

Simply Cistercian – Chautard and Merton

Review of

The Spirit of Simplicity

By Jean-Baptiste Chautard, OCSO

Translated and Annotated by Thomas Merton

Preface and Afterword by Elias Dietz, OCSO

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Reviewed by **Thomas A. Snyder**

In 1945, Dom Frederic Dunne, Abbot of Gethsemani, aware of his young monk's linguistic skills as well as his writing ability, asked Thomas Merton to translate a French tract ("report") commissioned by the 1925 General Chapter of the Cistercian Order. Its author remained anonymous, as would Merton's translation and annotations when the volume was first published in 1948; it is not certain that Merton himself was even aware of the original author's identity at the time of his assignment. The rather onerous original title of Merton's translation, notes and additions was *The Spirit of Simplicity / Characteristic of the Cistercian Order / An Official Report, / demanded and approved by the / GENERAL CHAPTER / Together with Texts from / ST. BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX / on Interior Simplicity / Translation and Commentary by / A Cistercian Monk of Our Lady of Gethsemani* (vii). (Patrick O'Connell fully described this edition, with helpful background on its author and its provenance, including the occasion of Merton's translation and additions, in *The Merton Encyclopedia* 446-48).

The author of the original French brochure was Dom Jean-Baptiste Chautard, OSCO, a highly respected abbot known for a previous work, *The Soul of the Apostolate*, originally published in 1907 (and also translated by Merton). In his helpful Preface to this most recent edition (vii-xiv), current Gethsemani Abbot Elias Dietz, OCSO describes Chautard as a "natural choice" for the directed piece on simplicity, as "he belonged to a generation of abbots who saw a need to shift the focus away from the details of external observance to the specific spirituality that was meant to give Cistercian life its shape" (x). Having already identified the work, with Merton's added selections from St. Bernard, as "a kind of classic Cistercian Life 101" (vii), he celebrates this volume bringing together two of the most important monastic voices of the twentieth century.

Merton begins his Foreword to Chautard's work (xv-xviii) with an acknowledgment that "*Simplicity* is a word that has too many meanings," often vague, sometimes sentimental, although it can also

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indicate the monastic traits of humility, obedience and charity, all themes he would address in his own future writings. He provides a rationale for the exploration of the topic: “Now simplicity is one of the outstanding characteristics of Cistercian spirituality and of Cistercian saintliness. Indeed, the experience of many monks will verify the fact that when members of our order are seen to grow and progress in sanctity among us, the chief characteristic which they acquire is this simplicity” (xv).

Chautard dealt largely with how externals subvert simplicity in liturgy, vestments and architecture, the loss of historical perspective and foundational understandings, and other areas which draw the monk’s attention away from the basics of the monastic life such as silence, prayer and contemplation. Merton saw the need to expand this theme with a presentation of St. Bernard’s teachings which illustrate interior simplicity. He sums up St. Bernard and the *Little Exordium* (which Chautard also addresses): “for them, simplicity consisted in *getting rid of everything that did not help the monk to arrive at union with God by the shortest possible way*” (xvi-xvii).

Dom Chautard’s work is divided into five chapters. His brief introduction (3-5) highlights the foundational role of the *Rule* of St. Benedict and the “scrupulous fidelity” of the early Cistercians to that *Rule*. “The founders of Cîteaux drew their inspiration from that eminently simple source, the spirit of the *Rule*, and therefore they themselves remained simple” (3). The first chapter, “Interior Simplicity” (7-10), states that any examination of exterior simplicity must return to its source, interior simplicity, “the right intention of the soul, directed toward its last end: God” (7). Union with God, whose nature is simplicity, connects the very being of the monk, whose title indicates singularity, in a divine oneness, in love. This is lived out in an adoption of exterior simplicity: conduct, created goods, clothing, nourishment, occupations and relationships (9). Seasoned with scripture, reminded by the *Rule* to “hold nothing dearer to them than Christ” (10) and citing St. Bernard’s injunctions about unity, this chapter points to a oneness forged by the contagion of love.

Chapter Two, “Being True to Our Ideals” (11-14), is a brief plea to return to, stay faithful to and base all reform on the intentions of the founding generation, St. Stephen Harding, St. Bernard and other early Cistercians. This is the basic rationale for all historical study: we cannot know who we are or where we are going unless we remember where we have been. Chautard quotes a demand from Vatican I that religious orders identify themselves, not just by their disciplines, but “*by the virtues and spirit which animated their holy founders*” (13).

The third chapter, “Simplicity in the *Little Exordium*” (15-34), begins with this highlighted sentence: “*The close fidelity of this document to the Rule meant that simplicity became the outstanding characteristic of Cistercian monasticism*” (15). While Chautard credits Stephen Harding with this foundational text on Cistercian origins, Dom Elias in his Introduction reports that recent scholarship indicates it is more of a hybrid, with St. Stephen having contributed portions to it (x). The strict adherence to the *Rule* by the founders and its implications are again emphasized, and the abbot declares, “The spirit of Cîteaux is a spirit of simplicity: that means, a spirit of sincerity, of truth,” and continues that these *are* (note the present tense) “the watchwords of our fathers: truth, simplicity in all things, *unity* as opposed to *duplicity*: our behavior, our name, our profession, all should be reducible to one and the same thing” (19). This chapter includes strictures about clothing, bedding, diet, sources of income for the monasteries, geographical location (remote), enclosure and worship. Details concerning worship include vestments, sacred vessels and even the austerity of the churches themselves. Of this final category Chautard concludes: “Unity, finality, sincerity, rectitude, purity,

naturalness, nobility, sobriety, proportion . . . the old Cistercian churches were all that” (33). Merton illustrates these architectural qualities in his addition of thirteen black-and-white photographs of early Cistercian church interiors and exteriors, and an annotated typical monastic floor plan (51-68).

A detailed historical overview of how the Cistercian Order over the centuries experienced an “Anxiety to Preserve Simplicity” is the content of Chapter Four (35-42), or as Chautard avers: “our fathers were obsessed with solicitude for the spirit of simplicity” (35). He names specific periods on the trajectory of vitality to decline: the “golden age” from ca. 1100 to 1256, the “silver age” for the next one-hundred-fifty years, and decline and decay throughout the late Middle Ages and beyond. The author sadly notes that this “helplessness was due, in large part, to the loss of the spirit of simplicity” (40), a symptom being that “*The simple interior life was no longer enough for monks: indeed, it was often merely a burden to them*” (41).

The plea “Let Us Die in Our Simplicity” is the title of the Chapter Five (43-50). Chautard notes that when Pope Leo XIII proposed the fusion of the various branches of Strict-Observance Cistercianism into a single order in 1892, he was harkening back to St. Stephen Harding’s twelfth-century goal: “Our aim is to live in the union of one charity, one Rule, and one set of customs” (43). The abbot wrote this fervent tract only three-and-a-half decades after this union, and the Order invited him to bolster this unity with an appeal to the most valued principles of the Cistercian movement. Peppered with scripture and quotations from the Desert Fathers through the Cistercian Fathers down to popes of his own era, Chautard, in this closing chapter, invited a new spiritual vitality and depth of vocation into his beloved Order. It then would be “ever more and more penetrated by the spirit of simplicity of our first fathers and of all the saints of our order, and . . . profit by such luminous and eloquent examples” (50). In his translation, Merton has captured with clarity and care the spirit of monastic simplicity so desired by Dom Jean-Baptiste Chautard.

Merton’s gathering of monastic illustrations follows Chautard’s text (51-68), and he continues with an introduction to Part 2 (71-74) where he asserts: “The whole aim of the Cistercian life – and the fathers of the order are unanimous on this point – is to set men apart from the world that their souls may be purified and led step by step to perfect union with God by the recovery of our lost likeness to him” (71). He then proceeds to explore the facets of interior simplicity as found in five mystical texts from St. Bernard. Text 1, “Our Original Simplicity” (75-80), from Sermon 81 on the Canticle of Canticles, is an invitation for the soul to recall her resemblance to God which is a “natural simplicity in her very substance” (75). Merton comments that the basic call for the monk is to know himself, and in being himself he will “return to the original simplicity, immortality, and freedom which constitute his real self, in the image of God” (79). Here is a seed of the theme of the real or true self which Merton would explore in later writings.

Text 2, “Intellectual Simplicity: Humility Is Truth” (81-92), is excerpted from St. Bernard’s Sermon 35 on the Canticle of Canticles, and addresses the danger of culpable ignorance: the necessary knowledge which all need includes knowledge of themselves and knowledge of God (81). The purpose of these is not just for the sake of knowing, but to love God (82), and this is the place of simplicity in our intellectual life, “to eliminate all that is superfluous, unnecessary, indirect” in order to attain “the knowledge and love of God, union with him, in the closest possible way” (84). This union is our coming to truth – knowledge – in humility, recognizing the goodness of God, and in imitating of Christ. All this leads to the “higher simplicity of contemplation” (91).

The third text, “Simplification of the Will: Obedience” (93-99), is based on the presumption of a submissive and charitable will, “the virtue of simple *obedience*” (93). In his third Paschal sermon, Bernard addresses the purification of the will, the removal of selfishness: “Self-will means to will things that are intended not to give pleasure to God or to be of use to our brethren, but only to satisfy the selfish promptings of our own minds. Diametrically opposed to this evil is charity: and charity is God” (95-96). How hard these words fall on twenty-first-century ears!

Text 4, “Simplification of the Will: Our Own Judgment” (101-107), contains Merton’s warning: “Woe . . . to those who make themselves out to be holier than everybody else” by setting up their own standards of justice, while ignoring the justice of God (101). Exploring the Mellifluous Doctor’s Sermon 46 on the Canticle of Canticles, Merton addresses the issue of social simplicity, “charity or the *common will*,” which is characterized by love (104). Then using one of St. Bernard’s favorite images, mystical marriage, he claims: “The culmination of Cistercian simplicity is the mystical marriage of the soul with God, which is nothing else but the perfect union of our will with God’s will, made possible by the complete purification of all the duplicity of error and sin. This purification is the work of love and particularly of the love of God in our neighbor” (105).

The final text, “Perfect Simplicity: Unity of Spirit with God” (109-12), is drawn from St. Bernard’s *De Diligendo Deo*, again exploring the rapturous state of mystical union: “When shall the soul experience this desire (*affectum*) to the extent of becoming inebriated with divine love . . . so that it may pass over entirely into God and, adhering to God, become one spirit with him” (111)? Merton concludes this and his additions to *The Spirit of Simplicity* with: “This, then, is the ultimate limit of Cistercian simplicity: the simplicity of God himself, belonging to the soul, purified of all admixture of self-love, admitted to a participation in the Divine Nature, and becoming one spirit with the God of infinite love” (112).

A brief Afterword by Abbot Elias (113-14) gives an update of the most recent editions of classic Cistercian texts and other scholarly sources which make the Cistercian heritage even more accessible. This “encourages readers to go further afield and discover the order’s major authors” as Merton expressed in his concluding remarks to this landmark work (114).

These wedded texts of Chautard and Merton invite the deepest kind of soul work. In our cluttered, chaotic society, even in our churches as they struggle in various ways in an indifferent culture, they are both challenging and curative. Set in Merton’s rich prose, the promptings of both writers move us beyond ourselves. However countercultural or religiously farfetched the desire might be to our jaded worldviews, who cannot desire an ultimate simplicity; utter truthfulness about ourselves as we are confronted by the Holy; yes, even yearning for union with God? The invitation to *live* this spirit of simplicity is enticing.