

A Small Group Resource

# bridges to contemplative living with thomas merton

booklets in series

**one:** entering the school of your experience

**two:** becoming who you already are

**three:** living your deepest desires

**four:** discovering the hidden ground of love

**five:** traveling your road to joy

**six:** writing yourself into the book of life

**seven:** adjusting your life's vision

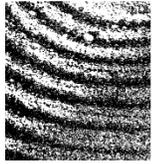
**eight:** seeing that paradise begins now

# bridges to contemplative living with thomas merton

series sampler

edited by

jonathan montaldo & robert g. toth  
of the merton institute for contemplative living



## WHAT PARTICIPANTS ARE SAYING ABOUT *BRIDGES*

---

"The *Bridges* program is different from everything I've done to become more spiritual. I am experiencing my spiritual life in a way that feels more integrated. It works for me."

"I like the way *Bridges* uses dialogue. Knowing that other people experience the same doubts and questions as I do helps me a lot."

"I never thought about all my relationships as being so important to my spiritual life. I'm seeing others and myself differently."

"This process opened up my mind—made me think more deeply and see sacredness in the ordinary and God in everything we do."

"I am discovering my contemplative self and I am more peaceful."

"Merton's message for me is that we are all called to a deeper awareness of God's presence in our lives."

"I have a whole different understanding of what being contemplative means."

## REFLECT AND DIALOGUE

Which images, words, or phrases in these readings resonate most with your experience?

How do they make you feel?

What do they mean for your life?

Do you have a personal way of discerning God's will for yourself?

What if God's will only required for us to make creative choices in every situation?

What is the most immediate way for you to discover God's will in your life?

## CLOSING

Conclude with one of the prayers on pages 53–55 or with a period of quiet reflection.

is that yearning which lovers have for one another. Not a yearning of the mind alone or of the heart alone but of the whole being. A yearning which we feel is only a glimmering of the depth of the yearning of God for us.

Thus, the will of God is dynamic, personal love urging us along the path that leads to union with the Lord. As with an ordinary journey, there may be several paths that can lead equally well to our destination; or some way may be notably better; or some way may lead us away from our destination. So, "the prayer to know God's will," states theologian John Wright, "is a prayer to have this kind of insight about the choices open to me." When we pray "Your will be done," we are not thinking about a script of our lives God has destined from all eternity. Rather we are referring to the choices we must make. And when these lead to union with God, they are compatible with God's plan to unite all creation. "Thus, it may sometime happen that I will actually be doing God's will, following the guidance of the Holy Spirit, whether I choose this or that" (pp. 67-68).

bridges to  
contemplative living  
with thomas merton

series sampler

edited by jonathan montaldo & robert g. toth  
of the merton institute for contemplative living

For more information or to order  
call 800-282-1865 or email [avemariapress.1@nd.edu](mailto:avemariapress.1@nd.edu)

ave maria press  notre dame, indiana

Ave Maria Press acknowledges the permission of the following publishers for use of excerpts from the following books:

*Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* by Thomas Merton, copyright © 1966 by the Abbey of Gethsemani. Used by permission of Doubleday, a division of Random House, Inc.

*Contemplative Prayer* by Thomas Merton, copyright © 1969 by The Merton Legacy Trust. Used with permission of Cistercian Publications.

*The Hidden Ground of Love* by Thomas Merton, copyright © 1985 by The Merton Legacy Trust. Used by permission of Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

*The Jerusalem Community Rule of Life* by Pierre-Marie Delfieux. Translated from the French by Kathleen England. Copyright ©1985, Paulist Press, Inc., New York, Mahwah, NJ. Used with permission. [www.paulistpress.com](http://www.paulistpress.com)

*New Seeds of Contemplation*, copyright © 1961 by The Abbey of Gethsemani. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

*The Psalms, A New Translation*, arranged by Joseph Gelineau, copyright © 1966 by Paulist Press, Inc., New York, Mahwah, NJ. Used with permission. [www.paulistpress.com](http://www.paulistpress.com)

*The Spiral Staircase: My Climb Out of Darkness* by Karen Armstrong, copyright © 2004 by Karen Armstrong. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc.

---

© 2006 by Ave Maria Press, Inc.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever, except in the case of reprints in the context of reviews, without written permission from Ave Maria Press®, Inc., P.O. Box 428, Notre Dame, IN 46556.

Founded in 1865, Ave Maria Press is a ministry of the Indiana Province of Holy Cross.

[www.avemariapress.com](http://www.avemariapress.com)

Cover and text design by Andy Wagoner

Cover photograph © Robert Hill Photography

Interior photograph; Zen Garden, Gethsemani, 1967, by Thomas Merton. Used with permission of the Merton Legacy Trust and the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University. Interior photograph of Thomas Merton on p.7 by John Lyons. Used with permission of the Merton Legacy Trust and the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University.

Printed and bound in the United States of America.

from truth, from compassion and therefore from God.

The requirements of a work to be done can be understood as the will of God. If I am supposed to hoe a garden or make a table, then I will be obeying God if I am true to the task I am performing. To do the work carefully and well, with love and respect for the nature of my task and with due attention to its purpose, is to unite myself to God's will in my work. In this way I become His instrument. He works through me. When I act as His instrument my labor cannot become an obstacle to contemplation, even though it may temporarily so occupy my mind that I cannot engage in it while I am actually doing my job. Yet my work itself will purify and pacify my mind and dispose me for contemplation (pp. 18–19).

If you want to know what is meant by "God's will" in man's life, this is one way to get a good idea of it. "God's will" is certainly found in anything that is required of us in order that we may be united with one another in love. You can call this, if you like, the basic tenet of the Natural Law, which is that we should treat others as we would like them to treat us, that we should not do to another what we would not want another to do to us (p. 76).

## ANOTHER VOICE

WILKIE AU, *BY WAY OF THE HEART*

Unfortunately, many people view the will of God as rather like a ten-ton elephant hanging overhead, ready to fall on them. . . . Actually the word which we translate into English as *will* comes from both a Hebrew and a Greek word which means *yearning*. It

We live contemplatively so that we can live dynamically in response to the changing needs of the neighbor before us. Contemplative living is a means to discern the “deeper laws of the heart” in relationships that demand our loving kindness beyond what is only legally correct. When we obey these personal requests of our neighbors we respond with justice and mercy, we strive to follow Christ’s command to “love one another” in all situations. This is God’s will for us.

### MERTON’S VOICE

FROM *NEW SEEDS OF CONTEMPLATION*

How am I to know the will of God? Even where there is no other more explicit claim on my obedience, such as a legitimate command, the very nature of each situation usually bears written into itself some indication of God’s will. For whatever is demanded by truth, by justice, by mercy, or by love must surely be taken to be willed by God. To consent to His will is, then, to consent to be true, or to speak truth, or at least to seek it. To obey Him is to respond to His will expressed in the need of another person, or at least to respect the rights of others. For the right of another man is the expression of God’s love and God’s will. In demanding that I respect the rights of another, God is not merely asking me to conform to some abstract, arbitrary law: He is enabling me to share, as His Son, in His own care for my brother. No man who ignores the rights and needs of others can hope to walk in the light of contemplation, because his way has turned aside



## WHO WAS THOMAS MERTON?

---

For over fifty years, the thought and writings of Thomas Merton have guided spiritual seekers across the world. His writings offer important insights into four essential relationships—with self, with God, with other people, and with all of creation. While the Christian tradition is the foundation of his perspective, he is open and inclusive in his examination of other religious traditions, recognizing the important contribution that all faith traditions have made throughout the history of civilization. He draws from their strengths to enhance the spiritual growth of individuals and communities.

Thomas Merton was born in Prades, France, in 1915. His mother was from the United States and his father from New Zealand. Educated in France, England, and the United States, he received a master’s degree in English from Columbia University. In 1938 he was baptized into the Catholic Church. He taught at St. Bonaventure University for a year, and in 1941, he entered the Cistercian Order as a monk of the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. Directed by his Abbot, Dom Frederic Dunne, Merton wrote his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, which was published in 1948.

For fifteen years he served as Master of Scholastics and Novices while writing many books and articles on the spiritual life, inter-religious understanding, and peace and social justice issues. In December of 1968, he journeyed to Asia to attend a conference of contemplatives near Bangkok, Thailand. While there, he unexpectedly died at the age of fifty-three.

Interest in Merton has grown steadily since his death. His autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain* appears on lists of the one hundred most important books of the last century, has been in print ever since its first edition, and has sold millions of copies. The volume of printed work by and about him attests to Merton's popularity. His works have been translated into thirty-five languages and new foreign language editions continue to be printed. The International Thomas Merton Society currently has thirty chapters in the United States and fourteen in other countries.

Thomas Merton is distinguished among contemporary spiritual writers by the depth and substance of his thinking. Merton was a scholar who distilled the best thinking of the best theologians, philosophers, and poets throughout the centuries, from both the West and the East, and presented their ideas in the context of the Christian worldview. His remarkable and enduring popularity indicates that he speaks to the minds and hearts of people searching for answers to life's important questions. For many, he is a spiritual guide, and for others he offers a place to retreat to in difficult times. His writings take people into deep places within themselves and offer insight into the paradoxes of life. He wrestles with how to be contemplative in a world of action, yet offers no quick fix or "Ten Easy Steps" to a successful spiritual life.



*session six*

## DOING GOD'S WILL

---

### OPENING REFLECTION

FROM PSALM 39

How many, O Lord my God,  
are the wonders and designs  
that you have worked for us;  
you have no equal.  
Should I proclaim and speak of them  
they are more than I can tell!  
You do not ask for sacrifice and offerings,  
but an open ear.  
You do not ask for holocaust and victim.  
Instead, here am I.  
In the scroll of the book it stands written  
that I should do your will.  
My God, I delight in your law  
in the depth of my heart.

### INTRODUCTION TO THE TEXTS

Merton understood that God's "will" was revealed most personally in the responses demanded of him through his relationships with his neighbors in the widest sense of that reality. Merton's neighbors were all beings with whom he shared his life. Every relationship in which we find ourselves asks us to respond flexibly, with justice and mercy, to what is the often unspoken need of our neighbor.

## REFLECT AND DIALOGUE

Which images, words, or phrases in these readings resonate most with your experience?

How do they make you feel?

What do they mean for your life?

How would you describe for someone else the way you pray?

What would it mean to you if you told yourself that you want to live more contemplatively?

Why are attention and awareness significant for a person who wants to live contemplatively?

## CLOSING

Conclude with one of the prayers on pages 53–55 or with a period of quiet reflection.



## WHAT IS *BRIDGES TO CONTEMPLATIVE LIVING WITH THOMAS MERTON*?

---

*Bridges to Contemplative Living with Thomas Merton* is a small group resource that is ideally suited for groups with four to ten members. Best described as a tool for spiritual development, *Bridges* invites participants on a journey toward spiritual transformation and a more contemplative and peace-filled life. Thomas Merton sought for himself and also encouraged others to pursue ongoing spiritual transformation and a life of contemplation. This series is carefully designed to lead participants into a holistic process of growth toward these two goals.

While *Bridges* uses Merton's writings as a starting point, it seeks above all else to mine the life experience and spiritual depths of those who use it. The series' format and themes are based on key principals from Merton's thought:

- Our everyday life is our spiritual life.
- It is every person's primary vocation to be fully human, aware of who we are and how we relate to others.
- Our spiritual formation cannot take place in isolation. It is grounded in the experience of relationships and community.
- Personal transformation is the foundation for societal and cultural transformation.

The eight booklets of the *Bridges* series each offer an introduction to Merton and contemplative living, prayers, readings from Merton and other spiritual writers, and questions for contemplative dialogue. Booklet themes express Merton's vision of spirituality as lived experience:

1. *Entering the School of Your Experience*
2. *Becoming Who You Already Are*
3. *Living Your Deepest Desires*
4. *Discovering the Hidden Ground of Love*
5. *Traveling Your Road to Joy*
6. *Writing Yourself into the Book of Life*
7. *Adjusting Your Life's Vision*
8. *Seeing That Paradise Begins Now*

The booklets provide the basis for small group dialogue, leading participants progressively deeper into spiritual reflection and contemplative living. Contemplative living is a way of listening and responding to our everyday experiences by consciously attending to our relationships with self, others, God, and all of nature. The goal of contemplative living is not merely the personal fulfillment of those who pursue it. Its ultimate goal is a global society that is profoundly just and at peace, as God intended it to be.

Each series' booklet contains eight sessions that are based on one reading from Merton paired with another on the same theme from a different spiritual writer. Each session begins with a Psalm passage and ends in prayer. In between, there is time for spiritual reading, reflection, and contemplative dialogue. Sessions are designed to last between ninety minutes and two hours, but should be adapted to the needs and possibilities of each group.

A series *Leader's Guide* is available for free download at [www.avemariapress.com](http://www.avemariapress.com) or by calling 800-282-1865.

resonance in the inmost center of our spirit in which our very life loses its separate voice and re-sounds with the majesty and the mercy of the Hidden and Living One. . . .

It is awakening, enlightenment, and the amazing intuitive grasp by which love gains certitude of God's creative and dynamic intervention in our daily life. Hence contemplation does not simply "find" a clear idea of God and confine Him within the limits of that idea, and hold Him there as a prisoner to Whom it can always return. On the contrary, contemplation is carried away by Him into His own realm, His own mystery, and His own freedom (pp. 1-5).

#### ANOTHER VOICE

PEMA CHODRON, *START WHERE YOU ARE*

We try so hard to hang on to the teachings and "get it," but actually the truth sinks in like rain into very hard earth. The rain is very gentle, and we soften up slowly at our own speed. But when that happens, something has fundamentally changed in us. That hard earth has softened. It doesn't seem to happen by trying to get it or capture it. It happens by letting go; it happens by relaxing your mind, and it happens by the aspiration and the longing to want to communicate with yourself and others. Each of us finds our own way. The very last slogan is "Train wholeheartedly." You could say, "Live wholeheartedly." Let everything stop your mind and let everything open your heart. And you could say, "Die wholeheartedly, moment after moment." Moment after moment let yourself die wholeheartedly (p. 142).

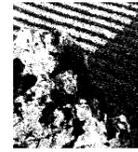
more deeply joyful and courageous human beings. When we live contemplatively we take a stance on life that enables us to focus and “see” that both simplicity and complexity of experience are equally good and beautiful. Living a life that is contemplative opens us to ourselves, our neighbors, and, at deeper levels that we do not often experience, to God who, Merton would say, has been present to our lives and experience all the time.

### MERTON’S VOICE

FROM *NEW SEEDS OF CONTEMPLATION*

Contemplation is life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is gratitude for life, for awareness, and for being. It is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent, and infinitely abundant Source. Contemplation is, above all, awareness of the reality of that Source. It *knows* the Source, obscurely, inexplicably, but with a certitude that goes beyond reason and beyond simple faith. . . . It is a more profound depth of faith, a knowledge too deep to be grasped in images, in words, or even in clear concepts. . . .

Contemplation is also the response to a call: a call from Him Who has no voice, and yet Who speaks in everything that is, and Who, most of all, speaks in the depths of our own being: for we ourselves are words of His. But we are words that are meant to respond to Him, to answer to Him, to echo Him, and even in some way to contain Him and signify Him. Contemplation is this echo. It is a deep



## SOME WAYS TO USE *BRIDGES*

---

*Bridges* is intended for use by adults from the college years through retirement who seek to live more meaningful lives through deepening and integrating the relationships that make up everyday life experience. The booklet and session themes are universal, and the *Bridges* process for reflection and dialogue respects the fact that participants will sometimes come with widely varying experiences, viewpoints, and beliefs. The dialogue format outlined in *Bridges* is intentionally simple and open-ended so that it can easily accommodate both age-specific and intergenerational groups.

While rooted in Thomas Merton’s Catholic tradition, *Bridges* is an excellent spiritual formation resource not only for Catholic groups, but also for members of other Christian churches, ecumenical Christian groups, and interfaith groups.

*Bridges to Contemplative Living with Thomas Merton* can easily become part of a parish, campus, or other pastoral ministry’s adult formation program. It is highly adaptable for various kinds of small groups or even for use by individuals. *Bridges* attends to the spiritual development of individuals and groups, responding to the deep spiritual hungers of the women and men of our day. We urge you to use it creatively with any who are serious about spiritual growth and transformation.

### WITH GROUPS

*Bridges* works best with small groups of four to ten that meet on a regular basis (at least once a month) and in which the members participate consistently. “Open” groups that

allow individuals to come and go frequently will not likely do well with this series. The depth of conversation that *Bridges* seeks to establish requires stability and commitment.

*Bridges* can be used with:

- parish faith sharing groups
- Christian ecumenical groups
- inter-faith groups
- campus ministry groups of students, faculty, or staff
- adult Initiation (RCIA) groups
- small Christian communities
- prison ministry
- ministry support groups (parish, diocesan, campus, hospital chaplains, social outreach workers, etc.)
- religious communities of women and men
- lunch hour or morning coffee prayer and reflection groups
- parish or diocesan pastoral councils, leaders, and staffs
- Catholic school faculty members and administrators.

#### FOR RETREATS

*Bridges* can be used for days or evenings of reflection, weekend or longer retreats. Retreat planners and facilitators can simply choose how many and which sessions they want to work into a retreat format.

#### IN SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

Using *Bridges* as a tool for dialogue in spiritual direction is a way to introduce themes that are important in spiritual formation. It is an excellent way to invite directees into more contemplative living.



*session one*

## CONTEMPLATIVE LIVING

---

### OPENING REFLECTION

PSALM 91:2–3, 5–6

It is good to give thanks to the Lord  
to make music to your name, O Most High,  
to proclaim your love in the morning  
and your truth in the watches of the night.  
Your deeds, O Lord, have made me glad,  
for the work of your hands I shout for joy.  
O Lord, how great are your works!  
How deep are your designs.

### INTRODUCTION TO THE TEXTS

Gabriel Marcel, the Christian French philosopher, could have been speaking about living contemplatively when he wrote that “Life is not a problem to be solved but a mystery to be lived.” Contemplation, as Thomas Merton writes of it, is not a solution to any of our problems, but a way of praying. Contemplative living is a way of being present to our experiences that appreciates the adventure and gift of being alive. Contemplation is not a series of techniques whose aim is to achieve self-calming, although contemplation cannot begin unless one develops a taste for quiet and periods of solitude. Contemplation is experiencing a “still-point” that allows us to recognize the “one thing necessary” for our lives that makes us

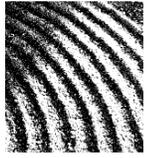
From the first booklet  
*Entering the School of Your Experience*

CONTENTS

Introduction	6
What do we mean by contemplative living?	
Who was Thomas Merton?	
Using <i>Bridges to Contemplative Living</i> with Thomas Merton	
What do we mean by contemplative dialogue?	
Eight Principles for Entering into Contemplative Dialogue	
Additional Resources	
Session 1: Contemplative Living	14
Session 2: Contemplative Dialogue	18
Session 3: Exploring Life's Questions	22
Session 4: Trusting Life, Nature, and God	27
Session 5: Praying through Your Changing Image of God	31
Session 6: Doing God's Will	36
Session 7: Praying Out of the Roots of Your Own Life	41
Session 8: Compassion: Prayer in Action	46
Concluding Prayers	53
Sources	56
Another Voice: Biographical Sketches	58

BY INDIVIDUALS

Individuals who seek spiritual transformation but do not have access to a small group or perhaps are not comfortable with that setting can use *Bridges* for personal spiritual reflection and growth.



## STRUCTURE OF THE SERIES

---

The *Bridges* series is not designed as a study of contemplative living or the contemplative tradition, but rather as a guide for discovering how to be more contemplative in their everyday life. *Bridges* does not provide lesson plans or blueprints, but simply a springboard into contemplative dialogue and living. Contemplative dialogue in the context of *Bridges* involves reflecting deeply on a variety of themes in the context of everyday lives. At its richest, it is simply listening to others without judgment or evaluation and sharing with them one's own experiences, thoughts, and questions as they flow from the session themes and from one's lived experiences.

Contemplative dialogue is meant to be non-threatening, providing a safe place for open sharing and discussion. It is not outcome-oriented, but focused on listening, reflecting, and integrating what one hears with one's own experience and thought. Contemplative dialogue has as its goal helping one to consider how what is being shared applies to the current context of one's life—what one believes and values, how one spends time, and how one decides what is important.

### FACILITATION

*Bridges* is designed for ease of use and facilitation. Contemplative dialogue is a very effective way for a group of diverse people to talk without dissention when they have differences of beliefs or opinions. Each participant's thorough understanding of the "Eight Principles for Entering into Contemplative Dialogue," found in the Introduction of each booklet and in the series' *Leader's*

*Guide*, will contribute greatly to the quality of the conversation. The *Leader's Guide* also provides useful hints for leading contemplative dialogue and "Five Simple Steps for Facilitating a *Bridges* Session."