

Reviews

MERTON, Thomas, *The Cistercian Fathers and Their Monastic Theology: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 8*, edited with an Introduction by Patrick F. O’Connell, Preface by James Finley (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2016), pp. cxii + 527. ISBN 978-0-87907-042-7 (paper) \$49.95.

The date of December 20, aside from its proximity to Christmas, might not seem to be a remarkable day in the Western liturgical calendar. Nonetheless, in the Liturgy of the Hours for that day, an excerpt from a sermon by St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) evokes both wonder and delight each year during the celebration of the Office of Readings. The conceit of the sermon is a presumed interval between Gabriel’s announcement of God’s plan for the Virgin to bear the Savior and Mary’s words of assent. Bernard constructs the scene as a moment of hesitation, brought alive by an eloquent urgency: the angel Gabriel must get on his way back to God, while the suppliant Bernard, the ancient patriarchs, Adam himself and indeed the entire human race have gathered and are waiting in suspense for the word that will bring relief to them all. Sentence after sentence prolongs the delay. So much hangs in the balance that Bernard is moved to advise the Virgin: “Let humility be bold, let modesty be confident. This is no time for virginal simplicity to forget prudence.” Finally, the sermon returns to the Gospel text and we hear Mary say, “Be it done to me according to your word.”¹

The spirit and tone of Bernard’s sermon are, however, more than an exercise in rhetoric. They signal the dynamics lying at the heart of his theological vision: God’s initiative and love on the one hand, and the response of the human person in freedom on the other. Likewise evident in the sermon are a loving attention to the Blessed Mother, for which Bernard became renowned, and a sensitivity to subtleties of meaning (even the space between one sentence and another) that a Biblical text afforded an adept theologian of the medieval period.

For Thomas Merton, the theological dimension within the work of Bernard (and others) was an essential component for the comprehensive introduction to early Cistercian monasticism that he developed for novices

1. Saint Bernard, “From a homily in Praise of the Virgin Mary,” in *The Liturgy of the Hours*, vol. 1 (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1975) 345-46.

and newly professed monks in their initial formative years at the Abbey of Gethsemani. The texts of these instructional conferences, now gathered under the title of *The Cistercian Fathers and Their Monastic Theology*, have as their unmistakable center an exposition of “a few characteristic works” (48) by St. Bernard. The treatment of other early Cistercian authors (in some cases only briefly) acknowledges that the early tradition was enriched by a variety of contributors: William of St. Thierry (c. 1085-1148), Aelred of Rievaulx (1110-1167), Gueric of Igny (d. 1157), Isaac of Stella (d. c. 1169), Baldwin of Ford (c. 1125-1190) and Adam of Perseigne (c. 1145-c. 1221).

By emphasizing the theological character of the material under discussion, Merton apparently sought to mark a departure from any approach that did not involve a firsthand acquaintance with Bernard’s (or others’) writings (cii; 48). Moreover, Merton valued Bernard as a theologian whose “coherent doctrine” shed light on Cistercian life (xxxv). With its assistance it was possible to show the cohesion that existed among the elements of monastic life, such as prayer and conversion, the centrality of love, the important role of Mary, the mother of Jesus. In short, this eighth volume in the *Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* series offers a selective, rigorous but nonetheless wide-ranging survey of Cistercian spirituality in its first century.

The material appearing within *The Cistercian Fathers and Their Monastic Theology* underwent a lengthy development. In May 1951, Merton began a series of classes on Bernard for novices and newly professed monks. The title for the course was “An Introduction to Cistercian Theology” (xl). Then, from late 1951 through 1953, Merton gave instructional talks on topics related to Bernard and his spirituality for students (that is, monks studying for ordination to the priesthood). Later, as master of novices, Merton gave an extended series of conferences devoted to “The Life, Works and Doctrine of St. Bernard,” which spanned from the summer of 1956 (possibly as early as June) through sometime over a year later in 1957 (liv-lv). Two forms of written record were preserved: the author’s typescript with notations, corrections and some handwritten pages; and a text for the novices that was reproduced on a duplicating machine. The latter was a transcription from Merton’s typescript, but with occasional errors and none of the text from the handwritten pages (lvi-lvii).

Quite a bit later, Merton offered an expanded series of classes on early Cistercian monasticism for novices and recently professed monks who had not yet begun priestly studies (lxxx). The conferences began in January 1963 and ended in August 1964. There is no extant typescript for this series, although a mimeographed document, “The Cistercian Fathers

and their Monastic Theology,” survives. It drew extensively upon the 1956 “Life, Works and Doctrine of St. Bernard” transcription for novices (including its errors), while supplementing it with additions, alterations and “large blocks of completely new material” (lxxxix).

The present edition integrates Merton’s original typescript of 1956-1957, in corrected form, with material added to the 1963-1964 mimeograph when it appears nowhere else. Thus, the texts for five of the seven appendices and for the section “An Introduction of St. Bernard of Clairvaux as a Person” (13-31) are drawn from where they appear elsewhere in Merton’s writings (cviii-cix).

The scope of Merton’s conferences is immense. *The Cistercian Fathers and Their Monastic Theology* falls into eleven distinct parts: (1) Comments on Pope Pius XII’s encyclical *Doctor Mellifluus* (1-10); (2) Background on St. Bernard’s life and his personality (10-48); (3) Homilies on the *Missus Est* (“[the angel] was sent” – In Praise of the Virgin) (50-68); (4) *De Diligendo Deo* (*On Loving God*), including Bernard’s response to Guigo the Carthusian’s teachings on love (68-125); (5) *The Apologia*, including Bernard’s dealings with the Benedictine abbot of Cluny (125-60); (6) The sermon *De Conversione*, including William of St. Thierry’s critique of Abelard and Bernard’s critique of intellectual life (160-214); (7) The treatise *De Praecepto et Dispensatione* (*On Precept and Dispensation*) (214-33); (8) Sermon III for Paschal Time (234-37); (9) “A Note on Contemplation and Mystical Theology” (237-44); (10) A *précis* of Bernard’s mystical theology within the Sermons on the Canticle of Canticles (244-62); and (11) Sermons 1 through 23 on the Canticle of Canticles (263-306).

Sections 1 and 2 serve as a combined introduction to Bernard’s significance and background. Merton opens the conferences with a discussion of Pope Pius XII’s encyclical *Doctor Mellifluus*. Issued in 1953 to commemorate the eighth centenary of St. Bernard’s death, the encyclical provides a suitable and convenient point of entry for considering Bernard’s significance to the church as a whole as well as his stature within the Cistercian tradition. Particularly important for Merton is the encyclical’s focus on the teaching or “doctrine” of St. Bernard, which subsequent conferences explore in detail and whose relevance for a contemporary Cistercian audience Merton seeks to make plain. Before moving directly into a pursuit of these purposes, however, Merton extends his introduction by presenting biographical and other information for situating the picture of Bernard that will emerge over time. Merton, as editor Patrick O’Connell observes, is particularly concerned to establish a unified and coherent understanding of Bernard’s work and his multifaceted personality

through carefully examining his life and historical circumstances (xxxiv-xxxv). Thus he not only discusses Bernard's religious development and his place within the ecclesial and public life of the time, but also includes "An Introduction of St. Bernard of Clairvaux as a Person" (13-31).

Merton considers Bernard's early sermons on the Blessed Virgin (section 3) in order to examine the characteristics of Bernard's Marian devotion, a matter of relevance for the spiritual life of a Cistercian monk. A passing reference to the sermon mentioned at the beginning of this review occurs when he notes Bernard's recognition of Mary's "act of choice in her response to the angel, her freedom as perfected by virginity of spirit" (66).

Each of the next three sections (4, 5 and 6) occasions a discussion of Bernard's interactions with his contemporaries. By his attention to Bernard's correspondence with Guigo the Carthusian (d. 1188 or 1193) and with Peter the Venerable, Benedictine abbot of Cluny (c. 1092-1156), as well as the controversy surrounding Peter Abelard (1079-1142), Merton demonstrated that Bernard was not to be divorced from the historical and theological contexts of his time. Merton's manner of presenting *De Diligendo Deo* suggests a confluence between Bernard and Guigo in their teachings on love, and he dwells on Bernard's vision of God and the human person. God's love bestows itself freely on the human creature. Yet if we are to receive this love, we ourselves "need to love" (108), and thus arise questions concerning the manner and motivation of one's loving response that Bernard addresses in detail. For the *Apologia*, Merton sketches the intricate relationship woven into the correspondence between Bernard, the embodiment of the Cistercian reform, and Peter the Venerable, the virtual chief of Benedictine monasticism. Their exchanges and statements testify to the challenge of defining one's monastic self in such a way as to avoid acrimony or a presumed spiritual superiority. Lastly, Merton is careful to describe the complexity of both Abelard's biography and the intellectual atmosphere of the twelfth century so that critique of intellectual activity issued in Bernard's sermon to the students of Paris (*De Conversione*) will not be overdrawn.

In sections 7 and 8, *De Praecepto et Dispensatione* and the Third Sermon for the Easter season supply guidance for responding to some exigencies of monastic life. The treatise *De Praecepto et Dispensatione* opens up questions concerning the extent to which the Benedictine *Rule* morally binds the monk and what constitutes a breach of obedience. Both there and in the Third Sermon, the monk encounters Bernard's challenging teaching that the motive for living a life of obedience can be, ultimately, nothing less than love.

Sections 9 and 10 serve as a bridge to Bernard's teachings on prayer in their provision of an instructional summary concerning the evolution and meaning of the term "mystical theology" (section 9), and principles to guide one's reading of the Sermons on the Canticle of Canticles (section 10).

The first twenty-three of Bernard's eighty-six Sermons on the Canticle of Canticles are the focus of section 11. Introductory Sermons 1 to 8 are treated as a unit (263-68), culminating in Sermon 8, which identifies the "kiss" of the Bridegroom as the Holy Spirit. Likewise, Merton brings together Sermons 9 to 12 (269-74), Sermons 13 to 18 (274-87), Sermons 19 and 20 (287-97) and Sermons 21 and 22 (297-99). He draws attention to Bernard's teaching on grace, understood as the bestowal the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit's animation of both the active and the contemplative life. These sermons, then, constitute a theological discussion of the dynamics of the Christian life in general, and of the monastic life in particular. Importantly, it adverts to those gifts of grace known as the charisms, which are given to the individual for the benefit of others, as is the case with the gift of one's vocation.

Merton's commentary on Sermon 23 (299-306) brings the conferences to their end. Although it does not reach the very end of Sermon 23 (see 299, n. 1066, and 306, n. 1103), the last conference bears the marks of a conclusion insofar as it speaks of large themes important to the series as a whole: the soul's experience of God as offered in the gift of authentic or "true" contemplation (306) and the consequent peace that the soul enjoys. Merton positions a line from within the body of Sermon 23 into a pointed parting statement: "But unfortunately one does not remain there [in tranquil peace] for long" (306).

Seven appendices follow upon the conferences. They constitute what might be called a "special topics" section on matters significant for a monastic beginner. Most, but not all, are based on sermons; some of the less known Cistercian authors make their appearance here.

Appendix I (307-11) takes up Bernard's *De Diversis* Sermons 37 and 38 for their instruction concerning the authentic satisfaction offered by monastic life (a joy not to be confused with a spirit of "consolation") and the inevitably incomplete character of a life whose mainstays include conversion and perseverance. Appendix II (311-13) illustrates, by way of Isaac of Stella's Third Assumption Sermon, the capacity of self-will to fuel quarrels and complaining, and thereby to undermine monastic life's aim of submitting to God's will through a life of obedience. Appendix III (313-20) explains, with the help of Blessed Gueric of Igny's Third Sermon for the Assumption and Baldwin of Ford's tract *De Requie Caelesti*, how

the call to “spiritual rest in God” applies in some way to all Cistercians (313). Gueric places this common vocation within an eschatological framework, whereas Baldwin sees this dimension of the monastic call apparent when considered within the sweep of Salvation History. Appendix IV (320-38) examines Bernard’s Lenten sermons for their teaching on the nature of Lent as a gift from God to the monk, and the monk’s gift of self to God. Merton observes a connection with the teaching of the Carmelite mystic John of the Cross (1542-1591): it belongs to conversion “not to annihilate passion but to change its course” (337). Coincidentally, the appendix supplies a complement to Merton’s treatment of Bernard’s Advent sermons elsewhere (“The Sacrament of Advent in the Spirituality of St. Bernard”: see xxvii). Appendix V (338-55) draws upon Sermons 49 and 50 on the Canticle of Canticles to discuss the “ordering of charity” and the practical concerns that it addresses. For instance, if conversion describes moving with one’s entire being ever closer toward God in love, then on what appropriate basis might zeal and fervor be moderated? Similarly, how does a person integrate the demands of activity within a life devoted to contemplation? Appendix VI (356-59) offers, without commentary, excerpts from Adam of Perseigne’s Letter 29 on Silence. The context of the Holy Trinity provides the frame of reference for silence, whose activity is listening and whose outcome is communion. It is much more than not speaking. Appendix VII (359-395) assembles material from Bernard’s *De Gradibus Humilitatis*, *De Diligendo Deo* and Sermons 23 and 52 on the Canticle of Canticles, in order to outline a synthesis of Bernard’s teaching on “contemplative union” with God (359). The value of this last appendix for further study hardly needs mention.

Patrick O’Connell’s work as the editor of this volume is monumental. The first accomplishment to praise and appreciate is his insightful introduction. There he traces, for instance, the development of Merton’s interest in St. Bernard (xi-xliv). Early in his monastic life his abbot made provision for Merton’s access to Bernard’s writings by giving him the specific volumes of Bernard’s work within Migne’s celebrated collection of Patristic sources. If Merton initially saw himself as a translator, the evidence did not support this self-designation for long. Merton’s familiarity with Bernard deepened as he completed multiple writing projects from the late 1940s through the late 1950s, all of which O’Connell identifies and discusses (xiv-xl). The Introduction likewise gives an account of the origins and textual history of *The Cistercian Fathers and Their Monastic Theology* (mentioned earlier in this review), and provides a thorough overview of its contents.

O’Connell’s exceptionally valuable footnotes likewise deserve

recognition. As with earlier volumes in the *Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* series, any use of Latin within the text receives translation in a footnote. When Merton's script indicates that he was to read a passage from one of his sources, the accompanying footnote provides the passage in its entirety. Allusions to Scripture and other literature are identified, as are pertinent cross-references to Merton's other works. Lastly, the presentation of this information as footnotes, rather than endnotes, lightens the reader's task considerably.

In addition, the editor supplies three appendices of his own. Technical in nature, Appendix A consists of five sections: the readings that were adopted from *The Cistercian Fathers* mimeograph (397-427); the additions and alterations that occur in the "Life, Works and Doctrine" typescript (428-37); the readings that were adopted from the "Life, Works and Doctrine" typescript (438-42); the readings that were adopted from another of Merton's works (i.e. the earlier *Monastic Orientations* series) (442-44); and variants that occur in *Monastic Orientations* (444-47). In Appendix B, the "Table of Correspondences" coordinates the texts of the conferences with available audio recordings. (Unfortunately the page numbers provided in this table do not correspond to those in this published volume.) Appendix C provides a recommended bibliography, valuable for those who wish to pursue further study of Bernard and other early Cistercians in English translation, Merton's discussion of these authors published elsewhere, or the scholarly and spiritual retrieval of early Cistercian writing.

With this abundance of material available to the reader, the minimal Table of Contents comes as a surprise. The title "The Cistercian Fathers and Their Monastic Theology" is listed there, but without any indication of subdivisions within its three-hundred-six pages (v). The insertion of material as the conferences developed augments the treatment of any single work (e.g., lv and xciv). Thus, the integral blocks of material that a table of contents might catalog are elusive. The editor's Introduction, of course, provides a discursive overview of the conferences and directs the reader to the dispersed locations where treatment of a given work can be found (lii-ci). The index, an exhaustive sixty-eight pages, is also exceptionally helpful. Merton's headings and subheadings, too, guide the reader to topics that appear in the text, although inconsistency of style and the interlacing of independently numbered sections defy the reader who looks for order and system. It seems, then, that a "critical text" (cix) calls for respecting the text in its omission of a unified organizational system, and that wrestling with the internal complexity of *The Cistercian Fathers and Their Monastic Theology* is a necessary challenge.

Fortunately, the rewards of immersing oneself in the reading far outweigh such considerations. Available here is a remarkable opportunity for an exploration of Bernard's world, and of Merton's. If, as James Finley notes in his Preface, "The playful humor that was present when Merton spoke tends not to be evident in these notes" (vii), *The Cistercian Fathers and Their Monastic Theology* is nonetheless a vibrant piece of writing. The conferences readily engage the reader with a discussion that, ultimately, beckons one to pray.

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MERTON, Thomas, *Thomas Merton on Monastic Spirituality* (Introduction by Fr. Anthony Ciorra + 6 talks: 6 CDs); *Thomas Merton on Pilgrimage to the Holy Land* (Introduction by Fr. Anthony Ciorra + 3 talks: 3 CDs); *Thomas Merton on Desert Spirituality* (Introduction by Fr. Anthony Ciorra + 8 talks: 5 CDs) (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2016).

After a year's hiatus during which no new material was released (evidently due to personnel changes at the company), in 2016 Now You Know Media added three more sets of audio recordings of Thomas Merton's novitiate conferences to its extensive catalogue of Merton materials; each is introduced by Fr. Anthony Ciorra, who was the most frequent contributor of these commentaries for the earlier programs issued in 2012-14 as well. Though it is nowhere indicated by Fr. Ciorra or in the brief descriptions printed on the cases of the sets, all these presentations belong to the lengthy course (66 classes *in toto*) on Pre-Benedictine Monasticism¹ that Merton began in early 1963 and that continued to run on Sunday afternoons until the week Merton resigned as master of novices and became a full-time hermit in August 1965.

The first set, *Thomas Merton on Monastic Spirituality*, is composed of the initial half-dozen sessions of this course, each close to an hour in length (though generally shortened somewhat by omission of preliminary material in these published versions), presented between February 3 and March 24, 1963, and focused on significant monastic texts and figures of the fourth and fifth centuries that preceded and in some cases directly influenced the *Rule* of St. Benedict. As usual, Fr. Ciorra's introductory comments are aimed mainly at listeners with relatively little previous acquaintance with Merton, providing a helpful general overview of Merton's

1. Thomas Merton, *Pre-Benedictine Monasticism: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 2*, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2006): see in particular the discussion in the Introduction comparing the written text and oral presentation of this material (li-lxi) and Appendix B, the table of correspondences between the text and the recorded conferences (359-62).