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MERTON ISSUES: A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

by **Edward Rice**

I saw the report in the Winter 1990 *Merton Seasonal* (and the reply by Kenneth Voiles) about "the question of updating Merton's language to be inclusive" and the mention that one pamphlet had already been "published and desexed." I don't know whether to be appalled or sarcastic. Certainly, if the Church and her people are going to fix up the writings and work of her most prominent thinkers, why not start at the beginning and work up to the present? The Old Testament is in dreadful need of desexing, and the New Testament is hardly any better (what a job could be done on St. Paul!). Yes, let's get gender out of Catholic writing until every writer, thinker and theologian is a true castrato . . . But — once Merton is "updated," can we expect the public to accept the new versions as authentic? What a wonderful opportunity for forgery!

Another point in the same issue, opposite page ["Merton and the feminine: a reflection," by James R. Lauridson]. Writers on Merton generally deplore Ruth Merton as "a cold cerebral mother." And, "Certainly her actions at the time of her own death (sending young Tom a farewell letter and not allowing him to visit) would suggest this." But such statements show a lack of understanding of the facts. In the 1920s child rearing was, for educated and aware people, placed on a "scientific" basis. The popular guru was a man named Angelo Patri, who preached firm control, rigid schedules, no unnecessary "mothering" or babying, and feedings at fixed times only, no matter how loudly the infant cried for food. Ruth Merton, as a thoughtful and concerned mother, was merely following the most advanced teachings of the period. It was not until much later that the renowned Dr. Benjamin Spock broke with such "scientific" methods in favor of a return to the basic warmth of earlier ages when baby and mother were a unit.

The other issue that repeatedly arises is Ruth Merton's sending young Tom a farewell letter and not allowing him to visit her as she lay dying in the hospital. At the time, children were not allowed to visit seriously ill patients, and the fact that Ruth was near death would have been considered psychologically bad for Tom should he see his mother. I must add that I speak from personal experience about the matter of 1920s child rearing. And a close relative, then age six, was also prevented as late as 1948 from seeing her father as he faced death in a New York hospital. Much as both father and daughter wanted one last embrace, they could only wave to each other, he from the window, the child from the street.

You may note that in the first paragraph I spoke of the Church and "her people." Is Holy Mother Church also to be desexed?

I think the issues are important and will affect Merton studies one way or the other for many generations to come.