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## Review Essay: An Apostolate of Friendship: Recent Publications on the Letters and Conferences of Thomas Merton

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**Review Essay: An Apostolate of Friendship: Recent Publications on the Letters and Conferences of Thomas Merton**

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Fred Herron, in a recent essay, wonders if once all of Thomas Merton's papers and letters are catalogued and published, "Will Merton studies finally have come to the end of the line?" (Herron, 2021, p. 205). Herron raises a fair question. Fifty-five years after his death, the writings of this cloistered, middle-aged, white monk continue to inspire doctoral theses, books both academic and popular, and conferences and retreats on several continents - but are we nearing the end of the road?

Herron goes on to suggest "...the transformative experience which Merton provokes cannot be accounted for sufficiently by an account of his literary output, no matter how sweeping or profound it might be" (Herron, 2021, p. 206). Herron's offering of his own experience is suggestive. When at a conference or retreat, he notes people "will begin their discussions of Merton with a personal experience related to what they read first or what he meant to them" (Herron, 2021, p. 206). True. Had I met Herron I would have told my own story of having pulled off the shelf a twenty-five cent, used copy of *The Seven Storey Mountain* as I was struggling with whether I had a vocation to ordained ministry. I felt like Merton, while describing his own struggle, was speaking directly to me. There was a sense of immediacy to his voice. The experience led me to seek out more of his writing. His provocative way of approaching important questions and his deep commitment to contemplative prayer helped me navigate my way out of fundamentalism to a richer and more authentic Christian faith.

Merton's writing engaged topics that remain current: inter-religious dialogue, racism, war, Indigenous issues, ecology, contemplative spirituality, the feminine face of the divine. His work as a poet, photographer, and visual artist model for us a different approach to doing theology, a sort of theopoetics that goes beyond the confining limits of rationality. His development of friendships through correspondence, and his struggles with his monastic vows of obedience, stability, and chastity open the door to engage with Merton the human being. His interactions with others can provide readers with a model of dialogue sorely needed in an age of violence and division.

It might well be that once all the Merton papers and letters are catalogued and published, Merton studies will come to an end. Recent events and publications, however, suggest the end of the line is not yet in sight. My intention, in what follows, is to review three recent publications. Two offer previously unavailable letters, and one a combination of previously unpublished letters and lectures, opening the door to additional study and investigation. The letters offer the possibility of knowing more deeply Thomas Merton as a person, allowing for reflection on his commitment to friendship and dialogue. The lectures allow us to see him in action as a teacher, giving insight into his commitment to collaborative learning, to monastic renewal, and to the areas of interest he was developing shortly before his untimely death in 1968.

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***Signs of Hope: Thomas Merton's Letters on Peace, Race, and Ecology.* Gordon Oyer  
Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2021, paper 275 pp., ISBN: 9781626984301**

Thomas Merton is best known for his spiritual writing, social essays, and poetry. This, however, is only his public voice - a voice often compromised due to the formal censorship of his writing by the Cistercian Order to which he belonged.

In 1985, twenty-seven years after his death in 1968, the publication of five volumes of Merton's correspondence began. The published letters are grouped thematically. This is helpful if one desires to probe Merton's thought in an area of particular interest, but at the same time the reader is disadvantaged by having only one side of the conversation.

We have been able to read both sides of some of the conversations, as, one by one, publications have appeared that brought together all of the available correspondence with a particular friend or writing partner (Rosemary Radford Ruether, Jean Leclerc, Ernesto Cardenal, etc.). These volumes have been published with short introductions that provide some background and context to each relationship.

Gordon Oyer's latest book, *Signs of Hope: Thomas Merton's Letters on Peace, Race, and Ecology*, analyzes both sides of the conversations, offering a carefully constructed study of Merton's interaction with nearly a dozen correspondents on three specific themes: peace, race, and ecology.

Oyer has already made a significant contribution to Merton studies with his first book, *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest: Merton, Berrigan, Yoder, and Muste at the Gethsemani Abbey Peacemakers Retreat*. Oyer's research allowed him to reconstruct the conference from its original idea to its actual completion. What set the work apart, though, was his ability to offer a finely crafted narrative that drew you into the event, and his care to draw forward the conversations and approaches that emerged and place them in conversation with the issues of faith, protest, and resistance today. His second book evidences the same characteristics.

The Merton archives hold some twelve thousand letters, most of them written in the last decade of his life. Letters, in a time without email and social media, provided opportunities for friendships and connections outside the monastery. Merton saw this as an extension of his monastic vocation, yet at the same time, commitment to letter writing was, like all of his literary interests, "both a lifeline and a bane" (p.1) as it encroached on his commitment to solitude and prayer.

Oyer's Introduction zeroes in on the concrete and personal focus of Merton's letters. Unlike Merton's wide ranging journal entries, his letters addressed particular persons. They had to "express thoughts intelligible to and capable of reception by another, written with greater care and emotional restraint than journal entries" (p. 2) They also expressed his compassion, frustrations, and shortcomings. Oyer helps us see beyond the Merton hagiography to engage with Merton the man.

Oyer notes that "Merton approached letter writing differently, depending on his objective," (p. 203). Sometimes Merton was seeking to connect with his correspondent in a deep and meaningful

way; other times, it is apparent that exploring a shared interest in ideas was at the forefront. Oyer carefully organizes his material to reflect this.

Part I studies Merton's exchange of letters with four individuals in the developing Catholic peace movement. Each chapter focuses on Merton's friendship with one particular individual over an extended time. Part II is centered on his relationships with four African Americans struggling with racism. Again, each chapter is devoted to a single friendship over a multi-year period. Part III, on modern cultural dynamics and ecology, focuses more on Merton's late influences, and ideas being discussed with new acquaintances, than on the depth of the relationships.

It may seem a daunting task to plunge into these letters, tracing the development of Merton's friendships with so many individuals, but Oyer handles it deftly. Choosing to deal with one friendship at a time allows him to capture for us the contours of the relationship as it develops and trace significant themes that emerge as the letters are exchanged. He weaves a compelling narrative while opening a window into the issues and conflicts of the nineteen sixties, all the while challenging us to see them in relation to the social conflicts and issues we face today.

Merton seemed able to adjust his voice to the circumstances of those to whom he writes, and it is particularly apparent in situations where there is conflict or disagreement. Christian personalism, Oyer argues, grounds his approach to letter writing.

The framework of personalist philosophy is not often discussed in relation to Merton, but Oyer makes a point of tracing the influences of Etienne Gilson, Jacques Maritain, Dan Walsh, and Emmanuel Mounier in the development of Merton's Christian personalist approach, as well as identifying the theological and spiritual influences of St. Bernard, Eastern Orthodoxy, and his monastic formation. He teases out its understated presence in Merton's writing on the true and false self, and his reflections on mass society and illusion. In developing an appreciation of persons as opposed to individuals, of solidarity and communion of persons as opposed to collective thinking and mass movements, Merton understands, "The transformation of society begins with the person. It begins with the maturing and opening out of personal freedom in relation to other freedoms – in relation to the rest of society" (p. 10).

For each chapter, Oyer provides a brief biography of the person to whom Merton is writing, including the circumstances and concerns that prompted their contact, prior to focusing on their correspondence. As he walks us through the conversations, Oyer draws on additional sources, continuing to enrich the context while probing the issues being explored and the relationship that is developing. Most chapters end with an example of Merton's correspondence – most previously available in abridged versions or previously unpublished – to illustrate Oyer's central theme.

It is not possible in a short review to do justice to the many themes and relationships Oyer probes, but we can get a sense of the depth and value of his investigations by looking closely at two chapters.

Part I, Chapter 3 is devoted to Merton and peace advocate, Jim Forest. Their correspondence began in the Summer of 1961 and ran until September of 1968, only a few months before Merton's death.

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Forest, Oyer opines, found in Merton “a spiritual mentor who offered grounding to balance reactive urgency with a long view,” while Merton found in Forest young man of courage and compassion, who was actively involved in the development of a nonviolent resistance movement to the Viet Nam war (p. 66). The two formed a deep bond.

The relationship was based on more than a commitment to peacemaking, and went beyond Merton mentoring Forest. Merton felt comfortable enough with Forest to share with him the depth of his frustration after he was forbidden by his Order from publishing essays on war and peace, and spoke openly of his struggles with his vow of obedience (p. 71) When Merton heard the news of Catholic Worker Roger Laporte’s self immolation in protest of the Viet Nam war, his knee jerk reaction was to write to Forest and sever his sponsorship of the Catholic Peace Fellowship. Oyer walks the reader through the extant first and second drafts of the letter, demonstrating the shifts in Merton’s emotional response and his thinking over the course of the day. His letter to Forest was harsh rather than questioning. Forest patiently addressed his concerns and persuaded him to remain as a sponsor (pp. 78,79). When Forest’s marriage failed and Dorothy Day wished him to resign from the Catholic Peace Fellowship, Merton gave support to Forest and tried to mediate with Day.

Drawing on the letters, and supplementing from Merton’s journals, Forest’s essays, and letters from James Douglass and Dorothy Day, Oyer is able to convey the complexity of their friendship. What surfaces from his analysis are questions of the place of individual conscience in responding to social crises and movements. Forest’s drive to develop a framework for Catholic conscientious objection to the war and draft, and his deep sense of a need for a Catholic peace movement, challenged Merton’s discomfort with mass movements, refining his thinking. Ultimately, “Merton did not oppose efforts to reach and influence others on a mass scale, and he felt prophetic and provocative acts had their place. But he refused to let those measures affect the centrality of human personhood and individual conscience. He emphasized movement building through dialogue and education of ‘ordinary decent people’ to disrupt their dependence on myths perpetuated by a cultural mass mind” (p. 86) Oyer questions whether Merton would hold the same opinion now, “...as the juggernaut of an increasingly destructive and schizophrenic ‘mass mind’ propels us closer...” to large scale destruction, whether a “countervailing ‘mass mind’ to push against it may be warranted” (. 86).

It is apparent from this chapter – and more so when read alongside the other three - that the Catholic peace movement did not have an integrated vision, nor a well-thought-out strategy. Day, Berrigan, Douglass, Merton, and Forest were not in full agreement on pacifism, or even on the exact meaning and shape nonviolent resistance should take. What is instructive though, is that Merton and Forest (and the others) provide a model for how to stay in relationship despite disagreement; they continue dialogue towards understanding, and provide mutual support and care.

Oyer ends the chapter with a letter that “illuminates how Merton felt movements and conscience intersect” (p. 87).

Oyer looks at the correspondence of Merton and Robert Lawrence Williams, a young, black, classical singer, in Part II, chapter 7. Unlike Part I, where the correspondents were all known to each other, Merton never met Williams. This created challenges, in addition to the challenge of the racial divide and of Williams’ desire for Merton to take part in a collaborative musical project.

Oyer rightly suggests, “Any collaboration requires connection, communication, and shared objectives, and these in turn depend on a capacity for vulnerability and trust” (p. 154).

Williams was simultaneously attempting to develop an international singing career alongside creating foundations to assist black African students and foster understanding between young black and white Americans. After reading “Letter to a White Liberal,” he wrote to Merton with the idea of creating a concert in honor of the late President J.F. Kennedy, asking Merton to write a series of eight poems that could be set to music. His initial approach to Merton was in March 1964. His intentions were for a November 1964 concert. Merton accepted.

Oyer, after reflecting on William’s self-description in his letters and researching the modest information available on his musical career, offers, Williams’ “pursuits sometimes seem naïve and unrealistic, bordering on grandiose, but they drew on strong faith commitments and social ideals” (p. 157). I would agree. The faith and ideals aspect are certainly attested to in his letters. But the idea of producing a concert of professional quality in a mere seven months when you have neither lyrics nor composer, musicians nor venue, sponsors nor publicity in place, is beyond naïve. (My conclusion is based on forty years of following my brother’s career producing opera on two continents.) It was a project doomed to failure.

Indeed, the project did not turn out the way Williams envisioned. His dream of having Aaron Copeland create music for Merton’s lyrics did not materialize, and it was not until August of 1968 that the songs were performed. Along the way, there were failed attempts to find an alternate composer, an aborted attempt at a recording of the songs, legal wranglings over the ownership of the lyrics, and a musical setting that lay outside Williams’ tenor range. The situation was complicated by Williams’ absences to perform in Ireland, and poor communications on the development of the project between Merton, Williams, and the composer.

Oyer sees in Williams’ surviving twenty-seven letters to Merton a window into black Catholic experience: “Even as he entrusted outcomes to God, he engaged a church administered by flawed human beings living in a flawed white supremacist culture” (p. 166). Williams lamented the Catholic church’s lack of support for blacks, particularly in the matter of civil rights: “Feeling that we should wait on God is all well and good, but God’s time is now,” he writes (p. 167).

Williams, on the basis of Merton’s writings on racism, had significant trust in him, but, “his letters revealed the fragility of that trust, the readiness to believe it had been misplaced. This surfaced quickly when the concert project went awry, and Williams learned the composer, Alexander Peloquin, was arranging for a white singer to premiere the songs. He wrote to Merton, “When has the white man ever really been concerned about his black so-called brother... With Mr. Peloquin’s help you’ve merely added your voice to the voices of our enemies...” (p. 169). He suggested he might leave the Catholic church.

Merton’s responses to Williams varied as the circumstances changed. At times tangible (e.g. legal), at times encouraging (e.g., during delays), and often empathetic (e.g., affirming Williams struggles as an African American). They were, at times, less than perfect; indeed, stumbling. At one point Merton suggested his personal and monastic experience was parallel to being black. Oyer is rightly critical here, suggesting Merton “too readily equates experience across racial lines... (his

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experience) remains distantly removed from the intrinsic barriers that accompany birth into an existential status of racial marginalization” (p. 177).

Oyer captures vividly both the tensions and the care in their relationship. He concludes, “...the interactions of Thomas Merton and Robert Williams still offer a model worth emulating, despite – or perhaps even because of – their vulnerabilities. They model the willingness to risk and remain in sometimes strained relationships to sustain, however imperfectly, the hope of social transformation (p. 179).

*Signs of Hope* picks up where *The Spiritual Roots of Protest* left off. Each chapter honors the complexity of the times and Merton’s relationships. Oyer offers us a deeper glimpse of a side of Merton that merits closer attention. *Signs of Hope* lends itself to careful study, and the structure Oyer uses facilitates this. It can be taken whole, yet since each chapter is largely self contained, it lends itself to both thematic assessment and individual case study. It is an invitation to go deeper.

Oyer holds out no solutions to the questions that beset us, but rather offers significant questions for us to ponder. And as we ponder, Merton’s commitment to dialogue, privileging human relationship over ideology, becomes a more deeply viable and compelling model.

***The Merton Annual, volume 35. ed., Deborah Pope Kehoe and David Golemboski Louisville, KY; Fons Vitae, 2022, paper, 288 pp., ISBN 978-1941610-930***

The Merton Annual often includes previously unpublished writing by Merton. Past issues, along with essay and review contributions by Merton scholars, have included transcriptions of a lecture to Merton’s novices at the Abbey of Gethsemani, a short essay, or a prayer. Volume 35 is a departure, offering, instead, the publication of letters from peace activist, Jim Forest, to Merton. Their correspondence took place over seven years, from 1961 to 1968. There are over fifty pieces of correspondence from Forest, the sheer volume making it necessary to publish the letters in stages. Volume 35 contains correspondence from 1961-1965. Volume 36, to be published in the Spring of this year, will contain the correspondence from 1966 to 1968.

Much of Merton’s correspondence to Forest has already been published in *The Hidden Ground of Love* (Merton, 1985). An edited version of one of them, often referred to as the “Letter to a Young Activist,” has circulated on the internet for many years. Forest, in 2014, published both the letter he sent and Merton’s complete response on his website (Forest, 2014).

The Forest letters are carefully edited and introduced by Patrick O’Connell. O’Connell is the editor of *The Merton Seasonal*, a regular contributor to *The Merton Annual*, and has edited several volumes of Merton’s lecture notes and essays.

Unlike the collection of letters from Merton to Forest in *The Hidden Ground of Love*, which contain only the body of the text, O’Connell has elected to provide the opening greeting and closing of each letter. When initially addressing Merton about a poem he submitted to *The Catholic Worker*, Forest begins, “Dear Fr. Merton...” and concludes, “In Christ, James Forest.” (pp. 18,19) The next letter starts and ends in identical fashion. After visiting with Merton for a week at the Abbey in February 1962, Forest’s next letter, May 15, 1962, and all subsequent letters, begin,

“Dear Tom,” (p. 19) and end variously with “Best,” (p. 29) “Much love in Christ,” (p. 38) “Much love to you” (p. 47). O’Connell thus allows us to see how quickly and deeply the friendship between Forest and Merton developed.

Forest’s letters were initially short, but over time grew longer. He discussed with Merton the development of the Catholic peace movement, the phenomena of worker priests; he shared articles and news about the war and the draft. He noted the upcoming birth of his first child and congratulated Merton on receiving permission to live as a hermit. When Merton wrote to withdraw his sponsorship of the Catholic Peace Fellowship, Forest wrote back, challenging his withdrawal and was successful in getting him to relent.

We are able for the first time, using *The Hidden Ground of Love*, to place Forest’s correspondence alongside Merton’s. We get a clear picture of the depth of care and respect that developed in their friendship, and begin to understand that Forest was as much an influence on Merton as Merton was on Forest.

Forest’s letters have been housed in the Merton archives at Bellarmine University. They have been made available to scholars previously, and their publication now makes them available to general readers. It will allow for a deeper appreciation of the importance of this friendship in Merton’s life, the development of the Catholic peace movement, and Forest’s own growth as a peace advocate through the nineteen-sixties.

Volume 35 also includes an interview with Brendan Collins (Odirisio, 2022). Collins was known as Fr. Bernard during his years in the Trappist and Benedictine orders, and was the editor of the journal, *Monastic Studies*, from 1962 to 1967. Merton was a regular contributor to the journal. Collins began corresponding with Merton in August of 1962, first to thank him for the influence of his writing on the decision he made to become a monk, and later asking for contributions and editorial assistance for the publication of *Monastic Studies*. There are around ninety pages of correspondence from Merton to Collins. Collins is interviewed by David M. Odirisio, who previously edited *Merton and Hinduism: The Yoga of the Heart* (Merton, 2022).

The interview is wide ranging, covering the origins of *Monastic Studies*, Merton’s support and involvement with the journal, and Collins’ personal search for a vibrant and mature monastic community.

Collins referred to Merton as “the most enthusiastic and the most reliable contributor” to the journal (p. 99). A trusting friendship emerged from their correspondence, allowing Collins and Merton to write more frankly about the challenges they faced in their monastic vocations, the political problems that beset their monastic communities, and to offer one another sympathy and encouragement. Merton made a gift to Collins of several calligraphies he had crafted, and even provided instructions on how best to mount and frame them. Merton shared with Collins that he received permission to move permanently to the hermitage to have “the solitude he craved.” Collins was perceptive enough to refer to it as “a modified solitude,” noting “friendship and conversation never stopped being an important part of his life” (p. 111).



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Odirisio's thoughtful questions and Collins' responses provide the reader with a sense of the energy in the nineteen-sixties around monastic renewal after Vatican II, and Merton's personal commitment to exploring the possibilities for a renewed monasticism. The interview also underscores Merton's ability through letter writing to reach out to others, and to transform an interaction that might seem mundane and transactional into an enduring friendship.

While there is much in Volume 35 that contributes to Merton scholarship in general, the focus on the exchange of correspondence, with the Forest letters and the Collins interview, bring us a little closer to Merton the human being.

***Thomas Merton in California: The Redwoods Conferences and Letters*, ed., David M. Odirisio. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2024, paper, 444 pp., ISBN 9798400800313.**

Thomas Merton travelled extensively the last year of his life. He twice stayed at Our Lady of the Redwoods Abbey in California, where he gave conferences to the sisters. The first set of conferences were given in May 1968, and were limited to the sisters and their chaplain. The second set, given in October 1968, included participants from other monasteries.

Most of the conferences were recorded, in whole or in part. Several of the participants took extensive notes. The recordings languished in the Abbey archives for decades, and although attempts were made to organize their transcription and publication, the work, for various reasons, never made it to publication. Until now. A friend of the monastery arranged to have the tapes digitized and transferred to CD. David Odirisio agreed to take on the project of transcribing and editing the conferences for publication.

Odirisio has elected to give us more than the conferences. He has included the letters exchanged between Merton and Sr. Myriam Dardenne, and "Four Days with Merton," a reflection by Gracie M. Jones, a visitor to the monastery, that originally appeared in *The Monitor*, a San Raphael California newspaper, in 1969.

The letters and the newspaper article are significant. They, like the letters discussed in *Signs of Hope* and the ones written by Forest in *The Merton Annual*, volume 35, allow us deeper insight into Thomas Merton as a human being, opening a window into his capacity for friendship, empathy, and dialogue.

Merton first met Sr. Myriam when she and a group of nuns stopped at the Abbey of Gethsemane in October 1962, while travelling to California to establish a new Cistercian monastery. Merton was impressed with the nuns and the projects Sr. Myriam envisioned. In his letter of December 12, 1962, he raises the possibility of having them make liturgical vestments for Gethsemane. He notes he wrote to Graham Carey, the editor of the publication *Good Work*, who he thought might have an interest in what they were doing. In typical Merton fashion, he also talks about the snow and cold weather, relating it to themes in the liturgy. There is a sense of respect in his writing, but also formality. He addresses her as "My Dear Mother Myriam," and closes, "Most cordially and fraternally in Christ, Fr. M. Louis" (pp. 383,384). He writes again in January 1963, repeating his interest in vestments, and the formality continues, this time opening with "My Reverend Mother," and closing "I remain united to you in the Holy Spirit, Fr. M. Louis" (pp. 385,386).

In March 1965, Merton responds to an invitation to come to California. He is willing to express some concerns over his travel restrictions and his ongoing tension with his abbot and the Cistercian hierarchy. This time he requests her prayers. The sense of formality in his openings and closings continue. The travel restrictions lifted under a new abbot, and from the Spring of 1968 onwards, they begin to plan out the logistics of Merton's visit to California. He is clear that he is looking for solitude, and she responds by rhapsodizing that "the contrast between the Pacific ocean and the rough Northern California vegetation is breath-taking. And most often the solitude is complete" (p. 389). She continues to address him as Fr. Louis, but in April 1968 he signs off as "Thomas Merton" (p. 392).

During his time in California – and he is there only for a week – there is a definite shift in the relationship. He writes afterwards to the Sisters as a group, speaking briefly of the isolation of the New Mexico landscape, then adding that he has happy memories of staying with them, "...it is the best place of all, and I can find nowhere to compare with the solitude on the Pacific shore." He offers, "May God bless you and increase your love, and bring you always closer to Him," signing off, "In His Spirit, Tom." From this point on, as they plan a second visit, it is "Dear Myriam" and "Dear Tom," with letters closing, "Best wishes...Best - love to all of you, in the Lord..." and they are now merely "Myriam" and "Tom."

The letters from the Redwoods Monastery let us see Merton developing a relationship with a group of nuns, first as a resource and educator, and eventually as a friend. Gracie M. Jones' reflection allows us to see Merton's openness to friendship and the depth of his engagement with her, an African American lay woman. Jones' writing, even though it occurred a couple months following her meeting Merton, has a sense of immediacy about it, and, when combined with the letters Merton wrote to her in the months that followed, provides a glimpse of the energy and affection that developed over the period of their very brief time together.

Jones' initial encounter with Merton at the Redwoods was not the stuff of which friendship was made. As she was getting into her car to rush to Vespers, Merton came out of his room and asked if she had a nice drive up to the monastery. She "mumbled something and drove off," without even offering him a ride (p. 428). She was embarrassed after their official introduction, but the next morning when he saw her on the trail to the chapel he called out "Hurry Gracie, or we will be late," and they ran together to Lauds (p. 428) At Mass, when offering her the cup, Merton called her by name: "Gracie, the blood of Christ" (p. 429). Afterwards, he took her hiking on the monastery grounds, and they spoke of the struggle for civil rights, Martin Luther King's death and more. The following day they went to the beach, enjoying conversation and allowing each other time for reading and solitude. She writes that with Merton she felt "immediately at ease. You felt loved. You knew you would be remembered in his prayers, you knew he would be thoughtful of little things...His openness and sensitivity to the needs of the poor and those suffering from injustice were overwhelming" (pp. 428, 430).

The final day of her retreat, she felt they "really opened up to one another." She discussed her feelings about being the only black family in a "lily-white community," and felt it was "a time of seeing Christ present in each other" (p. 431). It was Mother's Day, and Merton presented her with a flower before she departed. Afterwards, while travelling and back in Kentucky, he sent letters, copies of his informal magazine, *Monk's Pond*, articles he had written, and noted that on her

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wedding anniversary he offered Mass for her and her husband. At the close of her reflection, she tells her readers that while some of them might have know Merton through his writing, her aim was to help them get to know him as a Christian man. Significantly, she concludes by quoting from Merton's *Life and Holiness*, on the connection between justice and charity and the need for Christians to be concerned with humanity's "greatest need, the need for love" (p. 432).

Merton's journals speak often of his need for solitude, his desire to be a hermit or to relocate to a more remote place. It was something he struggled with his entire monastic life. At the same time, we read often in his journals of his hosting visitors and guests, organizing retreats for nuns and peacemakers, and the affection he had for the novice monks he was responsible for forming in the Trappist tradition. The Redwood letters and Jones' reflection provide us with a glimpse into the depth of Merton's longing for connection, the depth of his care, and his ability to be attentive and engage with those he met.

Odirisio's introductory essay provides more than the historical background to the conferences Merton gave at the Our Lady of the Redwoods Monastery. He understands the importance of landscape and place in Merton's life, and in the monk's spiritual longings and development, and draws that to the forefront of his reflections. He speaks of the significance of the California coastline in Merton's "eremitical wanderings" and how it "became the imaginal locus of his increasing search for solitude...Merton would poetically infuse these remote wilderness spaces with a contemplative *eros* that revealed his heart's desire to return and even relocate to these windswept shores and bluffs..." (p. 2).

He draws on Merton's journal entries from his time there, as well as his reflections after returning to Kentucky. Merton's language is pared down, direct, almost like a painter's brushstrokes, as he conveys the impact of what he saw and heard and felt. Odirisio grasps how the landscape and the experiences with the Redwoods community intertwined for Merton, giving his sojourn there an almost mystical dimension. He enhances his point by including several black and white photographs Merton took of the coast (pp. 26,27,258,259,381,382). He quotes from an entry in Merton's journal as he reviewed his photographs: "The Agfa film brought out the great *Yang-yin* sea rock mist, diffused light and half-hidden mountain – an interior landscape, yet there. In other words, what is written within me is there, 'Thou art that'" (p. 7).

The Thomas Merton we meet in the conferences at the Redwoods is down to earth and fully engaged with his listeners. It is entirely apparent that he is deeply committed to his Christian monastic vocation, and willing to explore with his listeners ways to experiment with actual monastic renewal in life and prayer. This was more than speculative. Comments from his listeners and from Merton himself make it clear that some of the experimentation was taking place right then and there.

Merton's exploration of Eastern religious traditions is also portrayed here as part of his personal quest to deepen his experience of God and Christ. Merton makes this particularly apparent in his discussion on dissolution and reconstitution in Sufism, commenting, "What this is, in Christian terms, is dying and rising with Christ...We tend to rattle off terms like that...The value of going into something like this, is that it gives us a slant on that Christian truth, which people don't

ordinarily go into...something like this gives us deep insight into what this could possibly mean...” (p. 245).

When he turns his attention to the actual conferences that took place in May and October, Odirisio’s editorial craftsmanship makes the material come alive. The conferences could have been edited to give us Merton’s thoughts on religious consciousness, feminine mystique, the value of exploration and dialogue with Hinduism, Sufism, and Buddhism. He could have stuck to the core of what Merton was trying to convey on the possibilities of monastic renewal and the life of prayer. Instead, he elected to give us everything!

He points out that the first conference was not recorded, and allows the reader to know if the tape recorder was accidentally turned off, or turned on late, during the other conferences. (e.g., p. 82, footnote 6). He captures every time there is laughter, and every question that came from the audience, more often than not even giving the name of the questioner. There are moments when something said created so much chatter that it was not possible to tease a line of conversation out of the recording, and that, too, is conveyed to the reader (p. 98, footnote 9). He leaves in questions of whether the group should break for lunch or Mass, and comments on the use of guitar and dance in experimental liturgies (p. 223). Merton jokes at one point, “Let’s have some beer together after supper. That would be very nice. That will stimulate [laughter]. We’ll probably be inspired. We’ll probably have some beer, and then I’ll leave, and you can have chant practice...” (p. 98).

This might sound chaotic. It is not. Odirisio, in taking this approach, has captured for the reader the sense of joy and spontaneity that marked these gatherings. It is masterfully done. Again and again it made me feel like I was there, in the room, a participant in the friendship and excitement that were bubbling up through each session. To read these conferences is to be left with the unmistakable sense of the participants’ desire and excitement for authentic monastic renewal and their deep commitment to the life of prayer.

Another significant editorial decision is the inclusion of footnotes and an index. This was not done in the publications of Merton’s conferences at Gethsemani with a group of Sisters in December 1967 and May 1968 (Merton, 1997), nor with the conferences published in Thomas Merton in Alaska (Merton, 1989). Odirisio, in his footnotes, has helpfully drawn out the threads of Merton’s thought from his journal and essays, gives the reader background on authors Merton references in his talks, and identifies the author and publication information of books that informed Merton’s preparatory notes. For the sake of readers not familiar with the territory, he offers useful information on comments that might seem obscure, such as pre-Benedictine Egyptian monasticism (p. 264, footnote 4).

The content and framework of the conferences allow insight into Merton’s approach as an educator and his engagement with his audience. His references and citations indicate how widely he read, yet he humbly admits when he does not have an answer to a question. He allows the questions and interests of his hearers to take precedence and will put down his notes and allow them to shift the direction of the proceedings. He acknowledges the value of their insights and experience. He jokes and frequently uses humor to keep the sessions feeling informal and to keep his hearers involved. There are points where he attempts to get the group to break for a meal, but they can’t stop coming up with questions and insights. He relents and runs with it. Together they come up with ideas and

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generate additional questions to pursue. The sessions become a model of communal learning, grounded in prayers.

One is left with the sense that for Merton, the days in California allowed for a merging of education and friendship, grounded and enhanced by contemplative prayer and the richness of the landscape. David Odirisio's thoughtful and creative editorial decisions allow the reader to imaginatively see Merton living out his Christian monastic vocation in real time, while simultaneously offering us the tools we need to trace the origins of Merton's mature and compelling vision. It is an indispensable aid to anyone with an interest in Merton. In addition, it is a significant contribution to our understanding of the rich thought and enthusiasm that fed the movement for monastic renewal in the late nineteen sixties.

**Concluding Thoughts**

Oyer, O'Connell, and Odirisio, by bringing us Merton's letters and conferences, assist us to fill in the portrait of Merton as both monk and friend. The portrait allows for a better understanding of Merton the human being, as well as providing resources for the possibility of developing what we might refer to as Merton's spirituality of friendship. They assist us towards a richer understanding of Merton as an educator and Merton as a model for the sort of dialogue with others that seems so easily to escape us in a world where discussions are marked by polarization, sound bytes, and the inability to find common ground.

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