

MERTON, Thomas, *Monastic Observances: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* 5, edited with an introduction and notes by Patrick F. O'Connell, Preface by James Conner, OCSO, Monastic Wisdom Series 25 (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2010), pp. lv + 335. ISBN 978-0-87907-025-0 (paper) \$32.95.

Thomas Merton left numerous manuscripts and notes that remained unpublished at the time of his death in December 1968. Some works of this collection were readied for publication in the early years following, while others required more time, so that during the forty-two years since the accident that took his life an uninterrupted flow of fresh articles and books has found its way into the public forum. The book being reviewed here is the most recent of the lengthy list of posthumously published works of the Cistercian monk whom we knew as Father Louis in the Gethsemani community. *Monastic Observances* is the fifth volume of the series of Merton's monastic conferences published in the Monastic Wisdom Series. The text is well presented and rendered still more useful by the extensive Appendix A added at the end of the volume, which provides variant readings from a preliminary draft with revisions Merton made in Merton's hand as well as typed in. The conferences he actually gave to the novices were the revised version. The 45-page Introduction serves well to situate this work in the context in which Merton lived and wrote.

The contribution this volume makes to the understanding of the spiritual and human development of the author is not the least interest of this work. Although several biographies of Merton have appeared in print, yet none has presented the daily life that made up the large portion of his experience with the fullness of concrete detail that is essential to a more vivid contact with the dedicated monk as lived in his monastic setting. The care and energy found in this series of conferences to the novices for whose formation he was responsible, as well as his manner of presenting monastic life in its daily expression, reveal features of the author's personality and character essential to an adequate appreciation of his person and the role he exercised in the Cistercian Order as well as in his own community.

For reasons to be presented below, it is this implicit feature of this text that is, perhaps, of more lasting and broader import than the formal, explicit subject of monastic observances. By this I do not mean to imply that the autobiographical insights concealed

in the letter of this book, significant as they are, provide the sole interest of this volume. The relation of concrete practices to the development and deepening of character and spiritual insight is consistently stressed by Merton. A particularly informative and useful discussion of the nature of *lectio divina* and of meditation receives extensive treatment and remains as helpful today as when it was first presented to the novices. In fact, just yesterday in the course of my work in the guesthouse, two married women consulted with me precisely on the topics dealt with in these pages that present the monastic approach to reading, meditation and contemplation.

Another area of interest in this work is in the historical domain. When these talks were being given, at irregular intervals in the years 1957 to 1960, Fr. Louis was not conscious of the fact that he was treating of practices that in a few years would be seen as belonging to an era soon to be considered past history. The usages in effect during the years Fr. Louis lived as a Cistercian monk were already under study in view of modifications during the years these lectures were being given to the novices for whose formation he was largely responsible. The changes envisaged during this period proved to be considerably more modest than those that were in fact adopted in 1969, the year after his death, when the Statute on Unity and Pluralism was framed and made the legislation of the Order by the General Chapter.

The usages treated in this series of conferences applied to the lifestyle of monks who were living the same Cistercian way of seeking God and witnessing to His loving care for all peoples. The unity of the Trappist-Cistercian Order was maintained by a uniformity of the concrete practices that make up the daily monastic life as it passes through the various seasons of the year. As the Order had spread from France and other European countries to other continents, the seasonal changes were markedly different than in those areas for which the traditional usages were elaborated. The same woolen material for the monastic habit, to mention but one instance, was not equally suitable in the hot summers of Georgia and the more temperate climate of Europe.

Moreover, during the years when Merton was novice master and presenting the teaching represented in this series of conferences, the diverse cultural developments of the young monks in the different countries of the West, as well as those living in the Eastern world, created additional strains on uniform practices

inherited from a past long disappeared; Americans had known a style of authority decidedly at variance from that in force when the traditional usages had been framed. Merton loyally taught and practiced customs that required much adaptation on the part of modern North Americans. His personable manner of relating to his students, his enthusiasm, and his solid common sense did much to preserve the human touch in the actual living out of the norms as realized in these usages.

Fittingly, the editor of this volume has included, under the title "Spiritual Direction in the Monastic Setting," Merton's notes that reveal his conception of one of the more important roles he fulfilled in the monastery. He gave serious attention to this aspect of his relations with novices as he had done while Master of Students in the four years preceding his term as Novice Master. Especially in his private sessions with the individual students and novices Merton consistently emphasized the primacy of the spiritual purpose of living in a Cistercian monastery. Love of God that entered into relations among brothers living together in a fraternal spirit was the climate he did so much to create and the doctrine he taught that gave spirit and energy to his lectures. Much of this emphasis on the more spiritual and fraternal values that give soul and purpose to monastic community life was conveyed by his personal presence that brought his words to life for his listeners. As one reads this text, something of that same presence is conveyed by the words on these pages. Rightly to read this work one is helped to keep in mind this more spiritual and personal emphasis that is not always on the surface, but never far from those who know how to listen with the ear of the Spirit. Fr. Louis himself was keenly aware of this feature of his writings, and on one occasion gave explicit notice of this more hidden dimension of his words. His reflections apply not only to his autobiographical writings but likewise to this work on Monastic Usages, though requiring more subtle attentiveness to perceive. Here are his words: "most honorable reader . . . if you listen, things will be said that are perhaps not written in this book. And this will be due not to me, but to One who lives and speaks in both!"<sup>1</sup>

Abbot John Eudes Bamberger, OCSO

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1. Thomas Merton, *"Honorable Reader": Reflections on My Work*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 67.