

THREE PLAYS

Review of

Anthony T. Padovano
*CONSCIENCE & CONFLICT:
 A TRILOGY OF ONE-ACTOR PLAYS:*
THOMAS MERTON, POPE JOHN XXIII, MARTIN LUTHER
 New York / Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1988
 xii, 102 pages / \$7.95 paperback

Reviewed by **John C. English**

The body of this book consists of three "monodramas," each devoted to one of the personalities named in the subtitle. The first play, "Winter Rain," recalls two events which occurred in December, Thomas Merton's departure for Kentucky and his burial at Gethsemani. The rain also symbolizes the destruction of war (Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941) and the loneliness which Merton felt among the crowds of New York. The second play is entitled "His Name is John." The third, "Summer Lightning," refers to July 2, 1505, when Luther was caught in a violent storm and vowed to enter the monastery if his life was spared. The scripts are preceded by eight pages of biography (mislabelled "bibliography") and another eight pages of introduction in which Padovano characterizes each of his heroes and explains why he wrote the plays.

Padovano has a good idea. He intends to use life stories as a way of doing theology and the theater as a means of evoking reflection and a personal response. It is appropriate then that a set of discussion questions follows each play. They were written, it seems, primarily with college and university audiences in mind. This accounts for certain emphases which run through all of them. Relationships between parents and children, the "generation gap" as we might say, are one of Padovano's constant themes. Another is the "identity crisis," in which young people try to resolve fundamental problems of worth and meaning. For the most part the language of the plays is very realistic and well-conceived. In some passages it is quite moving. However, sentences appear from time to time which no one would use outside the lecture hall.

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Readers of this journal will especially want to know about "Winter Rain." This play is composed of six brief acts, a total of twenty-four printed pages. The first act, entitled "Harbor," opens in a New York railway station. Merton is reflecting upon his unsatisfactory relationship with his mother as he prepares to board the train for Gethsemani. The second act, "Mountain," takes place in 1948, shortly after Merton's autobiography made the bestseller list. Padovano has Merton say: "I hate to admit this — and I'd never tell the abbot — but I'd rather be a writer than a monk" (p. 15). Act three, "East," recounts Father Louis' meeting with the Buddhist sage, D. T. Suzuki. Merton describes his Louisville experience at the corner of Fourth and Walnut: "I was in the street with many people and I felt an overwhelming sense of oneness with them. It was the most profound religious experience of my monastic life. And it happened outside the monastery" (p. 20). Acts four, "Peace," and five, "Love," are set in the hermitage. "Gandhi said you can't be holy in the twentieth century unless you helped change the political order" (p. 24) strikes the keynote of the fourth act. In the fifth, Merton is seen drafting a letter of resignation to his abbot, after he fell in love with the nurse at St. Joseph's Hospital. "Home" is the title of the final act. Here Padovano imagines Merton lying in his coffin, meditating upon the course of his life and asking God for the gift of inner peace.

Padovano emphasizes the conflict in Merton's psyche and the inward pain and turmoil which accompanied it. Up to a point, one can appreciate what he is doing. Conflict belongs to the dramatic situation, and these plays are designed especially for college students, persons who are likely to be somewhat anxious and unsettled. However, "Winter Rain" seems to say that, in Merton's case, this conflict was never resolved. Is this not to mistake the peripheral for the essential? When one reads Merton on the person of faith who, in the power of the spirit, knows and loves the Triune God (I am thinking of *New Seeds of Contemplation*), it is difficult to accept this conclusion.

To put the matter another way: Padovano describes Merton as a "prophet" (p. 5). This characterization is also troubling. A prophet may be thought of as a "see-er," one who discerns the course of the future in the events of the present. Merton would disclaim this role, would he not? Or the prophet may be the one whom God summons to speak the particular word which God wants the men and women of his generation to hear. This comes closer to the mark. We have only to recollect Merton's witness against war, anti-Semitism, racial injustice and false materialism. But does the term "prophet" do justice to Merton's calling to be a man of prayer, a "contemplative?" At the least it seems to obscure the way in which prayer, theological reflection, humanistic culture and the ethic of love are knitted together in Father Louis' person.

I pass over the play on Pope John since I do not know his career well enough to evaluate this dramatization. "Summer Lightning," on the other hand, is badly flawed. Padovano says that "the essence of Luther's reform is the priesthood of all believers" (p. 5). This is to mistake the part for the whole in a truly astonishing way. Luther was protesting against every magical conception of religion in which human beings try to manipulate the Holy for their own selfish purposes. Merton was closer to Luther when he wrote: "Repentance is at the same time a complete renewal, a discovery, a new life, and a return to the old, to that which is before everything else that is old. But the old and the new meet in the metanoia, the inner change, that is accomplished by the hearing of God's word and the keeping of it. That which is oldest is also newest because it is the beginning" (*Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Image Books edition, p. 127).