a collective discussion on them, spread over the weeks of Lent. This would offer a diversity of opinion that would provide valuable insights into the contents and offer serious options to the core reading.

We need to ask ourselves some hard questions before trying to change our direction. We will not be listened to if we duck the crucial issues of our times, if such matters go un-addressed by the Christian people. That may well involve asking ourselves some difficult questions before we exchange views with others, being honest about where we are and the historic journey that has brought us to this point. That path has not been without mistakes among many successes; it is peopled by both saints and sinners. There is a need to be honest with ourselves. It is no good hiding difficult issues under the hedge.

Considering the material in three sample chapters can provide an idea of how the book can be useful. In chapter 11, “What is Contemplation?” after discussing Merton’s approach to contemplation, Inchausti summarises his position in four statements: first, that contemplation is a *behavior*; the act of attaining access to a hitherto untapped region of subjective experience – it is spiritual wonder lived with gratitude for life, awareness, the highest expression of man’s intellectual and spiritual life; second, contemplation is a *way of knowing* – pure and virginal – poor in concepts, poorer still in reasoning, but able by its very poverty and purity to follow the Word wherever He may go; third, contemplation is a *manifestation* of the “true self” hidden with Christ in God, and so . . . ; fourth, a contemplative is a particular kind of Christian disciple, someone

Who has risked his mind in the *desert beyond language and beyond* ideas where God is encountered in the nakedness of true of pure trust, that is to say in the surrender of our poverty and incompleteness in order no longer to clench our minds in a cramp upon themselves, as if thinking made it exist. The message of hope the contemplative offers you then, brothers and sisters is not that you need to find your way through the jungle of language and problems that today surround God, but whether you understand or not, God loves you, is present in you, lives in you dwells in you, calls you, saves you, and offers you an understanding and light which are like nothing you ever found in books or heard in sermons. (63-64)

He then offers four questions for reflection, the final one being: “What problem are you in the middle of solving that might better be turned over to God?” (65)

In chapter 16, “The Root of War Is Fear,” the focus is on the final decade of his life when Merton got involved in the political scene, with his concern for the civil rights movement, the Cold War and the conflict in Vietnam. Merton contributed his support for peace activists with articles, letters and encouragement, the long prose-poem *Original Child Bomb* being published in 1961 and followed by numerous other powerful writings. It was during this same year that Merton’s essay “The Root of War Is Fear” was published in *The Catholic Worker*. It is a seminal piece of writing and establishes the central thread of this chapter. Paraphrasing Merton, when the world is in a state of moral confusion and denial, and everyone is running away from responsibility, blame and moral accountability, “we expend all our efforts in constructing more fictions with which to account for our ethical failures.” In a world rife with such recrimination, “the good will of negotiators looks increasingly pathetic – and they find themselves reviled, blamed and treated with contempt,

destroyed as victims of the universal self-hate projected on them.” He then offers three questions for reflection, the second one being: “If the root of war is fear, what is the root of fear?” (86). One wonders what his analysis of the current Middle Eastern conflict would have been.

In the final chapter, “The Merton Legacy” (95), the author concludes his book with an interesting and thoughtful reflection on Merton’s life and influence. Primarily a writer who lived his final 27 years, the second half of his short life, as a monk of the Abbey of Gethsemani, he commented somewhere that “It is not much fun to live spiritual life with the spiritual equipment of an artist.” In spite of his brevity of time as a Cistercian, his written legacy is prolific, books, volumes of letters, poetry, articles – and all before the age of the laptop. Brother Patrick Hart, who was Thomas Merton’s secretary in the final months of his life and the guardian of this legacy, once told me of his speed of writing, reflected in its impressive volume and variety, sampled in the excerpts provided here. Robert Inchausti has mined the deep well of Merton’s wisdom and has produced a text well worth the attention it demands, be it during Lent or at other times of personal reflection.