

A Window on Merton's Mind and Heart

Review of

Thomas Merton Tapes:

“Early Christian Apologists”; “The Prophets” (2 cassettes; 3 CDs);
 “The Quest for the Grail and Conversion of Manners”;
 “Tertullian and Cassian”; “The Virtue of Temperance” (2 cassettes; 2 CDs)
 Kansas City, MO: Credence Cassettes, 2001
 \$9.95 (single cassettes); \$19.95 (double cassettes)
 \$15.95 (single CD); \$24.95 (double CD); \$29.95 (triple CD)

Reviewed by **Genevieve Cassani, SSND**

Five more audio recordings of unpublished lecture material given by Thomas Merton over forty years ago to the young men studying to be monks at the Abbey of Gethsemani were released by Credence Communications in the Fall of 2001. “And the next voice that you will hear is that of Thomas Merton” – so ends the introduction repeated at the beginning of each recording, setting the stage for a listening experience still fresh and new, despite the medium through which the message comes – audio cassettes – being near to becoming technological dinosaurs (though unlike earlier offerings in the series, these are also available on compact disk). Equally refreshing is hearing a vibrant display of bird song, monastery bells, thunder and raindrops punctuating Merton’s words, and adding the dimension of a sense of place that was Gethsemani and Kentucky in the 1960s.

What do these recordings offer us? The talks take us back in time only to bring us forward into our present reality; for what Merton said then, has significance for us even now. For example, when he comments in “The Quest” that “we are living in a tragic time, and a tragic time is a time of serious questions,” my thoughts roamed to the kinds of questions asked since the tragic events of September 11 and the probing of our national conscience to find the answers. Through these lectures, we experience Merton as teacher. His appealing teaching style relates serious insights from his well-researched lecture material to the monastic life, spiced with wit and even humorous impersonations. “The Prophets” is one such tape. To miss listening to his “take off” of Fr. Amadeus, a priest from Luxembourg who used to give retreats at the monastery, is to miss a chance to laugh at the “ham” Merton allowed himself to be before his brother monks. At the same time, it is on this tape that he demonstrates what a no-nonsense teacher he could be. He was not always the most patient in waiting for answers from the novices, and even when they did try to respond to his questions, he would speak over their words hurrying their answers along by his staccato-like comments.

Right relationships as something to strive for is a theme in “The Prophets.” The prophetic relationship is one that is based on a relationship of love of God. Merton speaks of the prophets as the

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friends of God who live according to their conscience and the will of God even when this does not follow well-worn paths, and he challenges the young monks to do the same. He encourages everyone to develop a conscience, find out what's important, take things seriously so as to preserve the integrity of monastic life, and keep "from becoming a kind of comic book school of religious life that is gabby yet empty." He cautions: avoid "spiritual trifling." Spending a good deal of time trying to explain what spiritual trifling is, he finally levels it down to a definition and an example: "Spiritual trifling is to diddle around with something of no importance while evading something of great importance." (Can relate to that.) The example, "to pray for your aunt's cat who had kittens is to be a 'spiritual trifler'," draws a chorus of laughter.

Throughout these lectures, he manages to keep the young monks abreast of what is going in the world, as we hear in the first part of the second section of "The Virtue of Temperance," a reference to the Supreme Court decision to rule prayer as unconstitutional. "Well," he says wryly, "They'll have to cut a few things off the dollar bill and the Constitution."

Drawing from the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas, Merton emphasizes the positive and beautiful aspects of the virtue of temperance. The need for good manners and for a sense of proportion in all things is important for the spiritual person. Insensibility, a vice opposed to temperance, expressed in callousness and contempt for another, he candidly admits is found in human relationships even in the monastery. He encourages expressing affection and friendship with a noble reserve so as to combine temperance and chastity in the best possible way. What follows is a lively repartee between Merton and Fr. Matthew Kelty on northern, cold-potatoes, reserved types like the Swedes, and various strata of Italian warmth and spontaneity. Merton quips, "I used to date a Swede." Laughter. He names John XXIII as the model of perfectly balanced spontaneity and Pius XII somewhat less so, because, as Merton says, "There are Italians, and there are Italians."

"The Quest for the Grail and Conversion of Manners" is a lecture both serious and deep. Speaking of the monastic life as a quest in the sense of a question leads into the legend of the Fisher King. Merton compares the monastery and monastic life to the illness suffered by the king until Parsifal comes along and asks the right question: "Where is the grail – the sacred – the source of life?" "We are good monks," he says, "if we can ask the right question." In turn, monastic life asks questions of the monks: "What are you looking for?" "Why have you come?" With simple directness, Merton states, "You shouldn't come to try the life out, you should come to stay." A statement enough for any young monk to realize the quest for Christ must be taken seriously.

More formal and with the qualities of a classic lecture style, "Early Christian Apologists" I found the least interesting, except for addressing the importance of faith and reason working together. Monks are people of faith and their obedience has to be reasonable. They have to obey with understanding. "If," he says, "we have a faith that can't co-exist with reason, we are in a bad way." This presentatoin is a segue into the one on "Tertullian and Cassian" where Merton begins in a giddy sort of way. Evidently, he had done some extensive research on Tertullian and was perhaps a bit weary of the man because he says, "He sticks in my craw," and "Well, I guess we'll have another talk on that old fool Tertullian." Tertullian is admirable even when wrong. Merton believed it a good exercise for the minds of the students to see how this sharp reasoner with a legal mind thinks even when he is wrong. Getting carried away at times with what he is saying, Merton provides some hilarious moments which are best caught only by listening to the recording.

The material from the life of Cassian is based on his cosmology as related to the phrases in the

Our Father, "Thy will be done," and "Give us this day our daily bread." Merton breaks open these phrases by saying that God is not arbitrarily controlling things and we get to submit and say, "Amen." Rather, the words reflect a cooperative, collaborative work with God's will, a work of love which makes all the difference in the monastic life and in the whole world for that matter. The daily bread we hunger for is the spiritual hunger that is only fed by the truth. Spiritual hunger will not go away, even in heaven.

What these recordings offer us is a menu rich and tantalizing, but listening to the lectures is a bit like dining on appetizers alone. Since the talks are single lectures from what I would suspect was a series of several classes, we get only a flavorful sampling. This is only to say that listening to a lecture by Merton made me want to get into the main course and follow his thought further. Without a doubt though, these recordings are worth our listening time. They are very enjoyable and the quality of the sound makes for easy listening. What is most valuable, in my opinion, is the glimpse we receive of a Merton who teased the young monks he loved, expressed tender care for those fledglings in the monastic life through his manner of speaking and tone of voice, and presented some very solid material for reflection and prayer. His lectures are a window into the breadth of his mind as it reached out, around, and into many topics and the depth of his heart as it reached into the hearts of the students before him.