

Merton in His Monastic Milieu

Review of

Thomas Merton: Prophet of Renewal

By John Eudes Bamberger, OCSO

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Reviewed by **Lawrence S. Cunningham**

This work was first delivered as a series of conferences given to the monks of Melleray Abbey in France in 2000. John Eudes Bamberger is the retired abbot of Our Lady of the Genesee Abbey in New York. He was a junior under Thomas Merton, having entered Our Lady of Gethsemani in the early 1950s, shortly after he finished his medical degree. Dom John Eudes, in short, writes as a monk for monks, drawing both on his close collaboration with Thomas Merton and on his more than five decades' formation as a contemplative monk. That he spoke and wrote as a monk to monks, nevertheless, does not mean that what he has to say is for only a monastic audience. Many of the observations he makes in this most satisfying volume are not only striking in their originality but also serve as a corrective for those who tend to forget what in my mind is a fundamental axiom for anyone who wishes to understand the genius of Merton, namely, if he is not understood as a monk he is not understood at all. Within the time and space constraints of a review I do not intend to rehearse the full contents of this book but, rather, I want to single out two crucial points which it makes that must be highlighted: Merton's prophetic role in monastic renewal and the perceptive things he had to say about the nature of contemplation.

In my 1999 book *Thomas Merton and the Monastic Vision* I argued, from the perspective of my own reading of the Merton corpus, that Merton underwent a number of conversions relative to his understanding of what monasticism was all about. Even before he was ordained to the priesthood, as is clear from a number of memoranda he wrote to his abbot, he saw that monks were being educated for the priesthood and not for the monastic life. Because those two quite different ways of life were conflated into one (he still worked on the assumption that choir monks would be ordained to the priesthood) monks were getting an inferior seminary education and not much in the way of a monastic one. He already understood in the late 1940s that a radically new curriculum had to be devised to aid monastic formation, even though at that time he could not detach that formation fully from the then-expected seminary curriculum. His emphasis on monastic orientation (the generic title of those piles of mimeographed volumes we still have) was a shift towards monastic *ressourcement* which would have profound implications for the future of monastic life. What I said haltingly

as an outsider has been brilliantly traced in detail in this volume and, as such, it makes a major contribution to monastic history. That shift, already alluded to, would be only one stage as he went on for the rest of his life pushing deeper into the monastic vocation.

Second, as part of his deepening understanding of the monastic life, Merton also recognized that the monastic milieu he found at Gethsemani emphasized too strongly the ascetic or penitential dimension, to the detriment of the contemplative. This penitential emphasis was not peculiar to the Trappists (it was a large problem in Carmels right down to our times) but was magnified in the modern period. What Merton saw clearly was that the goal of the monastic life, as Cassian pointed out centuries ago, was not ascetic denial but purity of heart – that purity of heart which brought one in this life to “see” God. Over the centuries that primordial instinct for purity of heart generated a whole monastic theology (this book is limpid in tracing out its general outlines) with an attendant anthropology and psychology, but at its core it was a single-minded search for the recuperation of the true self at the core of which was the *imago Dei*. In diverse places in this book the author points out that the early Cistercians like Bernard had no special spirituality and in this they were faithful to the earliest monks.

Bamberger cites with approval Merton’s *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* – that too much neglected but crucial work – to the effect that the ancient monks understood contemplation not as some Plotinian ascent but as the ordinary, faithful, persistent love which pushed them to seek out purity of heart. The struggle to keep alive the presence of God in the heart was what the monk sought to do and what was the most precious gift the monks gave to the world. What Bamberger clearly shows is that “contemplation” is not just one more thing that a monk does in addition to *lectio* and praying the psalms but, as it were, is the awareness that makes all of these other things intelligible. Contemplation, then, is also part of the monastic *ressourcement* which Merton broadcast to the larger monastic family and, by extension, to the millions who have been nourished by his life and his writings.

These two themes – monastic *ressourcement* and the centrality of contemplation – are not separate topics but part of the larger whole which shaped Merton’s rich legacy. If there ever was a theologian in the older sense of the term Merton was one. He was a monk, as the late Apostolic Delegate to the United States Archbishop Jean Jadot said in an interview, who was a prophet who did not say new things but old things in a completely new way.