



Reading  
with  
Leader's  
Guide

# VINTAGE Saints & Sinners

Thomas Merton (1915-1968)

1 | Every moment and every event of every person's life on earth plants something in her or his soul. For just as the wind carries thousands of winged seeds, so each moment brings with it germs of spiritual vitality that come to rest imperceptibly in the minds and wills of men and women. Most of these unnumbered seeds perish and are lost, for such seeds as these cannot spring up anywhere except in the good soil of freedom, spontaneity and love. (New Seeds of Contemplation)

*Does Merton say anything new to you—something you've never thought of before?*

*What does this short passage still have you thinking/Puzzling over/Wondering about?*

*Can you think of one particular moment or event that planted something in your soul? Talk about that.*

*Think back upon your day so far. What winged seeds of spiritual vitality came to rest upon you? How could you allow it those grow?*

*According to Merton, what makes for good soil? How can we live in a way that fosters freedom, spontaneity and love—and makes us more receptive to spiritual seeds, germs of vitality? Are there any spiritual practices or practical daily choices that could make way for freedom, spontaneity and love?*

*The readings today come from three areas of fruitfulness & growth in Merton's life: conversion, contemplation and community...The first section come from his best-selling autobiography, Seven Storey Mountain.*

## Conversion

2 | God---that center Who is everywhere, and whose circumference is nowhere, finding me, through incorporation with Christ, incorporated into the immense and gravitational movement which is love, which is the Holy Spirit---loved me. And he called out to me from His own immense depths. (*Seven Storey Mountain*)

*In these few words, what do you notice about Merton's view of God?*

*Tom tells the story of being a student at Columbia University. He is not a Christian.*

*Think back to when you were 23. What do you remember about your spiritual life—that you'd be willing to share?*

*In this scene, Tom is in his room reading...*

3 | *at age 23:* All of a sudden something began to stir within me, something began to push me, to prompt me. It was a movement that spoke like a voice. 'What are you waiting for?' it said. 'Why are you sitting here? Why do you still hesitate? You know what you ought to do? Why don't you do it?' I stirred in my chair. I lit a cigarette, looked out the window at the rain, tried to shut the voice up. 'Don't act on your impulses,' I thought. 'This is crazy. This is not rational. Read your book.' [the inner voice only renewed its appeal:] 'It's useless to hesitate any longer. Why don't you get up and go?'...I could bear it no longer. I put down the book, and got into my raincoat, and started down the stairs. I went out into the street. I crossed over, and walked along by the grey wooden fence, towards Broadway, in the light rain. And then everything inside me began to sing. (*Seven Storey Mountain, 215-16*)

*What do you notice about Thomas's experience? Have you ever felt anything like this? How did you respond? Merton says, "And then everything inside me began to sing." When do you feel everything inside singing?*

*Tom Merton continues to welcome the seeds, the germs of spiritual vitality in his life—and continued on this surprising journey with God—to unexpected places.*

*At age 26 he made the startling decision to join the monastery of Gethesemani in rural Kentucky.*

*He wrote a great deal about solitude, silence, prayer and contemplation.*

## Contemplation

*What does this word “contemplation” mean to you? What associations do you have with this word?  
We’ll ask the questions again at the end of our reading...*

4 | “Our real journey in life is interior: it is a matter of growth, deepening, and of an ever greater surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts.” *AJ 296*

*The next passages speak of contemplation but this was no life of freefloating meditation—He committed to a regimen of work and worship and discipline...*

**Gethsemani Monastery, Kentucky** | **Winter AM:** 2:00 Rise, recite Matins & Lauds | 2:30 Meditation | 3:00 Night Office | 4:00 Mass, Communion, Reading | 5:30 Prime, breakfast | 6:30 Reading, Study, Prayer | 7:45 Tierce, Mass, Sext | 9:00 Work | 10:45 Reading, Prayer | 11:07 None | 11:30 Dinner **Winter PM:** 12:15 Reading, Prayer | 1:30 Work | 3:30 Reading, Prayer | 4:30 Vespers | 5:15 Meditation | 5:30 Collation | 5:40 Reading, Prayer | 6:10 Compline, Examination of Conscience | 7:00 All Retire

*Tom Merton was a poet and a writer—here he gives us a picture of his experience of silence and contemplation:*

5 | The new bells sound wonderful from the woods. St. John’s day—Frater Tarcisius and I walked all the way to Hanekamp’s in the afternoon. Wonderful, quiet little valley! The silent house, the goats in the red sage grass, the dry creek, and Hanekamp’s vineyard. The beautiful silence of the woods on every side! Frater Tarcisius looked about with such reverence that you would have thought he was seeing angels. Later we separated to pray apart in the thinned pine grove on the southeastern hillside. And I could see how simple it is to find God in solitude. There is no one else, nothing else. He is all there is to find there. Everything is in Him. And what could be more pleasing to Him than that we should leave all things and all company to be with Him and think only of Him and know Him alone, in order to give Him our love?... My silence is part of the whole world’s silence and builds the temple of God without the noise of hammers. *Journals. III.27, 29*

*Doesn’t this picture of uninterrupted communion with God sound wonderful—and maybe unachievable?  
Hear this line again:*

*“what could be more pleasing to Him than that we should leave all things and all company to be with Him and think only of Him and know Him alone, in order to give Him our love?”*

*What keeps us from doing this?*

*If you truly wanted to spend time in company with God tomorrow, how would plan your day?*

*Any practical ways you’ve found for choosing solitude?*

*Thomas Merton reminds us of the reason WHY contemplation, prayer, silence is important—what gifts we can receive—hope, freedom*

6 | **The message of hope** the contemplative offers you...is...that whether you understand or not, God loves you, is present in you, lives in you, dwells in you, calls you, saves you, and offers you an understanding and light which are like nothing you ever found in books or heard in sermons.

*[go on to read 7]*

7 | The contemplative life should not be regarded as the exclusive prerogative of those who dwell in monastic walls. All men can seek and find this intimate awareness and awakening which is a gift of love and vivifying touch of creative and redemptive power that power which raised Christ from the dead and cleanses us from dead works to serve the living God...It should certainly be emphasized today that **prayer is a real source of personal freedom** in the midst of a world in which men are dominated by massive organizations and rigid institutions which seek only to exploit them for money and power. Far from being the cause of alienation, **true religion in spirit is a liberating force that helps man to find himself in God.**” *HGL 159*

*In what ways can prayer become a source of personal freedom—in your own life or in the life of another?*

8 | There are so many Christians who do not appreciate the magnificent dignity of their vocation to sanctity, to the knowledge, love and service to God. There are so many Christians who do not realize what possibilities God has placed in the life of Christian perfection—**what possibilities for joy in the knowledge and love of Him**. There are so many Christians who have practically no idea of the immense love of God for them, and of the power of that Love to do them good, to bring them happiness....

But there is only one condition. If you desire intimate union with God you must be willing to pay the price for it. The price is small enough. In fact, it is not even a price at all: it only seems to be so with us. We find it difficult to give up our desire for things that can never satisfy us in order to purchase the One Good in Whom is all our joy—and in Wisdom, moreover, we get back everything else that we have renounced besides!

9 | The fact remains that contemplation will not be given to those who willfully remain at a distance from God, who confine their interior life to a few routine exercises of piety and a few external acts of worship and service performed as a matter of duty. Such people are careful to avoid sin. They respect God as a Master. But their hearts do not belong to Him. They are not really interested in Him, except in order to insure themselves against losing heaven and going to hell. In actual practice, their minds and hearts are taken up with their own ambitions and troubles and comforts and pleasures and all their worldly interests and anxieties and fears. God is only invited to enter this charmed circle to smooth difficulties and to dispense rewards. (*Devotional Classics, 18*)

*As you read these words, what words challenge or engage you? What really rings true for you?  
In the final passages, Thomas Merton turns our focus outward, toward others.*

10 | It seems to me that I have greater peace and am close to God when I am not 'trying to be a contemplative,' or trying to be anything special, but **simply orienting my life fully and completely towards what seems to be required of a man like me at a time like this**. I am obscurely convinced that **there is a need in the world for something I can provide and that there is a need for me to provide it**. True, someone else can do it, God does not need me. But I feel He is asking me to provide it. The wonder of being brought, by God, around a corner and to realize a new road is opening up, perhaps—which He alone knows. And that there is no way of traveling it but in Christ and with Him. This is joy and peace—whatever happens. The result does not matter. I have something to do for Him and, if I do that, everything else will follow. (*Journals III.159-60*)

*Is there a phrase or a sentence in this passage that speaks to you? Read it out now.  
Having read these passages from Merton, what does this word "contemplation" mean to you? What has he added to your understanding?*

*Merton lived a focused life of prayer at the monastery. Like all of us, he may have turned inward a bit too much. One day he had a new spiritual experience—and revelation that opened his eyes to the strangers around him. This as an important step into community.*

## Community

11 | In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness... This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud... I have the immense joy of being man, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.,,

Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts, where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time."

*(Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander)*

*What is it about prayer, about contemplation, that opens us up to community, to other people?*

*How can we come to see other people as God sees them?*

*Merton's Prayer*

*"My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me.*

*I cannot know for certain where it will end.*

*Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.*

*But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.*

*And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.*

*I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.*

*And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it.*

*Therefore will I trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.*

*I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone."*