

## Thomas Merton: Essential Writings

Selected with an introduction by

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*Thomas Merton: Essential Writings* is the fourth collection of Merton's writing to appear. Readers of *The Merton Journal* are probably aware of the earlier collections. *A Thomas Merton Reader*, edited by Thomas McDonnell, was first published in 1962 with Merton's co-operation. A revised edition was published in 1974, and most recently this was republished in 1996 with a new introduction by M. Scott Peck. The *Reader* is a broad selection of Merton's writings providing the reader with a great range of Merton's work. More recently Lawrence Cunningham edited in 1992 a collection of Merton's writings entitled *Thomas Merton, Spiritual Master: The Essential Writings* containing some lengthy extracts from Merton's major autobiographical works and extracts from his major spiritual writings. Finally, William Shannon has brought together a collection of Merton's writings on issues related to war and peace in his 1995 volume *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*.

With these collections all still in print, along with a great deal of Merton's own writings, I was really asking myself as I began to read Christine Bochen's selection whether another such collection of Merton's work is really necessary? When I finished reading her collection I felt that I could answer my question with a resounding "yes".

In this volume Christine Bochen focuses on three areas of Merton's writing which she suggests are 'especially significant to Merton's spirituality' - contemplation, compassion and unity. In her introduction she justifies succinctly her choice of these three areas. It is a masterful introduction reflecting her knowledge of Merton over many years, a knowledge deepened by her editing of a volume of his letters and a volume of his journals.

The extracts from Merton's writings are very carefully selected, from well known pieces such as his account of his experience on the corner of Fourth and Walnut in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* and descriptions of contem-

plation from *New Seeds of Contemplation*, to some passages from less popular books such as *He is Risen* and *Thomas Merton in Alaska*; to some relatively obscure gems from Merton's correspondence. I was particularly pleased to see two little known articles that have not previously received much publicity - "A Life Free from Care" and "The Poorer Means: A Meditation on Ways to Unity."

'A Life Free from Care' is a transcription of a talk that Merton gave to the novices at Gethsemani as he was about to become a full time hermit in the monastery grounds. It was published in *Cistercian Studies* in 1970 and the recorded version was available through Credence Cassettes: 'Solitude: Breaking the Heart.' It is a wonderful piece bubbling over with Merton's enthusiasm for God, for life in general and for the hermit life he was about to embrace. 'The Poorer Means: A Meditation on Ways to Unity' is an article that was originally published as a pamphlet by the Holy Cross Convent at Hayward's Heath in 1965 and was subsequently included in *The Cord* in 1965 and *Sobornost* in 1966. In it Merton proposes the importance of silence, prayer, fasting and almsgiving to true ecumenism. Over thirty years on his thoughts here are as relevant as ever to ecumenism and to inter-faith dialogue.

Sadly there are very few quotes in this volume from Merton's poetry, just 'Song: If you seek...' and 'Chant to be Used in Processions Around a Site with Furnaces' both taken from his 1963 collection *Emblems of a Season of Fury*. It is interesting that Merton always included his poetry among lists of his more important works and yet 'essential' collections of his writings fail to sufficiently illustrate this aspect of his life and work.

Overall though this volume is a refreshing read for a keen reader of Merton but, more importantly, I think it will serve as an excellent introduction to Merton's life and writings for someone interested in reading Merton for the first time, or for someone returning to read Merton whose only contact with him had been his earlier writings.