

FEATURE

Writings reflect Thomas Merton's inner journey

Thomas Merton: Essential Writings. Christine M. Bochen, ed. Orbis Books. 191 pages. Paperback, \$14.

Reviewed by Sr. Dolores Monahan, SSJ
Guest contributor

Thomas Merton: Essential Writings, part of Robert Ellsberg's Modern Spiritual Masters series, comes as a refreshing selection of Merton's work. At first glance, the title may imply a revisiting of material that has been addressed numerous times in various ways. This assumption is readily set aside, however.

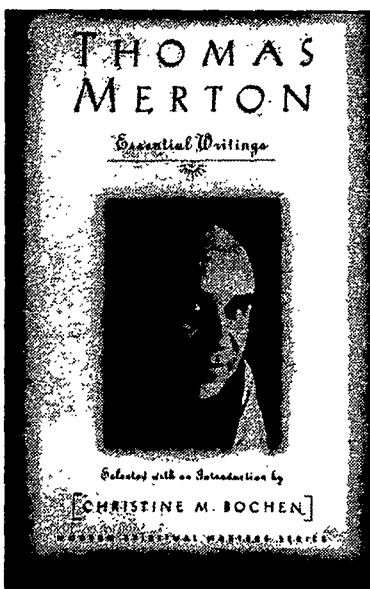
Christine Bochen has selected well by coupling references that are more widely known with those that have been less available to the general readership. Inclusion of the latter has highlighted and added further significant dimensions to the more well-known works. Bochen, a professor of religious studies at Nazareth College, having edited *The Courage of Truth* (one volume of Merton's letters) and *Learning to Love* (the sixth volume of Merton's journals) aptly used her access to Merton's works.

In it, Bochen begins her "Introduction: Awakening the Heart" with a quote from the Dalai Lama's autobiography, in which he wrote about Merton: "More striking than his outward appearance, which was memorable in itself, was the inner life that he manifested. I could see he was a truly humble and deeply spiritual man. This was the first time I had been struck by

such a feeling of spirituality in anyone who professed Christianity ... It was Merton who first introduced me to the real meaning of the word 'Christian.'"

These words, so true then, are still attested to by the large number of people who continue to read Merton's writings, attend Merton lectures, and delve into the countless books continuing to be published about Merton. Indeed, as Bochen states, "The Dalai Lama experienced what countless readers have sensed: Merton's spirituality was embodied in his person." Merton's works and Merton's life strove for a contemplative unity with his person, his God and all persons. Yes, he was correct in saying, "Every book I write is a mirror of my own character and conscience."

Later, Bochen lays the groundwork for the three themes that she has chosen to express Merton's person and the development of his spirituality. She states, "Three dimensions of Christianity are especially striking in Merton's life and writing: its contemplative dimension, its commitment to social justice and compassion, and its vi-



sion of unity. In other words, being a Christian involves awakening to the reality of God within, living with love and justice, and recognizing and sustaining all that unites the human community." Bochen's selections focus on how Merton lived, developed and expressed these dimensions of Christianity.

Reading the book's "Selections," we soon become imbued with an appreciation of how he leads us into both a discovery and a rediscovery of contemplation.

This call to contemplation was truly "at the very core of Merton's spirituality," as Bochen writes. "His writings on contemplation invite persons to experience for themselves the reality of God's presence."

He tells us, "But the gate of heaven is everywhere." Although disclaiming any attempt to teach a "method" of contemplation, Merton pours out from the very "ground of his being," statement after statement of what contemplation is, of how it fills, and how it empties.

Merton's inner journey led him into compassion. His overwhelming realization

of loving all people on the corner of Fourth and Walnut streets in Louisville led him to say that, "The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream ... My solitude, however is not my own, for I see now how much it belongs to them - and I have a responsibility for it in their regard, not just my own." Merton shows us this same compassion in his letters, poems and reflections on war. He puts violence, fear and the actions of the "sane" in war beside statements that cannot be lightly passed over.

"Compassion teaches me that my brother and I are one," he states. "... I must have at least enough compassion to realize that when they suffer they feel somewhat as I do when I suffer."

And finally, we see that Merton's contemplation and compassion brought him to "A Call to Unity." He stated, "Not that we discover a new unity. We discover an older unity ... we are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are."

Let us pray with Merton that we can indeed be what we are.

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Sister Monahan directs retreats in Geneva and at Notre Dame Retreat House in Canandaigua, teaches prayer classes at St. Michael School in Newark, offers spiritual direction and prayer program series in Geneva, and is involved in Project Rachel and Rachel Vineyard Retreats.

Biography details the many talents of St. Francis of Assisi

Francis of Assisi, by Adrian House. Hidden Spring Books. 336 pages. \$28

Reviewed by Gerald Schwartz
Guest contributor

Many of us may remember from our school days pictures and stories of St. Francis of Assisi preaching to the birds: the wrens, finches and sparrows. But, however original and characteristic, they tell very little of his genius. On the other hand, *Francis of Assisi*, by Adrian House, goes in-depth in a most gratifying and clear way.

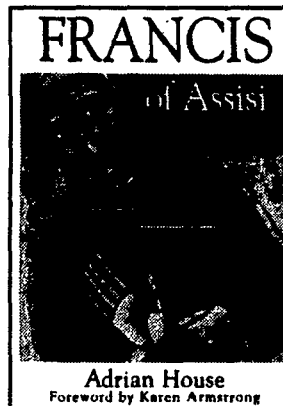
In the preface to *Francis of Assisi*, House, who has spent decades in publishing and television production in Britain, writes that the inspiration for writing the biography came while visiting a friary where all the guests - be they bishops, ex-prisoners, retired generals, travelers or alcoholic stockbrokers - received identical treatment from the friars, making it impossible to know for certain who was who. At the start of a story so synonymous with compassion and acceptance of all forms of life, this anecdote serves as a powerful reminder of St. Francis' enduring appeal and popularity - this man who seems

quite Christ-like in his Christianity.

The real achievement of this book is to relate what House calls "the almost continual drama" of the saint's life to the political, social, economic, military and religious upheavals of 12th- and 13th-century Europe, in order to explain the culture that formed Francis, and expected his ascent to its mores - a culture that, to a great extent, he set about changing with tenacious forbearance and wit.

The picture of Francis that House gives us, then, is far more complex, and of course, more fully realized than the hazy image many of us have in our hearts and minds from stories and pictures of him in such activities as preaching to the birds. He was not only the great orator and evangelist we think we know but also soldier, poet (he wrote the first known surviving poetry in Italian and is said to have inspired Dante away from Latin to the same), socialite, linguist, merchant, troubadour and ecologist.

Above all, House presents Francis as a man of many paradoxes. Of upper middle class background, Francis was the son of a merchant. His father was pleased that his son was acquiring new graces, skills and



Adrian House
Foreword by Karen Armstrong

social connections.

There would be only one life for Francis - a career in the family business. But Francis came to embrace poverty, abjuring property and possessions, much to his

father's agonized bewilderment.

Answering the call of his times, and increasingly convinced that to get the most out of life he should put it at risk, Francis became a soldier. As cavalryman, he was taken prisoner, held one year, only to be ransomed early due to his failing health. He had contracted tuberculosis. But during that time in dark solitude he began to be stirred by a new sense of purpose, humanity, unselfishness. A new spark of faith changed this callous man of war into a man who would take up the mantle of the Prince of Peace.

Francis, this man who once lived as a

rich, arrogant, flamboyant playboy in a manner that would not be too unfamiliar to people today, threw himself into a new existence. He worked, first alone, then with handfuls of followers in the fields, building modest shelters, preaching. But his witness did not end there: He applied himself to perhaps the most severe test of taking up the cross - caring for lepers.

There is hardly an incident in this engaging biography that doesn't enlarge our understanding of Francis's vision of God's love lived out generously. Moreover, *Francis of Assisi*, a splendidly written, generously illustrated book, is an excellent resource for learning about medieval Christianity, medieval European society, and how Christ spoke to the life of a single man.

Like the work of all supreme artists, poets, scientists and original thinkers, St. Francis' legacy transcends distance and time. It survives with theirs to offer us illumination, guidance or instruction; to encourage, console or delight us on our individual journeys through life toward salvation.

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Schwartz, who resides in Irondequoit, writes reviews and poetry for literary journals.

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