

NowYouKnowMerton

Review of *Thomas Merton on Contemplation*

Introduction by Fr. Anthony Ciorra

6 Lectures on 4 CDs

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By **Gregory J. Ryan**

Happily, for those of us who are not monks of the Abbey of Gethsemani, the monastic community there in the 1960s recorded hundreds of hours of conferences given to the monks and novices by their own Father Louis. Topics for these conferences ranged through contemplative prayer and meditation, lives of the saints, church history, early Christian spirituality, monastic spirituality, biblical studies, liturgy, faith, dialogue within the Church and with others, and much, much more. In the early 1970s, through an agreement with the monastery and the Merton Trust, Electronic Paperbacks released three dozen of these informal talks in three different series of cassette tapes, a relatively new form of media in those days. At the time, the tapes cost more than one week's salary for me, but I bit the bullet and got them – with no regrets. Years later, Credence Communications took over the production, offering a much more extensive catalogue of Merton titles on tape and eventually on compact disk. Due to the great number of CDs and the increased cost, I was more judicious about ordering those – for which I do have regrets! Recently, the agreement to publish Merton's conferences was given over to NowYouKnowMedia.com, a company that specializes in a wide variety of courses and retreats by 87 religious and lay professors, making them available on CD or by download from iTunes by way of their Web site.

NowYouKnowMedia.com offers several sets of CDs both by Merton and about Merton, with others scheduled for future release. Unfortunately, at this time there are no indications in their catalog or online whether the Merton audio recordings had been released previously by those other companies. (A complete searchable list of Merton's 935 recorded conferences is available on the Merton Center's Web site at: http://www.merton.org/Research/Manuscripts/TitlesAV_audioTM.asp). Some of the NowYouKnow recordings are the same as the earlier published titles, but others are not. This makes it a bit confusing for those who already have a number of CDs or tapes in their Merton collection: NowYouKnow becomes SometimesYouDon'tKnow. Unsuspecting buyers may start listening and realize that they've heard the talk already. Repetition is not a bad thing, unless you've

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already paid for the content previously. Some attention needs to be given to this by NowYouKnow as they move forward with this project, though perhaps due to previous popularity and present-day interest it appeared logical to start with these talks. One can only hope that someday *all* of Merton's recordings will be available through iTunes or some other technology. Who knows? Maybe sometime in the not-too-distant future, videos and still photos of Merton will be mashed with the audio tracks into some kind of hologram, so he will appear to be talking to you from across his desk! (Why not dream BIG?)

All that being said, I recommend *Thomas Merton on Contemplation* very highly. The set of 6 talks on 4 CDs include an Introduction by Fr. Anthony Ciorra and five conferences by Merton entitled: "Prayer and Meditation on the Meaning of Life," "Monastic Spirituality: Life Is a Journey," "Cassian on Prayer," "God-Centered Prayer" and "Religious Silence." The recordings have all been digitally re-mastered and the sound quality is excellent. In his Introduction, Fr. Ciorra, an author and a leading expert on Catholic spirituality and on inter-religious dialogue among Jews, Christians and Muslims, gives the listener who may be new to Merton helpful background about what he or she is about to hear. But, as he says (wisely), it's best if he himself says little about the contents of the talks and just lets Merton speak for himself. The company's promotional blurb says: "You may have read Merton's writings, but hearing his voice and manner of expression brings out another side of Merton that you haven't experienced before." I would agree with that wholeheartedly! As one who has read 99.99% of everything Merton ever published, I must admit that I am still enthralled listening to his spoken words – yes, even words I've heard before. His talks are always well prepared, but he wears his incredible erudition so lightly that they still have an informal quality to them. There is lots of give-and-take with his listeners, much good humor, and lots of shared laughter – but always to make a serious point. And all before the bell rings to end their time together and they go on about their day.

Following Fr. Ciorra's lead, I will point out only a couple of gems in each talk and encourage you to discover more on your own. (Keep in mind: another reviewer – or you yourself – would likely latch onto other points to make here, so don't judge these CDs solely by what I say here.)

Throughout all the talks, Merton emphasizes the importance of prayer and meditation. In the first talk, "Prayer and Meditation on the Meaning of Life," Merton keeps everything simple and real. He does not describe the sometimes esoteric practices of earlier masters of prayer; he just talks about how simple the contemplative life should be whether inside or outside the enclosure. "There is no meaning to life except in man seeking God and God seeking man. . . . It's the only meaning life has." Riffing on Isaias, Merton says we should meditate on life to "become aware that at every moment God is molding us. That's the goal of our prayer life" – to just live the life God has given each one of us as his beloved child. "God is acting in our life. Keep coming back to the love of God. God's love is really acting and working in my life." I may make a mess out of it, but that's still part of what he's made. "He can make anything out of anything."

In the second talk, Merton talks about "Monastic Spirituality: Life Is a Journey." He says that the metaphor of the journey is very important for Christians. Humans are not "just covering ground." The journey is symbolic of man's state on earth. "Every Christian is in the same state. We're all on a journey. We're all going to the same place. All Christians." The great Biblical figure for this is Abraham: "Go to the land that I will show you." Merton says we are to go from what we know,

what we are comfortable with, and strike out into the unknown. But this is not done on our own initiative. We go out at God's invitation. God calls us. "God is a person who has called us into the unknown" – a place where *He* is in control. Even in a monastery, "in the middle of what we know, we're not at home. We are not at home on earth. Not even in the monastery. We are all exiles on the earth. We may be happy in a relative sense, but we're not fully happy here." He then goes into a terrific analysis of the part that loneliness plays in life – even in community life. But, as always, his message is filled with hope: in the end, "we are explicitly called to come and see God. We are called explicitly, personally. We should prepare for the wedding feast with God in eternity."

Merton discusses "Cassian on Prayer" in the third talk. (I loaned my copy of Merton's *Cassian and the Fathers* edited by Patrick O'Connell to somebody and never got it back, so I can't check to see how this CD and the book compare.) On this CD Merton discusses the importance of Cassian's *Conferences* for the tradition of Christian contemplative prayer, even pointing out that St. Benedict's *Rule for Monasteries* borrows heavily from Cassian. Merton says we must learn to live our lives in such a way that we "get our mind into a condition that it will naturally pray." The person of prayer must be careful that he or she be sensible about their practice. Our prayer is a response to God's call, so we must not be passive and just sit around in a daze. Christianity is different from other spiritual traditions, and uniquely so. We are not stoics practicing what Merton says is a bad translation from the Latin in Cassian: "unmoved tranquility of mind." He says if you do that, "You'll be a capital jerk!" Far from being weighed down by our thoughts, we must clear our minds and become as weightless as a feather, ready to respond to the breath of the Spirit. The life of prayer should make us "normal, human, what we're supposed to be." Later he says, "This is the kind of prayer that is open to everybody. This is the way everybody should be praying. This is contemplation for everybody." There is some good joking around during this talk, but I won't spoil the fun for you here! He also makes some very beautiful comments about mothers visiting the monastery, and about what he considers "an original and great discovery" on his part about the spirituality of contemplative prayer in Cassian, but I will leave all that to you, as well.

The talk on "God-Centered Prayer" is from a tape recording that Merton made himself for the Community of Sisters of Loretto living up the road from the monastery. He tells them how he is sitting in a room in the monastery library above the dairy and working the tape recorder himself. He admits that this was a new experience for him and he hoped it worked all right. Well, of course, it does. Apparently, they had submitted a number of questions to Merton for him to answer about religious life and prayer. This is classic Merton. After warning them about making prayer into a project, he reminds them that prayer should be "as simple as breathing or as simple as living." He says he doesn't like to talk about prayer because it makes it into a "thing" as though it is apart from the very fabric of our life. "Prayer is our life, the very ground of our life. We belong most completely to God when we are at prayer." He mentions that he has just finished reading the latest book by Romano Guardini on Pascal (*Pascal for Our Time*) in which Pascal says that we have to open the ears of our heart so we may hear God calling us. Guardini says, as Merton quotes him, that "if the heart yields to the call, then something happens to it: for the first time appears the *genuine* center, the *genuine* center [Merton repeats], the counterpart of the divine center that is calling. For the first time awakens the genuine God-intended self, the real self." More gems await you here.

In the last talk, "Religious Silence," Merton begins with an extended back-and-forth with the

young monks about the observance of silence in their lives. What is the value of silence? What is the point of it? On this one, I will remain silent – but encourage you to listen.

In closing, I can't resist offering what might just be my only original thought on Merton ever – not unlike Merton's own discovery about Cassian. When I started writing this review, I was going to skip pointing out NowYouKnowMedia's mistake in giving Merton's name wrong on the CD covers: "Thomas Merton, O.C.S.O." Merton never used that hybrid form of his name. But now I think I have good reason for mentioning the mistake. Right from the beginning of his publishing career as a monk, and with the agreement of his abbot, he decided to use his secular name, Thomas Merton, not his Trappist name, Fr. M. Louis Merton, OCSO. But, everyone knows that this tension between seeing himself as an author or as a monk is what caused him all kinds of struggles within himself through the years. So, now I'm thinking: if Merton had published as Thomas Merton, OCSO, he may have saved Fr. Louis a lot of grief. *A lot* of grief!