

## Reviews

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MERTON, Thomas, *In the Valley of Wormwood: Cistercian Blessed and Saints of the Golden Age*, edited with an Introduction by Patrick Hart, OCSO, Foreword by Brian Patrick McGuire, Cistercian Studies, vol. 233 (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2013), pp. xxix + 438. ISBN 978-0-87907-133-2 (paper) \$39.95.

*In the Valley of Wormwood* is a menology of Cistercian saints and blessed of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, compiled by a very young Thomas Merton shortly after his entrance into the Abbey of Gethsemani in December 1941. The book was created at the request of Abbot Frederic Dunne, who appreciated Merton's considerable literary gifts and tasked the young monk with this project as a way of making Cistercian origins better known in and beyond the Cistercian world. After completion, the book was copied and circulated among English-speaking Trappist houses. Any plans there may have been for mass publication were delayed and eventually forgotten. Now, thanks to Cistercian Studies and Liturgical Press, the book is available to a wide audience for the first time.

*In the Valley of Wormwood* is organized like all menologies: entries are arranged calendrically according to liturgical feasts and memorials. At the time of writing, there were, according to Merton's count, 177 Cistercians acclaimed locally or universally as saints or blessed. Merton chose just over seventy for inclusion in this text. Among them are monks, nuns, bishops and popes. Technically, there is no Cistercian third order, but Merton includes a handful of laypeople who were particularly influenced by Cistercian spirituality and lived their life in the world according to Cistercian ideals. This book captures the diversity of the original Cistercian movement, and provides a sense of the many colorful personalities who populated it.

By his own admission, Merton selected mainly the more overlooked and even forgotten saints of his beloved order. This helps explain the notable absence of Bernard of Clairvaux. There are excellent profiles, however, of Bernard's sister Humbeline (February 12), brothers Gerard (January 30) and Nivard (February 7), and parents Aleph and Tescelin (May 23). Inevitably, their stories shed light on Bernard's, but Merton avoids presenting them as mere satellites in the saga of the Melliflu-

ous Doctor. He strikes the right balance between portraying them as unique persons with their own struggles for sanctity and showing their significance in the life of the greatest saint of the twelfth century. The Cistercian spiritual family, of course, extends far beyond those who share Bernard's blood. *In the Valley of Wormwood* illuminates other forgotten figures and chapters of ecclesiastical history. The tales of Christian O'Conarchy (March 18) and Malachy of Down (November 3) describe how fragile the faith had become in Ireland after the Viking invasions and how important Cistercians were for maintaining the faith in that country so many centuries after its first evangelization. Merton's depictions of Peter of Castelnau (March 5) and Foulques de Marseille (December 25) recount how, before the Dominicans, it was the Cistercians who were first employed by Pope Innocent III to counter the Albigensian heresy. The story of Peter of Tarentaise (May 10) details how this saintly bishop almost singlehandedly ended a schism by working tirelessly to defend the papacy of Alexander III.

This book is undoubtedly most valuable as a resource in the history of spirituality. As Brian Patrick McGuire's Foreword indicates, Merton anticipated Vatican II's direction of religious institutes to recover the primitive inspiration of their founders. To this end, Merton provides lengthy entries on the three great initiators of Cistercian life: Saints Robert of Molesme (April 29), Alberic of Cîteaux (January 26) and Stephen Harding (July 16). For these figures, the needful thing was to distance Benedictine life from all that seemed to threaten the contemplative core of monasticism. In their view, Black Benedictines had become overly entangled in temporal and economic affairs. They had replaced manual labor with scholarship and pastoral work. The early Cistercians even wanted to curtail the amount of time spent on receiving guests, which helps explain why they placed their monasteries at the greatest possible remove from wider society; they chose hidden swamps and valleys as locations for their abbeys, in contrast to the highly visible hill-tops of Black Benedictines. Furthermore, Cluny, the crown jewel of the Benedictine world, was, in their estimation, overwrought by an excessive liturgical program fueled by the need to provide intercessory prayer for benefactors. This left almost no time for more solitary meditation. The Cistercians sought a simpler life that better honored the cloister and created more space for authentic contemplation. They also advocated a stricter, more literal interpretation of the *Rule* of St. Benedict.

Certain aspects of early Cistercian spirituality will seem esoteric to most contemporary readers. Many of the figures profiled by Merton had visions and audible conversations with angels, demons, the saints, Christ

and Mary. One inevitably feels a sense of distance from the medieval world where the sensory experience of celestial and earthly interpenetration was a far more ordinary and expected occurrence than today. Nonetheless, it is still delightful to encounter figures like Blessed Ida of Leeuwen (October 29). In her mystical heights, Ida experienced herself cradling the infant Jesus. When it was her turn to sing a versicle, she had no choice but to stand up and let go of the child. However instead of seeing the child drop to the ground as she feared, she experienced him grasping his arms around her neck and clinging to her while she sang.

Another challenging aspect of these portraits is the enthusiasm for extreme austerity displayed by a few of the early Cistercians. Blessed Asceline of Boulancourt (May 26), for example, would self-flagellate until she filled a bowl with her own tears. Blessed Placid of Rodi (June 12) would only sleep in a crouching position. Saint Stephen of Obazine (March 11) liked to immerse himself in freezing water in the dead of winter. Saint Arnulph of Villers (June 30) wore not only a hair-shirt, but also hair-undergarments and hair-stockings, and regularly beat himself bloody in a spirit of atoning for others. Merton shows his own good sense by calling Arnulph an “incorrigible self-torturer” and warning that he should not be imitated. Similarly, he commends Asceline’s virtues of obedience and humility as “more common” but “more meritorious” than her severity with the discipline. Despite the extreme austerity of a few early Cistercians, Merton’s book shows that most Cistercians focused on softer spiritual themes. The early Cistercians pioneered affective Marian and Eucharistic devotion as well as devotion to the Sacred Heart. Merton reveals how these devotions, which arguably became overly privatized in later centuries, have their first roots in common monastic liturgical practice.

Merton makes a special contribution to the history of spirituality by drawing attention to important but overlooked spiritual masters such as Blessed Aleyde de Scharbeek (June 12) and Saint Lutgarde of Aywieres (June 16). Merton recovers their doctrines and presents them anew to our age. Aleyde articulated a “victim-soul” mysticism that anticipates the teaching of Margaret Mary Alacoque and Thérèse of Lisieux by centuries. Lutgarde’s teaching overlapped Aleyde’s most important themes and also included doctrine concerning the overcoming of the false self and the discovery of one’s true self in God. Thus, she anticipates Meister Eckhart’s mysticism, and likely greatly influenced Merton’s own later emphases. Merton also provides substantial syntheses of the teachings of better-known masters such as William of St. Thierry (September 8), Gertrude of Helfta (November 16) and Mechtilde of Hackeborn (November

19). Merton's introductions to these figures rival any found in surveys of Christian spirituality or anthologies of Western mysticism. His description of Gertrude is particularly good; it leaves one wondering why this spiritual giant has yet to be named a doctor of the Church.

For readers whose primary interest is in Merton himself, the text is a fascinating window into the perspectives of Merton at that point in time just after the young professor and ardent spiritual seeker had left the world to become Frater Louis the Trappist, and a few years before that moment when *The Seven Storey Mountain* became an explosive best-seller, making Merton the most famous monk of the twentieth century. If Merton the celebrity and Frater Louis the monk can be separated, this is a work of the latter. It is a book by an unknown monk in the first fervor of community life who is writing primarily for his own community.

The young Merton's personality shines through the text. He is passionately committed to the Cistercian ideal, and he is confident in his knowledge of what this ideal entails. Some readers will be surprised by how consistently the young Merton equates Cistercian life with cenobitic life and looks askance at hermits. As is well known, Merton struggled in his later years for approval to live as a hermit and he advocated a large-scale re-introduction of the eremitical life into the Cistercian order. Here is an area where the young Merton stands in sharp contrast to his later self. On the other hand, the spirit of moderation that will mark the more mature Merton is already present in his early critiques of twelfth-century Cistercian austerity. There is a commendable aptitude in the young Merton to filter the past, even the past of his beloved order, through common sense. Another terrific aspect of Merton's personality evident in this early text is his famous dry sense of humor. After describing a legend about a donkey that paused to genuflect before an altar, Merton wryly comments: "nobody who doubts this story will be excommunicated" (161). While lauding the honesty of medieval texts in their frank descriptions of bodily functions, Merton quips: "even ladies sweated in the middle ages. They did not begin to perspire until the seventeenth century" (342).

For a Black Benedictine, the greatest hurdle presented by *In the Valley of Wormwood* is the idealistic young Merton's tendency to see the Cistercian reform as the most, if not the only, authentic Benedictine way of life. While the young Merton is correct that no one in the contemporary Benedictine world maintains a liturgical observance quite like Cluny, many Black Benedictine houses do not see scholarship, apostolic engagement or devotion of time and manpower to hospitality as irreconcilable with the Benedictine vocation. Recent Benedictine scholars such as Terrence Kardong and Columba Stewart have reminded the monastic world that

attempts to define the Benedictine charism need to consider the life of St. Benedict and not just his *Rule*. When one considers that Benedict's life, as St. Gregory tells it in his *Dialogues*, is a series of encounters with guests, and that Benedict engaged in apostolic preaching and even sent monks out to preach, one may reach a different conclusion than Merton and the early Cistercians did about the place of hospitality and apostolic works in Benedictine life. Michael Casey, himself a Trappist, has argued that it is best to see Benedictine life as lying between two poles represented by the two monastic fathers Benedict used as sources and recommends for further study at the end of his *Rule*. On the one hand, there is John Cassian, who represents asceticism, solitude and contemplation. On the other hand, there is St. Basil, who represents hospitality, the apostolate and engagement with the wider Church and world. Monasteries and monasticisms will fall somewhere on this spectrum between contemplative cloister and apostolic engagement. A wide range of emphases can still be considered authentic expressions of the Benedictine charism. The young Merton, committed as he was to the Cistercian ideal, does not have a broad enough perspective in this regard. At times, he comes off condemnatory against variations. In the most extreme instance, he opines that while the Cluniacs may have been good Christians, they could hardly be considered Benedictines (see April 29).

Despite this small reservation, this book is recommended as a valuable contribution to the history of spirituality and as a clear and unapologetic presentation of the Cistercian ideal. *In the Valley of Wormwood* is a rewarding read for those who seek greater familiarity with the beginnings of Cistercian life and of Merton himself.

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MERTON, Thomas, *Selected Essays*, edited with an Introduction by Patrick F. O'Connell, Foreword by Patrick Hart, OCSO (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2013), pp. xviii + 493. ISBN 978-1-62698-023-5 (cloth) \$50.00; 978-1-62698-092-1 (paper) \$38.00.

For the first time this year I assigned students in my freshmen theology class to read Merton's "Rain and the Rhinoceros," widely regarded as one of his most beautifully realized essays, and included among thirty-three essays in this superb new volume. One of my students – like nearly all, she was brand new to Merton – wrote in her journal as follows:

Over the course of ten pages Thomas Merton made me the most confused college student in the world. By the time I finished reading those same ten pages the second time, Thomas Merton made me