

tionship of spirituality and social justice (Darton, Longman & Todd, 1989). Brother Ramon, an Anglican Franciscan, has produced a very personal account of Merton's development in his book, *Soul Friends: A Journey with Thomas Merton* (Marshall Pickering, 1989). As the destructive efforts of ten years of Thatcher government become clearer and clearer in British society, so the social teaching of Merton becomes more and more relevant to our situation. We need his voice now more than ever.

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Thomas Merton  
*THE MERTON TAPES*  
Second Release of Lectures

Kansas City, Missouri: Credence Cassettes, 1988 & 1989  
Thirty cassette tapes [Sixty minutes each] — \$7.95 each

Reviewed by **Dewey Weiss Kramer**

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The goal of all Christian formation is to become formed in the image of God. Of all human institutions, the monasteries, especially contemplative ones, see as their *raison d'être* the creation of an environment and program which makes this goal possible. The monk has but one "work," to seek God alone. Thus the practices of monastic formation can be expected to help all serious Christians in their attempt to image Christ, and methods used in the monastery can be expected to work for non-monastic Christians as well.

This is particularly the case when the director of such monastic formation is one of the era's most gifted spiritual teachers, Thomas Merton, a writer whose published works, while intended primarily for non-monastics, were the fruit of his monastic experience. Thus, it is no surprise that the two series (now made available to the general public by Credence Cassettes) of Merton's lectures to the novices at Gethsemani during the 1960s have enjoyed tremendous success. This second group of tapes brings the number of tapes released in unedited versions to forty-nine. Used judiciously, and most effectively in groups of lectures wherein relationships

between and among the various talks can be absorbed, these lectures give insight both into Merton as teacher and novice master, as well as into the nature of the monastic community itself in which he played a significant role. His awareness of that role stands out clearly in these tapes.

One wonders, however, if there might not be a large number of perplexed or disappointed listeners among the various purchasers of the tapes. For, while the series is undoubtedly of value, one does not receive the concentrated, carefully crafted and thought-out fare of Merton's books. Rather, insights and guidance come out in bits and pieces during the sixty-odd lectures. These are lecture-discussions, not formal lectures, nor were they meant to be. They are a record of Merton and other monks in the process of learning more about the monastic life. Merton as teacher is eliciting responses, assisting others to think and to contribute basic answers to his questions. Seen in this light even the "small talk" which frequently begins a tape is valuable. Merton may ease into a discussion by telling about something which has recently occurred in the monastery. The final tape to be discussed in this review, "Spiritual Direction" (AA2137), for example, begins with some talk about a just completed "Tricenary," thirty days of prayer for the dead, and he uses explanation of this tradition to lead into discussion of the tradition of spiritual direction, a tradition vital to the Cistercian vocation and to the serious Christian life. Still, a caveat is in order. These tapes are not for the Merton beginner who will do better to turn to the books. But they can prove valuable, perhaps even invaluable, for the person knowledgeable in Merton matters, or monasticism, and this is so for several reasons.

First, there *is* a wealth of sound advice on how to live the spiritual life meaningfully, and the compilers have facilitated this by arranging the twenty-nine tapes under review in thematic sets and color-coding the cases accordingly so that one can keep track of the groups. Secondly, and closely related to the first point, there is a wealth of suggestions for further study provided. Merton frequently advises his novices to get hold of this or that book, contemporary, ancient, classic, and the listener would do well to follow his advice. Further, Merton is drawing constantly on his copious reading, and the references to his sources are simultaneously references to crucial foundations of spirituality. The works of Cassian, Origen, the Cistercian Fathers are now all far more accessible to the general reading public than they were in the 1960s, and this is due in part to Merton's own pioneering efforts at bringing them back into the mainstream of contemporary spirituality. Merton's use of such thinkers gives insight into his

method and provides a clue to his own position in the history of twentieth century spirituality. In his talks on conversion of manners, for example, he develops his own thought and that of his novices by going back to the sayings of the Desert Fathers, to Origen, Cassian, bypassing eighteenth and nineteenth century authorities to return to the sources of perennial wisdom. It has been this return to the sources that has contributed greatly to the renewal of contemplative spirituality in the present era and we see Merton playing early on a major role in this renewal. In the lecture on Mary, as a further example, he presents his novices with *the* Cistercian Father, Bernard, thus trying to teach Cistercian essence by delving deeply into the original Fathers. Other novice masters have since done comparable work, perhaps more careful work, but the ease, grace, and liveliness of Merton's use of and integration of an immense range of essential original sources was seminal and explains his importance in the re-emphasis of Cistercians on their contemplative charism.

Two final points should be made in regard to the value of these tapes, both of which relate to the decision to offer the lectures without editing. The original Merton tapes produced by Norman Kramer in the 1970s were edited with a heavy hand, omitting pauses, Merton's ubiquitous "see?," comments by students, all small talk and joking. The sober teacher who spoke from those tapes was a far cry from the mirthful and witty Merton treasured by those he had taught personally. The editorial policy followed by Credence Cassettes which omits nothing has, in turn, elicited some virulent criticism, especially in regard to the inclusion of commentary (sometimes barely audible) of his students. Such pauses, the references to personal matters, to specific events at Gethsemani or in the world, account in part for the point made in the beginning that the essential "teaching" is sparse and has to be gleaned in pieces.

Understandable as such criticism is, the unedited versions are preferable. One hears Merton as mirthful, can observe his teaching style, and is brought to the realization that spiritual direction is a long, slow process. The emphasis on the building of community which constitutes a vital part of the content of the series of lectures is viscerally realized here in the give-and-take of the dialogue, the groping for words, the repetitions. Even though some answers are inaudible, Merton's responses almost always restate the material so that the sense is not lost. Beyond the personal repartee documented, one gains invaluable clues into the nature of Gethsemani. The accents of its novices, the trivia, the bantering all produce something akin to a time capsule. What has been lacking in the biographies of Merton thus

far has been the essential monastic element of his life. These tapes could help supply that to the future definitive biographer.

Individuals, librarians, spiritual directors, and researchers who use these tapes should seek to perceive how they fit together as a whole. The following discussion of these taped classes has two aims: to give some brief indication of their content, and to demonstrate how they feed into one another. Merton's job, the job of his Gethsemani auditors, and our job as we listen, is to become aware that Christian formation is first and foremost a process, sometimes a painful process.

### I.

Two groups of lectures, on "conversion of manners" and on "poverty," can profitably be evaluated together. Both deal with fundamental aspects of monasticism difficult to comprehend because of the emphasis on interior change. (Other aspects of monastic formation — silence, chastity — to be discussed later seem at first glance more understandable; refraining from talking or sexual abstinence appear to be, at least superficially, quite concrete. Merton, however, points his audience to the subtlety beyond most initial assumptions.) Taken together, the six tapes on the subject of conversion of manners (AA2228 - AA2233) provide a valuable index to Merton's thinking about the positive dimension of renunciation. The same is true of the discussions on poverty.

Conversion in the radical sense Merton discusses it is a mode of life wherein renunciation of self is fundamental. In his first lecture ("The Vow of Conversion" - AA2228) he observes that people in the modern world are trained never really to find themselves: "Today's culture is one where we are floating." To take a vow which demands a complete change, "the baptismal vows pushed a little further," is to allow God's will to become realized as one's own will. Such conversion is thus not a matter of imposition, but rather it is like becoming a saint, "one who acts because the root of the willing is in God." Rootedness is essential to all conversion of manners; you cannot just float. The next tape in this set, "Conversion in Christ" (AA2229), treats the monastic commitment in relation to its sacramental aspect. With reference to Bede Griffiths (side A), Merton explains how conversion is a simple change whereby the individual "lives closer to God," yet in which the community is crucially involved; thus the rituals of, for example, tonsure or washing of feet stress community relationship and

mutual responsibility. On side B, he examines Peter of Celle's "Nine Letters to Carthusians" as a continuum of the basic idea that within a monastic setting, a theocentric setting, one works to make a "cultivated place full of light and peace." In such a setting, made possible by a loving community, it is possible to "get one's self together."

All this leads naturally into the next lectures on "Becoming Our True Self" (AA2230) where Merton considers finding "our true self" in discipline. These two lectures also contain an intriguing excursion into avoidance of the "Old Directory" (it is *not* a matter of "progress") (side A), and into Indo-European languages and an anecdote about a Zen monk (side B). Two Zen monks met a woman at a stream who did not want to get her skirt wet. The one monk obliged her by carrying her across the water while the other fretted. The punch line comes in the former's reply to his companion: "I dropped her ten miles back; you're still carrying her." The story exemplifies well both Merton's own attitudes and his teaching methods.

"Permanent Conversion to God" (AA2231) stresses that one's vow truly changes life. "The Patience of Conversion" (AA2232) emphasizes the need for choice, and the realization that according to the Rule of St. Benedict "to prefer absolutely nothing over Christ" is a process which allows an individual gradually to be so disposed that he or she cannot easily do something contrary to God. This then leads naturally into "The Commitment to Conversion" (AA2233), a set of lectures which examines the relationship of commitment to obedience. Side A considers the Blessed Mother as model, noting her importance for the Cistercian Fathers. Side B alludes to Cassian, observing that certain of his fundamental ideas were later abridged: Merton says, with a sense of irony, that Cluny "was a place [for producing] future popes." His point is that conversion of manners is not primarily a concern with externals. Fulltime Christian renunciation means "we do everything so that Christ lives in us."

The six tapes discussed thus far, while sometimes rambling, clearly emphasize the need for perseverance. Given the nature of the subject, repetition is justified, even necessary. The same might be said about the next group of four on poverty (AA2101 - AA2104). The first, "The Modern Cult of Efficiency," is also perhaps the most interesting in its discussion of a paradox endemic to religious life. The life depends on a "spirit of poverty," yet Merton must admit that the contemplative orders "need to have a modicum of security." Detachment is, of course, the key. These four tapes are probably the weakest set within the series, not because the material is bad, but because Merton relies heavily upon lists and examples: canonical

vows discussed in relation to money; specific terms defined; sins outlined; and finally the difference between "Inner and Outer Poverty" (AA2104). Occasionally boring, they are not without their worthwhile insights. In fact, the last mentioned includes a valuable discussion of and revelation of Merton's thinking on poverty in contemporary Central America, and specifically in Nicaragua, with reference to sins of large landholding families.

Merton's task as teacher is to help his listeners see their job as monks as a lifelong process. Thus, as implied above, if we listen to the six tapes on conversion, or these four on poverty, the stress is very much upon the Christian life as a process to be consciously lived out. It is never merely a matter of a vow being taken but rather of the vow being a reminder of the direction in which a life must grow. The next set of tapes to be discussed demonstrates this.

## II.

Four lectures are devoted to humility, and while of varying quality and containing much student discussion (the first tape of this group, "The Holy Rule — On Humility" [AA2105] is headed with the publisher's commentary: "This talk contains more dialogue than some."), they remind us what work it is to be saintly. Merton returns to the Rule to get his students thinking about how the "ladder of perfection" works; how "we ascend by descending" and how there is a fundamental paradox in the Christian or monastic life. He explicates Chapter 14 of St. Luke, about taking the lower place, to make his point and to stimulate discussion. On side B, using Peter of Celle and Benedict, Merton discusses the need to avoid pride.

In "Conversion" (AA2106) he analyzes "Sermon Number Seven" of Bernard's, "On Humility," to make the point that we must learn to rely upon humility in *all* things, to learn that nothing is against God's will. He explicates the same ideas *via* Benedict on side B. Benedict says that "formation of consciousness of the last things is basic." Keeping such a fact clearly in mind should convince us that *our thoughts* do matter. This content leads naturally into the next set of lectures on "Formation of Conscience" (AA2107). Self-will is to be avoided: any "will which is exclusively ours and thus not in union with others" is bad. Merton observes in an overview of Western history, and as a commentary on what is wrong with the present moment, Renaissance humanism's glorification of that which is good for the self. This, he maintains, is subversion of nature. It is precisely self-will

which “we have to avoid.” On side B he develops these ideas and discusses the difference between an aggressive and a passive fortitude, the one bad and the root of many troubles, and the other good. The problem is one Merton discusses in many places and is fundamental to his view of life: “The great problem is that in ourselves there are two selves: a real self; and, the ego . . . The outer self is what has to be removed, despised . . .” The fourth tape in this group, “The Fourth Degree of Humility” (AA2108), discusses scripture texts which give insight into the practice of humility.

This release includes one group of two lectures about “The Virgin Mary” (AA2128), probably occasioned by the need for some feast day commentary. Though containing some awkward comments, these lectures are ultimately focused and tie in nicely with the preceding four on humility, for Mary is the model *par excellence*. On side A Merton cites Bernard on Mary as mediatrix. As a type (and in the writings of Bernard, a metaphor), Mary is beheld as a model for the spiritual life. On side B Merton develops the connection between Mary and our need for a mother (“as long as we don’t get sloppy and sentimental”). A mother beyond an earthly mother, says he, heightens our awareness of the presence of God. This tape also contains some important comments on bad art and the impossibility of combining art with the spiritual life if the art is weak — “like Muzak.”

All of the fifteen tapes discussed above (six on conversion, four on poverty, and five on humility and Mary) emphasize the need for interior change. While useful, they tend toward the abstract. Discussion of the second fifteen tapes here will focus on more specific and practical matters, a shift which the subjects themselves enjoin. In the foregoing lectures, Merton stresses matters of attitude and the heart. In these remaining ones Merton tries to give *specific* hints about the monastic life: about how to read; think; and live. One hears him, as it were, thinking along with his students about the difficulty of the monastic life and its relationship to the wider world — historical and contemporary — about the community beyond themselves, when considering the Christian life as lived, for example, by married people. Thus, as these lectures develop, Merton seems increasingly concerned to make sense of the monastic life by tying it in with the world beyond the life of one Abbey, or one person.

Two sets of lectures (AA2234 and AA2235) treat communism. Fairly fundamental, they provide a good basic picture of the difference between the Christian approach and “the whole idea of Marxism [which] is that God is the big illusion.” Especially valuable here is Merton’s willingness to point out problems with both communism *and* capitalism. In both systems,

humans are alienated from themselves. In tape AA2235, "Communism versus Capitalism," Merton discusses a Czech economist-philosopher, Hromadka, whose valid point is that to a great extent the Communists are "our fault." Merton ties in this dialectical thinking with the "God is dead" movement. These lectures offer thoughtful introductions to challenges made by communism.

Two additional tapes expand on the concern of how one lives as Christian in a world so completely different from the Christian ideal. The lectures on St. Augustine (AA2236) and St. Jerome (AA2237) provide basic introductory material about these Fathers. Because their subjects are so vast, these two tapes are a bit disappointing; but like most of the others, in context, they are worth hearing. The lecture-discussion on Augustine centers on the need to discern which signs are of value for Christians. This material grows out of a discussion of *De Doctrina Christiani*, and basic points are clearly explained, most importantly that as readers of scripture we need "to distinguish between reality and sign." Ultimately "sign is to be used; reality is to be rested in."

In the lecture-discussion on St. Jerome we learn of the significance of the use of scripture, as well as the significance of a small Christian community. Both these tapes are essentially a series of hints to be followed up on later. Merton urges us, for example, to look up Jerome's Letter No 125 to Rusticus (side B of AA2237). His hints are intriguing and might well lead his latterday listener to further exploration.

### III.

Quite valuable for monks and for lay people are the several tapes on silence. Why is genuine silence more than the absence of vocal speech? In "Silence" (AA2133), Merton explains: "In a certain way my word *is* myself . . . the capacity to make things intelligible. Like all natural gifts, it needs to be controlled." Within the religious (or monastic) context "refraining from speech is, therefore, an act of worship." Also, to restrain from useless words has a human value. This leads into discussions of "Solitude" (AA2099), and some interesting commentary on Merton's departure from the novitiate. (This must have been in 1965 just as he was becoming a hermit).

Side B of AA2099 is then about hermits and the purpose of (Merton's) life in the hermitage. Significantly, what comes across most strongly is the relationship of this kind of life to that of the larger community. "Solitude

and Resurrection" (AA2100) also pulls together various good insights in regard to silence and the life of the solitary. Merton speaks of Zen "bringing you back into the realm of straight being; [its] purpose is to get you detached." And then emphasizing the relationship between "solitude and resurrection": "The whole meaning of our life is to say yes to God. The only real affirmation is the affirmation of the Risen Christ." Side B continues this discussion in relation to the Modernist controversy, a crisis, says Merton, which was sixty years behind the times. "The reality of tradition is not a spirit with a small 's'. The reality is that Christ lives in us NOW."

The four tapes on "Chastity" (AA2129 - AA2132) contain considerable dialogue and are best heard as part of the larger grouping, where each may be seen as part of the whole. Merton has to establish the meaning of chastity; the meaning of "Authentic Friendship" (AA2130); the "Uses of Charity" (AA2131); and "The Symbolism of Chastity" (AA2132). There is much of interest about the sacrament of marriage, especially in AA2131. The theology of the monk's vow of chastity emphasizes the mystical aspect of marriage; yet chastity for the monk has to be seen as a gift, and a calling not extended to all.

What comes across in the lectures on chastity is Merton's conviction that because the sexual drive is such an exceedingly strong force, "if put aside, it has to be replaced by something else." And this is all for the good. Merton's view of life as essentially a paradox built on a natural contradiction is basic to this discussion: "If one yields fully, one yields to death." Conversely, "true life is a mortification of nature." All the lectures on silence and chastity show that denial of natural goods is a means of finding a higher good, not some kind of perverse loss.

#### IV.

Many of the tapes discussed thus far are ultimately about community. The same is certainly true of the final group to be evaluated here, those on love and spiritual direction. The last block of three (AA2134 - AA2136) are essentially discussion of points made by St. Bernard on the nature of love. In "Love Casts Out Fear" (AA2134), Merton also outlines how his students might become aware of Bernard as an artful user of words, one concerned about how, as preacher, he could make people of God aware of God's plan, yet also aware of the limitation of words: "The sum total of all we should strive for cannot be written down."

The lectures on love — “In the Image of God” (AA2135) and “Pure Love” (AA2136) — are valuable expositions of their topics. While defining terms and guiding his listeners, Merton demonstrates that the love we need to strive for “is a dynamic force.” In many different modes of living, no matter the cost, we must and will love. If we do not love well, we will love badly. There *is* always this force toward unity. Therefore at every moment each person *is* loving. You cannot avoid this fact.

Merton’s distinctions (based on Bernard’s types of love — of the slave, of the mercenary, of pure love for the sake of love) are examined carefully on side A of AA2135. On side B he comments upon the “Meditations of Guido the Carthusian” and relates them to life in today’s world. Over and over we hear that “You put nothing away for love which you do not recover at a higher level.”

AA2136, “Pure Love,” continues the consideration of these same ideas derived from St. Bernard. There is a good bit of chatting, but the comments on love and conversion are worth attending to, and especially so in relation to the other lectures in this grouping. A major idea is that in a Cistercian monastery everything is arranged so that “a change in one’s whole self . . . a revolution in one’s whole life is possible.”

How such a conversion is to be effected is, of course, the point of the whole course in formation preserved on these tapes. But a crucial element in the formation is “Spiritual Direction” (AA2137, mentioned already at the beginning of this review). This set of two lecture-discussions examines the significance of spiritual direction, bringing out the fact that it is so necessary and simple, and yet so difficult.

It is “a matter of guidance. A becoming is taking place.” Merton refers to other traditions in which spiritual direction is crucial, such as Sufism. On side B he outlines the veils that have to be removed if we (as also the Sufis) are to find our way on the spiritual path. It is also on this tape that Merton recounts a conversation with D. T. Suzuki who had asked him about his work as Novice Master and spiritual director: “Are you teaching those novices to be mystics?” Merton answered: “No!” and added that any answer would be “Baloney,” for “this development I’m talking about is much closer to home.” And home is essentially being at home!

Occasionally rough or sketchy, these lectures are definitely worth hearing. Merton constantly demonstrates his love of his fellow monks, his community, and thereby the church and the world. These are classroom performances, but accepted as such they provide a unique witness to the work of monastic formation.