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Review of Reading Thomas Merton and Longing for God in Haiti: Learning Wisdom in the School of My Life

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***Reading Thomas Merton and Longing for God in Haiti: Learning Wisdom in the School of My Life.* Gerard Thomas Straub. Ft. Pierce, FL: Pax et Bonum Communications, 2022, paper, 359 pp., ISBN-13: 979-8-98608888-1-5.**

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Born into a modest Brooklyn Catholic family, Gerard Thomas Straub has climbed up to and then pushed himself off of every high economic and intellectual berth his bright mind and communications savvy earned for him. Consciously agnostic to his Roman Catholic Roots in the forties and fifties, he climbed his mountain to perch at Thirty Rock in NYC as the producer of popular soap operas. He deserved and relished every perk of his attainment until, while teaching filmmaking at the Gregorian Pontifical University in Rome, he found his truer self's calling to another life while he sat quietly in Rome's Franciscan Church of St. Isidore. He met the image of Jesus that was a live image for his own soul in the journey to poverty experienced by Saint Francis of Assisi. For decades since that afternoon, Straub has never ceased radicalizing his life's identity as a writer and filmmaker who serves the poor. A harvest of ten books and twenty-five full-length films has marked Straub's life of downward mobility in service to the least resourced among us. He has won awards for his books and film, received honorary doctorates, and raised funds for the projects of others who serve the poor. In what might be his final, specific commitment, seven years ago he founded from scratch with "no scratch" the now thriving Santa Chiara Children's Center in Haiti where he lives with his Haitian physician spouse.

Thomas Merton, the American monk who was a poet, priest, and public intellectual, most widely famous for his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain* published in 1948, has exerted an influence on Straub's vocation as writer, filmmaker, and social activist that is only exceeded by that of St. Francis of Assisi. His most recent book, *Reading Thomas Merton and Longing for God in Haiti*, recounts the tone of Straub's encounter with the spiritual legacy of the Trappist monk whom Pope Francis has declared to be among the four most important Americans as models and mentors for contemporary living, along with Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Dorothy Day. Straub's new book exposes his spiritual life and philosophy in a refreshingly candid appraisal of how insufficient without grace would be his ability to rise to his tasks in his Haitian community every day. The reader is invited to smell the daily bread being made through hair-raising diary entries of his activities in Haiti.

"Much of this book was written during a tumultuous year when both the global pandemic and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement captured the nations attention. [...] In Haiti, I spend days on end without seeing another white person. In the last seven years, I've entered deeply into the Black experience. In doing so, my attention is often focused on the prophetic and dangerous words of Thomas Merton writing in the tensions of the 1960s."

I have befriended Gerry Straub for over twenty years now. He calls me to make him laugh. It has quite recently dawned on me that Gerry's humility and ordinary way of being a religious mystic has allowed me to regard him as something of an "old shoe" whom I can tease constantly. I'm only now realizing that I have been befriended by a religious genius, a communicator of spirituality in action whose talents are high and intense. Straub is easily the most admirable human being I have

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ever met. His simplicity of touch and tone deceives a reader into believing this guy is an ordinary dude. There's more to Gerry Thomas Straub than has ever accurately met my eye. Giving friendship to me, I now know, was like Stradivarius gifting his violin to a gorilla.

"Just to be clear," he writes, "I don't believe my ministry to abandoned kids in Haiti will save my soul. Only God can do that. While the spiritual discipline required to live in a deeply impoverished area of Port-au-Prince is personally very beneficial, it doesn't make God love me anymore than he/she already does. God loves us no matter what we do or don't do. However, if we do right and express true sorrow when we do wrong, we can live and die in peace, trusting fully in God's extravagant, unwarranted mercy."

Another reviewer, a monk, Guerric Heckel, provides the best invitation to explore Straub's book: "The power of contemplation and action to beacon hope for our world's dark journeys shines out in Gerry Straub's fascinating tale of his adventures in Haiti as the founder of the Santa Chiara Children Center. Merton would have been avid to read the story of this married, secular Franciscan who gave up a New York media career to serve the poor. Gerry's witness in this book would have been a case in point for Thomas Merton to believe that a faithful life in action can triumph in hiding over great despair and violence."

Finally, in a word of caution to his reader that his latest book will not be an easy read, Straub opens his new work with advice: "As you read this book, the book will be reading you. Anytime you read a text, the text is actually inviting you to enter into a different world, to move beyond your limits of yourself. As I read Thomas Merton in Haiti and in numerous slums around the world, I felt as if he had kidnapped me. I couldn't escape, couldn't put down whatever Merton book I was reading. My point is you should allow this book, influenced so deeply by the legacy of this American contemplative, to open up for you new vistas of understanding. Read it with more than your eyes. Read it with your broken heart. Read it with an opening mind."

**An editor, international retreat presenter, and writer, Jonathan Montaldo specializes in promoting the literary and spiritual legacy of Thomas Merton. His work includes a Merton-based program in ten booklets for small group dialogue entitled Bridges to Contemplative Living with Thomas Merton.*