

Letters for *Lectio*

Review of

Precious Thoughts: Daily Readings from the Correspondence of Thomas Merton

Selected and edited by Fiona Gardner

London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2011

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Reviewed by **Monica Weis, SSJ**

Interest in Thomas Merton continues in ever-widening circles, and although the five volumes of selections from his more than 10,000 letters are now out of print, we have had rich samples of Merton's interaction with a vast number of individuals in *Thomas Merton: A Life in Letters* (HarperCollins, 2008), carefully gathered from the published correspondence by William H. Shannon and Christine M. Bochen. This new collection, edited by psychotherapist and spiritual director Fiona Gardner, takes a different tack, offering readers an excerpt for each day of the year. Not meant to reveal the scope of Merton's interests or the spectrum of his correspondents, Gardner's collection is intended as a stimulus for personal prayer. The title of this small and handy paperback comes from Boris Pasternak, who said of his communication with Merton that his "precious thoughts and bottomless letters enrich me and make me happy" (9).

A quick overview suggests that the selections follow both the seasonal and the liturgical cycles, but, after more careful reading, this reviewer found evidence of a loose, yet coherent, thematic approach or "trend" to each four-week period, consciously or unconsciously intended by the editor. For most of the months, the first and last entries seem either to set the tone or provide an exclamation point to the month's controlling idea. For example, the entries for January focus on reality, the importance of *now*, faith and hope; February's selections remind us of the value of Lenten suffering and the importance of surrendering to the power of God's love; March zeros in on the mystery of God's love and acquiring a contemplative vision; April rejoices in Easter, silence, solitude, and sharing ourselves with others; May emphasizes planting seeds and the grace of discovering our nothingness in Christ; June reminds us of the necessity of peace, walking with God, and discovering our True Self; July emphasizes simplicity, the Jesus prayer, and faith in the unknown future; August stresses the importance of discerning truth and hope, and making peace with the unknown; September highlights God's patient love and the importance of purity of heart; October calls us to deeper solitude and

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recognition of the communion of saints; November challenges us to know God not as object, but as he is in faith; December reiterates the need for courage and faith as we discover more deeply how much we are loved by God.

This choice of excerpts from Merton's letters, as Gardner notes in the Preface, is intended to connect our timeless spiritual searching with Merton's ability to have a "deep resonance with contemporary life" (10). She is clear about her criteria for selecting passages: "they are chosen to provide a way into both silence and contemplative prayer" (11), and are to be savored, not devoured (12). Indeed, although not explicitly stated, Gardner invites us into a spirit of *lectio divina*. A superficial reading of these selections for daily prayer will give us the voice of Merton, but not the spiritual giant behind the words; a quick sampling will provide us with the sense of a syndicated columnist, but not the rich value of Merton, the spiritual director. Only with prayerful reflecting on the words – a process of reading recently deceased French Trappist André Louf referred to as "chewing and ruminating" – will the reader/prayer come to the profound essence of Merton's spiritual advice.

Interspersed between the months are samples of Merton's calligraphy. The drawings generally fit the seasonal weather (sun for July, fish for August) or liturgical motif (Crucifix for April, dancing creation for December) and offer yet another page for prayerful reflection. If the reader is curious about the recipients of these letter excerpts, a list is provided in the Reference section at the back of the volume. A bit disconcerting, however, are the editorial errors in the Preface ("who"/"whom" confusion on page 11; "affect"/"effect" on page 12; essential comma missing on page 13) that disturb the flow of reading and interrupt the mental groundwork necessary for preparing to reap the benefits of this book. Furthermore, readers should be aware that although selections are arranged according to the twelve-month calendar, Merton's wisdom might not be in sync with an individual's spiritual needs on that day. Random selection of passages that strike a resonance within the reader could also be beneficial way to engage with Merton's advice.

What must have been an exhaustive selection process for Gardner has provided Merton followers with yet more examples of his writing, practical grist for prayer, and, in the long run, should deepen their admiration for this most important spiritual writer of the twentieth century.