

Reviews

MERTON, Thomas, *Liturgical Feasts and Seasons: Novitiate Conferences on Scripture and Liturgy 3*, edited with an introduction by Patrick F. O’Connell, Foreword by Paul Quenon, OCSO (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2022), pp. lxxxi, 525. ISBN: 978-1-7252-5312-4 (paper) \$59.00.

This volume completes the publication of Thomas Merton’s novitiate conferences on scripture and liturgy – or, perhaps better for this volume, scripture *in* liturgy – from the 1950s. The whole series represents a very considerable achievement of editing, scrutinizing the different typed versions of a mass of material, which Merton himself continued to adapt and reorganize after the original talks were delivered. It is helpful to know how widely these typescripts were circulated among those concerned with Cistercian formation during the fifties: we can be somewhat distracted by Merton’s own self-depiction in his journals and letters and fail to remember how deeply his material was appreciated by others seeking to develop a style of monastic training that went beyond the rather monochrome ascetical focus of the Cistercian novitiates of the earlier twentieth century – the style described by Merton himself in his autobiography. Underlying these conferences is a robust theology of the life of the Mystical Body, nourished by liturgical prayer, a theology of monastic life as fundamentally a realization of the baptized identity, the believer’s life in Christ, anchored in the prayer of Christ which we share in the Eucharist (pages 83-84 provide a fine digest of the interweaving of Eucharistic theology with the Paschal Mystery as a whole). And this nurtures a theology of grateful dependence on the indwelling of Christ in the power of the Spirit and the life of grace, contrasted with a spirituality of individual struggle and attainment. As Merton puts it in a note on grace (360), the individual struggle model can imply that “my aim {is} to reach Him from Whom I am separated, and reach Him by my own virtuous acts” – which has the unwelcome effect of leading me to separate my “higher” self from the uncomfortable reality of continuing temptation. Confidence in grace allows me to recognize my sinfulness and look to the indwelling life of Christ; evil inclination may remain but it is rendered “inactive.” And so one focal aspect of the monastic calling – as of the baptized calling in general – is “to rest content with the actual” (270), to be ready to encounter God in

the immediacy of the moment and of the personas and circumstances that in fact confront me. This is the foundation of the *pax* that should prevail in the community. The extended reflections on the Holy Week liturgy, especially the Triduum (94-109), provide a strikingly rich overview of the heart of this theological perspective, informed by an impressive range of patristic, medieval and contemporary theological insight.

Within this framework, Merton engages in (sometimes quite detailed) discussion of both scriptural and non-scriptural lections from the old office of nocturns as well as the readings for Mass, deploying ancient, medieval and modern theological perspectives, from Augustine to Louis Bouyer. There is a judicious use of Aquinas here and there, reinforcing a view – now fairly common, but less so in the 1950s – of the Angelic Doctor as standing very much in the tradition of the Greek Fathers. Overall, this is molded by some of the currents of the *nouvelle théologie* but with no overt hostility to scholasticism. The theological culture is gently reformist, more sympathetic to a fuller liturgical literacy than to wholesale liturgical reconstruction. And one of the valuable elements in the substantial introduction is an intelligent survey of Merton's attitudes to actual liturgical revision: he is consistently skeptical about the self-conscious splendors of traditional liturgical performance, but equally unconvinced by the fussy pointlessness of much "reform." He needs no persuading that some styles of supposedly renewed liturgy are as much vehicles for clerical self-importance and authoritarianism as any more traditional idiom; and he laments the unthinking primitivism that so much reform took for granted. It is good to have this broad perspective on his thinking about the theology of liturgy – a topic in his work that probably deserves more attention than it has received: he is not very interested in the nuts and bolts of reconstruction, but more exercised about the "register" of liturgical action (avoid the merely theatrical and triumphalist) and the possibilities of a more deliberate entry into the depths of the liturgical texts. It would be fair to say that the understanding of liturgical formation with which he is working is centrally about an informed "inhabiting" of these texts rather than the issues around space, movement or embodiment that preoccupy many contemporary professional liturgiologists, or the investigation of the logic of liturgical structure in itself. But Merton is pre-eminently a *writer*; and it is not surprising that his approach to liturgy is deeply marked by a typical writer's concern with the subtleties of text.

A reader looking for hints of the later Merton may well be disappointed. His meditations on these textual subtleties never stray far from what might be described as a sensible pre-Vatican II intellectual consensus, scripturally alert (and *very* cautiously receptive to some aspects of criti-

cal biblical scholarship), not slavishly fettered to textbook scholasticism, but essentially focused on the distinctive ways of thinking and absorbing theology that would characterize a contemplative life. Occasionally there is a hint of something a little bolder (see the reference on 108 to “saints of the natural law – like Lao Tse and Confucius and Buddha, no doubt,” as sharing in the fullness of redemption opened to the saints of the First Covenant through Jesus’s descent into Limbo), but not often. Biblical and patristic or medieval references to Jews are left without gloss or apology in their raw state, in a way that would certainly by the early sixties have been impossible for Merton. There is – as the editor notes – a strong Mariological interest, and a vocabulary about Our Lady that reflects the devotional climate of the era, including the popular “co-redeemer and mediatrix of all grace” language (202). Several of the meditations for Marian feasts are more lengthy and carefully written than most of the material; these include an extended discussion of the use and meaning of the rosary (see 251-59). There are points of real interest and originality in some of these Marian passages – as when, in discussing the Immaculate Conception, Merton says almost in passing (372) that Mary’s “ignorance of sin” as a result of her conception entailed “a correspondingly greater knowledge of sinners.”

All in all, this is a useful and often enriching sourcebook. It is easy to see why the typescripts would have provided solid fare for other Cistercian communities; it is certainly a set of texts that exhibits a “conservative” Merton, in the sense that he is deliberately setting out to induct his hearers into a long inheritance of thought, prayer and liturgical practice, rather than to develop new and striking theories. The agenda we know from his journals, of refreshing and resourcing a properly contemplative and theologically literate monastic discipline to fill out or replace the close focus on asceticism and manual labor that had characterized the houses of the Order in the USA, is of course in evidence, but not pressed as an issue on itself, except perhaps implicitly in the various passages warning against too much focus on individual asceticism and strained effort. The whole book exudes the kind of pre-conciliar theological “humanism” that Merton never really abandoned, even when his own priorities had led him into areas only faintly discerned by the Novice Master of the mid-fifties.

The book is well-presented. The forbiddingly complicated history of the manuscripts is set out in the introduction with as much clarity as the intricacies allow, and, as we have seen, the introduction also provides a really helpful overview of Merton’s thinking about liturgy, with detailed analysis and summary of his most important essays. The footnotes include full quotation from sources mentioned by Merton in the main text,

often in both Latin and English, and the English versions are generally reliable (more than can be said for some of the volumes of the journals, alas) – though the reader needs to be warned that translations from the Vulgate will at times look very odd to anyone consulting a biblical text in any modern translation (see, for example, the reference to Daniel [156]). And it seems ungracious to complain that an index is too extensive, given that most indices these days are very much the opposite; but this one too often gives the impression of simply throwing a set of occurrences and associated individual words which does not do much to help the reader with tracing serious themes (look, for example, at the entry for “Jews”).

As the editing and publication of Merton’s vast oeuvre continues, this series of volumes will have a particular importance as filling out in such detail the intellectual and spiritual monastic culture Merton was trying to instill in his novices. His later life took him in apparently different directions, as we have noted; but we understand nothing of him unless we grasp that this theology, with its patristic and liturgical roots, was something that continued to mold his thinking and praying right up to his last days.

Rowan Williams

MORGAN, Bill, *Thomas Merton, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and the Protection of All Beings* (Temple, PA: Beatdom Books, 2022), pp. 95. ISBN: 978-0-9934099-9-8 (paper) \$11.99.

In *Thomas Merton, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and the Protection of All Beings: The Correspondence*, Bill Morgan skillfully situates the relational thread linking Merton and Ferlinghetti within a wider web of resonant figures, including key members of the Beat Generation. One particularly important connector within this web was the Columbia University poet and professor, Mark Van Doren. Van Doren, Morgan notes, was “instrumental” in the development of both Merton and Ferlinghetti, as well as Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, all of whom studied with Van Doren at Columbia (8). Merton’s close friend, the poet Robert Lax, was also a Van Doren Student (10).

Throughout the book, Morgan invites his readers into Merton’s and Ferlinghetti’s relationship, as well as the broader nexus within which this particular connection unfolded. In the process, the power of literature to link people in a kind of subterranean solidarity, akin to the mycelial network connecting trees, shines through these pages. Kerouac, Ginsberg and the Buddhist beat poet and environmentalist Gary Snyder were all close associates of Ferlinghetti’s, and they all read *The Seven Storey Mountain* (11). Ginsberg read it due to Kerouac’s enthusiastic recommendation (11). Snyder read it while hitch-hiking through the U.S., and he eventually