

Getting to Know the General

Review of
Dom Gabriel Sortais: An Amazing Abbot in Turbulent Times
 By Guy Oury, OSB
 Translated by Brian Kerns, OCSO
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Reviewed by **Ron Dart**

Those with some interest in Thomas Merton will inevitably be quite aware of the clashes between Merton and Dom Gabriel Sortais (1902-1963), Abbot General of the Cistercians for much of Merton's monastic life. In their initial meeting, Sortais and Merton seemed to have some affinities, according to Michael Mott (*Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* 244-45). In fact, many of Merton's published works bear the approving stamp of Sortais. While there were early problems about some of his writings on solitude, and conflicts over personal writings (both *The Sign of Jonas* and *The Secular Journal* were initially forbidden to be published), it was when Merton became more political in his writings in the early 1960s that he and Dom Gabriel locked horns in earnest.

Those who are devoted to Merton tend to see Sortais in a negative way and Merton in a more positive light. Merton is seen as the prophet, ever pushing the Cistercian envelope, and Dom Gabriel is viewed as the oppressive chief of the Cistercian Sanhedrin, limiting, censoring and finally silencing Merton. Such a simplistic notion, though, is not quite true to the more complex facts. In *Dom Gabriel Sortais: An Amazing Abbot in Turbulent Times*, biographer Guy Oury walks the extra mile to make it abundantly clear that Sortais himself was, in fact, a serious and substantive reformer within the international Cistercian order. Dom Gabriel might have moved at a slower pace than Merton, and he had wider organizational responsibilities than Merton, but he was aware that changes had to be made, and he was more than willing to engage in the process of making them.

Dom Gabriel Sortais, based largely on archival sources, is divided into twenty-three readable and compact chapters. Each chapter tells the unfolding tale of Sortais' life in a way that draws the reader ever more deeply into the activity and thinking of this influential abbot. Translated from the French by Brother Brian Kerns, OCSO, with a Preface by Abbot Emmanuel Coutant, OCSO and an Afterword by Laurence Bourget, OCSO of St. Joseph's Abbey, Spencer, the book also includes a bibliography of manuscript and printed sources and an impressive list of "Printed Works by Dom Gabriel Sortais."

Dom Gabriel Sortais is a tome worth the read in itself, and for those interested in a more complex view of Sortais than is found only in primary and secondary sources by and about Merton, it is an essential book to read and reread. There are a couple of critical points that need to be noted,

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however. First, while Oury does raise some mild and minimal criticisms of Sortais, for the most part the book is a work of subtle hagiography, as its subtitle, “An Amazing Abbot in Turbulent Times,” suggests. Secondly, Oury, much to the annoyance of the Merton aficionado, completely ignores the clash between Sortais and Merton on the hot-button political issues for which Sortais censured Merton’s writings – while this may represent the more “Eurocentric” perspective of the author, there must have been other reasons at work that made for this obvious omission – surely Oury would have been more than aware of the conflict, and overlooking it weakens the biography significantly.

Those who are interested in contemporary Cistercian history (relatively few) and those interested in Thomas Merton (many more) should have a copy of *Dom Gabriel Sortais* in their library; but the book should be read both appreciatively and critically. There are chapters of illuminating insight and chapters that omit some of the more important issues.