

*On the last day of January 1915, under the sign of the Water Bearer, in a year of a great war, and down in the shadow of some French mountains on the borders of Spain, I came into the world. Free by nature, in the image of God, I was nevertheless the prisoner of my own violence and my own selfishness, in the image of the world into which I was born. That world was the picture of Hell, full of men like myself, loving God yet hating Him, born to love Him, living instead in fear and hopeless self-contradictory hunger.*

The opening lines of Thomas Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain* capture in a few words much of the confusion and inner turmoil that seems to have defined his early life. Thomas was born in a small town in France in early 1915 to two artist parents, Owen Merton (a native of New Zealand) and Ruth Jenkins (who had grown up in the American Midwest). His mother died when Thomas was six, and his father just ten years later. Before his father died, however, he appointed a former schoolmate and physician, Dr. Thomas Bennett, as Thomas' guardian. Merton later acknowledged that Tom Bennett was the person he "most respected and admired and consequently the one who had the greatest influence" on him at that time of his life. Merton later recalled that Tom Bennett "gave me credit for being much more intelligent and mature than I was," but he added that his trust in him was misplaced. Merton was terribly unsettled during these years: a brilliant but undisciplined student, intent on little more than attending parties and having a good time. Merton was educated first at a French lycée, then at an English boarding school, and then at Clare College, University of Cambridge. His drinking and raucous behavior at Cambridge, however, led to his dismissal from the school, his coming to the United States, and his eventual enrolling at Columbia University.

As he left Europe for the last time, Merton reflected on the events at Cambridge and became miserably aware that a war was being waged within himself. He felt that all he had been trying to do at Cambridge was simply to enjoy himself without hurting anyone, yet he realized that "everything I had reached for had turned to ashes in my hands. ... I was a mess."

His dismissal from Cambridge, however, proved a blessing in disguise. Compared to what he spoke of as "the dark and sinister atmosphere" of Cambridge, he found Columbia's "big sooty factory to be full of light and fresh air." At Columbia he met and began to study with Professor Mark Van Doren, whose English literature classes had a profound effect on him. "You found yourself saying excellent things," he recalled, "that you did not know you knew and that you had not, in fact, known before. [Van Doren] 'educed' them from you by his questions. His classes were literally 'education' – they brought things out of you; they made your mind produce its own explicit ideas." He thrived in this newfound light and in the warmth of the many close and long-lasting friendships that he soon developed there. He joined the staff of the *Jester*, the campus humor magazine, became editor of the yearbook, and contributed to the *Columbia Review*. It seems that writing and being with writers had become almost a way of life for him. In 1938 he completed his BA in English and immediately began work on his MA.

What Merton was experiencing was the slow process of conversion from his old and terribly troubled way of life to a new one. His autobiography reveals that his transformation happened in a number of steps. The first step was through a sort of gradual intellectual progression, as Merton searched for a system of belief to satisfy his natural curiosity. Mark Van Doren seems to have opened the door for Merton to begin this progression. In February 1937, however, Merton happened upon Etienne Gilson's *Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* and bought a copy. The book made a profound impression on him. In it, he discovered "an entirely new concept of God," a God, he was relieved to discover, who was utterly beyond human comprehension and even imagery. He soon became fascinated with writers like Huxley, Blake, Hopkins, Joyce, and Maritain – each of whom was opening him to God.

The second step to conversion was through his senses, especially through art. And this too happened gradually. As a boy, Merton had flipped through a picture book of monasteries and, captivated by their beauty, was, as he later said, “filled with a kind of longing.” In 1933, just prior to starting his studies at Cambridge, he spent several weeks in Rome and soon became “fascinated” by the mosaics and religious art he saw there. “Without knowing anything about it,” he later wrote, “I became a pilgrim.” It seems that the icons that so arrested his attention served as windows through which he felt Christ’s gaze. The experience was his first glimpse of life rooted in Christianity. He later wrote “For the first time in my whole life I began to find out something of who this Person was that men call Christ. … It was in Rome that my conception of Christ was formed. It was there that I first saw Him, whom I now serve as my God and my King.”

Merton’s third and final step to conversion came through his affections. One weekend in August 1938 he realized that he had “been in and out of thousands of Catholic cathedrals and churches, and yet had never heard Mass.” Canceling a weekend date, he walked to nearby Corpus Christi Church where he heard his first Mass. Later, walking in the sun along Broadway, he felt that he was in a new world. “I could not understand what had happened to make me so happy, so much at peace, so content with life.” The next Sunday he was back at Mass, and the next, and the next. In September he spoke with a priest at Corpus Christi about becoming a Catholic, and two months later he was received into the Catholic Church.

His conversion, however, was only the beginning. The following year, as he was starting work on his PhD, he sensed within himself the desire to be a priest. The Jesuits appealed to him – Gerard Manley Hopkins had been a Jesuit – but a friend suggested the Franciscans, feeling that order would be better suited to Merton’s temperament. He investigated the Franciscans and decided to apply. His application, however, was rejected, leaving Merton in tears. Though the doors to religious life and priesthood had seemingly been closed to him, he realized that he could lead a more committed, more God-centered life. In September 1940, still unclear about his future, he took a position teaching English at St. Bonaventure College in Olean, in western New York. During Holy Week 1941, at the suggestion of a friend, Merton made a retreat at a Trappist monastery in the Kentucky hills, the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani. It was not so much the retreat that so greatly affected him as the place itself. As soon as he stepped into the monastery it was clear where he was. “I felt the deep, deep silence of the night and of peace and of holiness enfold me like love.” Merton had found the home he had been looking for. On December 10, 1941, he returned to Gethsemani to stay: he had decided to become a Trappist.

The Trappists are members of the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance (O.C.S.O.), a monastic order that follows the Rule of St. Benedict. The Cistercians take their name from their foundation in Citeaux, France, in 1098 (the word *Cistercian* stems from the town’s original Latin name, *Cisterciū*), and the Trappists take their name from their foundation as a reform movement at La Trappe Abbey or La Grande Trappe in Normandy, France, in 1664. The Trappists live a life of prayer and penance. The day of a Trappist is divided between manual work and prayer. Trappist monasteries generally provide for themselves through the sale of goods produced in the monastery. Prayer is divided among the Divine Office, lectio divina, and various forms of meditative and contemplative prayer. Trappists do not take a vow of silence. They generally speak only when necessary, and idle talk is strongly discouraged. Their silence expresses the wish to give space to what truly matters: gaining a deeper love and understanding of God.

Changes in recent years have softened many of the sharp edges in Trappist life as Merton found it. A monk of Gethsemani today has his own small room, freedom to correspond and to follow world news, and heat in the winter. The life Merton embraced in 1941 was considerably more austere. At that time the monks slept in their robes on straw-covered boards in dormitories that were freezing in winter and sweltering in summer. Beds were separated by shoulder-high partitions. Half the year was devoted to fasting. A typical meal featured bread, potatoes, an apple, and barley coffee. Even on feast days, such

as Christmas and Easter, meat, fish, and eggs were never served. Trappist life wasn't easy for Merton. He wasn't robust; he treasured privacy, and he didn't like the smell of straw, but he took to his new way of life with joy, feeling that he had at last found his true home.

Merton, who knew himself to be a self-centered man, expected and may even have hoped to become lost in the anonymity of Gethsemani. He continued to keep a journal at Gethsemani, yet he initially felt that writing was at odds with his vocation. His superior, however, saw that Merton had a gifted intellect and a talent for writing, and soon put him to work translating religious texts and writing brief biographies of the saints for the monastery. In 1946 his superior suggested that he begin writing his memoirs. He did so, and two years later his spiritual autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (the title referred to the mountain of Purgatory in Dante's *Divine Comedy*), quickly became an overnight sensation whose sales would exceed more than 4,000,000. Merton's life would never be the same. He later observed that "it is possible to doubt my vocation as a monk, but it is not possible to doubt my vocation as a writer. I was born one and will probably die one." His journal entry for September 27, 1958 says: "I am not going to write as one driven by compulsions but freely, because I am a writer, because for me to write is to think and to live and in some degree even to pray."

Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain* describes his dissipated youth, his doubts, his eventual conversion to Catholicism, and his decision to give up what would surely have been a promising literary career to enter a monastery, yet it did so in a manner that gave eloquent expression to the widespread rootlessness and spiritual hunger of the time. He later expressed considerable misgivings about it – the narrowness of its theology, his smug sense of belonging to the true church, his easy dismissal of other Christian religions, and the sharp separation he made between the supernatural and the natural – yet it was clearly the product of an extremely gifted writer who managed to touch the hearts and minds of many.

Perhaps one of the most poignant passages in the entire work is his reflection about his beloved brother John Paul, almost four years his junior, who had enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force shortly before Thomas entered Gethsemani and was killed in April 1943 when his damaged plane crashed in the North Sea:

"When I think now...of my childhood, the picture I get of my brother John Paul is this: standing in a field...where we have built our hut, is this little perplexed five-year-old kid in short pants and a kind of leather jacket, standing quite still, with his arms hanging down at his sides, and gazing in our direction, afraid to come any nearer on account of the stones, as insulted as he is saddened, and his eyes full of indignation and sorrow...there he stands, not sobbing, not crying, but angry and unhappy and offended and tremendously sad. And yet he is fascinated by what we are doing, nailing shingles all over our new hut. And his tremendous desire to be with us and do what we are doing will not permit him to go away. The law written in his nature says that he must be with his elder brother and do what he is doing: and he cannot understand why this law of love is being so wildly and unjustly violated in his case."

Merton completed his novitiate training and in 1948 was ordained a priest. In 1951, now Fr. M. Louis, O.C.S.O., Merton was appointed Master of Scholastics in which he oversaw the monks in training, and in 1955 he was appointed Master of Novices, a particularly important position in the monastery. During this time, he gave regularly scheduled conferences and met with individuals for spiritual direction. At the same time, however, he continued to write. But with each new book he published, his fame grew, and a steady stream of letters and visitors soon followed – scholars, priests, religious, peace activists, writers, poets, artists, musicians, and those who were simply drawn to his writings.

A frequent theme in Merton's journals was the ever-present tensions in his life at Gethsemani. Merton seems to have been a man of great contradictions. He questioned his monastic vocation as much as he embraced it. He battled with his religious superiors as much as he desired to be an obedient monk. He sought solitude as much as he craved attention and affection from his brothers. And he wished for fame

and influence as much as he recognized that humility was so critically important for a healthy monastic life. Yet these contradictions seem to make Merton very endearing since they reveal him to be a person so very much like us.

Merton wrote in a subjective, intuitive, and often lyrical style. In fact, he is best understood as a thinker who was a poet. In this regard, he was intuitive and perceptive and trusted his own experiences more than systems of thought. Merton was always ‘becoming’ a monk. Being a monk was never anything he achieved, but rather something he was always striving toward. His early writings focused primarily on the spiritual journey and contemplative spirituality. *The Sign of Jonas*, *No Man is an Island*, and *New Seeds of Contemplation* are among the most noteworthy of this genre.

- *The Sign of Jonas* (1953), begun five years after he entered Gethsemani, offers a privileged view of Merton’s life in the monastery. Many Merton aficionados consider this their favorite book. They love its intimacy and spontaneity, its enthusiastic and joyful piety. It is primarily a journal in which Merton describes events from his life, oftentimes commonplace events, but brimming over with meaning for him; reflections on people, on life in the monastery, on his reading and writings, on scripture and liturgy, and on nature and all forms of natural phenomena. This last-mentioned is a particularly appealing aspect of the book and it reveals Merton’s love of nature and his ability to give expression to its beauty.
- *No Man is an Island* (1955) is a compendium of sixteen essays on a variety of topics foundational to the spiritual life – love, hope, interior freedom, vocation, charity, mercy, solitude, silence, and more. Each is clearly the product of considerable reflection and insight. Like much of Merton’s writings, it is often lyrical, and it abounds in aphorisms that are clear, succinct and challenging – a particular favorite, touching on the roots of nonviolence, is this gem: “A man of sincerity is less interested in defending the truth than in stating it clearly, for he thinks that if truth be clearly seen, it can very well take care of itself.”
- *New Seeds of Contemplation* (1961) is a 20<sup>th</sup>-century classic on the contemplative life. Merton blends a disciplined and deeply learned intellect with the lyrical passion of the poet. The result is a book that is not only informative but also very moving. Covering a diverse range of subjects (faith, the night of the senses, renunciation), it describes the traditional phases of contemplation, and gives an idea of what to expect in this spiritual process (including despair and darkness). In its magnificent prose the book invites us to “cast our awful solemnity to the winds and join in the general dance.”

In his writings, Merton spoke eloquently and movingly of silence:

“Silence has many dimensions. It can be a regression and an escape, a loss of self, or it can be a presence, awareness, unification, self-discovery. Negative silence blurs and confuses our identity, and we lapse into daydreams or diffuse anxieties. Positive silence pulls us together and makes us realize who we are, who we might be, and the distance between these two. Hence, positive silence implies a disciplined choice, and what Paul Tillich called the ‘courage to be.’ In the long run, the discipline of creative silence demands a certain kind of faith. For when we come face to face with ourselves in the lonely ground of our being, we confront many questions about the value of our existence, the reality of our commitments, the authenticity of our everyday lives” (*Love and Living*)

...and of contemplation:

“Contemplation is the highest expression of man’s intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life and of being. It is gratitude for life, for awareness and for being. It is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant Source. Contemplation is, above all, awareness of the reality of that Source. It *knows* the

Source, obscurely, inexplicably, but with a certitude that goes beyond both reason and simple faith.”  
*(New Seeds of Contemplation)*

...and of his own prayer:

“Strictly speaking I have a very simple way of prayer. It is centered entirely on attention to the presence of God and to His will and His love. That is to say that it is centered on faith by which alone we can know the presence of God. One might say this gives my meditation the character described by the Prophet as ‘being before God as if you saw Him.’ Yet it does not mean imagining anything or conceiving a precise image of God, for to my mind this would be a kind of idolatry. On the contrary, it is a matter of adoring Him as invisible and infinitely beyond our comprehension, and realizing Him as all. My prayer tends very much to what you call *fana*. There is in my heart this great thirst to recognize totally the nothingness of all that is not God. My prayer is then a kind of praise rising up out of the center of Nothing and Silence... Such is my ordinary way of prayer, or meditation. It is not ‘thinking about’ anything, but a direct seeking of the Face of the Invisible – which cannot be found unless we become lost in Him who is Invisible.” (*The Hidden Ground of Love* – from a letter to his friend Abdul Aziz, an Islamic scholar in Pakistan)

When Merton entered Gethsemani in late 1941, he undoubtedly thought he was saying good-bye to the world he had known. Yet the God to whom he had surrendered drew him out of himself and returned him in spirit to that world. His realization that the world beyond the monastery walls was his world as well seems to have come to him most profoundly on March 18, 1958, during a visit to Louisville. It was an experience he shared later that year in a letter to Boris Pasternak and then later developed at length in one of the most memorable passages in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966). It is worth quoting at length:

“In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping distract, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream. Not that I question the reality of my vocation, or of my monastic life: but the conception of ‘separation from the world’ that we have in the monastery too easily presents itself as a complete illusion: the illusion that by making vows we become a separate species of being, pseudo-angels, ‘spiritual men,’ men of interior life...

This sense of liberation of an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud. And I suppose my happiness could have taken form in these words: ‘Thank God, thank God, that I *am* like other men, that I am only a man among others.’ ...

It is a glorious destiny to be a member of the human race, though it is a race dedicated to many absurdities and one which makes many terrible mistakes: yet, with all that, God himself gloried in becoming a member of the human race...

I have the immense joy of being *man*, a member of the race in which God himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun. ... There are no strangers!

Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of the heart, the depths of their hearts, where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God’s eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, nor more cruelty, no more greed. ... I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other. ...

At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our mind or the brutalities of our will. This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us. It is, so to speak, his name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our sonship. It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it, we would see these billions points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely. ... I have no program for this seeing. It is only given, but the gate of heaven is everywhere.”

Merton was increasingly being drawn toward solitude. Yet at the very same time, he was entering into a far deeper engagement with people and events distant from the monastery. It was no longer simply the world of the Spirit that engaged him, but rather the world at large with all its pains and struggles. As “a contemporary of Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Vietnam and the Watts Riots,” he knew that he must speak out – and speak out he did. He began to read, reflect and write on social issues of great concern: war, peace, civil rights, racial strife, and modern life and values. But his writings were not always welcomed by his Trappist superiors, and for a while he was forbidden to deal with the topics of war and peace. Two of his reflections on war, peace and nonviolence are worth quoting:

“Violence rests on the assumption that the enemy and I are entirely different: the enemy is evil and I am good. The enemy must be destroyed, but I must be saved. But love sees things differently. It sees that even the enemy suffers from the same sorrows and limitations that I do. That we both have the same hopes, the same needs, the same aspiration for peaceful and harmonious human life. And that death is the same for both of us. Then love may perhaps show me that my brother is not really my enemy and that war is both his enemy and mine. War is *our* enemy. Then peace becomes possible.” (from the preface to the Vietnamese edition of *No Man is an Island*)

“In Gandhi’s mind, nonviolence was not simply a political tactic which was supremely useful and efficacious in liberating his people from foreign rule, in order that India might then concentrate on realizing its own national identity. On the contrary, the spirit of nonviolence sprang from *an inner realization of spiritual unity in himself*. The whole Gandhian concept of nonviolent action and *satyagraha* [insistence on truth] is incomprehensible if it is thought to be a means of achieving unity rather than as the fruit of inner unity already achieved.” (*Gandhi on Non-Violence*)

Perhaps his most noteworthy book of this time was *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966). The title he chose for the book gives some indication of where he was at this point in his life. What he offered were not answers, as he seemed all too ready to do in some of his earlier books, but rather ‘conjectures’ or thoughtful probings of issues. In calling himself a ‘bystander,’ he was making reference to the aloofness of more than two decades in the monastery, whereby he had distanced himself from involvement in the problems of the world – and it was for this that he felt guilty. In this series of notes, opinions, experiences and reflections, Merton examined some of the most urgent questions of the day: the ‘death of God,’ politics, modern life and values, and racial strife. The book was Merton at his best – humorous yet sensitive, at all times alive and searching, and with that facility of language which has made him one of the most widely read spiritual writers of our time.

In 1960 he received permission to have a small cinderblock hermitage built on the monastery grounds. This hermitage seems to have brought him greater peace, and he was better able to dictate his daily schedule. In August 1965 he finally received permission to become a hermit on the monastery grounds. He would still say daily Mass in the library chapel, eat a hot meal in the infirmary, and give a lecture on Sundays that interested members of the community could attend, but he was otherwise free to set his own schedule.

His love of the 14<sup>th</sup>-century recluse, Julian of Norwich, dates from this period. Supplanting even John of the Cross in his affection, he saw Julian as “without doubt one of the most wonderful of all Christian voices.” Julian, whose writings made reference to “Jesus our Mother” and “Mother Jesus,” helped open the door to Merton’s exploration of God’s feminine dimension.

Merton seems to have been drawn to Asia from his youth. When he was a fifteen-year-old schoolboy, he had taken Gandhi’s side in a student debate. Seven years later, while living in New York, he had met, spoken with, and been deeply impressed by the Hindu monk Bramachari. In November 1949, he attended a talk by a man who had been a postulant in a Zen monastery. This seems to have been his first contact as a Trappist with Eastern religious traditions – and it is noteworthy that it came, not through books or scholarship, but through a practitioner. In the mid-1950s he found himself particularly drawn to Zen Buddhism and had begun reading everything he could find on the subject, especially books by the Japanese scholar, D.T. Suzuki. Three years later he began exchanging letters with Suzuki, and in 1964, he received permission to make a short trip to New York where he met with him.

“What Zen communicates is an awareness that is potentially already there but is not conscious of itself. Zen is then not Kerygma [proclamation] but realization, not revelation but consciousness, not news from the Father who sends his Son into the world, but awareness of the ontological ground of our own being here and now, right in the midst of the world.” (*Zen and the Birds of Appetite*)

But what, we might wonder, attracted Merton to Buddhism? It is important to recognize that it was not Buddhism’s doctrine that drew him, but rather its spiritual practice. Merton’s goal was spiritual growth, and he seems to have seen in Buddhism (1) clear teaching on ways of fostering spiritual development: a clearly delineated path and (2) a refined and precise vocabulary capable of describing this development. Moreover, it can be said that Merton saw in Buddhism a cultural alternative to the radical individualism and fascination with technology that he saw as pervading Western society. He felt that Christianity in the West was losing its interiority.

Merton realized, however, that reading about Buddhism and corresponding with Buddhist scholars could do only so much. He sensed that he needed to visit Asia so as to meet with its spiritual practitioners, and in 1968, he received permission to do so. During his subsequent trip to Asia, in a conference bursting at the seams with talk of convergence and religious oneness, he stressed that unity will never be achieved at the level of intellectual discourse:

“The deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond speech, and it is beyond concept. Not that we discover a new unity. We discover an older unity. My dear brothers, we are already one, but we imagine that we are not. What we have to do is recover our original unity. What we have to be is what we are.” (*Asian Journal*)

His Asian stay of almost two months was filled with meetings, conferences and conversations, but a visit to Polonnaruwa, a place of pilgrimage in Sri Lanka known mostly for its colossal figures of the Buddha carved from huge stones, left him so stunned by what he experienced there that three days passed before he attempted writing about it:

“I don’t know when in my life I have ever had such a sense of beauty and spiritual validity running together in one aesthetic illumination... I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for. I don’t know what else remains, but I have now seen and have pierced through the surface and have gotten beyond the shadow and the disguise.” (*Asian Journal*)

Merton had already passed through a radical self-emptying that gave him an openness to and receptivity of another spiritual tradition. As events unfolded, little else remained for him, because on the afternoon of December 10, while attending an interfaith conference in Bangkok, he slipped getting out of the bath. Attempting to break his fall, he grabbed an electric fan and was electrocuted. He died instantly, twenty-seven years to the day after becoming a Trappist.

In *Thoughts in Solitude*, Merton spoke of his spiritual journey. His words offer an eloquent and fitting conclusion to these reflections:

“My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing. And I know that if I do this, you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.”

#### Some Noteworthy Books about Thomas Merton:

Jim Forest, *Living with Wisdom: A Life of Thomas Merton*: Jim Forest met Merton in 1961 and kept an active correspondence and friendship with him until Merton’s death in 1968. This book, written in an engaging style and accompanied by many rare photographs, is the most complete, balanced and readable biography of Merton available.

Anthony T. Padovano, *The Spiritual Genius of Thomas Merton*: The author, a professor of literature and philosophy, and an internationally recognized authority on Merton, presents a skillful blend of literary analysis and spiritual biography. The book sketches the life of Merton in its elusiveness and assertiveness, addresses his faith and writing, his mysticism and secularity, and the psychological pressures that shaped his life and the myths that influenced his century.

William H. Shannon, *Thomas Merton: An Introduction*: This book, written by the founding president of the International Thomas Merton Society and general editor of Merton’s published letters, is an excellent and very readable introduction to Merton and his writings. The sections on specific themes in Merton’s writings and suggestions on what to read first are most helpful.

James Finley, *Merton’s Palace of Nowhere*: The author writes: “This door is the door of the Palace of Nowhere. It is the door of God. It is our very self, our true self called by God to perfect union with himself. And it is through this door we secretly enter in responding to the saving call to ‘Come with me to the Palace of Nowhere where all the many things are one.’” In this book, Merton offers illuminating insights into the quest to know who we are, a quest which leads from an awareness of the false and illusory self to a realization of the true self. For almost forty years, this book has been the standard for exploring, reflecting on, and understanding this rich vein of Merton’s thought.

*Thomas Merton: Essential Writings*: This book, prefaced by a substantial introduction, includes a broad range of Merton’s writings and highlights his three-fold call: to prayer, to compassion, and to unity.

Thomas Merton, *The Intimate Merton: His Life from His Journals*: Perhaps no other work reveals Merton in all his wondrous complexity. This diary-like memoir, composed of his most poignant and insightful journal entries, spanning the time from his conversion to Catholicism and decision to enter the Trappist Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky until his untimely death almost 30 years later in Bangkok, offers a privileged view of his human and spiritual development which proved to be for him truly a journey into God.