

Reviews

MERTON, Thomas, *Charter, Customs, and Constitutions of the Cistercians: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 7*, edited by Patrick F. O'Connell, Foreword by John Eudes Bamberger, OCSO (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2015), pp. lxii + 263. ISBN 978-0-87707-041-0 (paper) \$29.95.

Charter, Customs, and Constitutions of the Cistercians is the seventh installment in Cistercian Publications' *Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* series, ably edited by Patrick F. O'Connell. This series has made available in book format the formation conferences offered by Thomas Merton during his years (1955-1965) as novice master for the Trappist community at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. As the title suggests, the book contains Merton's notes for the conferences he delivered to Gethsemani's novices on the original Cistercian *Carta Caritatis* and *Consuetudines*, both dating from the twelfth century, and on the 1925 *Constitutions of the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance*, under which Merton and his students were living at the time these conferences were delivered.

Other books in the series (e.g. *Pre-Benedictine Monasticism*, *Introduction to Christian Mysticism* and *The Life of the Vows*) frankly make for more exciting history and/or provide richer, more accessible spiritual doctrine. The series editors were wise to publish those other texts first as they will serve as better entry points for most readers to the teaching Merton offered during his years as a monastic formator. This book should probably be considered supplementary rather than essential for all but those who are specialists in Merton or Cistercian studies. Nonetheless, this book contributes to our appreciation of Merton and Cistercianism in important ways.

Thomas Merton is best known for being a popularizer of monasticism and a prophetic Christian voice during the dramatic social and ecclesial changes of the mid-twentieth century. As Merton's former student Abbot John Eudes Bamberger indicates in the preface to the present volume, Merton should probably be better appreciated as an American pioneer of the *ressourcement* (return to the sources) movement which was so important for the Second Vatican Council in general and for the reform of religious life in particular (cf. viii-ix). Merton was an excellent histori-

cal theologian who possessed wide and deep knowledge of the Catholic spiritual tradition and especially of Cistercian sources. He was able to use his vast knowledge of monastic and ecclesiastical history and texts to identify with clarity the contours of his charism and so recall his fellow monks to what Vatican II called the “primitive inspiration” of their founders (*Perfectae caritatis* 2).

Since the novice master’s task was largely to introduce new members of the community to the textual monuments and history of the order, Merton’s gifts as a historical theologian and accomplishments in *ressourcement* are obviously well-showcased in his formation conferences. To offer just a couple examples of Merton’s encyclopedic historical knowledge from this volume, he deftly contrasts the treatment of the monastic calefactory (warming room) in the twelfth century with the descriptions of the calefactory in documents from the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries (cf. 21-22), and provides a highly detailed commentary on the history of personal grooming in the order (cf. 37-39). Merton’s maturing as a thinker is demonstrated in the way he was no longer explaining Cistercian life by way of polemical contrast with the Black Benedictines and Cluniac tradition, as he did in the recently published but early-authored *In the Valley of Wormwood*, but rather was articulating an internally coherent vision of Cistercian life, grounded in the sources, that stood well on its own terms. Not surprisingly Merton provided in this collection a sketch of the Cistercian charism that highlighted silence, contemplation, prayer, penance and cloister. This book also underlines some aspects of early Cistercian identity which have become so commonplace in religious life at large that it is easy to forget they were not always normative in monastic life but were only introduced by the great Cistercians of the twelfth century – namely the prohibition of child oblation and the international organization of religious orders.

Abbot James Fox would have been hard-pressed to find anyone in the Gethsemani community more intellectually equipped than Merton to pass on knowledge of the Cistercian tradition to novices. However, the novice master needed to be more than a purveyor of historical detail. He was not simply a teacher; he was a superior. According to Merton himself, the novice master “represents the abbot” in the matter of the whole “formation of the novices” (168). Given the now familiar narrative that Merton had a contentious relationship with his abbot, it is intriguing that Fox would have appointed Merton to the office of representing him and his will to the junior-most element of the monastic community and thus forming the future of the monastery. Merton was clearly intellectually qualified for the work, but would he form the men

as the abbot would have them formed?

If this text is any indication, the answer to that question was yes. Merton took his position as novice master very seriously and carried it out dutifully. As O'Connell explains in his excellent introduction, while Merton may have been personally attracted to controversies and might have preferred to devote all his formation conferences to "the spiritual teachings of the desert fathers, or the Christian mystical tradition, or the rich texts and rituals of the liturgical cycle, or the lives and writings of the great contemplative Cistercians of the first generation," he knew that he had to also communicate to his novices the "much more mundane details of schedules and governance, of meals and dormitory arrangements, of monastic jobs and monastic sanctions," etc. (xv). Merton accomplished his task of communicating the expectations for living at Gethsemani to novices by extrapolating upon the ancient charter, customs and constitutions, and illuminating for his charges how those older guidelines were now expected to be carried out, which was often still quite strictly.

Merton's obedience and fidelity to his duties as novice master comes into especially high relief at those moments when he had to communicate values and expectations that he obviously struggled with himself. For example, in discussing the "hidden life" to which Trappists should aspire, Merton told his novices: "monks should not get involved in matters savoring of controversy" (98), and "the desire of *publicity of any kind* is extremely dangerous and can easily ruin the monastic spirit" (135). It is always difficult to preach against one's own weaknesses and one wonders how many of Merton's novices realized how much Merton may have felt implicated by his own words. Yet Merton communicated these values, because it was his duty to do so. There are also the rules that Merton may have privately questioned but which he nonetheless delivered soberly to his charges. For instance, he communicated the expectation of total abstinence from alcohol in American Trappist houses even though this was not a practice in Europe (127-28), and the rather clerical and conspicuously non-Benedictine pre-conciliar practice of having novice priests placed in seniority above non-ordained novices (163). One suspects that Merton would not have agreed with either of these policies, but there is nothing to suggest that Merton encouraged insubordination or even doubt among his charges. This is to his great credit.

This book contributes to our appreciation of Merton as a historical theologian and to our understanding of the Cistercian charism, the integrity and beauty of which Merton, as always, illuminates in an attractive way. What perhaps makes the book most special, however, is the way it

displays Merton's love for his living community and his dutiful cooperation with his abbot in his role as novice master.

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MERTON, Thomas, *Early Essays, 1947-1952*, edited by Patrick F. O'Connell, Foreword by Jonathan Montaldo (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2015), pp. vii + 168. ISBN 978-0-87907-266-7 (paper) \$19.95.

I would like to focus this review of Thomas Merton's *Early Essays, 1947-1952* on the *simple experience* of appreciating this particular set of writings within the general context of Merton's work. Not to be too cryptic or provocative at the outset, I will thus proceed in a fairly mundane manner only to give way to joyful celebration in signaling how this book enables us to better appreciate Merton's overall expressive life that helps crack open our lives so that our living life dawns on us.

Simply put, this is a collection of twelve essays, mainly written by Merton between 1947 and 1950, with one lone article from 1952. The timeframe is important because the original edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain* was published in 1948, followed by a mass-market edition in 1952. Remember how his remarkable autobiography concludes with an Epilogue, penned in 1947, in which Merton claims that "America is discovering the contemplative life."¹ It is from this rooster-like announcement that these "early essays" begin to rise and spread the vital news of such a discovery.

As usual, Patrick O'Connell continues his dependable, impeccable scholarship in handling Merton's writings with archival brilliance; in this case, he has elected to neatly organize the essays into two groups: the first six essays in the collection were published in *The Commonweal* (as it was then called), while the second set of six were published in five different publications (two in the magazine *Integrity*). O'Connell's Introduction and insightful summaries of each article supply the publishing history and any other background information the reader might suddenly wonder about, making the entire book a complete study in and of itself. The Foreword is gracefully written by Jonathan Montaldo, a wayfarer-scholar always helping readers appreciate the deep struggle in Merton's voice, journey and soul as he expresses the life within him and brings hope to our own struggles. Montaldo recognizes, here, that though Merton's voice may seem young in these first public essays, it is unmistakably Merton's spirited voice we are listening to. And there is much to hear.

1. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 414.