

## These Are the Champions

Review of

*Thomas Merton on Desert Spirituality*

Introduction by Fr. Anthony Ciorra

8 Conferences on 5 CDs or MP3 files

Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2016

\$37.95 (sale price); \$129.95 (list price)

Reviewed by **Gregory J. Ryan**

In chapter 32 of his *Rule*, St. Benedict says that the “goods of the monastery, that is, its tools, clothing or anything else” should be well cared for. Fortunately for us, at the Abbey of Gethsemani those “tools” included a reel-to-reel tape recorder, so the monks could record Thomas Merton’s conferences to his novices. Now You Know Media has digitally remastered and released this series on the roots of desert spirituality that Father Louis presented to the novices in 1964 (see the volume *Pre-Benedictine Monasticism: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 2* [2006] for Merton’s own text of this material). As someone who has purchased all of the sets released by Now You Know, I can say that this series of conferences is among Merton’s best and most personal, expressed with his usual mind-boggling erudition, quick wit and good humor, perhaps because they deal with what was most important to Merton in his own life at the time – preparing to live a simple life of prayer as a full-time hermit, living out the spirit of the desert in a modern context.

In his fine Introduction, Fr. Anthony Ciorra of Sacred Heart University lays out the background for these talks, recalling another author’s observation that Merton’s infectious enthusiasm for his topic is akin to a baseball fan’s enthusiasm for the World Series, not such a far-fetched comparison since asceticism originally referred to athletic training. In my opinion, in these talks Merton hits a series-winning home run. My biggest challenge in reviewing these talks is to outline the topics without giving away the high points of Merton’s comments. He is truly masterful in his delivery, and I don’t want to spoil your enjoyment as the talks unfold for you.

In the first conference, “The Beginnings of Monastic Spirituality,” Merton works at the blackboard outlining the development of monastic spirituality with its roots in the Egyptian and Syrian deserts. His premise is that the origins of monasticism are not all that clear. In what must have looked like a spider web, he lists a breathtaking array of people and places including St. Anthony, James of Nisibis, Origen, Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, Evagrius, Cassian, Augustine, Aphrahat, Nestorius, the Zoroastrians, Sufis and others, sweeping through Egypt, Palestine, Syria, India, Greece, Rome, Gaul, Constantinople, Mount Athos, Russia, Persia, China, Ethiopia and Arabia. All this just lays the groundwork for his topic!

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In “Syrian Monasticism,” Merton begins by asking the young monks, “Who knows anything at all about Syrian monasticism?” and launches into a discussion of Simeon the Stylite – calling on Brother Simeon and others to help get things rolling. The stylites (“pillar sitters”) were an extremely austere group of ascetics whose reputation for saintliness reached as far away as England and Ireland, as Merton tells it. He also discusses the differences between Judaizing Christians from Jerusalem and Jews of the Greek Diaspora, using St. Peter, St. Paul and St. James (called “James of the Knees” by the Irish) to illustrate his points.

“The Syrian Monks, Part I” deals with the history of Syrian monks written by the fifth-century bishop Theodoret of Cyrrhus, whose approach is to compare the legends of Syrian ascetics such as James of Nisibis, Julian Sabas and the *boskoi* (“grazers”), to Old Testament saints. Merton reminds the novices that Theodoret uses a literary form, not an historical one, as he reads samples from Theodoret’s writings. There’s a lot of joshing here – even while he’s reading from the Latin texts!

“Syrian Monastic Traditions” returns to Theodoret. Merton explains the writing as “a panegyric” not a history. Theodoret’s goal is to praise the monks as being just as good as martyrs, prophets or Old Testament saints. He includes everything good that can be said about the column-sitters and other ascetics. Merton says this shows the importance of making room for varieties of monastic expression, even at Gethsemani. In one of his characteristic extemporaneous asides, Merton gives a beautiful treatment of love in considering the relationship between *eros* and *agape*. In his discussion of Julian Sabas, Merton gets to the heart of the importance of psalmody in the life of the monk: a monk transforms himself by finding himself in the psalms. They are the foundation stone of monastic prayer.

“St. Julian Sabas the Elder and Liturgical Prayer” begins with a discussion of Aphrahat, a fourth-century Persian, a “son of the covenant,” author of twenty-three homilies on Christian doctrine. Referring to the thirteenth-century Persian poet Rumi, Merton asks and answers Aphrahat’s question: “Where is your heart? In God.” As the conference title states, Merton also gets into the importance and beauty of liturgical prayer. Typically, Merton uses his notes to make connections to Christianity, Zen, Sufism and Syrian Monasticism. God is *the* reality of our lives.

In “The Syrian Monks, Part II” Merton discusses Theodoret’s concept of “symmetry,” which is the perfection of life for Syrian monks, akin to “*apatheia*” in the Greek tradition. Symmetry is a positive approach to life by which the monk keeps the passions in balance, while *apatheia* directs the monk to keep the passions under control. “Symmetry is welcoming, open to everything, not afraid of anything.” “Everything is good and it all comes from God.” The rewards are “gentleness, meekness, non-violence, a capacity to pardon others and universal tolerance.”

“Syrian Spirituality” is on the concepts of virginity and marriage found in Aphrahat. These ascetics were wary of marriage – some actually condemning it – but Merton provides a different view, referring to Genesis and saying, “Marriage is from God. It is profoundly spiritual.” Practically speaking, to keep the male and female in balance in the monk’s life, there is his love for the Blessed Mother. “She is *really* our mother.”

“The Ascetic Life of the Desert” continues with Aphrahat’s thoughts on “prayer for different states of mind,” the goal being to rest in God. “We don’t rest until God rests in us. Then we rest in God.” In the final analysis, we live out of a spirit of childhood. “We live the Bible.” We “live by the Word of God” and “put our total trust in Christ above all else.”

Anyone interested in the foundations of Christian monastic prayer will profit from these conferences. Father Louis draws deeply from the wells of wisdom found in the ancient Syrian desert. (Remember: I’ve left out the best parts.) I give the set five stars.