

The Franciscan Heart of Thomas Merton: A New Look at the Spiritual Inspiration of His Life, Thought, and Writing

Daniel P. Horan

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Franciscan friar Horan adapts theological material for laypersons without sacrificing depth.

The Franciscan Heart of Thomas Merton: A New Look at the Spiritual Inspiration of His Life, Thought, and Writing is a fresh, well-studied look at two compelling figures of the Catholic faith. Daniel P. Horan's main premise, that Thomas Merton was a "Franciscan-hearted person," may seem strange at first. After all, Merton was a Trappist monk, and the Trappist and Franciscan traditions differ considerably, the former being more contemplative and the latter being more active. But not only does Horan highlight Merton's early religious life as part of the Third Order of St. Francis at St. Bonaventure College, he also traces Merton's "deep and passionate study of the Franciscan intellectual tradition" that continued the rest of his life, as evidenced by his writings.

The book is part biography—of Merton and St. Francis—and part theological discourse. Horan begins by exploring the life and identity of St. Francis of Assisi, rounding out the vision that many Catholics have, and getting non-Catholics up to speed. Horan then covers Merton's legacy and path to faith before delving into the heart of the book: comparing Merton and St. Francis's faiths, from their approach to Christ to their prophetic voices to their passionate pursuits of peace.

Horan, a Franciscan friar himself, shows his faith through his careful, detailed research and presentation, as well as through his warm, devoted tone. Merton's broad, fervent faith, spurred on by study of disparate religions, makes him a compelling religious figure in today's increasingly nonreligious culture—the cover photo perfectly captures his approachable, gentle persona. Horan's work only makes Merton more compelling, highlighting the depth of his immersion into the Franciscan facet of the Catholic faith. While Merton and Horan are passionately devoted to their specific faith and respect the distinctions of belief between sects, they show the value of blurring the dividing lines and embracing a boldly holistic faith. They represent a compelling, devout middle ground between people stuck in their religious divisions and people who've fled all organized belief systems.

Catholics will appreciate the distinction of religious sects and appreciate Horan's surprise in finding Franciscan roots in Merton's writing; other religious people will simply savor the holy truths Merton lived out.

MELISSA WUSKE (Winter 2015)

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