

Reviews

HART, Patrick (ed.), *Survival or Prophecy? The Letters of Thomas Merton and Jean Leclercq* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2002), pp. 196. ISBN 0-374-27206-9. \$16.95.

This volume, the latest in the series of Merton letters published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux consists of the correspondence between two of the most famous monastic writers from the post-war period. The letters cover the period 1950-68, or roughly from the time of Merton's ordination until his death. None of these letters is very lengthy, nor does it take very long to go through this short book.

Since readers of this journal are much more familiar with Merton, a few words of the background on Jean Leclercq seem in order. He was a Benedictine monk of Clervaux, Luxembourg, although the picture on the dust cover shows him wearing a Cistercian habit, while Merton wears something nondescript. After a conventional monastic education at Sant' Anselmo, which did not culminate in a doctorate, Leclercq nevertheless became a prestigious lecturer and scholar.

It was no doubt his work on St Bernard that put him in touch with Merton. He and Henri Rochais produced a monumental critical edition of the works of the Abbot of Clairvaux (not Clervaux!) which sealed Leclercq's reputation for scholarship. During the rest of his long life (1911-93), Dom Jean published dozens of books and hundreds of articles, mostly on medieval monastic writers.

But Leclercq was not exactly a scholar's scholar. For one thing, he spent much more time in airports than he did in the library at Clervaux. Indeed, I would guess that he logged more air miles than any monk in history, including Rembert Weakland, who wrote a fine foreword for this book. When I was a student at Sant' Anselmo, there was a joke that his manuscripts smelled more of benzine (jet fuel) than candlewax. I also remember an occasion at Kalamazoo when it was announced that Dom Jean would not be present to give his scheduled address, for he was home in his monastery – with a broken leg!

So, in this regard, there could hardly have been a greater contrast than that between Merton, whose Abbot kept him under lock and key, and Leclercq, roaming the world at will. And of course that theme, or rather the subject of Merton's confinement, comes up often enough in these letters. To his credit, Leclercq sympathizes, but he does not feed Merton's resentment. As Weakland remarks, the two had very different temperaments: Leclercq was extroverted and rather bluff, Merton was more complex and reserved.

But they had one great thing in common, and that was their mutual appreciation for the contemplative dimension of the monastic life. Nowadays, it is pretty much

taken for granted by most monks and nuns that this is the heart and soul of the monastic enterprise, but 50 years ago it was not so. In fact, there were plenty of monks who thought Merton put altogether too much emphasis on contemplation to the detriment of community and apostolic activity.

In Merton's case, the specific form that this quest took was his desire to be a hermit. For many years that request was denied almost automatically, since Trappist life was so markedly cenobitic. That is, there was almost no place in that life for individual spontaneity and freedom apart from the activities of the group. And it did not help Merton that Gethsemani was flooded with novices in those days.

For his part, Leclercq was very sympathetic. Although he himself had no eremitical inclinations, he recognized well that solitary life was a very important part of the early history of monasticism. Like Merton, he understood that monastic communities are much healthier when they offer their members some latitude in regard to aloneness. And so he did not hesitate to use his influence in Rome and elsewhere to win at least some freedom for Merton and his fellow hermits.

These letters are very readable. Not only are they well edited by Patrick Hart, but they are written by two of the best monastic writers of the century. True, Leclercq is writing in a second language, but he still does fine. Much better than he did with his spoken English, which was almost incomprehensible. Merton, of course, could flat out write. Indeed, he could not not write; he would die if he could not write. That's why his firm resolution to cease writing upon becoming novice-master is so ludicrous.

This correspondence is also made fascinating by the fact that it occurred at such a momentous time for the whole Church and the monastic world. Even though things seemed to be booming, with many new foundations and full novitiates, both of them sensed that the old regime was about to collapse. They could see that it was too rigid, too arrogant, too European to perdure. Hence they were both fascinated by new monastic developments in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Personally, these letters served to increase my respect for Leclercq. I have always thought there was something grotesque about his constant roaming of the earth giving conferences and lectures. What kind of stability is that? And yet, he turns out to be an excellent ambassador for monastic renewal. He comes through as level-headed, relatively optimistic, and not given to harsh judgments, even of the Vatican!

For his part, Merton seems less serene and more prone to a blacker view of things. Of course, he was a genius, and he no doubt saw better than Leclercq the depths of foolishness around him in both Church and State. But these letters also suggest that it would have helped his disposition and his worldview if the Trappist superiors had seen fit to allow him to see more of the monastic world, if not the secular world. That way, it would not have taken him so long to have his '4th and Walnut' experience.

Terrence G. Kardong

SHANNON, William, Christine Bochen and Patrick O'Connell (eds.), *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), pp. 556. ISBN 1-57075-426-8 (hardback). \$50.

Having read something that I wrote about Thomas Merton a while ago, a friend observed that he had gone out to buy a dictionary comprehensive enough to contain