

bridges to
contemplative living
with thomas merton

lent and holy week

edited by jonathan montaldo & robert g. toth
of the merton institute for contemplative living

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It is necessary that, at the beginning of this fast, the Lord should show Himself to us in His mercy. The purpose of Lent is not only expiation, to satisfy the divine justice, but above all is a preparation to rejoice in His love. And this preparation consists in receiving the gift of His mercy—a gift which we receive insofar as we open our hearts to it, casting out what cannot remain in the same room with mercy.

Now one of the things we must cast out first of all is fear. Fear narrows the little entrance of our heart. It shrinks our capacity to love. It freezes up our power to give ourselves. If we were terrified of God as an inexorable judge, we would not confidently await His mercy, or approach Him trustfully in prayer. Our peace and our joy in Lent are a guarantee of grace.

THOMAS MERTON

SEASONS OF CELEBRATION

A NOTE ABOUT INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

Merton wrote at a time before inclusive language was common practice. In light of his inclusive position on so many issues and his references to our essential unity, we hope these texts will be read from an inclusive point of view.

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INTRODUCTION

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY CONTEMPLATIVE LIVING?

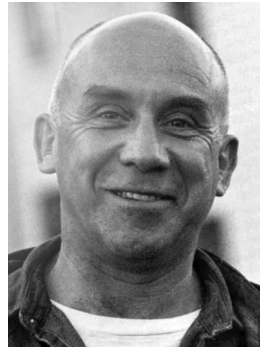
Life is a spiritual journey. Contemplative living is a way of responding to our everyday experiences by consciously attending to our relationships. It deepens our awareness of our connectedness and communion with others, becomes a positive force of change in our lives, and provides meaningful direction to our journey. Ultimately, contemplative living leads us to a sense of well-being, profound gratitude, and a clearer understanding of our purpose in life.

Living contemplatively begins with ourselves but leads us in the end to embrace deeply not only our truest self, but God, neighbor, and all of creation. By reflecting on our everyday experiences, we seek the depths of our inner truth. By exploring our beliefs, illusions, attitudes, and assumptions, we find our true self and discover how we relate to the larger community. Contemplative living directs our minds and hearts to the truly important issues of human existence, making us less likely to be captivated by the superficial distractions that so easily occupy our time.

WHO WAS THOMAS MERTON?

For over sixty years, the thought and writings of Thomas Merton have guided spiritual seekers across the world. His writings offer important insights into four essential relationships—with self, with God, with other people, and with all of creation. While the Christian tradition was the foundation of his perspective, he was open and inclusive in his examination of

other religious traditions, recognizing the important contribution of all faith traditions to the history of civilization. He drew from their strengths to enhance the spiritual growth of individuals and communities.



Thomas Merton was born in Prades, France, in 1915. His mother was from the United States and his father from New Zealand. Educated in France, England, and the United States, he received a master's degree in English from Columbia University. In 1938 he was baptized into the Catholic Church. He taught at St. Bonaventure University for a year and then in 1941 entered the Cistercian Order as a monk of the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. Directed by his Abbot, Dom Frederic Dunne, Merton wrote his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, which was published in 1948.

For fifteen years he served as Master of Scholastics and Novices while writing many books and articles on the spiritual life, interreligious understanding, peace, and social justice issues. In December of 1968, he journeyed to Asia to attend a conference of contemplatives near Bangkok, Thailand. While there he was accidentally electrocuted and died at the age of fifty-three.

Interest in Merton has grown steadily since his death. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, which appears on lists of the one hundred most important books of the last century, has been in print ever since its first edition and has sold millions of copies. The volume of printed work by and about him attests to Merton's popularity.

His works have been translated into thirty-five languages and new foreign language editions continue to be printed. The International Thomas Merton Society currently has thirty chapters in the United States and fourteen in other countries.

Thomas Merton is distinguished among contemporary spiritual writers by the depth and substance of his thinking. Merton was a scholar who distilled the best thinking of the best theologians, philosophers, and poets throughout the centuries, from both the West and the East, and presented their ideas in the context of the Christian worldview. His remarkable and enduring popularity indicates that his work continues to speak to the minds and hearts of people searching for answers to life's important questions. For many he is a spiritual guide, and for others he offers a place to retreat to in difficult times. His writings take people into deep places within themselves and offer insight into the paradoxes of life. Merton struggled to be a contemplative in a world of action, yet he offered no quick fix or "Ten Easy Steps" to a successful spiritual life.

USING *BRIDGES TO CONTEMPLATIVE LIVING*
WITH *THOMAS MERTON*

Bridges is intended for anyone seeking to live more contemplatively. For some it initiates a spiritual journey, for others it leads to re-examination or recovery of a neglected spiritual life, and for still others it deepens an already vibrant spirituality. Through reflection and dialogue on specific spiritual themes, participants revisit and refresh their perspectives on and understanding of life. They explore the strength and balance of the relationships that ultimately determine who they are: the relationships with self, God, others, and nature. Through examining these relationships, participants probe their understanding of life's great questions:

"Who am I?"

"Who is God?"

"Why am I here?"

"What am I to do with my life?"

The selected readings move participants in and out of four dimensions of contemplative living: *Awakening* to an ever-deepening awareness of "true-self"; *Contemplation* of a life experienced from a God-centered perspective; *Compassion* in relationships with others; and *Unity* realized in our undeniable and essential interconnectedness with all of creation. This fourfold process of spiritual formation frames much of Merton's thought and writing.

This is not a spiritual formation program in some "otherworldly" sense. Merton insisted that our spiritual life is our everyday lived experience. There is no separation between them. *Bridges* does not require an academic background in theology, religion, or spirituality, nor does it require the use of any particular

spiritual practices or prayers. There are no levels of perfection, goals to attain, or measurements of progress. This is not an academic or scholarly undertaking. Everyone will find a particular way of contemplative living within his or her own circumstances, religious tradition, and spiritual practices.

The *Bridges to Contemplative Living with Thomas Merton* series is especially designed for small group dialogue. The selected themes of each session are intended to progressively inform and deepen the relationships that form our everyday lives. Each session begins with scripture and ends in prayer. In between there are time and mental space for spiritual reading, reflection, and contemplative dialogue.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY CONTEMPLATIVE DIALOGUE?

Contemplative dialogue is meant to be non-threatening, a “safe place” for open sharing and discussion. It is not outcome-oriented. It’s not even about fully understanding or comprehending what one reads or hears from the other participants. The focus is on *listening* rather than formulating a response to what another is saying. Simply hearing and accepting another’s point of view and reflecting on it can inform and enlighten our own perspective in a way that debating or analyzing it cannot. The pace of conversation is slower in contemplative dialogue than in most other conversations. We are challenged to listen more carefully and approach different points of view by looking at the deeper values and issues underlying them.

EIGHT PRINCIPLES FOR ENTERING INTO CONTEMPLATIVE DIALOGUE

1. Keep in mind that *Bridges* focuses on our “lived experience” and how the session theme connects to everyday life. Keep your comments rooted in your own experience and refrain from remarks that are overly abstract, philosophical, or theoretical.
2. Express your own thoughts knowing that others will listen and reflect upon what you say. It is helpful to use “I” statements like “I believe . . .” or “My assumption is that . . .” or “My experience has been. . .” Others in the group may very well not respond to your thoughts verbally; trust that they are hearing you.
3. Pay attention to the assumptions, attitudes, and experiences underlying your initial or surface thoughts on the topic. Ask yourself questions like: “Why am I drawn to this particular part of the reading?” “What makes me feel this way?”
4. Remember to listen first and refrain from thinking about how you might respond to another’s comments. Simply listen to and accept his or her thoughts on the subject without trying to challenge, critique, or even respond aloud to them.
5. Trust the group. Observe how the participants’ ideas, reflections, common concerns, assumptions, and attitudes come together and form a collective group mind.
6. Reflect before speaking and be concise. Make one point or relate one experience, then stop and allow others to do the same.

7. Expect periods of silence during the dialogue. Learn to be comfortable with the silence and resist the urge to speak just because there is silence.

8. Avoid cross-talking. In time you will adjust to saying something and not receiving a response and to listening without asking a question, challenging, or responding directly. Simply speaking to the theme or idea from your own experience or perspective takes some practice. Be patient with yourself and the other members of your group and watch for deepening levels of dialogue.

These principles for Contemplative Dialogue are extracted from the work of The Centre for Contemplative Dialogue. For more complete information visit www.contemplativedialogue.org

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Online resources available at www.avemariapress.com include:

- Leader's Guide
- Sample pages
- Suggested Retreat Schedule
- Program Evaluation Form
- Links to other books by and about Thomas Merton
- Interview with Robert Toth, executive director of The Merton Institute for Contemplative Living

FROM THE MERTON INSTITUTE FOR CONTEMPLATIVE
LIVING: WWW.MERTONINSTITUTE.ORG

Merton: A Film Biography (1 hour) provides an excellent overview on Merton's life and spiritual journey.

Soul Searching: The Journey of Thomas Merton is a sixty-seven minute DVD that goes to the heart of Merton's spiritual journey through the perspective of Merton's friends, Merton scholars, and authorities on the spiritual life.

Contemplation and Action is a periodic newsletter from The Merton Institute with information about new Merton publications, programs, and events. It is free and can be obtained by visiting the Institute's website or calling 1-800-886-7275.

The Thomas Merton Spiritual Development Program is a basic introduction to Merton's life and his insights on contemplative spirituality, social justice, and inter-religious dialogue. Especially designed for youth, it includes a participant's workbook/journal.

Weekly Merton Reflections Receive a brief reflection from Merton's works via e-mail each week by registering at www.mertoninstitute.org or by contacting:

The Merton Institute for Contemplative Living
2117 Payne Street
Louisville, KY 40206
1-800-886-7275



week of Ash Wednesday

WHERE DO WE TURN FOR FORGIVENESS?

OPENING REFLECTION

FROM PSALM 50 IN *THE PSALMS, A NEW TRANSLATION*,
ARRANGED BY JOSEPH GELINEAU

Indeed you love truth in the heart;
then in the secret of my heart teach me wisdom.
O purify me, then I shall be clean;
O wash me, I shall be whiter than snow.

O rescue me, God, my helper,
and my tongue shall ring out your goodness.
O Lord, open my lips
and my mouth shall declare your praise.

INTRODUCTION TO THE TEXTS

No sin is private, hurting no one but ourselves. A secret good deed has public consequences. We are interdependent and social creatures. We are one body. We need one another. Lent provides a perennial occasion to acknowledge and attend to our interrelatedness, to our most intimate and our most universal communities of love and concern.

When Thomas Merton, after visiting his doctor, stepped out on the busy sidewalk at the corner of Fourth and Walnut Streets in downtown Louisville, Kentucky, the illusion of separateness from everyone he saw faded to reveal that “there are no strangers.”

He wrote of this epiphany in his journal: "There, there is God in my own Kind, my own Kind—'Kind' which means 'likeness' and which means 'love' and which means 'child.' Mankind. Like one another, the dear 'Kind' of sinners united and embraced in only one heart, in only one Kindness, which is the Heart and Kindness of God" (*A Search for Solitude*, pp. 182–183).

Lent is a season for *metanoia*, a change of heart and mind from "former ways of life" that delude us into living as if we could be separate from one another. Lent reeducates us for living communally. Lent calls us to the truth of our unity as we celebrate our being one body in Christ.

MERTON'S VOICE

FROM *SEASONS OF CELEBRATION*

But where shall the sinner turn for pardon? To God, obviously. And the first thing is of course to seek Him in the depths of our heart, asking pardon for our sins. But the Christian conscience, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, tells us that this inner movement of repentance in the privacy of the heart, though it is essential, is not enough by itself. For sin is not a purely individual affair, and neither is pardon. However private it may be, sin remains in some sense everybody's business because everyone is affected by the evil that is in the heart of one. It is not possible for us to live so separated from others, so isolated and private in our own hearts, that our secret selfishness and sin will not affect others. We are involved in each other's lives, not by choice but by necessity, for that is the way we are made. No one can pretend successfully to live purely in his or her own private universe and remain sane. The very

condition of normal human life is community, communication, and “conversation” in the old Latin sense of *conversatio*—exchange on the level of social living. The lives of all of us are inextricably mixed together, and the salvation and damnation of souls is involved in this inescapable communication of freedoms. Either we will love and help one another or we will hate and attack one another, in which latter case we will all be one another’s hell. . . .

The heart of the Christian message is precisely reconciliation in the Spirit of Love so that communion in freedom turns into communion in beatitude. In which case heaven is communion with “others” (pp. 222–223).

ANOTHER VOICE

MARY MARGARET FUNK, O.S.B., *HUMILITY MATTERS*

In the foundational renunciation signified by baptism, we surrender our false self, generated by our egocentric desires. Since sin is living heedlessly, harming others or ourselves, we renounce these patterns of ignorance and sin by choosing a better way for ourselves and others. Furthermore, we enter into a process of critical discernment not just between good and evil, but regarding the hierarchy of goods. In other words, I renounce not just what may be harmful, but also what may be objectively good in itself, but not good for me. The phrase “former way of life” describes attachment to our family, property as possession, status linked to employment, rank in society, educational, racial, or gender entitlements, and any over-identification with what I do. These attachments dull our zeal and give us