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Leader's Guide



bridges  
to  
contemplative living  
with thomas merton

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

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

ISBN-10 1-59471-086-4 ISBN-13 978-1-59471-086-5

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.

Printed and bound in the United States of America.

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“I was brought to depths of self-discovery and prayer that I didn’t think possible.”

—Bridges participant

## 1. 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, the Bridges series invites participants to personal spiritual transformation for the sake of a more just and peaceful world. Thomas Merton is widely acclaimed as one of the leading spiritual guides of the twentieth century. He sought for himself and encouraged others also 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.
- Spiritual formation is grounded in the experience of relationships and community.
- Personal transformation is the foundation for societal and cultural transformation.

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

—Bridges participant

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.

## 2. WHO WILL BENEFIT FROM 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.

This resource is excellent for use:

- in parishes and on college campuses
- at retreat and spirituality centers
- with both men's and women's religious communities
- by ministry support groups
- with pre-existing small faith-sharing groups/communities
- spiritual reflection or prayer groups that meet over lunch hours or for morning coffee
- with diocesan, parish, or campus pastoral staffs

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

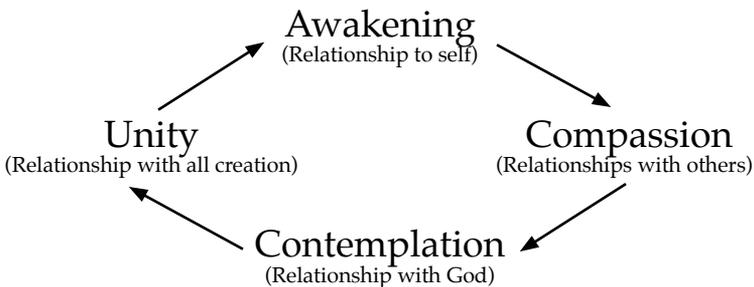
—Bridges participant

### 3. 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 participants in discovering how to be more contemplative in their everyday lives. 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.

Each session theme connects to one or more of life's essential relationships—with self, others, God, and all creation. The sub-structure of Bridges is therefore a four-fold call to spiritual development:



The eight Bridges booklet themes are sequenced to draw participants ever more deeply into contemplative living. However, some groups will want to use this resource in a more flexible manner. For example, a small faith sharing group that has been meeting together for some time may choose to begin with something other than the first booklet, *Entering the School of Your Experience*. Similarly, each Bridges booklet contains eight sessions that are designed to last between ninety minutes to two hours, yet there is no definitive schedule or predetermined length of meetings. Many of the booklets and individual sessions can be used independently of the others. Groups should adapt the materials to best meet their own particular needs and capacities.

Each Bridges session outline contains the same seven basic elements:

1. Session title or theme
2. Opening Reflection/Psalm Passage
3. Introduction to the Texts
4. Merton's Voice (a reading from Thomas Merton)
5. Another Voice (a reading from a different spiritual writer)
6. Reflect and Dialogue (questions for reflection and dialogue)
7. Closing (suggestions for closing prayer)

"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."

—Bridges participant

#### 4. SOLITUDE AND SILENCE

Whether a Bridges group meets once a week or once a month, the time between sessions is very important. This is when the content from the readings and dialogue becomes part of everyday living. Taking time to reflect, finding places in our daily routines for silence and solitude, seeing the significance and appreciating the beauty of ordinary experiences will facilitate the integration.

There are many contemplative and spiritual practices that can help us to hear our own inner voice, the voice of God, that of others, and of all creation. Practices such as centering prayer, various forms of meditation, spiritual reading, journaling, yoga, and other physical exercise can all be very helpful to spiritual growth. While Bridges does not advocate any particular practice, as a leader you may want to suggest these to other group members. Each person needs to be encouraged to discover those practices that will lead him or her to a place of interior silence and solitude, a place where she or he can hear and respond.

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

—Bridges participant

## 5. SOME WAYS TO USE BRIDGES

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
- interfaith 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 and 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.

#### 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.

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

—Bridges participant

## 6. 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 included here, will contribute greatly to the quality of the conversation.

### EIGHT PRINCIPLES FOR ENTERING INTO CONTEMPLATIVE DIALOGUE

1. Keep in mind that Bridges focuses on our "lived experience" and how the session theme connects to everyday life. Keep your comments rooted in your own experience and refrain from remarks that are overly abstract, philosophical, or theoretical.
2. Express your own thoughts, knowing that others will listen and reflect upon what you say. It is helpful to use "I" statements like "I believe . . ." or "I am confused by that response." Try framing your remarks with phrases such as "My assumption is that . . ." or "My experience has been . . ." While others in the group may not respond to you verbally, trust that they hear you.
3. Pay attention to the assumptions, attitudes, and experiences underlying your initial or surface thoughts on the topic. Ask yourself questions like: "Why am I drawn to this particular part of the reading?" "What makes me feel this way?"
4. Remember to listen first and refrain from thinking about how you might respond to others' comments. Simply listen to and accept his or her thoughts on the subject without trying to change them or respond to them.

5. Trust the group. Observe how the participants' ideas, reflections, common concerns, assumptions, and attitudes come together and form a collective group mind.
6. Reflect before speaking and be concise. Make one point or relate one experience, then stop and allow others to do the same.
7. Expect periods of silence during the dialogue. Be comfortable with the silence and resist the urge to speak just because there is silence.
8. In time you will adjust to saying something and not receiving a response, and to listening and not asking a question, challenging, or responding directly. Simply speaking to the theme or idea from your own experience or perspective takes some practice. Be patient with yourself and the others and watch for deepening levels of dialogue.

When these and the "Hints for the Facilitator" listed here are followed, the group will stay focused on the session's theme and reach surprising depths. As the group is becoming accustomed to the dialogue process, we recommend that they review the eight principles at the conclusion of the first several sessions to assess how well they are doing. We also urge leaders to evaluate how well they filled their role at the end of each session.

#### HINTS FOR THE FACILITATOR

1. Be aware of the process and the content. Manage both, looking for common ground to explore in the dialogue.
2. Keep the dialogue focused on the lived experiences of the group members.

3. Know the “Eight Principles for Entering into Contemplative Dialogue” thoroughly and be well prepared to hold the group to them as needed.
4. When appropriate, ask people to share the assumptions upon which they make statements.
5. Look for deeper level “themes” that emerge from everyone’s comments. Focus attention on a theme and ask for their thoughts.
6. Be attentive to the “group mind” by moving the group to talk more deeply about a significant issue or core assumption that surfaces.
7. As people share their experiences, understandings, attitudes, and assumptions there is a tendency for others to offer advice or sympathy, or to challenge or correct. Help group members refrain from giving immediate direct responses. This creates a “safe place” for open expression and frees participants from the tension of evaluating/judging others’ remarks. It frees them to listen and not be preoccupied with crafting responses.
8. Gently stop and redirect those who begin to challenge or debate another’s statement. Encourage them to frame their statement with words like: “I believe . . .” “My assumption is that . . .” or “From my experience or perspective . . .”
9. Trust the group and be sensitive to the contemplative use of Bridges and consider extending the dialogue on a particular session over two or more meetings as the need or desire warrants.

#### FIVE SIMPLE STEPS TO FACILITATING A BRIDGES SESSION

1. The facilitator should review the “Eight Principles for Entering into Contemplative Dialogue” at the beginning of the first session and continue to do so in subsequent sessions until the group feels comfortable with the method.

2. Begin by reading aloud the brief Psalm passage followed by a few minutes of silent reflection (3–5 minutes).
  3. In silence, members read slowly and reflect on the selections from Merton and Another Voice. The “Reflect and Dialogue” questions may be helpful in guiding reflection (anywhere from 15–30 minutes). If the members have all read the selections prior to the session, give them several minutes to review and quietly reflect on them before beginning the dialogue.
  4. The group engages in contemplative dialogue referencing the “Reflect and Dialogue” questions as needed (60–75 minutes).
  5. The session concludes with a prayer or period of quiet reflection (3–5 minutes).
- Between sessions, participants should take time to re-read the selections and reflect on the dialogue.
  - Consider allowing a few minutes at the beginning of the each session for the group to briefly share further insights on the previous session’s readings and dialogue.

“Contemplative dialogue is a wonderful way to learn or re-learn how to be with and communicate with people in a deeper, more meaningful way.”

—Bridges participant

## 7. ONLINE RESOURCES

To order Bridges booklets and the Bridges introductory DVD, and for other spirituality resources visit [www.avemariapress.com](http://www.avemariapress.com).

Questions, comments, or suggestions about any aspect of the Bridges series can be directed to [www.contemplative-living.org](http://www.contemplative-living.org). Check this website periodically for additional information and resources.

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

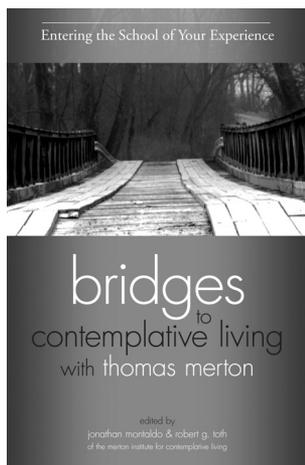
—Bridges participant





# bridges to contemplative living with thomas merton

Bridges to Contemplative Living with Thomas Merton leads participants on a journey toward spiritual transformation and a more contemplative and peace-filled life. Each eight-session booklet provides an introduction to Merton and contemplative living through prayers, readings from Merton and other spiritual masters, and questions for small group dialogue.



## BOOKLETS IN THE SERIES

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ISBN: 9781594712357 / 64 pages / \$5.95

**Three: Living Your Deepest Desires**

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PROMO CODE: F4J01100000

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