

Merton's talks to the novices (which many of us listened to with such enjoyment on Credence Cassettes) which she describes as informal, rambling, even disorganized, but still of sharp insight. He tells us what we need to know and to hear, time and again, with refreshing clarity: 'One of the things I don't like to talk about is prayer. It is not good to make a great issue out of prayer . . . as soon as you make an issue out of it, it tends to get confused and distorted. Prayer is life. It is our life and comes from the ground of our life.' He is totally down to earth. Addressing the novices about to make their vows on Ascension Day, he said: 'You don't have to rise. You don't have to go anywhere.' This is the constant theme: 'You have to start where you are and stay with it'. He looks at the extremes of impractical idealism and passive realism and shows that Christian reality lies in recognizing that, 'There's a seed that God has planted in all of us, and we have to let it grow in his own way and our role is to provide the love and the assent and submission so that there is the possibility of growth'.

Since Mary Luke Tobin lived so much longer than Merton – and one of the delights is to watch, through the splendid range of photographs that illustrate this book, the change from sister in the full habit to the free and vigorous woman with the energetic body language and the lively eyes – she can tell us about

Merton's final day, at Bangkok in 1968. Many felt disappointed that he had said nothing about converting people to Christianity. Before he walked back to his room, he said quite simply, 'Well, I don't think that is what we are asked to do today. Today I think it's so much more important to so let God live in us that others may feel God and come to believe in God because they feel how God lives in us'. Those were his last words, a beautiful last message as Mary Luke Tobin says in the concluding words of this gentle and inspiring book.

**Esther de Waal** writes and talks in the area of Christian spirituality, with a great interest in monasticism, particularly Benedictine and Cistercian. Her book on Thomas Merton has recently been re-issued by the Canterbury Press under the title *A Retreat with Thomas Merton*.

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### Thomas Merton – Contemplation and Political Action

Mario I. Aguilar  
SPCK  
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Paperback, 150 pages  
£14.99

Any book about Thomas Merton with the words *contemplation* and *action* in its title immediately draws comparison with Merton's own *Contemplation in a World of Action*, a collection of 22 essays

published posthumously in 1971. If Merton's wide-ranging book is about how people can come to experience the reality of God, and from this move out to share this in meaningful action in the world, Aguilar's book shows how these ideas were lived out in Merton's own life.

The brief introduction starts with a short biography of Merton (which curiously peters out around 1955) and then an introduction to the main themes of the book. There then follow six chapters, each picking up a particular strand of Merton's life and work. The first focuses on Merton as a contemplative teacher, and how he influenced those monks under his charge as first master of scholastics and then as novice master. Next comes a chapter on Merton as a contemplative writer and his correspondence with religious figures, poets and activists, and through this how in the 1960s his growing awareness of contemporary politics became part of his personal life. The third chapter explores Merton's involvement with the civil rights movement, nuclear weapons and the Vietnam war. The fourth chapter focuses on Merton the hermit, and is largely based on Merton's *Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude*, written in 1960. One wonders how much this reflects Merton's final views on solitude – certainly the working out of his vocation of hermit and his search

for a deeper solitude can seem paradoxical with his endless visitors and trips away from the hermitage. The fifth chapter explores Merton's involvement with Latin America, particularly through his relationship with Ernesto Cardenal who was a novice under Merton for two years. The author, who was born and brought up in Chile, gives an excellent account of Cardenal's monastic experiments and service to the Nicaraguan revolution. Frustratingly many of the texts and sources cited in the footnotes are in Spanish, making exploration of this intriguing area difficult for the average reader. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the influence Latin American anti-poetry had on Merton, in particular the work of Nicanor Parra. The sixth chapter focuses on Merton's final trip to Asia and his three meetings with the Dalai Lama. As Aguilar sums up, 'There in the hills of the Himalayas two men – dedicated to contemplation, daily and intense, and dedicated to challenging injustice and war among human beings as a kind of spiritual politics – met.'

A concluding chapter focuses on Merton's lessons for today; but in a sense they have already been expounded in the previous six chapters by showing that the ultimate human activity, the search for God, leads to seeking God beyond one's own monastery wall – and that that search can lead one

along many and various paths.

All sources cited are clearly listed in the back, enabling one to pursue points of interest. Many books are so listed, but it would have helped the reader if there had been a succinct bibliography for those wishing to explore particular themes further. The author is professor of Religion and Politics at St Andrews University, and at times the tone of his writing is that of a text aimed at undergraduates – indeed in the introduction he refers to the chapters as ‘units’. But the author clearly knows his Merton, and by showing us so many facets of his life, helps us guard against pigeon-holing this remarkable man. For me, this book with its wealth of ideas and insights has been an inspiration, sending me off on a renewed exploration of Merton’s life and writings, and their meaning for those on the spiritual path today.

**Stephen Dunhill** is a retired teacher living in Northumbria and is treasurer and membership secretary of the Thomas Merton Society.

*Have you used the discussion course, Bridges to Contemplative Living by Montaldo and Toth? Would you be interested in reviewing it for the Journal? We can send copies to you if you would like to try it. Please email or write to the editors.*

**Gethsemani Homilies,  
revised and enlarged edition**

Matthew Kelty, OCSO  
Edited, with an introduction,  
by William O. Paulsell  
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With the death of Matthew Kelty OCSO on 18 February, 2011 at the age of 95, this publication of a revised edition of a 2001 collection of homilies is timely. It comes with a new introduction and an additional piece about Thomas Merton. For countless guests and retreatants at the Abbey of Gethsemani, being present in the guest chapel after Compline and listening to Fr. Matthew was a memorable experience. That voice is now silent but the wisdom and humility, poetry and humour are powerfully present in this book. It is especially to be heard in the new introduction which takes the form of an interview with Fr. Matthew by the editor and his wife. For this introduction alone this is a book worth reading. Fr. Matthew speaks openly and honestly and with great humility about his life, his experience as a Divine Word missionary, becoming a Trappist and his novitiate under Thomas Merton. He also discusses what it was like being a member of an experimental monastery and of