

series of political manifestos or election cycles. Because their work will always be a process of becoming, activists like Jim Forest are primarily concerned with the revolution of personal consciousness.

## Notes

1. Patricia McNeal, *Harder than War: Catholic Peacemaking in Twentieth-Century America* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992), pp. 105-130.
2. Penelope Adams Moon, "'Peace on Earth: Peace in Vietnam": The Catholic Peace Fellowship and Antiwar Witness, 1964-1976', *Journal of Social History* 36, no. 4 (2003), pp. 1033-57.
3. Vanessa Cook, *Spiritual Socialists: Religion and the American Left* (Philadelphia PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), p. 101.
4. Thomas Merton, *Cold War Letters*, eds. Christine M. Bochen and William H. Shannon (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006).
5. Brian Wicker, 'Making Peace at Spode', *New Blackfriars* 62 (1981), pp. 311-20.
6. Thomas Merton, 'Christian Action in World Crisis', *Blackfriars* 43, no. 504 (June 1962), pp. 256-68.

**James G. R. Cronin** is an academic at University College Cork, Ireland. He is a regular contributor to the *Merton Journal* and is an international advisor on the board of the International Thomas Merton Society, Bellarmine, University, Louisville, Kentucky.

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## Shaped by the End You Live For: Thomas Merton's Monastic Spirituality

Bonnie B. Thurston

Foreword by Paul Quenon, OCSO

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Thomas Merton wrote that 'your life is shaped by the end you live for. You are made in the image of what you desire' (Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*; and cited in Thurston, p. 129). This powerful challenge, with its sacred and haunting overtones, is the key thread around which Bonnie Thurston weaves ideas in her most recent book about Merton. Throughout his life, she notes, Merton is concerned with questions of identity - monastic, personal, religious, social, etc. But he knows this quest to understand identity is forever tied to God's will; and the

discernment of God's will in our lives is bound up with the living of our earthly pilgrimage, namely the end for which we live. In making this journey, we discover that the things we desire tell us something about who we really are. Merton's own journey and desire, as the book shows, were not always easy, and were far from being straightforward.

During my reading of this book, I was very conscious that questions of identity and desire have reverberated very powerfully in the last year. Against the backdrop of Covid-19, the daily plight of refugees, increased racial tension, and of rapid climate change, Thurston's take on Merton's questions have a sombre and tenacious immediacy: 'What am I living for?'; 'what gives my life meaning?'; 'what do I seek?'. These questions, drawn from Merton's life and work, structure the book's ten chapters in what becomes a meditative exploration of prayer, spirituality and contemplation. The questions, posed as they are by Merton from the vantage point of the monastery, are ones which invite us nonetheless to think about the kind of world we want right now.

They are questions which also invite us to consider the sorts of relations we seek to build, both with each other and with creation. For Merton, solitude and prayer should lead us away from worship of the 'false self' (whether that be individual or collective selves) into spaces where we are open to the future and to the 'true self'. Thurston suggests we need to be ready to leave behind 'moldy [sic], old, emotional stuff' in order to 'hear the voice of God within, know the True Self, and by means of it benevolently engage the world' (p. 49).

This stress on engagement with the world is important. Thurston notes early in the book how Merton's desire is not one which seeks to escape or evade the world (a *fuga mundi*) so much as it is one which hopes to learn how better to love 'the other' in relationally expansive ways. Indebted always to Merton, both to his more systematic work as well as to his journals and letters, Thurston encourages us to learn from Merton's own 'presuppositions' and desires (Chapter 3) in his search for God as a monk. Her injunction at the outset is that we not forget Merton's identity as monk, his 'one center' (p. 48). To her credit, she captures the poetry of monastic life as much as the prose. The 'holier-than-thou' monk of the 1940s, for instance, is not the one who, in Louisville in 1958, or in Alaska in 1968, imagines himself a different monk, with different insights and with a more universal vision. Chapters trace how Merton changes, seeking afresh the true self (pp. 35-49), and learning that a monk's life is no more or less sacred than any other.

The book invites us, as mentioned, to consider another claim. From

the outset, Thurston suggests that in order to understand the (dis)continuities and contours of Merton's desire for God, we must remind ourselves that he is first and foremost a monk. Her claim isn't new or original - Thurston readily acknowledges this. But perhaps there are two dimensions that are of some import. One dimension is obvious. In these recent times, not least in moments of major world conflict and increasing global dissensus, it's timely and vital that we remind each other of the fruits of prayer, solitude and the disciplines of monastic spirituality. These disciplines, as Thurston shows, don't require a geographical leap into a monastery or a *fuga mundi*. Rather, they invite us into a new way of thinking about each other and our common home. When activists and campaigners across the globe pose the question 'what are we living for?', then any 'monastic' response will seek to reflect on the fruits of prayer, silence and solitude and on the prophetic identity of the monk. With Karl Barth - and surely for Merton, a great reader of Barth - 'to clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world.' (Barth).

However, there is a more subtle dimension concerning the perception of identity *per se*. If Merton's monastic identity is 'shaped by the end you live for', then a challenge we all face concerns the wider world in which human identity is shaped. Merton's prescient voice of the 1960s reverberates in our time. Climate change and systemic racism, to take only two instances, bring into sharp focus the need for action born of solitude and contemplation. The unrest and dissensus surrounding these major concerns, however, have served to show just how far the poor are not able to shape their own desired end. Events in Louisville in 2020 make Merton's prophetic voice all the more vital. The activism that swept America and Europe during the 1960s shaped Merton's response to prayer and contemplation. Today's activism is not the same, but it exposes just how many people are neither liberated nor free; shaped by the end, certainly, but not one of their own choosing or desire. 'Monastic spirituality and Christian spirituality at its core are about liberation, the freedom both to open up to what is as yet unknown ... and to assist others to become more free' (p. 152). Today's challenges surely invite us to reflect with urgency on Bonnie Thurston's words in our common search for God and the other's freedom.

**Anthony Purvis** lives at Turvey Monastery, a Benedictine house of the Congregation of Monte Oliveto (OSB) in North Bedfordshire.