
Thomas Merton. *The Merton Tapes*. Fourth Release of Lectures. Kansas City: Credence Cassettes, 1988 (Released 1991). 7 cassettes (60 min. each). \$8.95 each.

Reviewed by Dewey Weiss Kramer

Father Louis (Thomas Merton) begins one of his weekly talks to the Gethsemani community with the remark that the Thomas Aquinas text under discussion contains nothing really new; his brothers already *know* the facts of which Aquinas writes: "But it's the *attitude* we get from it" that is crucial, Merton says. Potential auditors can take note. They might also wish to consult the reviews of the first three releases (*The Merton Annual* II, 314-19: review of 19 tapes; III, 311-20: 30 tapes; and V, forthcoming: 18 tapes) since similar strengths, weaknesses, and methodology apply.

Auditors of those first groups, just like Merton's novices, will not find much new; they will, however, find much that is crucial. As with the earlier lectures, although the conferences were intended as instruction in the monastic life, Merton's teaching usually applies easily to non-monastics as well. In fact, the strongpoint of this most recent grouping, and its organizing principle, is first: the emphasis on *practical* applications of spiritual topics discussed; and second: the fact that the majority of the topics themselves tend to involve the world beyond the monastery. In no other group thus far is there as much concrete advice for pursuing a right attitude—for prayer, for a keener awareness of the present lived moment, for finding an effective grounding for one's own life, whatever its circumstances.

Credence Cassettes does not provide dates for the individual conferences, but these selections clearly reflect the later Merton who has left behind him all *contemptus mundi* and has turned toward a loving embrace of the world, not, however, without criticizing it at the same time. Victor A. Kramer's review of the first nineteen tapes noted their value as "documentation" (in addition to the spiritual instruction) of Merton and Gethsemani. In the choice of tapes presented here, Credence Cassettes has documented aspects of the final stages of Merton's personal journey. Thus, the final tape of the series, "Monasticism and Marxism" (AA2461), consists of the audio portion of his lecture

at the Bangkok conference, the last public appearance before his death (available also as video and printed in *The Asian Journal*). That lecture's topic, "Monasticism and Marxism," is a striking example of Merton's conviction of the necessary interrelationships between the monastic and the secular realms. Side B of tape AA2459, "Sanctity," is further demonstration of this attitude. Identified by the announcer as a lecture given "during" the Bangkok trip, Merton delivers a "chapter talk" of the sort often given to his novices or the assembled community, but now addressed to a group of Indian monastics. Typically for this series, his "spiritual" teaching is firmly ensconced in a secular context: his remarks on prayer are set against a well-articulated description of the tensions in Church and world engendered by the renewal of Vatican II and the Cold War respectively.

The political element is not the main aspect of the "world" presented in this series, however, but rather the right use of and appreciation of the universe and its beauty. This thrust is heard especially in tapes AA2457, "Justice for all of Creation," and AA2458, "Developing a Conscience"; but it is perceptible also in his approach to the cross and death, and spiritual direction (in "The Cross: Victory over Death," AA2455) and prayer (in "Sanctity," AA2459). This is also the rationale for including the rather slight conferences on literature ("Lyric Poetry," AA2460).

Highpoints of this series of seven tapes are the four conferences in which Merton uses Aquinas's *On the Ways of God* as his point of departure ("Justice . . ." and "Developing . . ."). It is here that the master teacher and spiritual guide is at his finest. Nor is the poet absent: celebration of gamboling calves, beautiful in their awkwardness, can constitute genuine "seeds of contemplation" for the listener.