

MEET THOMAS MERTON...

A conversation with Robert Toth, Executive director of The Thomas Merton Institute for Contemplative Living.

Q When people today turn to Thomas Merton...what are they looking for?

A People who turn to Thomas Merton are generally looking for guidance or direction on their spiritual journey and answers to questions about how to relate to God. His popular prayer, “My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going ...” probably best captures where most people are when they turn to Merton.

Q What do they find there?

A In Merton they often find an affirmation of their own thoughts and spiritual experiences and also find something that challenges them to look deeper into their relationship with God and others. They discover that Merton is one of us, very human. They identify with the personal account of his struggles and failings, his questions and concerns, and his insights and epiphanies. They find someone like themselves and a companion for their spiritual journey. They may have explored other spiritual writers or spiritual practices but in Merton find a sustained satisfaction that they didn't find in the others.

He challenges them to be totally honest, to discover their “true self” but also to be compassionate with themselves and others. Some find the focus they have been searching for in their spiritual life or a deeper sense of meaning in their lives. For some it is their first exposure to contemplative spirituality within the Christian tradition.

Q What don't they find there?

A They don't find a dogmatic approach in Merton. They won't find a set formula or a promise that deepening their inner-life is going to be an easy process.

Q Contemplative prayer is not for everybody? Or is it?

A I believe it helps to distinguish between contemplative practices and contemplative living. When we speak of contemplative living we mean integrating our spirituality and our everyday life. Spiritual practices such as centering prayer are disciplines that are essential aids to contemplative living. Each person needs to explore and adopt the practices that work best for them.

Q What does the Monastic tradition have to say to today's seeker?

A The monastic tradition offers people an approach to leading a God-centered life in the secular world. People who make retreats at monasteries often feel a sense of being “at home.” When they claim this feeling I believe they are referring to the inner calm and peace that comes from their experience of the balanced monastic schedule of prayer and work, silence and community. Merton’s writings make this experience accessible to everyone.

Q In his lifetime, Merton the monk became Merton the social activist. Tell us more.

A First, I believe it is important to understand the relationship between contemplation and action and Merton has a lot to say about this, as in *Contemplation in a World of Action*. Peace and social justice activists need to be well-grounded in order to be effective and to sustain themselves throughout the difficulties, frustrations and disappointments that come with their desire to change long standing patterns of behavior. Contemplative living is a key to becoming firmly grounded. It leads us out of ourselves into a deep compassion and concern for others. It helps us to experience our unity with others and nature. Merton became a social activist as an outgrowth of his contemplative life, a natural extension of it. He understood how critical it is for an activist to really understand himself and to be able to let go of his personal desires and objectives. Merton was able to do this and influence others to do the same.

Q What is Merton's attraction for people today?

A Some recent surveys we conducted indicated that people are looking for ways to live more contemplatively. For many that means finding a slower pace of life, less activities, some place where it is quiet. Merton addresses this need head on. He acknowledges that everyone, not just monks, is a contemplative and needs to attend to this aspect of their human nature. But he goes to the heart of what it means to be contemplative. It is not just being less busy and more quiet. It is living in loving relationship with ourselves, God, others and nature. This is what resonates with people.

Q What attracted you?

A My attraction to Merton was very typical of what I often hear others say. I felt as if he were writing directly to me. He was saying just what I needed to hear and he led me to read and explore other writers who expanded my understanding of myself, the spiritual life, peace and social justice issues, and other religious traditions.

Q What is your favorite Merton book?

A *New Seeds of Contemplation* and *No Man is an Island* are two of my favorites. If he hadn't written anything else, these would have been enough for me. And then there are the Journals where you get particular insights into how to integrate the spiritual and our everyday life from the account of his efforts to do so.

Q What is the most frequently asked question about Thomas Merton?

A The most frequent comment we receive is "Merton changed my life." The next would be comments about how pertinent his writing is to so much of what is going on in the world today, how prophetic he is.

Some have specific questions about what he would say about modern technology or terrorism. Others want to know about him -- how did he write so much? Did he ever have a thought that he didn't write down? The answers to most of their questions can usually be found in his writings and we try to direct them to where they can be found.