

So Long a Volume – “So Long” to an Era

Review of

The Life of the Vows: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 6

By Thomas Merton

Edited with an Introduction by Patrick F. O’Connell

Preface by Augustine Roberts, OCSO

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Reviewed by **Judith Sutera, OSB**

The first thing one notices about this book is that it is big. At 604 pages of text and more than an inch and a half thick, it was a massive undertaking for its editor, Patrick O’Connell. Needless to say it was an even more massive undertaking for Thomas Merton, who spent several years as formation director in his monastery, and several years compiling his notes and observations into this volume.

The book is big, however, in another important way. Here, in one place, the reader can sit in on a whole formation program by one of monasticism’s great modern teachers. It is definitely not Merton at his most poetic or conversational. It is clearly a series of instructions, intended to define practice and to orient the new member to a Trappist Benedictine view of the world. There are many long definitions and explanations of the theological and canonical nuances of monastic tradition. Yet sometimes, even in these sections, there are Merton’s great insights. For example, when he identifies the types of aberrations that can occur in religious life, he gives practical examples of ways in which one might see the problem manifested, and these show solid perception of the human struggle and a practical eye to what makes a vowed life healthy or unhealthy.

Unfortunately, some of these examples, as well as many other parts of the book, seem rather quaint, if not downright outdated, to the contemporary reader. The biggest caution about this book is that the reader not believe that this is the perspective of today’s monastic communities or that this is the ideal way in which one should form today’s monastics. These conferences date from 1955 to the early 1960s, predating all of the exploration and development that have marked the dynamic and challenging period from Vatican II to the present. Any reader of Merton knows that he himself was thinking, questioning and growing throughout his lifetime and one can only wonder what he might have thought and written had he lived through more of the period of renewal.

It is unfortunate that there are so many parts of this book that reflect pre-Vatican II understandings of the monastic vows. Even the use of the term “conversion of manners” is distracting in this era when we speak more commonly of the commitment to *conversatio*, or fidelity to the monastic way

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of life. Some parts reflect a rigidity that readers today will find unpalatable. Nevertheless, a reviewer cannot complain about content when the author has been gone for decades and his thought is frozen in time. The essential need for wholehearted commitment with all its demands has not changed and Merton has plenty of good points about human nature and the nature of the spiritual life that are well worth reading. The editor does a good job of noting the problems of the text as something from another era and culture. The entire introduction is well done and is essential for initial preparation to reading the text.

This is not a book that could be the primary text and basis for instruction on the vows for today's novices. Teasing out the essential theology and spirituality from all the lists of canonical terms and degrees of venial sin would call for careful guidance and discussion. Neither is it something that is going to excite the reader in the same way as Merton's more personal or poetic writings. Lay readers may conclude that it is far more than they really wanted to know about monastic vows. Yet anyone who wants to know Merton and his times will see that this is a big book because formation instruction was a big part of his life. It is also a big contribution to the body of Merton's published works.