

# SPIRITUAL BOOK NEWS

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## FEATURED SELECTION

December 2009

### COMPASSIONATE FIRE

*The Letters of Thomas Merton and Catherine de Hueck Doherty*

Edited by Robert A. Wild

Just after Thomas Merton's death in 1968, Catholic social activist Catherine de Hueck Doherty wrote to Merton's abbot: "In some strange mysterious way I never quite understood, [he] was in part my spiritual son." The friendship originated when Merton worked at Friendship House in Harlem, and this volume of warm, candid correspondence traces nearly three decades of friendship through thirty-one surviving letters—fourteen written by Merton, and seventeen by Doherty. Doherty's previously unpublished letters are now brought together with those of Merton. The exchange reveals Merton's development from a young man searching for his place in God's plan, to a monk seeking God through solitude and work for social justice.

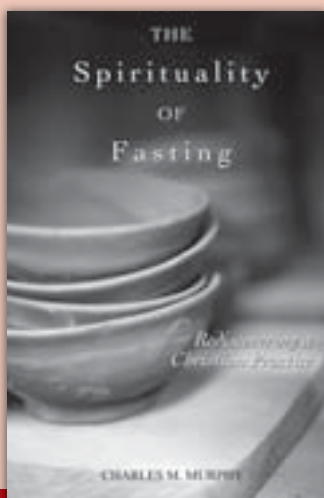
ISBN: 9781594712166 / 128 pages, with 4-page photo insert / \$12.95



## SPRING 2010 SBA SELECTIONS

Reminder: your next SBA newsletter and book selection will arrive in February.

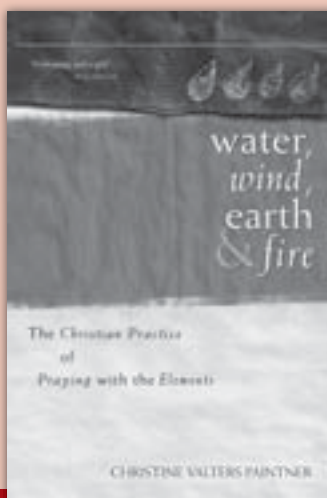
February



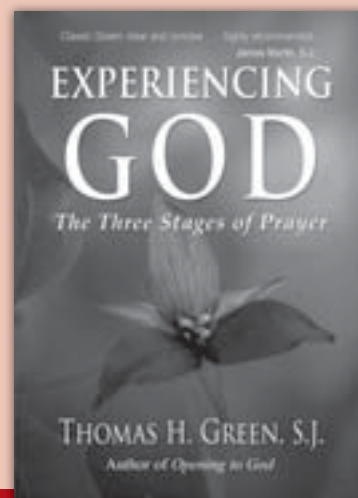
March



April



May



## A DIVINE FRIENDSHIP

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If the eyes are the windows to the soul, then perhaps personal letters are the windows to the heart. The letters between Thomas Merton and Catherine de Hueck Doherty unveil the nature and nurturing of their relationship, which Catherine likened to the spiritual bond between a mother and son. As the saying goes, there is no mere coincidence in divine providence.

They met in 1941—Catherine a well-known Catholic convert who worked among the poor; Thomas a St. Bonaventure professor who struggled to divine God’s will. Later that year, with her encouragement, he entered the Abbey of Gethsemani in the lush hills outside of Louisville, Kentucky.

Catherine was the daughter of Russian aristocrats. Born before the turn of the twentieth century, she grew up in a devout Christian family. Before arriving in the United States via England and Canada, she suffered the ravages of World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution, an annulled marriage, and a longing for more than the success that comes with wealth.

In her desire to grow closer to God, she railed against Communism, championed racial equality, founded two communities (Madonna House in Canada and Friendship House in the United States), and devoted her life to serving the poor. Like Dorothy Day, she ignited the lay apostolate in the twentieth century.

Nineteen years her junior, Thomas grew up in the 1920s and ’30s. His parents—artists by occupation—raised him to value intellectual pursuits. For a time, he embraced Communism but later abandoned it in response to Catholicism. This Catholic convert became even more famous than his early spiritual mentor after he followed her advice and became a writer for God. In a letter that Catherine wrote to him early in their friendship, she said, “You have fulfilled the first part of His commandment: You have arisen and started on that

journey that seeks a goal—Him.” The young professor and the middle-aged humanitarian traveled the same path.

Although they met in once 1941 and never saw each other in person again, their friendship was cemented in their mutual yearning to love God. Through written correspondence, they shared their souls. On October 25, 1941, Catherine wrote:

For nothing is more sacred than a letter or a conversation in which one human being opens his or her heart to another, who factually has no right (like a priest in confession) to that confidence. So it becomes at once both a tremendous privilege and a heavy, God-given responsibility. I treat it as such, and beg him for light on my answers. For in the first place it was He who directed that letter or conversation to me.

Perhaps the bond that this monk and his spiritual sister shared can best be summed up in her summation of their long-distance, long-lasting relationship: “And together we seek the Beloved.”

Both Catherine and Thomas understood the world with its wars and poverty, and yet they strove to not be of the world. They write of the misguidedness of Communism, the sorrows of the Depression, and the horrors of war. In fact, on December 13, less than a week after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, they simultaneously wrote to each other and signed off by asking the other for an occasional letter.

Although Catherine and Thomas last opened their souls to each other more than forty years ago, they penned timeless prose that can be applied to the modern world. In 1962 Thomas wrote, “It is at such a time as this that one has to have faith in the Church, and the fact that we suffer from the things that make us suffer, the fact that we cannot find any way out of suffering, is perhaps a sign of hope.”

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## AN ACTIVITY TO ENHANCE YOUR READING

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As evidenced in their letters, Catherine Doherty and Thomas Merton struggled with the violence and insanity of the world. They strove to embody the call to be in the world but not of it. To better understand their letters, consider the historical context in which they wrote.

After you have read *Compassionate Fire*, draw an outline of the historical events that occurred during their correspon-

dence from 1941 to 1968. Include the major world events, such as the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the rebuilding of Europe and Japan, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and ’60s, the Vietnam War and Vatican II. Upon subsequent readings of *Compassionate Fire*, refer back to your timeline to gain richer perspective on the insights of these two people who so deeply desired to meet God.

# READER'S GROUP GUIDE

## AN ACTIVITY FOR PERSONAL ENRICHMENT

When was the last time you wrote a letter to a dear friend? Not an e-mail or a text message but a letter on embossed paper made meaningful with thoughts in flowing ink? Letter writing is almost a lost art. Pick out a note card or a piece of paper and a pen that feels comfortable in your hand.

Be especially conscious of God working through you. Open your heart and let the words flow. Do not worry if someone else will read it. Even Catherine de Hueck Doherty had that concern. In one of her early letters to Thomas Merton, she wrote:

Lord, how you went and frightened me. I write my meditations; I write 9,000 letters a year; I have established a lengthy correspondence with at least a hun-

dred priests; and God alone knows how many laity; even a Bishop figures on the list. And you mean to tell me that they might not destroy my letters, and that all this accumulated material will some day see the light of day! God help us—me, I mean.

Put such thoughts aside. Write without hesitation. Let your thoughts flow from the abstract onto the page. On more than one occasion both the baroness and the monk stated that their letters were disjointed and yet they seemed not so to those privileged to read them.

Once you have put all of your thoughts at the moment on the paper then, and only then, should you decide whether or not to send it.

### A PRAYER FROM THE WEBSITE FOR THE CANONIZATION OF CATHERINE DOHERTY

[www.catherinedoherty.org](http://www.catherinedoherty.org)

*The words of "The Little Mandate" were given to Catherine Doherty by Christ, and they represent the very heart and essence of her personal vocation.*

#### The Little Mandate

Arise—go! Sell all you possess. Give it directly, personally to the poor. Take up My cross (their cross) and follow Me, going to the poor, being poor, being one with them, one with Me.

Little—be always little! Be simple, poor, childlike.

Preach the Gospel with your life—without compromise! Listen to the Spirit. He will lead you.

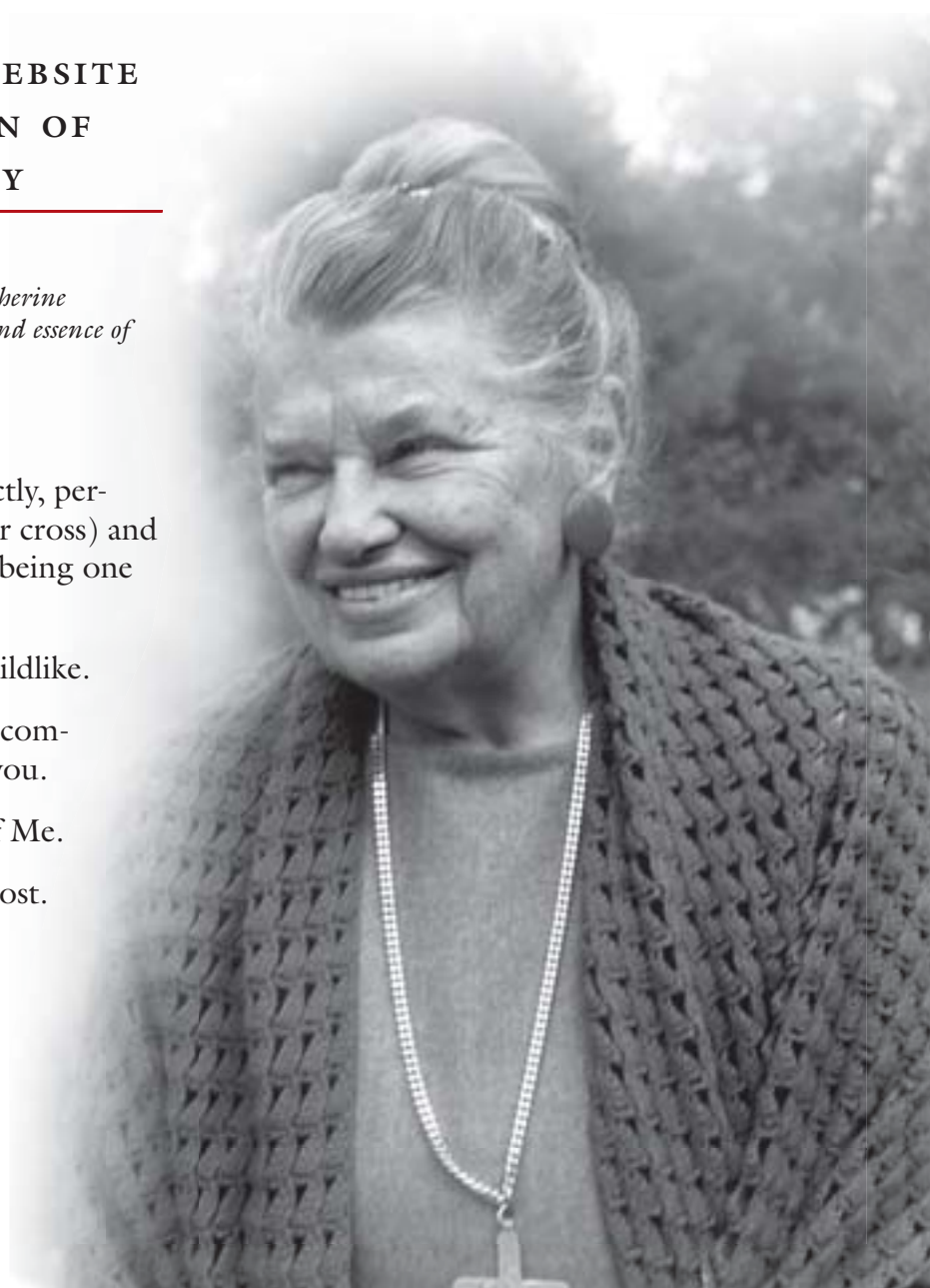
Do little things exceedingly well for love of Me.

Love. . . love. . . love, never counting the cost.

Go into the marketplace and stay with Me.  
Pray, fast. Pray always, fast.

Be hidden. Be a light to your neighbor's feet. Go without fears into the depth of men's hearts. I shall be with you.

Pray always. I will be your rest.





## WEBSITES OF INTEREST

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### CATHERINE DOHERTY CAUSE FOR CANONIZATION

[www.catherinedoherty.org](http://www.catherinedoherty.org)

This website provides updates on Catherine Doherty's canonization process as it teaches the layperson about the process. It features information about her cause, life, and writings, and highlights eight years worth of testimonials from thoughtful individuals touched by her life and work. In addition, the website instructs believers on how to pray for her intercession and gives those who have received her favors a chance to record them.



### RELIGIONS & ETHICS NEWSWEEKLY (PBS)

[www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/episodes/june-5-2009/thomas-merton/1378](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/episodes/june-5-2009/thomas-merton/1378)

Reporter Judy Valente's portrait of Thomas Merton gives beautiful insight into his monastic life, work, and surroundings. From this webpage the viewer can choose from Valente's video, a podcast of the week's program, and a written transcript and other viewers' comments about the piece. They also are one click away from more extensive Q&As with the men whom Valente interviewed for the segment.



### MADONNA HOUSE

[www.madonnahouse.org](http://www.madonnahouse.org)

Fr. Robert A. Wild, the editor of *Compassionate Fire*, carries on Catherine Doherty's legacy both by living in the Madonna House community and in acting as postulator for her cause for canonization. The Madonna House website opens the world to the grounds, history, and current happenings at Madonna House in Combermere, Ontario, Canada. Available in nine languages, the website offers an online tour of the center, an online store for spiritual aids, and an option to subscribe to *Restoration*, Madonna House's monthly newspaper.

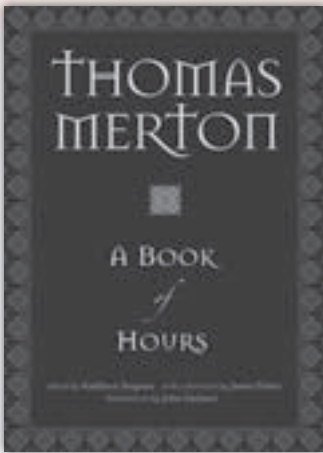


### THE ABBEY OF GETHSEMANI

[www.interviewwithgod.com/beatitudes](http://www.interviewwithgod.com/beatitudes)

The Abbey of Gethsemani website gives readers a better understanding of the place that Thomas Merton called home for nearly three decades. Its pages elucidate the mission, lifestyle, and lives of the Trappist monks. The website invites visitors to submit prayer intentions and to join in their retreats. For those who cannot make the journey, photographer John Cremons's images are the next best thing to being there.

# MORE THOMAS MERTON



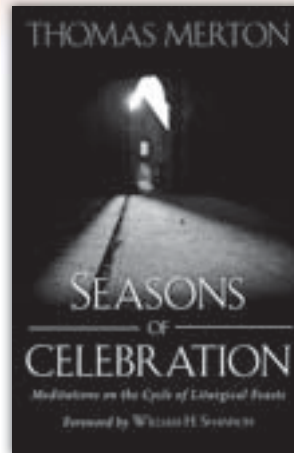
## A BOOK OF HOURS

Thomas Merton

Edited by Kathleen Deignan

The voluminous writings of Thomas Merton have been mined and arranged for the first time into prayers for Dawn, Day, Dusk, and Dark for each of the days of the week.

ISBN: 9781933495057 / 224 pages, hc / \$20.00



## SEASONS OF CELEBRATION

*Meditations on the Cycle of Liturgical Feasts*

Thomas Merton

Forty years after his death, fans of Thomas Merton continue to consult the spiritual wisdom found in his writings. Originally published in 1965, Merton's collection of essays on the liturgy is once again available to a vast and growing Merton readership.

ISBN: 9781594711701 / 224 pages / \$17.95

## BUY ONE, GET ONE FREE!

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### ALL WILL BE WELL

Julian of Norwich

ISBN: 9781594711510 / 128 pages / \$9.95



### LET NOTHING DISTURB YOU

Teresa of Avila

ISBN: 9781594711527 / 120 pages / \$9.95



### PEACE OF HEART

Francis of Assisi

ISBN: 9781594711558 / 128 pages / \$9.95



### SET YOUR HEART FREE

Francis de Sales

ISBN: 9781594711534 / 120 pages / \$9.95



### SIMPLY SURRENDER

Thérèse of Lisieux

ISBN: 9781594711541 / 128 pages / \$9.95



### TRUE SERENITY

Thomas à Kempis

ISBN: 9781594711572 / 120 pages / \$9.95



### WHERE ONLY LOVE CAN GO

The Cloud of Unknowing

ISBN: 9781594711589 / 128 pages / \$9.95



### YOU SHALL NOT WANT

The Psalms

ISBN: 9781594711565 / 120 pages / \$9.95

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