

MERTON, Thomas, *A Course in Desert Spirituality: Fifteen Sessions with the Famous Trappist Monk*, edited by Jon M. Sweeney, Foreword by Paul Quenon, OCSO (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2019), pp. xvii + 176. ISBN 978-0-8146-8473-3 (paper) \$19.95.

A Course in Desert Spirituality represents both Thomas Merton's legacy and the mission of the International Thomas Merton Society. Like other scholarly societies, the ITMS works with archivists and academics to offer conferences and publications. Unlike other scholarly societies, it includes and serves the general reader who is interested in the contemplative life and pastoral writings of this twentieth-century spiritual master. One need look no further than Merton's 1958 publication entitled *Thoughts in Solitude* to see that his vocation included laypersons beyond the walls of his monastic cell: "What is said here about solitude is not just a recipe for hermits. It has a bearing on the whole future of man and of his world: and especially, of course, on the future of his religion."¹

Thoughts in Solitude opens with a depiction of the desert that re-visions the postmodern world as a wilderness no different than that in which Moses led the Hebrew people and Jesus endured and overcame temptations, both alone with God in a place of desolation, despair and death. It is into this desert that Merton calls us to discover Christ: "This, then, is our desert: to live facing despair, but not to consent. To trample it down under hope in the Cross. To wage war against despair unceasingly. That war is our wilderness. If we wage it courageously, we will find Christ at our side. If we cannot face it, we will never find Him" (*TS* 21).

A Course in Desert Spirituality adds lectures by Merton to his call to follow him into the wilderness. This is the second of two books edited by Jon Sweeney that open to the public the Merton Archive at Bellarmine University and offer abridged and rearranged versions of the scholarly editions of Merton's conferences to novices at the Abbey of Gethsemani² in a volume accessible to laypersons. The first book was entitled *A Course in Christian Mysticism*.³ Br. Paul Quenon, OCSO underscores the importance of both publications for laypersons in his foreword to *A Course in Desert Spirituality*:

1. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1958) 14; subsequent references will be cited as "*TS*" parenthetically in the text.

2. Thomas Merton, *Cassian and the Fathers: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition*, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2005); Thomas Merton, *Pre-Benedictine Monasticism: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 2*, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2006).

3. Thomas Merton, *A Course in Christian Mysticism: Thirteen Sessions with the Famous Trappist Monk*, ed. Jon M. Sweeney (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2017).

In today's turbulent world many women and men in Europe, America, and Latin America are looking toward Benedictine and earlier traditions for a guide on how to live. They feel an urgent need for "discernment of spirits" on many fronts, personal, ecclesiastical, and political. How can we detect what is motivating people – myself, others, and those big faces on the TV screens? The path to "purity of heart," to unselfish, authentic, and guileless intentions of the mind and will, were understood by these wise and simple men and women of Egypt, Syria, and Palestine. Here they are carefully spelled out again for our guidance. (x)

This course consists of fifteen "lectures" on the history of Christian monasticism from the first century with the asceticism of the martyr Alcibiades of Lyons (see 7-8) to the sixth century with the homilies by Philoxenos of Mabbug regarding the demands of living a spiritual life (see 136-58). Between these two figures, stories of virgins, hermits, cenobites, stylites, abbots and bishops are narrated by Merton in a way that would have originally awakened the young novices to the world into which they were entering and thereby broaden their understanding of monastic life. For us, however, the stories from antiquity, unusual spiritual disciplines and theological conflicts, will likely challenge our preconceptions of contemplative life and leave us wondering how any of this can be relevant for men and women in the twenty-first century who go to work, raise families and long for peace in an age of anxiety. This is an important question that the editor raises and to which we will respond in a moment.

It is important to keep in mind the setting of these lectures. In addition to attending the conferences, novices were adjusting to monastic life; and there was Merton's pastoral care as novice master. Classes, monastic disciplines and the guidance of a spiritual master provided a holistic approach to their formation.⁴ With regard to monastic disciplines, the young men were most likely reading the ancient writings noted in the lectures during the time that is set aside for *lectio divina*. From time to time this setting breaks through in the talks. For example in lecture seven, Merton's reflections on the life and writings of Gregory of Nyssa remind the novices that monastic life requires a transformation of body, mind and spirit that entails more than simply knowing about God but living alone with God in the transcendent darkness of God. In lecture ten, Merton raises a question for the novices to consider: "What should a monk do?" He then

4. See Thomas Del Prete, *Thomas Merton and the Education of the Whole Person* (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1990).

directs their attention to a recent publication of his translations entitled *What Ought I to Do? Sayings of the Desert Fathers*⁵ that we will come to know in an expanded version as *The Wisdom of the Desert*.⁶ Merton then summarizes: “Have no confidence in your own virtuousness, do not worry about a thing once it has been done, control your tongue and your belly” (73) – simple disciplines, I suppose, until you have to live them.

As I read through the lectures, I began to notice how Merton was defining *desert spirituality*. It is not only Christ-centered, it is a path to mystical union with Christ. Entering a monastery is an imitation of prophets who moved into the desert where they encountered an unstructured world, a natural world, an anti-totalitarian world where one is free to discover oneself at the deepest level alone with God, in conversation with God and in community with others. Lastly, Merton identifies the monk’s cell with the martyr’s cell where one sacrifices one’s life to God’s will. I am sure that more could be said regarding this subject. I offer these thoughts only as an example of how the talks can encourage the imagination to explore, discover and articulate one’s own understanding of this particular approach to the Christian life.

The editor supplements these lectures with study guide topics, questions and additional readings that will lead persons and groups in interesting trajectories of thought and discovery. For example:

In her book, *The New Asceticism*, British theologian Sarah Coakley recently said: “[We are] titillated intellectually by antique ascetic rigour, but for the most part quite unthinkingly accommodated to post-modern self-indulgence. Asceticism [has] become voyeuristic, something to study but not actually *do*” (18). Does this strike you as accurate of many today who read a book such as this? (159)

How we answer this question will determine how we work through this course in desert spirituality. This returns us to the issue raised above of relevance of these talks for us today. For example, Merton shares the story of Gregory Nazianzen’s struggle with the active vs. contemplative ways of life (see 43-44). For Gregory, it was an either/or situation; either monk or bishop. For us, however, it is both/and. Consequently, these lectures will require creative adaptation and thereby challenge us to discover what the editor intended with this publication; that is the “possibility that the spirituality of the desert might form us – even those who have not taken

5. Thomas Merton, *What Ought I to Do? Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Lexington, KY: Stamperia del Santuccio, 1959).

6. Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings from the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century* (New York: New Directions, 1960).

monastic or religious vows – into better followers of Christ” (xv).

But what is necessary to make this “possibility” an “actuality” is the closing concern of this review. I earlier underscored the importance of keeping in mind the setting of these lectures. They were presented to novices living a monastic life, guided by a novice master overseeing their monastic formation, and reading the texts noted in the lectures during time set aside for *lectio divina*. We need no less. Our formation requires more than words found either in books or heard in lecture halls. We too need a way of life, a community of mutual support and continuous reflection on sacred readings. In other words, if we want to discover the spirituality of the desert, we have to live it. So I suggest that we consider forming small groups interested in spiritual formation, in particular the spirituality of the desert, and be willing to creatively modify our ways of life accordingly. If open to this approach, the lessons of *A Course in Desert Spirituality* will be of true benefit.

David J. Belcastro

MERTON, Thomas, *Thomas Merton on Franz Kafka* (4 tracks: 1 MP3 CD) (Rockville, MD: Learn25, 2019) \$29.95.

The title of the single release of Thomas Merton recordings during 2019 by Learn25 (formerly NowYouKnow Media) is apt to be somewhat confusing, for a couple of related reasons. One might expect that *Thomas Merton on Franz Kafka* would be, like previous sets on such literary figures as Rainer Maria Rilke (2012), William Faulkner (2013; 2018), James Joyce (2013) and John Milton, T. S. Eliot and Edwin Muir (2018),¹ a collection of presentations Merton made to his monastic community, an impression that is certainly suggested by the description of them on the case as “four talks on Franz Kafka that Thomas Merton delivered during

1. “*God Speaks to Each of Us*”: *The Poetry and Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke* (11 talks with Introduction by Michael W. Higgins: 5 CDs) (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2012); “*All the Living and the Dead*”: *The Literature of James Joyce* (4 talks with Introduction by Michael W. Higgins: 3 CDs) (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2013); *Thomas Merton on William Faulkner* (6 talks with Afterword by Michael W. Higgins: 3 CDs) (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2018); revised version of *Thomas Merton on William Faulkner and Classical Literature* (10 talks with Introduction by Michael W. Higgins: 5 CDs) (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2013); *Thomas Merton on Literature: John Milton, T. S. Eliot, and Edwin Muir* (6 talks: 3 CDs) (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2018). All these sets were presented to the entire monastic community during Merton’s hermitage years (1965-68); see also the series on literature given during Merton’s final months as master of novices: *Seeing the World in a Grain of Sand: Thomas Merton on Poetry* (16 talks with Introduction by Michael W. Higgins: 7 CDs) (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2013).