

Reviews

Thomas Merton. *The Courage for Truth: The Letters of Thomas Merton to Writers*. Selected and edited with an introduction by Christine M. Bochen. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993. xiv + 314 pages. \$27.95 hardcover.

Reviewed by Elena Malits, C.S.C.

The Courage for Truth presents a selection of letters to writers the editor of this volume describes as "in a special way Merton's literary friends, persons who shared with Merton a passion for writing as a life work." The writers addressed constitute an amazingly diverse group—internationally, intellectually, and religiously. Thomas Merton's "literary friends" include Evelyn Waugh and Henry Miller, Jacques Maritain and Ernesto Cardenal, Boris Pasternak, James Baldwin, and Czeslaw Miloz, as well as an assortment of younger poets from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Cuba, Nicaragua, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela.

Merton always addresses the individual with whom he is corresponding in specific and concrete ways. He comments on materials they are sharing with one another, inquires about particular circumstances in the person's life, and points out what he most values in that writer's work. But there are common themes that run through these letters from the last twenty years of Merton's life.

One is struck by Merton's sense of identification and union with persons very different from himself. To Czeslaw Milosz he insists that "it is true what you say affects me deeply, seeing that we are in many respects very much alike. Consequently any answer must involve the deepest in me, and that is not easy." Merton expresses a profound affinity with Boris Pasternak. He writes to the Russian novelist "as to one whom I feel to be a kindred mind." Merton's response to Paster-

nak's account of his youth goes even further: "I feel as if it were my own experience, as if I were you. With other writers I can share ideas, but you seem to communicate something deeper. It is as if we met on a deeper level of life in which individuals are not separate beings." Thomas Merton gives Pasternak the ultimate compliment: "In the language familiar to me as a Catholic monk, it is as if we were known to one another in God." To Hernan Lavin Cerda Merton acknowledges his deep identification with Latin American poets: "I am not a North American poet, but rather a South American. I feel closer to them because of their sensitivity, irony, political point of view, etc."

Reaching out to his literary friends as people who understand what it means to be under attack, Merton is explicit about his own suffering, especially from fellow Catholics. He tells Ernesto Cardenal that he knows from experience "that one cannot write anything alive without being attacked, and sometimes quite fiercely, by members of the Church. Certainly the most virulent attacks on any work of mine have come from priests and religious." To Henry Miller Merton complains that "the religion of religious people tends at times to poke out a monster head just when you are beginning to calm down and get reassured. The religion of half-religious people doesn't bend: it bristles with heads."

In contrast to all the conflicts, he tells José Coronel Urtecho, a young Nicaraguan poet, of "the joy of being able to communicate with friends, in a world where there is so much noise and very little contact." Writing to Cintio Vitier, a Cuban poet, Merton speaks of their living in a time "where the printed word is not read, but the paper passed from hand to hand is read eagerly. A time of small letters, hesitant, but serious and personal, and out of the meaningless dimension of the huge, monstrous and the cruel." Friendship is, for Merton, at the heart of God's desires. To his good friends Jacques and Raissa Maritain, Merton exclaims: "How beautiful and simple God's plan for humankind is! That's it. Friends, who love, who suffer, who search, who see God's joy, who live in the glory of God."

Friendship and authentic community are the only defenses against mass society. "We must form a union of creators, of thinkers, of men of prayer, a union with no other 'organization' than charity and unanimity of thought," Merton writes to Pablo Antonio Cuadra. It is imperative, Merton tells this Nicaraguan poet, that "man, image of God, should be a creator, but not only as an individual person, but

as a brother of other creators. Let us continue creating and struggling for the truth and the kingdom of God."

And to another Nicaraguan writer, Alfonso Cortes, Merton sums up his sense of the mission of the poet: "It is truly the task of the poet to teach the ways of truth in the language of beauty." Such a task requires courage, Merton proclaims to José Coronel Urtecho, because poets "remain almost the only ones who have anything to say. . . . They have the courage to disbelieve what is shouted with the greatest amount of noise from every loudspeaker; and it is this courage that is most of all necessary today."

This volume of Merton's letters, like the other volumes in the series, is filled with flashes of Merton's humor, irony, outrageous wit. It also reveals his preoccupation with never having enough time to get things done and his frustration with policies and practices within the monastery. But for the most part, *The Courage for Truth* gives us Thomas Merton at home with his own kind of creator: the writer. There is quite a lot of repetition—but how could there not be in anyone who wrote so many letters?

Thomas Merton. *The Merton Tapes: Fifth Release of Lectures*. Kansas City: Credence Cassettes. 1993. 6 Cassettes (60 min. each).

Reviewed by Steven L. Baumann.

Credence Cassettes' recently released (1993) tapes of Thomas Merton, originally recorded at the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani during the 1960s, provide a unique access to key aspects of the history of monasticism and Catholic spirituality. A narrator states that the tapes were made for the benefit of the community of monks at Gethsemani. But the content and presentation transcends time and audience surprisingly well, except for Merton's use of noninclusive language, for example, the use of the term "man" to refer to human beings.

Like earlier tapes released by Credence Cassettes, these lectures reveal Thomas Merton to be a master educator and spiritual director. Merton's use of terms is superbly clear and well defined, so that an audience with limited familiarity with philosophy or Church history