

Albert Haase, OFM. Swimming in the Sun: Discovering the Lord's Prayer with Francis of Assisi and Thomas Merton. (St. Anthony Messenger Press. Cincinnati, Ohio. 1993). pp.216, paper, \$9.95. ISBN 0-86716-193-0. (Distributed in the UK by Redemptorist Publications. £7.95)

In his first book the Franciscan Albert Haase has turned to two great spiritual masters who are obviously very close to his heart - the founder of the Franciscan Order, St. Francis of Assisi, and the Cistercian monk and author Thomas Merton. The title of this book comes from a comment that Merton made in his book The Sign of Jonas where he said that "Saying the *Pater Noster* [the Our Father] is like swimming in the heart of the sun."

Haase has structured his book very simply upon each phrase of that prayer, and, as he says in his preface, he integrates three elements "not always integrated in contemporary approaches to spirituality: the importance of practical experience, psychology and the wisdom of the world's religions". (p1.) Alongside these elements Haase emphasises throughout the book five components of personal spirituality - our image of God, the importance of the present moment for encountering God, community, our commitment to what he describes as "God's dream of peace, love and justice" and, finally, the importance of asceticism. These five components are developed gradually throughout the course of the book so that by the conclusion Haase can suggest that "swimming in the heart of the sun" is in fact an apt image for those five components and that through the course of a person's life these components can transform every moment into an experience of "swimming in the heart of the sun."

Against the structure of the Our Father and these five components, along with the influence on the author of the lives and writings of St. Francis and Thomas Merton, this book is easily accessible and readable. Haase, before his current work in Taiwan, was very much in demand in the United States for preaching and giving retreats and his style of writing reflects his gifts in these fields. Swimming in the Sun is homiletic, but soundly based theologically and well versed in the life and work of both Francis and Merton, and yet it combines simply and effectively personal anecdotes that bring new life and meaning to each phrase of the Our Father that Haase is dealing with.

As far as Merton scholarship goes this is not a scholarly tome on Merton. But, having said that though, the sources that Haase quotes from cover a broad range of Merton's work and will stimulate even the most avid reader of Merton to return to the sources. I found this to be especially true for some of the recorded conferences of Merton's available from Credence Cassettes which the author makes good use of and thus provides some pointers and inroads into these cassettes which can otherwise be off putting because of the numbers available and their cost.

This book could be read as a retreat, dipped into briefly and fruitfully in the spare moments that can be so hard to find in a busy life or could even be used for *lectio divina*, providing much for the reader to ponder on. Haase concludes each chapter with some "Points for Reflection", and although these are aimed at the individual reader they could provide a small group with ample material to stimulate the personal sharing of its participants, their discussion and their prayer.

in the current explosion of books in the field of spirituality I found this book one of the most refreshing and stimulating that I have come across recently and would recommend it to anyone looking for a fresh and invigorating approach to prayer and to life.

Paul M Pearson

Meditations with Merton. Nicki Verploegen Vandergrift. Ligouri Publications \$4.95 (Available here through Redemptorist Publications, Alton, Hampshire)

Praying With Thomas Merton. Wayne Simsic. St.Mary's Press (Available at £6.50 through Columba Books, Dublin).

These books add to an increasing body of literature about Merton's life and spirituality, a body which strikes to the paradoxical heart of the man Thomas Merton. The paradox is that a life directed to solitude and rooted in silence should produce such a volume of words. Words which come not only from Merton himself but from his friends and others touched by his life and writings.

These two books share a common aim: to help the reader to taste something of Merton's spirituality, to pray with him. It is a very worthy aim since Merton seems to have a power to speak to contemporary Christians who are hungry for nourishment. Both books are written by retreat directors and are clearly grounded in a long period of personal reflection and experience of guiding others on their spiritual journeys.

However, the two writers approach the challenge very differently. Vandergrift takes short passages from Merton's writings (particular Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander and New Seeds of Contemplation) as her starting point. It becomes apparent why she chose these works as her main source. New Seeds in a fecund store of wisdom and reflection on the spiritual life whilst Conjectures represents arguably the thought of Merton at its ripest.