

Always Right There

Review of

Cistercian Fathers and Forefathers: Essays and Conferences

By Thomas Merton

Edited with an Introduction by Patrick F. O’Connell

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Reviewed by **Isaac Slater, OCSO**

In a conference on St. Anselm of Canterbury given to novices at the Abbey of Gethsemani, Thomas Merton said of Anselm that while he wrote in a variety of styles and genres, “Nevertheless it’s the same man all the time. He’s consistent. He’s always himself. . . . He’s always in it. He’s always right there. There’s always the person” (54); and further on: “The person keeps coming through all the time. He’s got a love for the beauty of ideas. He loves the beauty of thought. He likes to think in a beautiful way and he likes to develop things beautifully” (54). This could very aptly be said for Merton himself in this selection of his articles, talks, introductions and reviews on medieval monastic writers. Merton’s personality – his humor, spontaneity and keen feel for the beauty of ideas – shine through on every page. Readers who enjoy Merton and are interested in beginning to learn more about the medieval sources of his spirituality will find this book worthwhile and a pleasure. Readers already steeped in the sources will find occasional nuggets and fresh angles of approach that may be useful. Whether they tend to consider Merton’s personal style refreshing or annoying will likely determine the value they find in these talks and writings.

Ablly curated by Patrick O’Connell, with an extensive yet concise apparatus consisting in prefatory headnotes that situate the texts in the context of Merton’s life at the time of their composition, along with notes, appendices and bibliography, the book includes both transcriptions of novitiate conferences and a variety of written materials Merton penned over a span of nearly twenty years. Specifically, after a 1960 article on St. Peter Damian there are a series of pieces on St. Anselm: conferences to novices, an essay on the ontological argument, and an overview of some contemporary literature on the saint. Concluding the material on pre-Cistercian writers there is an introduction to and translation of a letter by Guigo the Carthusian. On the Cistercian writers themselves the book includes introductions to liturgical sermons (Christmas, Easter, Advent) by Guerric of Igny, a partial biography of St. Aelred, more conferences to the novices, and one of the last writings Merton completed, an introduction to the English translation of Amédée Hallier’s *The Monastic Theology of Aelred of Rievaulx*. The volume concludes with introductions to English translations of writings

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by Isaac of Stella, for whom Merton had a particular fondness, and Adam of Perseigne. This last has become something of a classic, I think, in Cistercian circles. At the Abbey of the Genesee, we hear it every year at Vigils.

The thread that links what can seem a slightly disparate collection is the focus on monastic writers from the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The more substantial link, I would suggest, is Merton himself, which is the real interest. The notes are at their best when situating the different pieces in the context of Merton's life and writings. Toggling back and forth between the conversational flow of transcribed conferences and the polished prose of reviews and introductions can seem a bit jarring; but Merton was a great talker and readers who like to read Merton will also like "hearing" him talk.

Whether Merton fans new to his medieval forebears will be inspired to tackle Isaac of Stella and Peter Damian directly is hard to predict. Merton had a real gift as a cultural "translator": very much in the spirit of Vatican II he could distill and present the kernel of an earlier source's thought in a way that modern readers could receive and find attractive. He writes in these pages, primarily as a "spiritual writer" or speaker. That is, his focus is on finding spiritual teaching in his subjects that will be useful for contemporary readers and listeners. This is obviously the case with the conferences to novices, but no less so in the introductions. While clearly sensitive to the social, historical, literary and theological horizons informing his subjects, the focus on "spirituality" will be considered helpful by some and limiting by others, for whom inclusion of these other dimensions would only thicken and enrich the spiritual teaching. As a criticism of Merton however that would likely be unfair since he was writing at times about figures just beginning to appear in English translation and a certain amount of overview and paraphrase was called for.

The writings themselves are generally flowing, apt and organized. The style is lively and even pugnacious at times. The lengthiest piece (126 pages), an abandoned biography of Aelred of Rievaulx from the late 1940s, while limited in its sources, is enjoyable to read. Merton models a manner of personal engagement with his subjects that will hopefully encourage others to find their own points of resonance with authors who at first can seem foreign and obscure.