

Sheds Light on Unpublished Merton

"Thomas Merton's Dark Path: The Inner Experience of a Contemplative," by William H. Shannon. Published by Farrar Straus Giroux (New York, 1981) \$15.

By Prof. Chalmers MacCormick

This is a most welcome book! Gracefully and accurately written, its value is at least threefold: first, as a sound guide to Thomas Merton's major writings on contemplation, which Father Shannon rightly sees as "the explicit theme, or at least the implied background, of everything Merton wrote;" second, as a catalyst to a reading (or re-reading) of the best of those writings; and, third, as an impetus for laypersons and non-laypersons alike to renew and deepen themselves directly — to be practicing contemplatives.

To these three points may be added a fourth. As the full title implies, the book under review has a significant, even if hidden, autobiographical dimension. Charted and documented in it is Merton's own inner growth over a 20-year period, beginning in 1948 with his booklet "What Is Contemplation?" and culminating in 1968 in his collection of essays, "Zen and the Birds of Appetite" and his posthumously published "Asian Journal."

Over this two-decade span, Merton grew in both breadth and depth, in sympathy and insight, as is strikingly illustrated by his three versions of "Seeds of Contemplation," first published early in 1949, revised and reissued in December of the same year, then brought out with major revisions as "New Seeds of Contemplation" in 1962. Shannon shares with us a minor but by no means trivial example of the

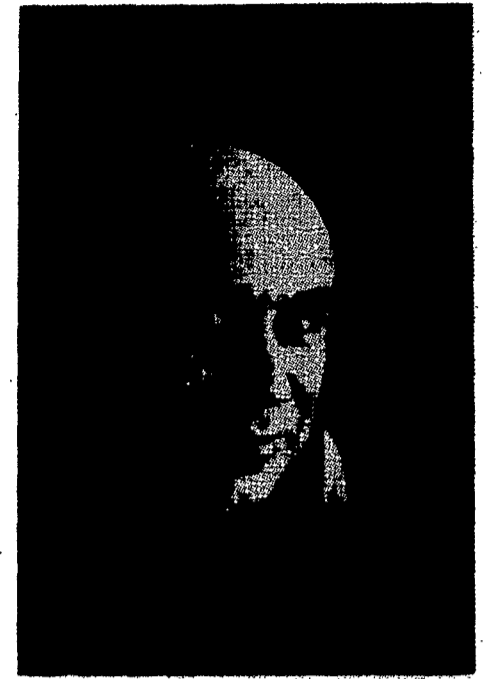
Chalmers MacCormick is professor of religion at Wells College in Aurora. He has written two articles on Thomas Merton, "The Zen Catholicism of Thomas Merton" (1972) and "A Critical Review of Solitude in the Life and Thought of Thomas Merton" (1981, though first presented as a paper on the 10th anniversary of Merton's death, 1978). He spoke to the Thomas Merton Society of Rochester on "Merton on Woman (Human and Holy)." He is an Oblate of Mount, Savior Monastery and attends St. Patrick's in Aurora, where he is sometimes lector.

differences among these three. In all of them, Merton counseled his readers about the reading of newspapers. In the first, he wrote: "do not read their newspapers, if you can help it," and in the second, "do not read their newspapers, unless you are really obliged to keep track of what is going on." Finally, in "New Seeds," when he himself felt obliged to keep track of what was going on, he tempered his previous counsel, replacing it simply with "do not read their advertisements." This shift leads Shannon to observe that as Merton "moved from the 'citadel' to the 'wide impregnable country,' new realms of experience opened up for him that he could carry back with him to his solitude — a solitude in which he could probe not only the depths of his own heart but, increasingly, the deepest realities of the heart of the world."

Shannon's highlighting of the differences among the three versions of "Seeds of Contemplation" is one of the things I found most engaging and important in this study, but there is unquestionably something else that distinguishes it even

more — indeed, makes it truly exceptional. Nearly a third of it is devoted to an unfinished work of Merton's entitled "The Inner Experience" (originally "The Dark Path"), which he began in 1959 and thoroughly reviewed and reworked from time to time in the ensuing nine years. Realizing after four drafts that it was still unfinished, he rightly decided against having it published. Since, 13 years after his death, it remains a work whose parts are decidedly better than the whole, the ban on the publication of the whole wisely remains in effect; however, the ban on publication of select parts has (equally wisely) been lifted. What Shannon has done for us, thanks to the approval and encouragement of the trustees of the Merton Legacy Trust, has been to provide a "summary overview" of "The Inner Experience" in one sizable chapter and present a series of substantial, well-chosen excerpts in another, thus making available to Merton aficionados-at-large what is otherwise accessible only to those fortunate enough to travel to the Thomas Merton Center in Louisville.

A word in conclusion about Shannon's title: as noted "The Dark Path" was Merton's original title for his "Inner Experience." Contrary to what might be one's first impression, "dark" is not meant (by either Merton or Shannon) to signify gloom, pessimism, despondency or despair. At core, it is a positive, not negative image — a paradoxical allusion to the awesome magnitude and unfathomability of the mystery of God and a metaphor for the deepest human experience of that mystery. A hint of what is meant is thus given in the following excerpt from "The Inner Experience" (quoted by Shannon):



"Thoughts, natural light, and spiritual images are, so to speak, veils or coverings that impede the direct, naked sensitivity by which the spirit touches the Divine Being. When the veils are removed, then one can touch, or rather be touched by, God, in the mystical darkness. Intuition reaches Him by one final leap beyond itself, an ecstasy in which it sacrifices itself and yields itself to His transcendent presence. In this last ecstatic set of 'unknowing,' the gap between our spirit as subject and God as object is finally closed, and in the embrace of mystical love we know that we and He are one."

Diocese and Others Study Teen Pregnancy

A coalition of private agencies has formed to set up open hearings on the growing problem of teen pregnancies in Monroe County. There were 1,112 live births by teens last year; 953 teens aborted their babies, and 741 unmarried teens gave birth.

The coalition will work

over the next two or three months with neighborhoods and groups in assessing teen sexuality and pregnancy needs and plan a program to meet those needs.

Among the agencies in the coalition are Action for a Better Community, Catholic Charities, the diocesan

Division of Social Ministry, Ibero-American Action League, the diocesan Office of Black Ministries, the Pan African Cultural Exposition, the Spanish Pentecostal Church Association and United Church Ministry.

According to Maurice Tierney, chief of Catholic

Charities, "The Community Coalition on Teen Pregnancy has met with representatives of a Monroe County-sponsored group (which includes Planned Parenthood) to encourage collaboration in the conduct of the neighborhood hearings. The coalition believes that the positive spirit of cooperation

of that meeting will enable the development of a project which will have broad-based community support, respectful of the recognized pluralism of values and cultural, ethnic and religious differences."

According to William Privett, associate director of

Charities, the coalition was formed in response to a proposal by the county that did not take the "pluralism of values" into account.

Deadline

The deadline for submitting news to the Courier-Journal is noon on Thursday preceding the following Wednesday's publication.

Fr. John Reedy

Looking for the Lord



Easing The Strain Of Celibacy

Within the past week or so, I've noticed a flurry of articles about pets. For example, the Beacon (Paterson diocese) did a double-page spread on priests and their pets — which included geese, steers and a guard dog you shouldn't fool around with.

But when that voice of the establishment, the Wall Street Journal, ran a major story on the psychological implications of pet-owning, I recognized a significant trend.

This preoccupation probably represents an escape from all the rotten news about the economy, nuclear weapons and assassination, but a columnist hates to let a trend pass him by.

Though I have a couple of titles which identify my activity on this campus, I think I am most widely known as the companion of a large, friendly, excessively familiar black labrador named Beau.

For many people at Notre Dame, I am known as the large, aging cleric who looks ridiculous chasing Beau,

getting little response either from blasts on a police whistle or from bellowing, "Heel!"

These episodes put a temporary strain on our relationship, but I am fond of the dog, and I always swallow my pride and go out to retrieve him when I receive one of those testy phone calls: "Reedy, come over here and get that dog out of my office so my people can get back to work."

The other embarrassment involving my dog comes from the fact that he has problems about his sexual identity. With other dogs, he seems decidedly gay... and at times he has manifested a kinky fascination with Volkswagens.

This didn't bother me too much until I read an article claiming that pets tend to take on the neuroses of their masters. After that I became self-conscious about the fact that I am driving a VW.

There is a more serious discomfort about spending money for dog food and vet fees. These expenditures bother me when I think of the number of children in the world who lack adequate food and medical care. I really don't need this additional ethical problem in

my life, but I don't think I can ease my mind by turning my dog over to the humane society.

When our relationship first began, a number of friends, realizing that the care of this dog would involve inconvenience for me, asked the logical question, "Why?"

The simple answer is that I like most dogs; also, I suspect there is some emotional link to the experience of my early family life in which an undemanding beagle played a prominent role.

But the usual answer I gave was related to all the discussion then going on about the demands of clerical celibacy, how this kind of a life tended to leave priests emotionally impoverished.

"I looked at my own emotional life," I said, "and found that there was some truth in that judgment."

"But, as I thought about it, I concluded that adopting a friendly labrador would be much less complicated than taking a wife."

For some reason, that answer usually generated a distinct chill among the women who were present.

But enough of this escapism. Next week I'll get back to solving the problems of the Church and the nation — after I've had a chance to discuss these concerns with Beau.

ANTIQUESHOW AND SALE



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