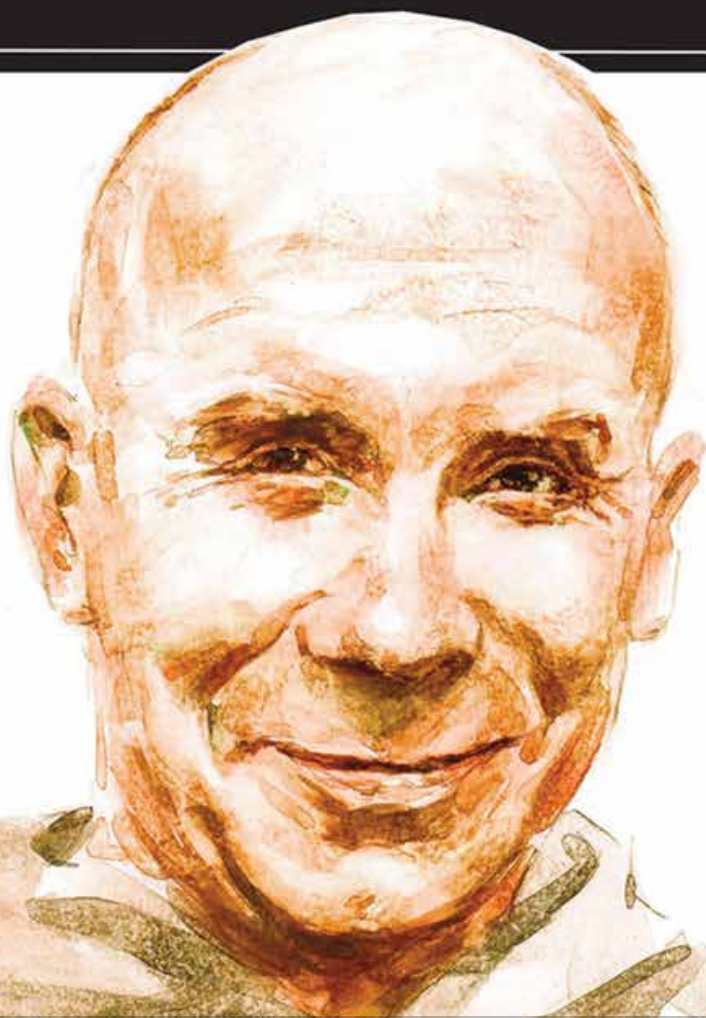


MICHAEL W. HIGGINS

THOMAS MERTON



*Faithful
Visionary*

DISCUSSION GUIDE

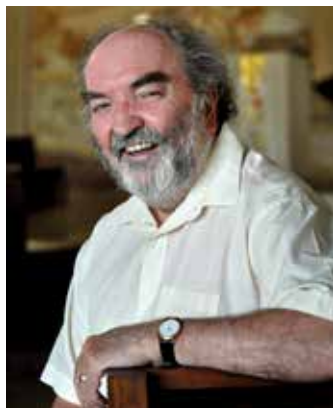
About the Book

Thomas Merton was the consummate post-modern holy one: flawed, anti-institutional, a voice for the voiceless. But he was also a classical traditionalist: centered, obedient, in search of stability. He was a religious thinker of remarkable insight, a social commentator of courage and conviction, and a writer of startling virtuosity.

Michael W. Higgins recounts the life of this insatiable wanderer. He explores the various layers of influence and evolution in Merton's thought and spirituality. This book tells the remarkable story of a life that remains to be understood from its beginnings and long after its premature ending.

About the Author

Michael W. Higgins is vice-president for Mission and Catholic Identity at Sacred Heart University, past president of St. Jerome's University in Ontario and St. Thomas University in New Brunswick, a columnist, editor, radio documentarist, and television commentator. He is the author and coauthor of numerous books, including bestsellers *Power and*



Peril: The Catholic Church at the Crossroads; Stalking the Holy: In Pursuit of Saint-Making; and Genius Born of Anguish—the Life and Legacy of Henri Nouwen.

Discussion Guide

Chapter One

1. Merton was “a perpetual wanderer and seeker of origins” (p. 1). How did this affect his spirituality throughout his life? Do you relate to this in regard to your own spiritual journey?
2. In what ways did Merton’s parents have an effect on the shaping of his personality? How did their influence affect him as a writer later in life?
3. What factors in Merton’s childhood contributed to his eventual attraction to religious life?
4. Discuss the relationship that Merton had with his father, and how his father’s death affected him.
5. Merton was given much freedom during his teenage years. Could this be one reason why he was eventually attracted to monastic life? Consider how the struggles he experienced in those early years make him more relatable.

Chapter Two

1. Merton was “aware of the need for a faith that is not conditioned by rational structures alone.” Did he find this in Catholicism?
2. Discuss the influence that William Blake’s poetry and art had on Merton.
3. Before joining a religious community, Merton “had a profound apprehension of the presence of God” (p. 22). Have you or anyone you know ever experienced something similar?
4. Merton hoped that the abbey of Gethsemani would be his “perfect society” (p. 23). Was this hope at least partially fulfilled? Why or why not?
5. Do you think Merton joined the Trappists for the right reasons? Why or why not? Could he have been better suited to a different occupation?

Chapter Three

1. In what ways was Gethsemani a good fit for Merton? What aspects were not a good fit, and why?
2. How did the death of Merton's brother affect his writings?
3. Do you agree that "there is a certain arrogance in publishing your autobiography" at a relatively young age (p. 28)? Why or why not?
4. Why was *The Seven Storey Mountain* such a great success? How did Merton feel about its success? Discuss how achieving celebrity status can be both a blessing and a curse.
5. Why was Merton drawn to a solitary life? Do you think he would have been well-suited to the life of a hermit at this point in his life (during the 1950s)?

Chapter Four

1. Discuss Merton's struggles with authoritarianism and being silenced in advocating for peace.
2. How did Merton's views of the monastic ideal differ from those of his superiors? Did both sides have opinions of some merit?
3. Is Merton's belief that "retreat from the world did not mean retreat from its concerns" (p. 41) an important view to retain in monastic life?
4. The author says Merton felt he was "a slave to confusion and doubt constantly agonizing over better prospects, embroiled with inner suffering that is largely his own creation, a perpetual failure in overcoming his narcissism and incapable of finding his way" (p. 42). Do you relate to any part of this description?
5. Why/how did Merton remain loyal to his religious order despite his troubles with authorities? What do you make of his relationship to his abbot, Dom James Fox?

Chapter Five

1. Reflect on the description of Merton offered by Dom Bamberger on pages 51–52.
2. What was Merton's interpretation of a monk's purpose in the world?
3. Discuss Merton's important contributions to the peace movement.
4. Could Merton have accomplished more for the peace movement if authorities hadn't repressed him, or did the repression itself help to motivate his work?
5. Merton was told that he incorrectly interpreted Pope John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris*. Discuss whether Merton's work was consistent with the message of this encyclical. (The document is available at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_xxiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem_en.html; see paragraphs 109–16.)
6. What do you think of Merton's comparison of himself with black people?

Chapter Six

1. Merton was finally allowed to be a full-time hermit in 1965. Was the hermitage all that he had imagined?
2. Discuss Merton's need for both solitude and companionship.
3. A friend of Merton's said that marriage "would have been disastrous" for him (p. 78). Do you agree or disagree?
4. Why did Merton believe that because of his affair, "his own spiritual turmoil may in the end be a good thing" (p. 83)?
5. What theological and spiritual discoveries did Merton experience as a result of his love for "M."?
6. Why did Merton reject the idea of abandoning his vocation? Consider the internal struggles that many public figures likely experience.

Chapter Seven

1. Why was Merton drawn to Eastern religious traditions?
2. What did Merton mean when he wrote, “the first way to be a decent monk is to be a non-monk and an anti-monk” (p. 94)?
3. Reflect on Merton’s realization that “the journey to the heart of all reality . . . is shared by all authentic traditions” (p. 95).
4. Discuss the idea of “the death of the master” in relation to Merton’s death (p. 103). Should Western thought be avoided in consideration of this idea?
5. Could Merton’s embrace of Eastern faiths have been an indication that he was moving away from his own faith, or was he indeed “just centering” (p. 105)?
6. How does the subtitle of this book—*Faithful Visionary*—reflect the legacy of Merton? What other words would you use to describe Merton?