

York. Perhaps he felt differently after the encounter, but we have no evidence to tell us that.

A niggling detail: The title of Part II of the book, the account from Merton's journals, seems slightly imprecise. It refers to the text as "Merton's unpublished journals." Actually, much of this material has already, though very recently, been published in *A Vow of Conversation* — a result of *Vow's* appearing before *Encounter* when it was actually scheduled for publication *after* it.

If some future edition could include the dialogue between Merton and Suzuki which grew out of the essay which Suzuki, at Merton's invitation, wrote to serve as a preface to Merton's *Wisdom of the Desert* (material which is now found in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*), then all the primary data on this exchange and meeting of Merton and Suzuki would be conveniently in one place. Meanwhile, this handsomely printed addition to *Mertoniana* sheds useful light on the dialogue between these two widely read religious and literary figures of our century.

THE MERTON TAPES

Initial Release of Lectures by Thomas Merton
 Kansas City, Missouri: Credence Cassettes, 1988
 19 cassette tapes [60 minutes each] -- \$7.95 each

Reviewed by **Victor A. Kramer**

Cassian laid down a fundamental rule: "What we would like to be at the time of prayer, let us prepare to be before [the time of] prayer."

(Tape AA2069)

Throughout these lectures Merton refers to the vocation of being a Christian and, particularly, of the monastic vocation. While his lecture subjects vary widely the core of his concern remains how one best seeks God. Thus, while he may be explaining some fine point of history, tradition, scripture or monastic usage, Merton's focus remains on the essence of the

monastic vocation which, of its nature, is a journey never to be completed in this life. In these many talks Merton's understanding of the paradox of a journey never to be completed always remains at the core, while moment-by-moment along the way he illuminates particular points which will help students find their way.

These tapes will be tremendously valuable both for persons who may want to listen to Merton for their own spiritual development and for scholars who will need to listen to the lectures to understand better the details and range of Merton's thought. Revealed here for those who have not before listened to tapes of Merton's lectures is fascinating documentation of Fr. Louis / Thomas Merton at work as a master teacher. That he could teach so well (he was Master of Scholastics for four years and Novice Master for ten) should not be a surprise to anyone who has given much thought to Merton's career, but the range, skill, erudition, wit and balance of these thirty-eight lectures may come as a surprise. Throughout Merton's life his gift was to maintain interest in many subjects and to be able to communicate such a vast range of interests in language understandable to persons less well read. These taped lectures demonstrate that, as a teacher, Merton was often able to add detail in just the right amount so that his students would not be overwhelmed. Rather the incremental knowledge is provided step by step so that it seems sometimes that this master teacher is hardly teaching at all. He seems just to be laying out information which these students can then focus upon in relation to their own lives or for additional study by making proper connections between various writers, etc.

The world knows Thomas Merton as both writer and monk. These tapes reveal him in another role and hereby we are able to realize that it was perhaps through this intermediary role that he moved back and forth from his complementary roles of purveyor of words and of solitary. Ultimately it is through the mystery of words that the mystery of God is revealed, and this core insight is what Merton tells his students: "Listen and be still."

These lectures were taped as a result of a continuing procedure at the Abbey of Gethsemani so that lay brothers who were unable to attend Merton's lectures could later hear what Merton had to say through tapes. Thus a gesture of charity has provided a mine of information and a storehouse of insight into Merton's methods as a teacher and has provided access for a wider audience a quarter of a century after the tapes were first made. The topics included in this series will appeal to a wide audience who

want to learn more about the spiritual life. In this initial release Credence Cassettes has chosen to provide six groups of tapes, series of lectures which cover the following basic subjects: 1) Monastic Spirituality; 2) Early Christian Spirituality; 3) Faulkner: Disaster in Paradise; 4) Rilke — Poet of Inwardness; 5) Art and Beauty; and 6) The Origins of Prayer (a series of meditations which use Cassian as foundation). In these lectures we hear Merton building connections between the spiritual life and the traditions of art and literature which can quite legitimately feed into a deepening of the spiritual life. Another group of ten tapes was released after this review was completed. Subjects included in the new group are: 1) Poetry; 2) Humility; and 3) Solitude. Within the initial group of nineteen tapes Merton's lectures, as made available without editing, reveal him as a teacher transmitting basic historical information or the essence of a particular text. In a fundamental way all of these self-contained lectures are about spirituality and the need for the development of the spiritual life. Therefore the lectures might well be listened to in almost any order.

As the result of work within a monastic context these lectures provide insights into the demands and rewards of the monastery but their application is broader. Three tapes are labeled "Monastic Spirituality" (AA2083, AA2084, AA2085) and are an excellent introduction to Merton's methodical honing down of insights so that his audience can understand and prepare to go further. When he speaks about the meaning of monastic spirituality, he frequently stresses both the reality of the "immortal self" (the "true self" of *The New Man*) and the "lower self" and the fact that one *must* first accept the lower self so that one can also move toward an acceptance of the "higher" self. In subsequent lectures in this group of three tapes, Merton builds links between basic Biblical materials, Jewish source materials, and the writings of the Fathers, such as St. Gregory, to provide insights not just into these sources but for the lives of his students. This, it seems to me, is his genuine accomplishment. Merton makes monasticism make sense because it is placed in a context which has made sense before.

Other lectures are detailed examinations of particular early Christian writers. Thus "Introduction to Church Fathers (AA2081) and "Clement of Alexandria / Origen" (AA2082) allow listeners to see how the fundamental insights of the earliest Christians have subsequently been clouded by too many words. Merton's joyful teaching of the rudimentary fact that there is only the choice between a way of life and a way of death takes the listener

back into the mindset of earliest Christian thinking and living: for Clement, classical culture could be baptized, says Merton. For Origen, if man is to ascend to God, he must first come to a knowledge of self. Only when a person comes to that knowledge can the contemplative life begin. This is fundamental stuff — basic, clean, and to the point. In these lectures one can see Merton's ideas being worked out which appear in more detail in books such as *The New Man*. How does spiritual enlightenment come? Merton says it comes when you do the work of, for example, reading the scriptures and, thereby, preparing yourself for the proper disposition for prayer through the cultivation of an attitude of simplicity. Of course, the beauty of it is that this is just exactly what Merton is doing here within this classroom situation.

The selection of lectures for this series is not, however, restricted to comments on monastic spirituality via early church fathers and scriptures. Many of the best lectures are about Faulkner and Rilke. Two sets of lectures analyze Faulkner's "The Bear" and *The Wild Palms*. Another whole set investigates Rilke's aesthetic. Merton's concern as he investigates the literature of these two writers (something also basic throughout all these lectures) is to demonstrate that the real key to contemplative awareness is to be tuned into the presence of God. That presence further manifests itself in different ways by different artists.

The Faulkner lectures reveal Merton's appreciation of setting and of nature as a place for revelation of God. As a way of approaching God, Merton argues that nature sometimes makes more sense than formal religion. He saw Faulkner as a truly religious writer whose vision was not limited by a religious framework. His lectures on "The Bear" (AA2079) demonstrate that Ike McCaslin is on the way to mystical insight: "Basic to the mystical life is the privilege of seeing." Similar points are well made in the talks on *The Wild Palms* (AA2080) and in the many lectures on Rilke ((AA2076, AA2077, AA2078).

In these lectures about Faulkner's stories and Rilke's poems, Merton reveals an intense appreciation of the modern consciousness in a world where belief within a traditional manner or mode is largely gone. What Merton is able to demonstrate, through a careful, almost line by line, investigation, is his appreciation of how a secular poet does provide important insights into the spiritual life. Yielding oneself to the moment; letting oneself go because of an appreciation of a reality which surrounds oneself — these are the necessary first steps.

Still another lecture group, issued under the title "Beauty is from God" (AA2075), shows Merton developing ideas about art (via Scholasticism) to convince his students of the genuine need for a sense of the beautiful. It is not, he stresses, that monks deny a sense of the beautiful. It is more a matter of giving up lower forms of beauty for higher forms.

The largest group of lectures in this series is devoted to an investigation of Cassian in relation to fundamental questions about prayer. This group of eight tapes (AA2067 through AA2074) may prove to be the most interesting of the talks. This is an extended series of sixteen investigations. Each of the lectures is self-contained and any one could (as an example, for this review) be discussed at length. The first five tapes (10 lectures) set the stage for the one labeled "Prayer and the Active Life" (AA2072). Each of these lectures builds on basic ideas of Cassian. Trials; faith; disposition; the "Our Father" as a fundamental form of prayer; and God's hearing of our prayer are the subjects. Merton's job is to show how the development of a method of prayer is a long, slow, arduous process. In the lectures about "Prayer and the Active Life" Merton pulls together many of the ideas from Cassian which he has earlier established as basic building blocks: one does not become a contemplative easily; troubles, testing, trials are basic. Merton notes: "The basis of the contemplative life is an active life which is rooted in humility and obedience."

Merton's gift of pulling together what may appear to be disparate ideas is beautifully exhibited in the set of two lectures about how the active and contemplative lives complement each other. We have to learn to train ourselves *not* to look at ourselves as the center. How does Merton stress this? Usually by taking a basic idea and examining it carefully. He takes a basic text "Behold the Bridegroom cometh . . ." and then stresses our fundamental way of life (monks, all Christians) as exiles allows us to perceive the life of God incarnated in real existential situations.

Merton's method — raising questions; joking; circling back; telling anecdotes; and then stressing basic insights — shows that as teacher he knew how to give his students enough, but not so much that they became lost. In one of these Cassian tapes he says, "Vocation is not something that is filed away. Vocation is something you work at by free response. You judge by the concrete facts. These facts are manifestations of what God has planned." These lectures are often informal, but that is one of their positive values. Some listeners may wish that these talks had been edited and repetitions eliminated. They are, however, more effective in their uncut

versions. Merton's students were a mixed group, some with college educations, and others with only high school educations. The beauty of these tapes is that they reveal Merton's gift of reaching a diverse audience. This review has implied the value of these lectures. Let me now be more specific. Merton as teacher accomplishes several things here:

- 1) He provides basic information.
- 2) He ties the spiritual life into fundamental psychological and historical patterns.
- 3) He ties all this together while avoiding making it dry or abstract.

In other words, Merton was a gifted teacher who could obviously hold the attention of students. There was no intention that these tapes, made primarily for the benefit of monks within Merton's monastery (though some were sent to other religious houses), would ever find a wide audience. Yet now because duplication is technically possible and reproduction standards are high Merton's lectures for a few of his brother monks will prove to be of assistance to an audience far beyond the monastery.

The series is made of imported Agfa Gevaert tape, a high quality audio tape which allows multiple duplications simultaneously (in this case hundreds at a time). The quality of the sound reproduction is quite high, especially within the context of original recordings which were made by non-professionals. The numbering and coding system could be improved. Cassette cases are matched with the AA code number used throughout this review yet, strangely, the tapes themselves bear a different series of numbers. Thus AA2068 is labeled on the tape itself as A2116. This is a minor problem.

These lectures will serve as a significant resource both for individuals who want to strengthen their spiritual lives and for scholars who want to know how Merton was thinking about particular issues. Tone of voice; hesitations; pauses; sometimes even a slow grasping for proper words — all of these things can be revealing. Here is Merton the teacher willing to be an inspiration by means of thinking out loud. We are fortunate to have still another means of access to Merton through these tapes.