

MERTON, Thomas, *Cassian and the Fathers: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition*. Edited with an Introduction by Patrick F. O'Connell. Monastic Wisdom Series 1 (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 2005), pp. lxvi + 304. ISBN 0-87907-100-1 (cloth). \$39.95; ISBN 0-87907-001-3 (paperback). \$29.95.

Thomas Merton's *Cassian and the Fathers* inaugurates the new Monastic Wisdom Series published by Cistercian Publications. Patrick F. O'Connell has expertly edited and annotated these lecture notes prepared by Merton for a two part course given to novices on multiple occasions from around 1955 to 1962. The first part is called the "Prologue to Cassian" and consists of a review of ascetic and monastic spirituality from the apostolic fathers onward, with the emphasis on the fourth century. The second part is the "Lectures on Cassian." Here Merton begins by summarizing Cassian's life and teaching and then examines key sections of both the *Institutes* and *Conferences*. O'Connell's ample Introduction of fifty-one pages explains the context of these lectures delivered in Merton's official capacity as Master of Novices and discusses Merton's engagement with, and indebtedness to, Cassian and other early monastic figures. The Introduction also describes the three major and one minor witnesses to the text of *Cassian and the Fathers*, and in Appendix A (pp. 260-280) O'Connell has supplied abundant textual notes. He is to be commended for his meticulous attention to detail in the editing of this text.

Scholars and others interested in the thought and personality of Merton will find in this book a hitherto largely inaccessible aspect of the man which complements and at times contrasts with the "public" Merton found in his works written for publication, the "interpersonal" Merton revealed in his letters, and the "intimate" Merton unveiled in his recently-published journals. This work thus constitutes a unique perspective for those engaged in the retrieval of Merton's ideas and in the reconstruction of his monastic and personal identity. Yet as this book is the initial volume of the new Monastic Wisdom Series, in this review I would like to answer the following question, as suggested by the subtitle: would it be any good for initiating monastic novices or others into the monastic tradition? A reply to this question requires looking at each of the two parts of the course in some detail.

The "Prologue to Cassian" is largely derived from Pierre Pourrat's 1927 *Christian Spirituality*¹ and unpublished notes writ-

ten by the Novice Master of Scourmont in Belgium, Fr. François Mahieu (later Dom Francis Acharya of Kurisumala Ashram in India), particularly in the earlier sections which summarize pre-fourth-century spirituality. There are four topics covered in these early sections: martyrdom and virginity in the first and second century, aberrant movements, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen. Merton's presentation of martyrdom and virginity as the spirituality of early Christians (pp. 7-16) is a decent introduction to the key principles, but is liable to give the impression that Christian thought on martyrdom and virginity was monolithic in the early centuries—which it was not. In the next section (pp. 16-19) Merton briefly deals with four "aberrations": Encratism, Montanism, Neoplatonism, and Gnosticism. Insofar as his terse descriptions are meant to highlight the errors of exaggerated asceticism they are successful, but they would not be acceptable today as scholars since the 1950s have done much to foster our understanding of these movements. In his discussion of Clement and Origen (pp. 20-29), Merton departs from Pourrat and relies more on Mahieu and on his own reading. As a result, these two sections are more satisfying. While one may quibble with certain details, such as Merton's understanding of the catechetical school of Alexandria (pp. 23-24), here he gives a pretty good summary of the works and the key points of the spiritual doctrine of these two Alexandrians.

Once he turns to the monastic figures of the fourth century, Merton depends more on his own reading of the primary texts and secondary scholarship. He deals with Antony (pp. 31-39), Pachomius (pp. 39-45), Basil (pp. 45-51), Gregory of Nazianzus (pp. 51-52), Gregory of Nyssa (pp. 52-60), Palestinian monasticism, including Jerome (pp. 60-69), Mesopotamian and Syrian monasticism (pp. 69-71), the desert fathers of Nitria and Scete and their apophthegmata (pp. 71-88), and Evagrius Ponticus (pp. 88-96). As a whole, these sections are better than the preceding as Merton's own greater engagement with these topics and thinkers is more evident.

His treatment of Antony's doctrine depends solely on the *Life of Antony*, an approach that would be questionable today given the numerous other ancient sources which preserve sayings and teachings of Antony, and given especially the widespread acceptance of the authenticity of Antony's seven letters preserved in Coptic. The section on Antony is more successful as an introduc-

tion to the *Life*—surely the seminal and single most important monastic text—than it is to the historical Antony.

Armand Veilleux's three volume translation of the Pachomian corpus,² of course, was not available to Merton for his discussion of Pachomius, so he is limited to using Jerome's Latin translation of the Pachomian rules. Still, his presentation is judicious: Merton avoids the pitfall found in earlier scholarship which saw the strictness of the Pachomian organization as amounting to a rigid system of military efficiency. Nonetheless, one detects here, perhaps, Merton's own bias influencing his treatment, in that he frequently compares Pachomian coenobitism to eremiticism, a concern not found in the sources.

In his survey of Basil's life and doctrine, while one could fault Merton for his facile characterizations of Basil (e.g. he is an "active, ascetic, organizing, administrating" saint rather than an "interior and contemplative" saint [p. 48]), he provides a summary of Basil's ascetical theology and his notion of coenobitism. Gregory of Nazianzus is mentioned almost in passing without any mention of his doctrine, seemingly because Merton must have considered him a "contemplative." Gregory of Nyssa, whom Merton calls "a great contemplative theologian" (p. 53), receives a far more extensive treatment. Here Merton shows himself familiar with recent critical scholarship, and his excitement over and personal engagement with Gregory is evident. All this contributes to making this section one of the best in this part of the course. Merton summarizes the key themes found in more than a half-dozen works by Gregory, stressing that his theology is drawn from his mystical experience.

The next section, on Palestinian monasticism, is less satisfying. Here Merton merely summarizes Jerome's *Life of Hilarion* and gives five very brief notices on other Palestinian monks from the fourth through seventh centuries without any discussion of their monastic significance or teaching. He then turns to Jerome and spends more time on giving an account of his life and controversies than his monastic doctrine, which is limited to comments on two excerpts from one of his monastic letters. While Merton fails to demonstrate that there was anything distinctive or even significant about Palestinian monasticism, his discussion of Jerome would be a good introduction to the complex saint if one were encountering him for the first time. Merton's treatment of Mesopotamian and Syrian monasticism is hardly more satisfying. Though it is

little more than a list of names, stylites are discussed sympathetically and not simply dismissed as bizarre. Nonetheless, Merton ultimately views both Palestinian and Syrian monasticism as defective for their extremism, betraying an implicit comparison to the "norms" of the desert fathers or Benedictine monasticism that does not obtain historically.

In the next section, Merton's favoritism towards the desert fathers of Nitria and Scete and their apophthegmata is apparent throughout, as evidenced once again by his engagement with critical scholarship on them. He discusses the sources for the spirituality of the desert fathers and the signal importance of the apophthegmata, and then proceeds to give an insightful thematic survey of their teaching. This results in the production of one of the best sections of this course. Indeed, the abiding interest in the desert fathers today is due in no small part to Merton's enthusiasm for them. His treatment of Macarius is dominated by a discussion of the authenticity of the pseudo-Macarian writings, on which subject he is conversant with the best scholarship of his day, and by a description of Messalianism, a "heresy" supposedly contained in the pseudo-Macarian writings. While Merton was evidently charged by this academic debate, one would question whether his summary of it is appropriate for an introduction to the monastic tradition, especially since not much is said that pertains to *living* the monastic life.

In the final section of the "Prologue to Cassian," on Evagrius Ponticus, Merton again displays critical engagement with some of the best monastic scholarship of his day. Though this section also suffers from too much summarization of academic debates of questionable relevance to monastic formation, it is salvaged by an excellent account of the Evagrian doctrine of prayer.

Despite some good discussions, in the opinion of this reviewer the "Prologue to Cassian" would be on the whole an unsatisfying treatment of early Christian monasticism if it were to be used today as introduction to the monastic tradition. Though Merton was surely a pioneer in the retrieval of early monasticism, his presentation of the material is too reflective of the state of scholarship in his day and his own biases to be a reliable guide for those first encountering the monastic tradition. For example, he implicitly accepts the traditional view of monastic origins in which Antony is the first monk ever; influenced by his anchoritism, Pachomius initiates the coenobitic life; from these two men and in these two

distinct forms all Christian monasticism spreads throughout Egypt, the East, and the West. In reality the development of monasticism in the third and fourth centuries was far more complex. The simple fact is that today we have much better understanding of early Christian monasticism for the period covered by Merton here, and much better surveys of it that would better serve the interested reader.³ O'Connell informs us that Merton abandoned this course after 1962 in favor of another course entitled "Pre-Benedictine Monasticism," which covered much of the same material, but with more focus on Syrian and Palestinian monasticism (p. lxii). Perhaps this switch indicates Merton's own dissatisfaction with the course. Fortunately, plans are underway for the publication of "Pre-Benedictine Monasticism" in the Monastic Wisdom Series.

We turn now to the "Lectures on Cassian." Here Merton abandons Pourrat and Mahieu and relies upon his own reading of Cassian, though he used Owen Chadwick for historical background.⁴ He begins with an account of Cassian's importance due to his influence not only on the monastic founders of the West such as St. Benedict, but also on medieval saints such as Sts. Thomas and Dominic. He then addresses the accuracy of the charge often made against Cassian, that he is a "semi-Pelagian." Merton adeptly handles the theological point at issue, demonstrating that it is erroneous to label Cassian a "semi-Pelagian." In the course of this he provides a summary of the basic teaching of *Conference* 13. Merton's choice to start here was a good one, I think, especially since his audience, even if they knew nothing else about Cassian, may have heard the heresy associated with his name. This enables Merton to launch into Cassian's teaching without lingering suspicion of his orthodoxy on the part of the audience.

Merton's first discussion of the monastic doctrine of Cassian comes in the course of his treatment of Cassian's life. After a brief description of Cassian's monastic residence in Bethlehem, he narrates his sojourn in Egypt by following the chronology presented by Cassian himself in the *Conferences*. This affords Merton the opportunity to summarize the contents of each conference as he tracks Cassian's progress through Egypt. For *Conferences* 3, 4, 11, 12, 14, 15, 18, 21, 22, and 23 Merton gives longer summaries, often filled with his own insight and observations and listing the key points of the conference. Shorter summaries are also given for *Conferences* 6, 7, 17, and 20. Worthy of particular mention are Merton's discussion of perfection (*Conference* 11); his insightful summary of

"the three kinds of monks" (*Conference 18*) in which he describes more generally his understanding of the nature of the monastic vocation (pp. 119–20); and his critical presentation of Cassian's teaching on "wanting good but doing evil" (*Conference 23*) in which he speaks on the necessity of humility. Hence, in the course of this narrative, Merton has managed to provide a basic orientation for reading fourteen of Cassian's twenty-four conferences.

Merton next turns to a brief account of the Origenist controversy, which precipitated Cassian's departure from Egypt. Here Merton is far too unnuanced in his presentation of the very complex issue of Origenism. Some statements are wrong, such as the implication that Athanasius was an Origenist (p. 133). Fortunately, the interested reader has more recent and more satisfying accounts to supplant this one.⁵ Merton then recounts Cassian's progress from Egypt to Constantinople and then to Marseilles, where he founded a monastery. This travelogue gives Merton the opportunity to speak briefly of John Chrysostom, Martin of Tours, Lérinian monasticism, and Caesarius of Arles, all but the first important for situating Cassian's monastic project in Gaul. In writing for Gallic monks, Cassian made "the great synthesis of monastic doctrine and adapt[ed] the Eastern tradition to the West" (p. 139).

The narrative of Cassian's life completed, Merton next turns to a detailed survey of the *Institutes* and *Conferences* 1, 2, 4, 9, 10, and 16. Though these sections seem to consist largely of summaries of the text under discussion, they are much more than that. They are astute distillations of Cassian's monastic doctrine. Furthermore, Merton continually tries to relate the monastic practices and teachings described by Cassian to the disciplines of his own monastery, modifying Cassian if necessary. In addition, he frequently uses the text of Cassian to discourse on his own perceptive viewpoints gained from reading Cassian, at times in dialogue with other monastic fathers, such as in his discussion of the crucial importance of obedience for any monk (pp. 148–49), of the tendency for monks to avoid true self-generosity (p. 171), and of how sadness can be sinful (pp. 179–80). In his treatment of the "eight principal vices" (*Institutes* 5–12) Merton often calls attention to Cassian's psychological acumen, thereby relating the categories of Cassian's ancient "therapy of the soul" to those of the modern science of psychology. Especially in his discussion of acedia, vainglory, and pride (*Institutes* 10–12) Merton weds his own psychological insight to Cassian's in a particularly fruitful way.

Yet it is in the final section of the course, in his discussion of *Conferences* 1, 2, 4, 9, 10, and 16 (pp. 203–59), that Merton is at his best. Though at times he devolves into mere summary, more often he distills Cassian's monastic wisdom found in these most important conferences through the lens of his own experience. Of particular excellence is his discussion of the proximate and ultimate goals of the monastic life (*Conference* 1) and his treatment of Cassian's teaching on monastic prayer (*Conferences* 9 and 10). This close reading and insightful presentation of Cassian in a way well-suited for modern-day audiences results in a new expression of classical monastic wisdom.

All in all, Merton's interpretations and explanations of Cassian constitute a "bridge" between the fifth-century monastic father and his present-day heirs and readers. Merton makes the sometimes obscure and verbose Cassian intelligible and applicable to modern-day sensibilities and concerns. Merton is no mere epitomizer of Cassian but rather his exegete and spokesman for men and women of today. In Merton, one hears the voice of the great synthesizer of monastic doctrine speaking to a contemporary audience and addressing their concerns.

For these reasons, I think that the "Lectures on Cassian" would be an excellent companion to reading Cassian himself if it were to be used today as introduction to the monastic tradition. There is really nothing like Merton's commentary on Cassian to help orient first-time readers through the massive works of Cassian.⁶ Though today we have the excellent translations of Cassian by Boniface Ramsey, his introductions and annotations offer the reader little help when confronted with over 1000 pages of Cassian in translation.⁷ Hence Merton could here supply a real need, for he treats of twenty-one of Cassian's twenty-four conferences, whether providing a short summary or discussing it at length. Merton would thus be a reliable guide for approaching Cassian.

Accordingly, Merton's *Cassian and the Fathers* is an excellent choice to inaugurate Cistercian Publications new Monastic Wisdom Series, just as his *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* was for the inauguration of the same publisher's Cistercian Studies Series back in 1969.⁸ Though I have expressed my reservations about the "Prologue to Cassian," I would heartily recommend the "Lectures on Cassian" to anyone interested in drinking from this great fifth-century source of monastic wisdom.

Notes

1. Pierre Pourrat, *Christian Spirituality, Vol. I: From the Time of Our Lord till the Dawn of the Middle Ages* Translated by W. H. Mitchell and S. P. Jacques (1927; Westminster, Maryland: Newman, 1953).

2. *Pachomian Koinonia*, 3 vols. Translated by Armand Veilleux. Cistercian Studies Series 45-47 (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1980-82).

3. For example: William Harmless, S.J., *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). O'Connell lists other items in Appendix C.

4. Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian: A Study in Primitive Monasticism* (Cambridge: University Press, 1950; 2nd ed. 1968). Merton obviously used the first edition.

5. For example: Elizabeth A. Clark, *The Origenist Controversy: the Cultural Construction of an Early Christian Debate* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992).

6. The only comparable thing is Adalbert de Vogüé, "Understanding Cassian: A Survey of the Conferences," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 19.2 (1982): 101-21, which attempts to help orient the reader by explaining the structure of the conferences. Vogüé does not deal with Cassian's teaching as Merton does.

7. John Cassian, *The Conferences*. Translated by Boniface Ramsey. Ancient Christian Writers 57 (New York/Mahwah: Paulist, 1997) and John Cassian, *The Institutes*. Translated by Boniface Ramsey. Ancient Christian Writers 58 (New York/Mahwah: Newman, 2000).

8. Thomas Merton, *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*. Cistercian Studies Series 1 (Spencer, Mass.: Cistercian Publications, 1969).

Mark DelCogliano

BECKER, Holly (Producer) and SCHONEGEVEL, Carey (Director), *Original Child Bomb* (Santa Barbara, CA: Unquiet Projects, 2004). DVD available for purchase at www.originalchildbomb.com \$25.00.

Perhaps the greatest testament to the urgency, necessity, and achievement of this remarkable film adaptation of Merton's 1962 poem comes from the audience who most needs to see it: the young people of today. After viewing the film several times myself, I decided—in light of the current nuclear crisis in North Korea—to screen it for my sophomore world literature class. I was horrified to discover that only about one third of the class was aware of this