

Merton's Words on the Word of God

Review of

*A Monastic Introduction to Sacred Scripture:
Novitiate Conferences on Scripture and Liturgy 1*

By Thomas Merton

Edited with an Introduction by Patrick F. O'Connell

Foreword by Bonnie Bowman Thurston

Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020

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Reviewed by **Robert G. Toth**

It would difficult to write a review of this book that could be any better than Bonnie Thurston's Foreword, which complements Patrick O'Connell's Introduction, as *A Monastic Introduction to Sacred Scripture* takes its important place in Merton scholarship. True to form, as evidenced in his previous editions of Merton's novitiate conferences, O'Connell's extraordinary attention to detail and documentation (648 footnotes!) has produced a definitive work on the subject. While Thurston's Foreword points out that "this material is some sixty years old, pre-Vatican II, and before the much happier current ecumenical state of scholarly biblical studies," she also points out that "Merton's knowledge of technical, scriptural subjects is more than a historical curiosity," offering "significant insights about Scripture study within and for the household of faith" (ix) – and, we might add, further insight into the scripture passages that had personal meaning for Merton. In his Introduction, O'Connell states: "All the other Scripture courses known to have been given by Merton . . . focus on particular biblical texts rather than the more technical background material found in this set of conferences" (xiv); and Thurston warns, "This is technical material, which may make it rather hard going for the general reader, as I imagine it must have been for some of Merton's original listeners" (vii).

As a "general reader" I wish to share my experience reading the book. Being an older general reader, I found the text print size a little difficult to read, and the footnotes even more difficult, so I got the Kindle edition which made reading easier and also had a couple of features that were helpful: the ease of clicking on a footnote number and seeing it instantly; the ability to word-search; and ease of highlighting and printing out notes. But I also found some serious drawbacks in the Kindle edition: not included in this version are a very useful "Index," actually a chapter-by-chapter table of contents that Merton prepared (139-42); a Scriptural Index (151-59); and an

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extensive General Index (161-90). Regarding the footnotes, many of them are translations of what Merton quoted in another language or the full scripture text that Merton references only by chapter and verse.

The Introduction (xi-lii) includes not only the background and summary of the actual text but places it in the context of Merton's developing relationship with scripture throughout his life. The text proper begins with a Prologue (1-26) that precedes the more objective material that follows and sets a spiritual tone; it conveys the importance of studying Sacred Scripture and the dispositions with which we should approach it. Part 1, "Biblical Inspiration" (27-61) focuses successively on the existence, nature, extent and effects of inspiration. Part 2, "The Canon of Sacred Scripture" (62-93), treats the development of the biblical canon and offers analogies between the monastic and the prophetic vocation. Part 3, "Texts and Versions of the Scriptures" (94-110), deals with the various manuscripts and translations of the Scriptures. Finally, Part 4, "The Interpretation of Sacred Scripture" (111-38), focuses on hermeneutics – the literal, implicit and typical senses of Scripture, and concludes with a look at the theology of the exodus in Old and New Testaments.

While the more technical information is interesting and informative, I focused on Merton's interpretations and insights on particular passages which served as mini-homilies and a time out for reflection. For a general reader, to read the book slowly in this way is well worth the time. For anyone for whom the Bible has landed at the bottom of a pile of the latest and greatest spiritual books, this is a great way to reengage with Sacred Scripture and with Merton. For scholars who may be looking for the scriptural seeds of Merton's later themes, access to both print and Kindle versions would make their work much easier. The Merton community, general readers and scholars alike, can be grateful to editor and publisher for bringing this first of three final volumes of Merton's novitiate conferences into print.