

Reviews

MERTON, Thomas, *Medieval Cistercian History: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 9* edited with an introduction by Patrick F. O’Connell, preface by William R. Grimes (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2019), pp. lxxix, 310. ISBN 978-0-87907-043-4 (paper) \$44.95.

In 1955, Dom James Fox, abbot of the Abbey of Gethsemani, appointed Thomas Merton as the novice master, a position Merton held until 1965 when he moved permanently to a hermitage on the abbey’s property. It was a job he seemed to love. As he said in his final conference to the novices, being novice master “is the best job in the monastery . . . from every point of view.”¹ And he took this job seriously. Over the ten years he held this position, he wrote voluminously, both for publication as well as in the form of letters he sent to his many correspondents. Even with this prodigious output, he did manual labor alongside the novices once or twice weekly, and met each of them weekly for spiritual direction.

Even more impressive was the extensive preparation Merton put into his classes (conferences) for the novices, evidence for which is available through the tireless work of Patrick O’Connell. Over the past fifteen years, O’Connell has edited eight substantial volumes of Merton’s conference notes.² These notes cover Merton’s teaching on monastic history and

1. Thomas Merton, “A Life Free from Care,” *Cistercian Studies* 5 (1970) 218.

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); Thomas Merton, *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 3*, ed. Patrick F. O’Connell (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2008); Thomas Merton, *The Rule of Saint Benedict: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 4*, ed. Patrick F. O’Connell (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2009); Thomas Merton, *Monastic Observances: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 5*, ed. Patrick F. O’Connell (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2010); Thomas Merton, *The Life of the Vows: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 6*, ed. Patrick F. O’Connell (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2012); Thomas Merton, *Charter, Customs, and Constitutions of the Cistercians: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 7*, ed. Patrick F. O’Connell (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2015); Thomas Merton, *The Cistercian Fathers and Their Monastic Theology: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 8*, ed. Patrick F. O’Connell (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2016).

theology, the history and practice of mysticism, the meaning of monastic vows, as well as the minutiae of monastic life.

This ninth volume, containing Merton's conference notes on medieval Cistercian history, is a valuable addition to the series. As he did in his previous volumes, O'Connell writes an extensive introduction for this set of conferences, providing an account of when specifically Merton taught these series of conferences along with a helpful synopsis of the topics and themes Merton addressed, as a means of illustrating what aspects of medieval Cistercian history he wanted his novices to know. O'Connell rightly emphasizes throughout the introduction that Merton's goal in teaching this history to the novices was not simply to convey historical knowledge, but was primarily to help the novices to understand their own formation in the context of the spirituality of the Cistercian Order as expressed in its history. In other words, Merton taught to transform.

These conferences are particularly valuable for scholars of Merton, as they, like the previous volumes, illustrate how deeply immersed Merton was in the sources of his own monastic and Catholic tradition. One of the more incessant and tiring questions asked about Merton has to do with his Catholicism, specifically about just how Catholic Merton was, given his griping about the monastery as well as his ecumenical and interreligious outreach and dialogue. Merton's conference notes on medieval Cistercian history – indeed, all the conference notes published thus far – give ample evidence of the breadth and extent of Merton's study and understanding of the tradition. In his account of medieval Cistercian history he painstakingly goes through the rise and decline of Cistercian monasticism from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries, and does so with a level of detail and comprehension that is made all the more astounding when we take into account that Merton never studied theology formally. This volume on medieval Cistercian history is a valuable addition to the volumes we possess thus far, and Merton scholars like myself look forward to the set of three novitiate conference volumes, on scripture and liturgy,³ that will provide the final documentation of this important aspect of Merton's monastic life and work.

Gregory K. Hillis

3. Thomas Merton, *A Monastic Introduction to Sacred Scripture: Novitiate Conferences on Scripture and Liturgy 1*, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2020); Thomas Merton, *Notes on Genesis and Exodus: Novitiate Conferences on Scripture and Liturgy 2*, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (Eugene, OR: Cascade [in press]); Thomas Merton, *Liturgical Feasts and Seasons: Novitiate Conferences on Scripture and Liturgy 3*, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (Eugene, OR: Cascade [in preparation]).