

Sharing the Fruits of Community

Review of

The Orchards of Perseverance:

Conversations with Trappist Monks About God, Their Lives, and the World

By David D. Perata

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Reviewed by **Robert Rhodes**

More than 30 years after his death, the influence of Thomas Merton is still common and vital in the lives of people who encountered him either personally or through his broad opus of books, poems, and essays. Perhaps they are attracted most by his personal mythos of deep and individual spirituality, expressed not only by his writings but by his unique and often aggravating journey to fulfillment as a hermit-priest in the woods of Kentucky. While his appeal extends to people far beyond the boundaries of the cloister, Merton's legacy also continues to touch in very special ways the men and women of his own Cistercian monastic order.

This legacy of devotion and inspiration is a common thread throughout David D. Perata's *The Orchards of Perseverance*, a series of essays and interviews centering on the lives of the men at the Abbey of New Clairvaux, a Trappist monastery in the fertile orchard country near Vina, California. Though the book is not primarily centered on Merton's influence on these latter-day monks, Perata's subjects frequently return to Merton as a touchstone, as a light that guided them to seek community among the Cistercians. That a number of them began their monastic lives either as fellow monks or as students of Merton at the Abbey of Gethsemani – which founded New Clairvaux in 1955 – draws this influence even more sharply into focus in these finely-expressed accounts of some distinctly individual lives.

Perata's subjects span two or three generations, from a former lay brother who was among the first to move from Kentucky to the new California community to the present-day abbot and novice master. Others interviewed are a former Dominican who after much struggle and doubt discovered his true calling as a monastic potter; another Gethsemani alumnus, a priest who like Merton has been drawn to a hermit's existence; a former Augustinian who had an especially circuitous journey to the Trappists; a Kenyan Trappist who studied at New Clairvaux for several years; the cellarer who also doubles as community cantor and composes liturgical music; and a guest master who had felt curious about the monastic life even as a child. Also interviewed is a young man who lived with the community for a time as a postulant, planning to commit himself to the order for life, but who later left and started a family.

In his interviews, most conducted in several sessions over nearly a decade, Perata, who has been visiting the monastery since he was a young boy, allows his subjects to speak for themselves; the pictures that emerge form a mosaic of community life that might seem surprising to some. Indeed, there are no lost or disillusioned poets here, no war-shocked recluses who couldn't bear to live in the world anymore. Instead, these modest, practical, and occasionally shy men are charmingly average people of no vast ambition, many of whom considered marriage at one time or another, and who sometimes seem perhaps more than a little surprised to find themselves in a Trappist monastery, with all that this implies. Still, it is a life they seem to fit into calmly and comfortably, each in his own way. Common to all of them, however, is a distinct and very human spirituality, a base of divine wonder that drew them to the monastery and keeps them there year after year seeking, together and alone, the unseen God of their daily prayer and devotion.

The influence of Merton is for some little more than a shadow here, a passing reference in their remarks to Perata, or a comment on a book read that steered one or another toward seeking a deeper spiritual life. To others, though, Merton is more a human presence than the invisible author of famous pages. To these, the ones who knew him at Gethsemani, Merton lives on as a unique spiritual guide who wielded considerable influence on the way they have lived their lives, both within and beyond the monastery gates, before and during their shared and sometimes difficult journey on the hidden path of Christian community. Like their famous fellow monk, they are gracious in sharing the harvest of that inner orchard where, obedient to the command of Jesus, they quietly and devotedly persevere in bearing fruit that will last.