

“This is not just a book *about* Thomas Merton. It is an invitation to *encounter* him and *delve deeply* into the monastic tradition that transformed his life, informed his spirituality, and opened him to the world. Whether they are meeting Merton for the first time or seeking to deepen their understanding of an already familiar friend, readers will enjoy Bonnie Thurston’s conversational style and benefit from her singular insights into Merton and his wisdom. This is a book to savor and ponder!”

—Christine M. Bochen
Professor Emerita of Religious Studies
Nazareth College, Rochester, New York
Co-author of *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*

“Thurston argues that to understand Thomas Merton one must understand him as a monk. This careful study argues that point with deep insight based on her four decades of reading and writing about the Merton corpus. This book, extremely readable and unfailingly intelligent, is highly recommended.”

—Lawrence S. Cunningham, The University
of Notre Dame

“One of Bonnie Thurston’s great gifts to us is her ability to write, when appropriate, about profound topics with a light touch—both accessible and illuminating. That gift is on full display in this wonderful distillation not only of Thomas Merton’s core spiritual teachings but of her many years of study, reflection, and prayer on these teachings. She shows clearly and persuasively how Merton’s monastic vocation and vision do not separate him from those outside the cloister, but are the ground for his compassionate, insightful identification with the hopes and needs of people in all walks of life, continuing to resonate and inspire in our day as it did in his.”

—Patrick O’Connell

Former president of the International Thomas
Merton Society and editor of *The Merton Seasonal*

Shaped by the End You Live For

*Thomas Merton's
Monastic Spirituality*

Bonnie B. Thurston

Foreword by
Paul Quenon, OCSO



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In grateful memory:

Sr. Mary David DeFeo, OCSO

and

Br. Patrick Hart, OCSO

They first were holy and we may truly call them so.

The Rule of St. Benedict 4.62.

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Foreword

There are so many aspects to Bonnie Thurston that the author of this study, like Thomas Merton, is hard to fit into one category. Of all the encounters I have had with her over many years, I retain an image of one moment that seems to sum up her profile. It was at one of the Thomas Merton international conferences where I was seated high enough to see the floor of the stage. After her introduction, in strides Bonnie Thurston, fully confident in the midst of academics, experts, scholars from across the country, and every kind of Merton reader. She wore a plain blouse, skirt, gardening shoes, and light gray socks. That said it all. Here was a woman who cultivates a solitary life, tills a garden at her hermitage back in my home state of West Virginia. Of course, she wore no religious habit, but the plain outfit and practical shoes spoke of monastic simplicity. Her tone was as one attending to business, and her content reached to the depths.

This book achieves those qualities both explicitly and implicitly, in the sense that she knows of what she

speaks and speaks by experience. Bonnie is precise, nuanced, and profound, yet writes simply and directly. She meets the highest standards of scholarship and has published widely and often in New Testament studies. In her scholarly work, her personal life remains out of sight, but nevertheless it informs her spiritual understanding. As a thinker she can be one tough-minded West Virginia gal and I remember her taking down the chair of theology from a Catholic university after his lecture, offering him nine points of criticism. His brief and humble response was he agreed with every point. I am glad it did not break out into a squabble because the audience was held in the abbey church here at Gethsemani.

While being a lecturer and author or editor of twenty-two theological books, she is also a poet. I once gave her an argument that her poetry reflects too much of the pedagogue in her. She said that is because she *is* a pedagogue. Since then I have seen nothing of the likes in her poetry. Her poetic sequence on ancient Irish sites and churches are so sensitive you can feel you are there, even though you've never been.¹

She has put it in her own words: "Writing is my authentic prayer, an attempt to articulate the glimpsed

1. Bonnie Bowman Thurston, *Belonging to Borders* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011).

“beyond” or “other,” to honor God’s gratuitous, humanizing gift of language and return the gift to its Giver.”²

In those poetic works more of the profile and history of her personal life emerges, and how it informs her writing. “I am not a monastic, and have no vocation to cenobitic life, knowing only too well the nightmare I would be to a novice mistress and my sisters. But for nearly thirty years of widowhood, I have experimented with living more or less as a solitary in the old Celtic mode. Without formal vows, I try in a quiet way to conduct my ‘ordinary’ life monastically.”³

This small volume is focused on the core of Merton’s writing, in terms of themes readers are familiar with—silence, prayer, God’s call, renunciation, contemplation. This is a deftly written handbook on the salient points of monastic spirituality fundamental to Merton’s writing. By all evidence it is a synopsis of a wide and continuous reading on Merton that began with Bonnie’s doctoral dissertation. But in a less obvious way it also springs from a life of solitude lived “in the old Celtic mode.”

I am thoroughly familiar with Merton’s themes and writings, beginning with my days with him in the novi-

2. Abbey of the Arts, “Featured Poet: Bonnie Thurston,” Featured Poet Series, <https://abbeyofhearts.com/blog/2019/09/11/featured-poet-bonnie-thurston/>.

3. Bonnie Bowman Thurston, *Practicing Silence: New and Selected Verses* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2014), xviii.

tiate, but nevertheless I find in reading through these pages a lucidity and balance, an engaging counterpoint of themes that does justice to Merton's multifaceted thought yet retains basic simplicity. It is an excellent work for beginners as well as for seasoned readers, helping to refresh the air and regain orientation. Merton had such broad interests and was such a pioneer on many frontiers, you can easily lose the central motifs that were driving his expansive energy. Namely, the search for God in monastic life, the love of the place and the brethren, all of which grew and spread beyond the enclosure walls. It is in the deep roots of this solitude and silence that we find one another, whether friend or stranger, whether Christian or of another faith and practice altogether—or of a faith that cannot name itself.

Merton came to the universal through the particular. It is good to acquaint here, or reacquaint oneself with the particular, to gain the profound but simple grasp on realities that lead unto such agape and inclusive humanity.

Br. Paul Quenon, OCSO

Introduction

Since the 1970s books about Thomas Merton have been a growth industry, never more so than in 2015, the centenary of his birth. As Henri Nouwen noted many years ago in *The Genessee Diary*, “Merton is like the Bible: he can be used for almost any purpose. The conservative and the progressive, the liberal and the radical, those who fight for changes and those who complain about them . . . they all quote Merton to express their ideas and convictions.”¹

This is in part because Merton had so *many* interests and wrote so *much* about most of them. Reflecting in 1964 on “the need for constant self-revision, growth, leaving behind, renunciation of yesterday, yet . . . continuity with all yesterdays,” he said of himself, “My ideas are always changing, always moving around one

1. Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Genessee Diary* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), 160.

center, always seeing the center from somewhere else. I will always be accused of inconsistencies.”²

It is my conviction that, actually, Merton’s “one center” was monastic life, that if one does not understand Merton as a monk, one does not understand Merton. This is not the first or only book on Merton-the-monk (see the bibliography that closes this book), but it has been some years since one has addressed the subject. Furthermore, monasticism has a great deal to teach all spiritual pilgrims, perhaps particularly Christian ones, so I have tried throughout this book to highlight how Merton’s monastic spirituality “translates” for the rest of us.

I am not a monk, but I have received important spiritual gifts from the Christian monastic tradition, especially from women’s monastic communities, with whom I have lived for extended periods as the stranger who was taken in. (You know who you are and have survived.) I have written a bit about monasticism elsewhere³ and bring my personal experiences of mo-

2. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage*, *The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 5: 1963–1965, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 67.

3. Bonnie Bowman Thurston, “Monasticism and Marriage,” *Contemplative Review* 17, no. 4 (1984): 6–12; Bonnie Thurston, “*Soli Deo Placere Desiderans*,” in *A Monastic Vision for the 21st Century*, ed. Patrick Hart (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2006), 1–22, and *Monastic Life: A Sign of Contradiction to the Fashionable Idols* (Oxford: SLG Press, 2016).

nasticism to over forty years as a student of Merton's thought, about which I have written extensively.

Let me begin in good, German academic fashion by describing what this book is not, beginning with the fact that it is not an academic or strictly scholarly book. Although of necessity there is reference to his life, this is not a biography of Merton. (Suggested biographies appear in the bibliography.) As noted, it is not the first on the subject, nor is it a comprehensive treatment of Merton's monastic spirituality. For example, I don't explicitly discuss Merton's ideas about monastic practices⁴ or Merton's deep devotion to Our Lady, to whom all Cistercian houses are dedicated. Merton was one of the founding fathers of monastic interreligious dialogue, which has subsequently developed a spirituality of its own.⁵ Herein I do not discuss that important material or Merton's work in ecumenism, his openness to the Orthodox and Protestant traditions of Christianity. There is a growing literature on the spirituality of poetry and on that of work for peace and justice. Again,

4. See Charles Cummings, *Monastic Practices*, rev. ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015). I delight to have had a hand in the revised edition.

5. Interested readers may consult the "Merton and" (Sufism, Buddhism, Judaism, etc.) series published by Fons Vitae Press in Louisville, Kentucky. Fr. Jaechan Anselmo Park, OSB, has recently written a very fine book on Merton and Buddhism, *Thomas Merton's Encounter with Buddhism and Beyond* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2019).

Merton made original contributions to both, which we shall not examine. What I have attempted to do is to highlight what I take to be the crucial or foundational aspects of Merton's peculiarly (in both senses of the word) monastic spirituality.

It might help the reader to know my methods of proceeding. I have tried to let Merton speak for himself, so I use primary source material (what Merton himself wrote) or secondary material from his fellow monastics (both men and women) who know monastic life from the inside. For the extensive secondary material (articles about Merton) the reader may consult the work of Patricia Burton or the Merton Center website, both mentioned in the bibliography. There is a lot of quotation from Merton in this book, all of it written before inclusive language was the norm in discourse. Some readers will find Merton's language in this regard difficult or offensive. I regret that, but I am not free to alter original sources. Nor do I think I know "what Merton would have thought about" subjects he did not explicitly speak to or write about. I do not change the primary sources or speculate about what Merton "might have said."

My rationale and intention in adding another book to the groaning Merton shelf is to make his foundational monastic ideas better known to those outside the monastery, though I hope it might be of some value to monastics, perhaps particularly to novices, precisely

because I think those ideas are so valuable and relevant to the world in which we live. (We'll address this explicitly in chapter 4.) To that end I have tried to write informally and conversationally in hopes of "inviting the reader in." Occasionally I have committed a scholarly indiscretion by, for example, filling in a bit of history or delving into the etymology of words. As Merton was in modern languages polylingual, had a command of Latin, and knew some Greek, I hope he wouldn't mind. I do this when the information illuminates what lies behind or beneath Merton's ideas. Forgive me. I hope readers who wish to pursue further one or another of Merton's ideas will find the notes of value. Unless otherwise stated, biblical quotations (of which there are many because the monastic offices are basically biblical) are from the New Revised Standard Version and quotations from *The Rule of St. Benedict* are from the Fry edition.⁶

I agree with Dom Michael Casey, OCSO, in his essay "Thomas Merton and Monastic Renewal" that "mostly" (as Casey suggests) when Merton "spoke about monasticism he seems to have been thinking about Gethsemani."⁷ Merton was formed by his own

6. Timothy Fry, ed., *The Rule of St. Benedict* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1981).

7. Michael Casey, "Thomas Merton and Monastic Renewal," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (2018): 165.

experiences in his own monastery. Thus Merton is not the definitive word on monasticism or monastic spirituality, although, as multiple volumes of his notes and talks in the Monastic Wisdom Series attest, he had done significant research into its origins and development. (See bibliography.) The five areas of reform that Casey suggests were focal for Merton (“more authentic exercise of authority, greater flexibility and adaptability, more seriousness in the practice of monastic discipline, a greater emphasis on solitude, and more openness to interaction with the world”⁸) are areas of perennial concern for monasticism and monastics. You will hear their echo in this book.

Finally, as I was finishing this study, I revisited the summary chapter of Lawrence S. Cunningham’s *Thomas Merton and the Monastic Vision* and was delighted to discover that what Cunningham notes as the “three fundamental characteristics . . . of what is implied by the term ‘monastic’” that Merton suggested for a talk in India are, in fact, primary themes woven into this book. Briefly they are (1) detachment, (2) “preoccupation . . . with the radical inner depth of one’s religious and philosophical beliefs; the grounds of those beliefs; and their spiritual implications,” and (3) “concern with inner transformation and . . . consciousness of a tran-

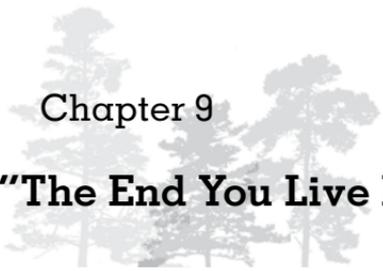
8. Casey, “Thomas Merton and Monastic Renewal,” 173.

scendent dimension of life beyond the empirical self and of ‘ethical and pious observance.’”⁹ Each also speaks importantly to the spiritual lives of those of us who are not monastics. I am always delighted when my thinking about Merton concurs with those of other Merton scholars from whom I learn so much. No matter how solitary the writing, no one writes a book alone. This work has been sustained by those who pray for me and by several Merton scholars who over many years have become dear friends and greatly enriched my life, as I hope something in this book might enrich yours.

July 22, 2019

Feast of St. Mary Magdalene
The Anchorage, Wheeling, WV

9. Lawrence S. Cunningham, *Thomas Merton and the Monastic Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 191 and 192.



Chapter 9

“The End You Live For”

In John’s gospel a question that suggests a Christology of open-endedness frames the ministry of Jesus. In fact, John’s story of Jesus begins and ends with essentially the same question. In chapter 1, as the disciples of John the Baptist see Jesus, he asks them, “What are you looking for?” (1:38). In chapter 18, as those same disciples watch, Judas and the detachment of soldiers enter the garden, and Jesus steps forward and twice says, “Whom are you looking for?” (18:4 and 7), the same question he asks the grieving Magdalene by the empty tomb (20:15).¹ “What are you looking for?” “Whom seek ye?” (Those words of the older translation echo in my head to the music of Bach’s *St. John Passion*.) These

1. With the exception of changes in number and gender of the pronoun and corresponding change in the verb, the question is essentially the same. The verb *zeteo* means to seek or search but also to strive for something.

are the fundamental questions of human life. When the basic necessities of life are in place, human beings seek for meaning. In one way or another, potential monastics are asked this question as they seek postulancy, and it undoubtedly arises, perhaps repeatedly, in the lives not only of monks but of thoughtful people in general.

Merton knew that “what are you looking for?” is a critical question. To ask it is to ask “what gives my life meaning?” “What is the goal toward which my life moves?” To frame the question in Teilhardian terms: “What is my ‘omega point?’”² Toward what does everything in my life move? Or, to use Paul Tillich’s term, what is my “ultimate concern,” that for which I would abandon everything else? One of the many books that appeared in 2018 to celebrate the quinquagenary of Merton’s birth was *What I Am Living For*, a collection edited by Jon M. Sweeney of reflections by a wide range of spiritual writers and practitioners that address this very question.³

2. We know Merton knew the work of Teilhard de Chardin. Two articles he wrote on the Jesuit appear in *Love and Living*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979). Merton quipped to sisters in India, “The only thing that a censor has finally stopped on me was an article on Teilhard de Chardin.” Thomas Merton, “Two Conferences on Prayer,” *The Merton Annual* 31 (2018): 29.

3. Jon M. Sweeney, ed., *What I Am Living For* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2018).

Merton wrote in *Thoughts in Solitude*, “Your life is shaped by the end you live for. You are made in the image of what you desire.”⁴ Ultimately, desire has to do with volition, what we choose. God chose some people for monastic life, but they had to choose monastic life for themselves. This pattern of *being* chosen and accepting/choosing that for which one is chosen characterizes all Christian vocation, as, indeed, it characterized the life of Mary, the mother of Jesus. In *Basic Principles of Monastic Spirituality* Merton opens the chapter “Spouse of Christ” with this sobering reminder: “We are not contemplatives by the mere fact of living an enclosed and penitential life. We can indeed be more active, more restless and more distracted in the cloister than we would be in the active life.”⁵ In short, the cloister and the habit do not a monastic make. Some deeper response is called for. It may well be choosing what God desires for us.

From a different angle, we are now reprising the theme of identity that was raised earlier in chapter 3 and has echoed through the book. It was also the central theme of a retreat given by Bernardo Bonowitz, OCSO, to the Brazilian Thomas Merton Society in October

4. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux/Noonday, 1956/1977), 56.

5. Thomas Merton, *Basic Principles of Monastic Spirituality* (Springfield, IL: Templegate Publishers, 1957/1996), 89.

2014. The talks were published in *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* in 2015. Therein Bonowitz notes that “no one can rescue himself from being a false self.”⁶ God is the source of our true identity. “By the inestimable gift of liberty with which God has endowed us, he had given us . . . the responsibility to decide how we will answer the question which we are.” We “participate in the creation of one’s own self” through our response, “the progressive, transforming welcome of God into one’s own life.”⁷

Whether recognized or not, the deepest human desire is for God who is the source of the True Self. In July 2019 the Jesuits in Britain offered an online experience of thirty-one days with St. Ignatius. The July 3 reflection included two statements by Brian Purfield that are very relevant to what we are considering. “For Ignatius, our deepest longing is identical with the will of God.” “Ignatius was convinced that we must find this will of God in our own hearts. Our deepest and most authentic desire is the point at which we are most united with God.”⁸

6. Bernardo Bonowitz, “Reaping Where Merton Has Sown: A Retreat for the Merton Centenary,” *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (2015): 43.

7. Bonowitz, “Reaping Where Merton Has Sown,” 45.

8. Copied from the July 3, 2019, reflection by Brian Purfield in the “31 Days of St. Ignatius” series offered by the Jesuits in Britain on Pathwaystogod.org. I am grateful for permission to use it here.