

Reviews

MERTON, Thomas, *The Rule of St. Benedict: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 4*, edited with an Introduction by Patrick F. O'Connell, Preface by Joan Chittister, OSB, Monastic Wisdom Series 19 (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2009), pp. lxi + 291. ISBN 978-0-87907-019-9 (paper) \$24.95.

This is the fourth work of Thomas Merton's novitiate classes that Patrick O'Connell has edited, following *Cassian and the Fathers* (2005), *Pre-Benedictine Monasticism* (2006) and *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism* (2008). (A fifth volume, *Monastic Observances*, has just been published.) These classes were given by Merton during his time as Novice Master between 1955 and 1965.

The present work begins with an Introduction by O'Connell which covers fifty pages. It gives an excellent overview of the work and the various sources for it. Merton repeated this course twice during the ten years of his mastership. There are some variations in the two presentations as given to the novices, subsequently duplicated and made available to them. Besides this, there are the actual typed notes which Merton used for the classes, plus numerous hand-written additions made by him in the course of preparing the classes. In his usual careful way, O'Connell has managed to compare these versions, and also the tapes of those sections which were recorded. Many of the hand-written passages he adds as an Appendix. To these he also adds a further Appendix of a table comparing the texts from the book with actual tapes available both commercially and in the Merton Center archives. Finally he adds another Appendix giving sources for further reading, extending to the current time. The Introduction also compares material from this work with material from other monastic writings published by Merton.

The work is not a complete commentary on the *Rule* of St. Benedict. Merton used those sections of the *Rule* which he felt were more important for the novices in living out their monastic life. He emphasized that "The important thing is for monks to love the *Rule*, not as a document printed on paper but as a life that should take possession of their inmost hearts. . . . [E]very line of the *Rule*

indicates that its various prescriptions are given us to show us how to get rid of self-love and replace it by love of God" (6). Also at that time, the choir religious still had chapter daily, when the abbot would give a short comment on some part of the *Rule*.

Merton begins with a study of the life and character of St. Benedict. He sees the *Rule* summed up in the injunction of Benedict "to prefer nothing to the love of Christ" (15 [c. 4]). He then spends a fair amount of time on the Prologue of the *Rule*, which he sees as "the theological foundation of the whole spiritual doctrine of St. Benedict" (51). His doctrine is simply that of the Gospels, applied to a special class of men – to monks. The very first word of the Prologue, "Ausculata" – "Listen" – sets the tone for all that Benedict will prescribe. The monk is to "listen" to the Word of God in Scripture, in monastic tradition, in the abbot, in the community and in his own heart. That Word is constantly calling the monk to respond to the love of God and to strive to live according to the life and Person of Jesus Christ. Merton then spends over seventy pages treating select chapters of the *Rule*, particularly those pertaining to the abbot, the community, manual labor and poverty.

Finally, a good third of the work is a study of chapter 7, "The Degrees of Humility." He sees this as the heart of the *Rule*. "[H]ere we have for St. Benedict the real interior life of the monk." He sees the degrees of humility as "a summary of the whole *praxis* (active life) which prepares us for *theoria* (contemplation)" (152-53). The monk is called to identify with Christ, the Word Incarnate, who "emptied Himself, becoming obedient even unto death" (Phil. 2:7-8). By means of humility Christ is formed in the heart of the monk and it is He who brings us to eternal life.

Throughout the work, Merton refers to earlier monastic writings. This shows the inner connection that exists between this course on the *Rule* and his other courses on Cassian and on Pre-Benedictine monasticism.

Patrick O'Connell is certainly to be congratulated for the work he put in on this book. More than simply editing the words of Merton, he clarifies them and develops them, particularly through his excellent Introduction and the Appendices that he added. In this way he presents Merton to us as Merton tried to present himself to his novices. He helps us to experience something of the esteem and veneration that Merton and the monastic tradition had for St. Benedict, not just as a law-giver, but as one who embodied the spirit of the Gospels, as well as that of the Desert Fathers and

earlier Christian and monastic writers.

James Conner, OCSO

MERTON, Thomas, *Compassionate Fire: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Catherine de Hueck Doherty*, edited with an Introduction and Afterword by Robert A. Wild (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2009), pp. xiv + 110. ISBN 9781594712166 (paper) \$12.95.

Perhaps a key to Thomas Merton's enduring fame is that he provides a window to a soul's spiritual development, that as a spiritual seeker he was in constant development and was honest about the struggles he experienced. Likewise, Merton's correspondence with Catherine de Hueck Doherty provides us Merton's candid autobiography in miniature from his pre-monastic vocational discernment in New York, through his highs and lows as a Trappist monk, to his transition to living as a hermit at Gethsemani. Having begun her correspondence with Merton at a comparatively older age (19 years Merton's senior), Doherty's style of writing changes less through the progress of their letters than does Merton's, but she relates similar changes in her state of life.

Doherty's journey progresses from Friendship House in Harlem, to Madonna House in rural Ontario, to the solitary life at her *Poustinia* (an eremitic style of life from the Russian Orthodox tradition brought by Doherty to Catholic spirituality). At times their tangents seem to be parallel, but in some regards they represent a perpendicular crossing. Both experienced mixed feelings about the vocation of writing, and both struggled at times with community life and with religious leaders and superiors. Merton's correspondence begins as a young man wondering whether he should embrace a vocation of lay service in Harlem at Friendship House or become a Trappist contemplative. Oddly, his inclination to join the Trappists was rekindled by listening to a retreat conference at Friendship House extolling lay "Catholic Action" by Doherty's spiritual director Fr. Paul Hanly Furfey (22, 106). He joins the Trappists and finds himself engaging more and more with the world in the 1950s and '60s, including the advancement of Civil Rights for many African Americans he could have served had he remained in Harlem. Although Doherty was a champion of lay service to the poor and racial justice through direct action, she chose to move to a rural setting, founded a lay apostolate with some quasi-monastic rules, mutually agreed with her husband Ed-

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