

## A Class Act

Review of  
*Medieval Cistercian History:  
 Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 9*  
 By Thomas Merton  
 Edited by Patrick F. O’Connell  
 Preface by William R. Grimes  
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Reviewed by **Colomban Weber, OCSO**

Those of us who had the honor and privilege of being students and novices of Thomas Merton happily recall his classes and talks and the enthusiasm, insight, wisdom and humor of those times. The volume being reviewed here is the last of a series of nine volumes of the class notes of Father Louis, on a wide variety of topics. The text here is on *Medieval Cistercian History*, and represents a thorough overview on the mentality and mores of those times. Like the other eight volumes in this series, the presentation and extensive analysis of these texts makes for informative reading. As an editor Patrick O’Connell proves to be as astute and erudite as the author himself, filling out the text where necessary and above all providing helpful and indispensable footnoting throughout. This is a scholarly work, and makes the usual demands.

The material in this volume actually consists of two distinct sets of conferences that were presented during the same period, the latter part of 1962. The first is simply entitled “Cistercian History,” although it begins with a lengthy introduction focused on the monastic background that preceded the foundation of the Abbey of Cîteaux in 1098, including discussion of the development of monasticism in England, the influence of the Abbey of Cluny on European monastic life, and various reform movements that prepared the way for the Cistercians. Merton then looks at the contributions of each of the first three abbots of Cîteaux, Robert of Molesme, Alberic and Stephen Harding, and considers some of the early documents that provided the guiding principles for the new order. With his facility in Latin and French, Merton was able to make accessible to his students scholarly research not then available in English, and to highlight the significance of new studies of Cistercian origins for contemporary monastic life and renewal. The second set of conferences, given on Sundays and open not just to novices but to the whole Gethsemani community, considers the Order’s history during the two centuries following the death of St. Bernard, its most influential figure, in 1153, an important but relatively little-studied period. He emphasizes the remarkable

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growth of the Order, its influence on economic, political and even military affairs, its service to the Church and to the wider society, its educational enterprises, and the various criticisms it attracted. He shows the ways in which the Order's remarkable success and influence led to various challenges and problems, not all of which were able to be resolved in a completely satisfactory way despite repeated efforts at reform. He stresses the need for honest evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of Cistercian life as it was actually lived out, during this period and throughout its history, rather than an idealized but inauthentic picture of past glories.

In his helpful introduction O'Connell provides a thorough overview of the material, including discussion of the multiple sources Merton drew on and comparisons of the written texts with the recorded conferences as they were actually presented by Merton. He points out, as did Merton himself, that the vast field of medieval Cistercian history is subject to various views and interpretations. Scholarship and critical editions of texts were just beginning in this area, and Merton was aware of it, interested in it at the time, and ready and able to use what was available and move on.

Speaking of "moving on" brings me to a topic which is of particular fascination and even amazement. It is revealing to find examples of how Merton could be his most severe and perceptive critic. Here is an example from the seventh and last volume of his journals, *The Other Side of the Mountain*:

I happened to glance through some old notes of mine – novitiate conferences on the vows – dating back ten years. Incredible and quite embarrassing. I was astonished to find them so legalistic, so rigid, so narrow. Yet in those days I thought myself quite broad and many regarded me as a dangerous radical. I was only doing what I thought I had to do – teaching what all the authorities held! That it now seems completely unrealistic and false is a sign that there has really been something of a revolution. (40)

However, for those of us who know Merton's work, the above disclaimer comes as no surprise, and is quite typical. How much such a similar honesty and growth is needed today goes without saying. Merton did indeed move on and was to produce some of the best insights into monastic renewal and adaptation for our time.

No comment on this masterpiece would be complete without a mention of the Preface by William R. Grimes, also known as Br. Alcuin in his novitiate days. Fr. Louis had a particular gift for relating to each person as an individual. We all wondered how he was able to do it, with so many people demanding his attention. Grimes gives us a fond remembrance and recollection of those halcyon days.

O'Connell's Introduction to this work, like those of the other eight volumes in this series, is a masterpiece of exegesis and presentation. Not only is the material given a broad explication, but extensive notes and clarifications provide for an informed reading and research tool. Additionally, an exhaustive Index makes this volume and the other eight in this series a joy to use and reuse. Hopefully, in the near future, all nine Introductions in the series will be collected in a volume of their own. Having such a research resource in one place would be enormously helpful. It has been mentioned that the cost of these volumes is rather high. It is well to remember that scholarly titles often carry a higher price. However, discounts and sales do become available, so everyone should be able to own and enjoy this marvelous collection.