

LIVING WITH WISDOM: A LIFE OF THOMAS MERTON (Revised edition)

Jim Forest (New York: Orbis Books, 2008) Paper, 262 pages. US \$22.00.

Jim Forest was a friend of the Trappist monk, Father Louis – better known to the outside world as Thomas Merton. After Merton’s death, one of his fellow monks at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, asked Forest, “How did Father Louis write all those books?” That’s what amazed me as I read through this biography and noted all the citations from Merton’s books and innumerable other writings. If I were that monk, I would have expanded my question this way, “How did Father Louis find time to write all those books, articles, reviews, poems, journal entries and letters to friends, fans and world dignitaries? I would have added, “How was he able to write about so many different topics so well – contemplation, prayer, monasticism, non-violence, civil rights, inter-religious dialogue, eastern forms of meditation, ancient Christian writers and too many other topics to count? Plus, he pursued interests in photography, Russian literature, Shaker furniture and calligraphy! That would be more than enough to occupy the lifetime of most of us, but Merton lived the arduous life of a Trappist monk for twenty seven years, which required many hours of choral prayer throughout the day and night and physical farm labor – without the use of modern equipment.

If one were to read just Merton’s autobiography, “The Seven Storey Mountain” and conclude they knew Merton’s life – since he spent the rest of his life “enclosed” in a monastery in rural Kentucky – their knowledge of Merton would be very limited. From his autobiography we would know that he was a trans-Atlantic gadfly who had to withdraw from Cambridge University after only a year. He then went on to Columbia University in New York and, while he continued to live a partying life with his fraternity brothers, he began to build his reputation

as a writer both in the university and secular press. Yet he was also growing more restless with the life he was leading. This restlessness and spiritual hunger eventually led him to Catholicism and, after considering some religious options (the Franciscans and Dorothy Day's Catholic Worker) he entered the Trappists in 1941. The closing of the monastery's gate behind him would seem to the outside world as the end of Thomas Merton's life. But, under orders from his abbot, he wrote his famous autobiography (now translated into 29 languages) and touched the lives of millions of a post-World War II generation who were disenchanted by the horrors humans could inflict upon one another and were searching for lasting meaning and spiritual significance for their lives. Many found that meaning in Merton – the ranks of those entering monasteries at that time swelled. But even more important, countless readers found his spiritual search gave meaning and insight for how to live the Christian faith IN the world.

While "The Seven Storey Mountain" told a profound story of a modern person's inner struggles and search, Forest's book fills in a lot of details left out Merton's autobiography. Forest was a close friend of Merton and so this biography gives more information about Merton's life before he entered the monastery. His Trappist censors did not want Merton to write in his autobiography about the more seamy sides of his pre-monastic life; they thought it would be unbecoming and scandalous to the pious. Forest fills in the blanks and, as a result, Merton's life becomes more accessible to later generations, especially to young adults who will identify with his search, mis-steps and spiritual hungers. Forest says he does not want to "iron out the wrinkles" in Merton's life. So, for example, what we don't learn in "The Seven Storey Mountain," we do in this book – about Merton's college excesses; that he fathered a child in England; his struggles with his monastic authorities, his severe doubts about his vocation and more.

Before he entered the monastery, Merton worked in Harlem with the Catholic Worker community and he saw first hand the injustices against blacks in the inner city. Forest, one of the founders of the Catholic Peace Fellowship, got to know Merton because of his writings on peace. Merton's writings on contemporary social justice topics attracted many peace and civil rights activists, many of whom wrote him and some even visited and made retreats with him at Gethsemani.

After he entered the monastery Merton became controversial among some of his fellow monks and more traditional church people because of his writings on social justice, civil rights, the Vietnam war, Buddhism and other world religions. They just didn't think a monk should be so "worldly," or, because of his controversial views, that a Catholic writer should rock the boat of the Church's hard-won acceptance into American culture. Catholics were supposed to be "good citizens," the argument went and support the government's positions in America and throughout the world. They also thought publicity on a world-wide stage was inappropriate for someone who was supposed to "lose himself" in the anonymous life of a Trappist monk.

Merton's honest sharing of his doubts and his dialogue with eastern religions also made him suspicious in other church circles. Forest reports that in 2005 a new American Catholic Catechism, aimed at young adults, was being prepared. Each chapter was to deal with a separate topic and include a profile of an exemplary American Catholic. But the bishop in charge of the preparation committee had Merton's name struck from the draft. The reasons given were that this generation would not know who he was and that "we don't know of all the details of the searching at the end of his life" (page 242). The chapter Merton was supposed to be profiled in

was the one on prayer – the only chapter in the book without a profile.

Forest includes in the sidebars of almost each page quotes or photos that parallel the time frame of the narrative. Those photos, gathered from very diverse sources, are a treasure and many of them I had never seen before. In particular, there are some taken during his monastic years when social justice activists came to talk with him. I love the photo of Merton and Daniel Berrigan (another founder of the Catholic Peace Fellowship). Merton is speaking and a very young Berrigan seems held in rapt attention to his words. There are many close up shots of Merton taken through his lifetime. Most are of him looking directly into the camera and they show a calm and good face – and, it must be said, an impish smile, monk or no monk!

Forest had a lot of access to correspondence between Merton and his friends, scholars, religious superiors, writers, philosophers, peace activists, etc. In addition, Forest quotes liberally from Merton's published writings and offers insightful commentary on them so, when I finished the book, I felt I had just completed a survey course in the life, spirituality and social activism of Thomas Merton. This book would be a good introduction for someone wishing to begin reading Merton. It is also informative for those who are already familiar with him, because Forest traces the development of his thoughts and spirituality in the light of his on-going spiritual practices and the rapid changes occurring in the Church and the world beyond his monastery walls.

Merton loved his solitude, yet Forest also reveals how he struggled with being “locked up” and cut off from social and world events that both interested and disturbed him. But it is clear, after reading Merton's biography, that walls do not a monastery make. Even after his death many people still come to Gethsemani to visit his grave, including the Dalai Lama who, in 1994 said,

“Whenever someone speaks about Jesus Christ, I think of Thomas Merton.”

-----Jude Siciliano, OP

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