

Sharing Monastic Family History

Review of

Thomas Merton on Monastic Spirituality

By Thomas Merton (6 CDs)

Introduction by Fr. Anthony Ciorra

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Reviewed by **Virginia Ratigan**

Anyone who has spent time sharing family (or even institutional) history knows how fascinating, informative, often funny and even moving the stories can be. Thomas Merton's conferences on monastic spirituality offer an invitation to the listener to draw around the monastic family table and meet the characters that shaped their history, while hearing the stories and teachings that have been handed down by their spiritual ancestors. Who better than Merton to guide the novices (and the contemporary listener) in discerning the relevance of this history for their lives while engendering love for the monastic life itself?

These conferences on monastic spirituality were recorded during February and March of 1963. It may be important to note that prior to 1963 Merton had been writing on monastic life and spirituality: see, among the books, *The Waters of Siloe* (1949), *The Silent Life* (1957) and *Wisdom of the Desert* (1960). In these works it is already clear that Merton has carefully studied the *Rule* of St. Benedict, monastic history and spirituality, and that he is writing as an insider being guided along the way even as he teaches. This life experience, knowledge and familiarity comes out in his conferences in the attention to detail, context, empathy and even the humor that marks these presentations. One can truly imagine a family gathering with the novices around the table ready to respond, to ask questions and join in the laughing. Merton tells them to pray that the Holy Spirit will help them "get something out of it" and remarks, "if it doesn't help anyone else it will help me."

These six conferences begin with "The *Rule* of St. Benedict" and include: "St. Martin of Tours and St. Anthony the Great"; "Influence of the Desert Fathers and Mothers on Benedict"; "The Sayings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers: Revealing Christ to the World"; "The Monastic Life: Sharing Joys and Sorrows"; and "Prayer and Cenobitic Monasticism."

From the outset the *Rule* of St. Benedict is presented as the crown jewel of these conferences.

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For Merton the *Rule* is characterized as a simple “way” to live the Gospel. It is a source of wisdom, very practical and relevant in every age. However he is clear that the *Rule* did not just “drop out of the sky” and so it is important to learn the *Rule* by “meeting the people behind the *Rule*.” As Benedict instructs he encourages the novices to “attend with the ear of your heart.” In Merton’s estimation it is not possible to follow the *Rule* until you see what is behind it. He tells the novices that “we will be going from one source to another to meet these people.” And so he begins filling out the monastic family tree, going from East to West, showing the evolution of the *Rule* of Benedict through the texts and stories. Pachomius, Anthony, Martin of Tours and so many more all come alive. He is able to take often weird and even bizarre tales of characters who lived a simple, practical life rooted in the gospel and show the “freedom” that they found in discovering God’s will for their lives. The lessons learned go much deeper than what appears on the surface of these stories.

In his dialogical style and with his signature sense of humor Merton leads the novices to some key insights, reminding them that monastic life is “most serious.” He insists that love “above all” is at the heart of monastic life but that love must come from a “true source.” God purifies and refines the monk. The quiet and silence of the monastic life enables one to rest in God – without this there is “no strength to live monastic life.” The stories and texts emphasize the importance of spiritual direction; the value of manual labor as integral to the *Rule*; and prayer as the chief work of the monk (and “this is what’s holding the world together”).

Purity of heart enables the monk to offer “pure prayer to God simply because I love God.” We are “not in control of the results.” Living in the presence of God means being present to yourself and also feeling the “joys and sorrows of my brother which will be the joys and sorrows of Christ. My joys and sorrows will be seen by my brother.” From that point of view, “if you are holding the world together then you must be in reality – you must be real – that is the prime job of the monk.” But alas, he says, “we find ways of hiding this truth from ourselves.” The temptation to give up when trials come (demonstrated in dramatic form by the desert fathers) witness to the importance of “sweating it out.” It is “when we are seen to be hateful to ourselves – at the end of our rope – that we realize that God is there and really loves us.” In all of the conferences there is some reference to the centrality of prayer and contemplation and frequently acknowledged is the importance of realizing monks are not the only ones for whom prayer and contemplation is a daily work. In so many ways these conferences offer an invitation to all of us for learning from a spiritual master important lessons for living in our troubled world today.

The series is skillfully introduced by Fr. Anthony Ciorra, Assistant Vice President for Mission and Catholic Identity at Sacred Heart University. A brief retrospective of Merton’s life from his conversion to the 1960s is given in a conversational style. For one who is new to Merton studies his comments serve as a helpful introduction, while for the seasoned Merton reader/listener it is a good review. There is a general overview of all of the conferences which is quite helpful. However the real contribution of this introduction is in the careful way that Ciorra links the lectures to Merton’s own monastic journey. He makes the point that as Merton teaches the novices he is widening his own monastic vision: “he is maturing” in the monastic life. His love for solitude, for the *Rule* of St. Benedict and for the classical monastic texts provides the foundation for a continuing unfolding of the rationale for his own life, which includes his engagement with social issues of war, racism and world peace and the dialogue between East and West. Ciorra says that Merton is “figuring out his own life as he goes along.” That

point comes out loud and clear in the conferences.

On January 20, 2017 – Inauguration Day – Merton scholar Christine Bochen drew attention to the excerpt from Merton’s “Concerning the Collection in the Bellarmine Library (November 10, 1963)” found on the Merton Center website. This quotation, like these conferences, came out of a very intense year in American history – 1963. It is a fitting way to sum up the content of these conferences on Monastic Spirituality, since it might well be applied to whatever he has spoken.

Whatever I may have written, I think it all can be reduced in the end to this one root truth: that God calls human persons to union with Himself and with one another in Christ, in the Church which is His Mystical Body. It is also a witness to the fact that there is and must be, in the church, a contemplative life which has no other function than to realize these mysterious things, and return to God all the thanks and praise that human hearts can give Him. It is certainly true that I have written about more than just the contemplative life. I have articulately resisted attempts to have myself classified as an “inspirational writer.” But if I have written about interracial justice, or thermonuclear weapons, it is because these issues are terribly relevant to one great truth: that man is called to live as a child of God. Man must respond to this call to live in peace with all his brothers and sisters in the One Christ.