

Reviews

MERTON, Thomas, *A Monastic Introduction to Sacred Scripture: Novitiate Conferences on Scripture and Liturgy I* edited with an introduction by Patrick F. O'Connell, Foreword by Bonnie Bowman Thurston (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2020), pp. lii, 190. ISBN 978-1-7252-5300-1 (paper) \$29.00.

I am writing these words shortly after wrapping up an intensive summer reading course in German, and there is a phrase I came across in an 1814 letter of Goethe that still hauntingly resonates: *Irrend lernt man* (“By going astray, one learns”). For the average German student, it concisely demonstrates the proper use of both the present participle and the indefinite personal pronoun. For me, however, it callously mocks my approach to this book review. You see, I had reasoned that the best way to prepare for actually reading Thomas Merton’s *A Monastic Introduction to Sacred Scripture* was to scour his journals, letters and books for any and all mentions of, well, Sacred Scripture. This would, after all, offer invaluable insight into his relationship with the holy text at this specific juncture in his life.

And so I did. The problem? Editor Patrick O’Connell had already beaten me to it – and masterfully so, I must add. If only I had taken the time to scan this portion of the quite accurate précis on the back cover: “The extensive introduction situates material of these conferences in the context of Merton’s evolving engagement with the Bible from his own days as a student monk through the mature reflections from his final years on the biblical renewal in the wake of the Second Vatican Council.” *Irrend lernt man*. It is my hope, however, that this mistake will translate into *your* more methodical and fruitful approach to an indispensable addition to the Mertonian corpus.

Merton’s text itself (1-138) is dense, painstakingly detailed, abstract and jargon-laden. For me, as a former seminarian of six years and now a doctoral student in biblical studies, it’s right up my alley as enjoyable reading. I agree, however, with Bonnie Bowman Thurston’s assessment in the foreword she penned for the book: “This *is* technical material, which may make it rather hard going for the general reader, as I imagine it must have been for some of Merton’s original listeners” (vii). As such,

I would caution readers away from beginning with Merton's text itself and would propose, instead, that they read the book in the order in which it is presented. In fact, there may not even be a need to read through Merton's text *seriatim*, and a better approach might be to reference sections as needed or desired. Your all-knowing guide will be O'Connell in his lengthy, carefully crafted introduction (xi-lii).

The introduction spans six sections (the last of which [lii] O'Connell uses to express gratitude for assistance and encouragement). The first section (xi-xiii) offers some helpful background information on the conference material that comprises *A Monastic Introduction to Sacred Scripture*, and O'Connell does some sound, helpful detective work in conjecturing dates for its composition and presentation. Keep in mind that Merton delivered these conferences as a newly appointed master of novices, reusing material that he had previously compiled and presented as master of students (1951-1955). This explains the "Spring 1951" (1) date at very beginning of the prologue and the "May 10, 1956" date at the very end of the so-called "Index" (142) – actually a detailed table of contents.

The second section (xiii-xviii) relies mainly on journals, letters and his early book on the Psalms, *Bread in the Wilderness*,¹ to distill Merton's relationship with Sacred Scripture from 1947 up through the delivery of these conferences. Here, O'Connell makes a crucial observation: despite the "largely abstract, technical nature of much of the material he presents," Merton regards Scripture as a "catalyst for 'communion with God'" (xviii) and stresses "the importance of a personal appropriation of the scriptural message" (xvii).

The third section (xviii-xxxvi) is perhaps the most important, as it walks the reader through the actual contents of Merton's conferences that comprise *A Monastic Introduction to Sacred Scripture*. Merton begins with a prologue (1-26) in which he relies on papal encyclicals, canon law, Scripture itself and the writings of St. Jerome to underscore the importance and necessity of studying Sacred Scripture, particularly for clerics and monks, but also for all the faithful. We must approach the sacred text, he argues, by recognizing its life-giving power, and we must foster a genuine love of it through faith, humility, sacrifice and diligence.

The material is then divided into four core parts. The first part (27-61) deals with biblical inspiration, specifically how the Holy Spirit employed humans as instruments in the crafting of the sacred word. O'Connell acknowledges the "problematic ring" which some of the positions may have to our post-conciliar ears, written, as Bonnie Bowman Thurston puts it, "before the much happier current ecumenical state of scholarly biblical

1. Thomas Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness* (New York: New Directions, 1953).

studies” (ix). However, as an uplifting counterbalance, O’Connell notes Merton’s almost prophetic emphasis on the “dynamic development of revelation in Scripture and its relevance to the lives of believers” (xxiv).

The second part (62-93) traces the historical development of the Catholic Bible without getting into any apologetical weeds. He spends most of the section outlining the development and the contents of the Hebrew Bible before treating the “much simpler,” though admittedly “slow” (93), history of the formation of the New Testament canon.

The third part (94-110) is a brief overview of the different texts and versions of Scripture. Merton begins by defining the overarching goal using Pius XII’s *Divino Afflante Spiritu*: to achieve a right, piety-driven understanding of the text. He then does a nice job of tracing the textual development of both testaments, while predictably interspersing a “digression” (101) on the early Cistercian copyists’ use of Gothic script.

The fourth and final part (111-38) deals with hermeneutics, but Merton chooses to focus more on the theory of scriptural interpretation rather than on its practical extension (i.e., exegesis). O’Connell cautions that Merton’s treatment of the noematics, or the senses of Scripture, “is marked by a certain amount of terminological awkwardness and inconsistency” (xxx). I agree with this assessment and with his advice that careful attention to context proves helpful in clarifying things. Merton’s juxtaposition of and appreciation for both Thomas Aquinas and Jean Daniélou here nicely captures the breadth of sources he draws on throughout. Much like the Gospel of Mark’s longer ending, there is an “*Exegetical note*” (137-38) that inexplicably concludes the conferences, but which O’Connell argues could actually be a sort of *felix culpa* highlighting divine mercy (see xxxvi).

After dealing with the contents of the text itself, O’Connell uses the introduction’s fourth section (xxxvi-li) to continue exploring Merton’s relationship with Scripture from the point where he previously left off up through Merton’s untimely death. He again draws heavily on journals, but also on the brief booklet *Praying the Psalms*² and on the posthumously published *Opening the Bible*.³ The bottom line of a captivating examination is this: while we can observe some real changes in Merton’s engagement with the Bible, particularly overcoming his early disdain for its literal sense, what remains consistent throughout is his insistence on the centrality of the text for his own life and on its deeply personal, life-giving nature.

The fifth section (li) summarizes the helpful improvements that O’Connell has made to the ditto reproduction of Merton’s original notes

2. Thomas Merton, *Praying the Psalms* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1956).

3. Thomas Merton, *Opening the Bible* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1970).

(the only surviving version, which must therefore serve as the copy text for this edition). He has cleaned up punctuation, paragraphing, abbreviations and typographical features that would have amounted to reams of errata slips. The text has become as reader-friendly as possible. He has also made a colossal, invaluable effort to cite all references to primary and secondary sources in the notes and even to provide translations of the untranslated Latin passages (avid readers of Merton know how often and how seamlessly he tends to interweave quotations in Latin and French). Finally, O'Connell provides several useful resources in the back matter: a bibliography of all cited sources (143-48), an appendix for further reading that lists updated materials nicely organized according to Merton's own four main topics (149-50), a complete scriptural index (151-59) and an enormously detailed general index (161-90).

All told, we owe a sizable debt to Patrick O'Connell for his meticulous work in making this ditto reproduction so beautifully accessible to us. After digesting it all, I cannot help but recall the words of Rowan Williams in his "A Person That Nobody Knows: A Paradoxical Tribute to Thomas Merton," first published back in 1978: "And so, in the long run, being interested in Thomas Merton is *not* being interested in an original, a 'shaping' mind, but being interested in God and human possibilities."⁴ As far as the contents of *A Monastic Introduction to Sacred Scripture* go, there is nothing terribly original in it. After all, Merton himself denies being a scripture scholar (see xliv). However, what overshadows the dates and details and dogmas is Merton's firm belief that to approach the Word of God is to approach the *possibility of true inner freedom* – and, as O'Connell puts it, "To accept this challenge is to be brought into a new relationship with oneself, with the human community, with history and with the transcendent" (l).

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MERTON, Thomas, *Beholding Paradise: The Photographs of Thomas Merton* edited by Paul M. Pearson (New York: Paulist Press, 2020), pp. xxv + 239. ISBN 978-0-8091-0625-7 (cloth) \$39.95.

In the interest of full disclosure, I must admit that Thomas Merton has been my *anam cara* since 2008 when I attended a retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani. The retreat became a turning point in my life as I set out to acquire books and talks by Merton. One especially memorable experience was when the retreat leader, Jonathan Montaldo, arranged for us to spend

4. Rowan Williams, "A Person That Nobody Knows: A Paradoxical Tribute to Thomas Merton," *Cistercian Studies* 13 (1978) 4; reprint in Rowan Williams, *A Silent Action: Engagements with Thomas Merton* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2011) 17-19.