

tions from his taped conferences, especially those given to novices, is that in these selections the polemics are least in evidence. And the spontaneity is delightful!

Somewhat remarkably, Merton's gifts of style are as evident in the unpolished talks as in the previously published material. In part, this is because his style depends less on the outward form than on the depth of his insight and his ability to articulate it.

The two figures who receive the most attention in this collection are Anselm of Canterbury and Aelred of Rievaulx. The writings on St. Anselm (41-152) are among the finest in the volume. Merton engages with some of his great contemporaries, such as Karl Barth, who were also studying this eleventh-century monk and doctor of the church at around the same time. Their insights, coupled with what was evidently extensive reflection on Merton's part, resulted in deep perception of what Anselm was attempting to achieve and a fine appreciation of his place in Christian history. As for Aelred, he occupies about 150 of the roughly 450 pages of the volume, an allotment that speaks for itself. A particularly lovely touch in the Aelred section is that Merton frequently, but unobtrusively, draws on his personal familiarity with the English countryside to bring his readers right into the events he describes.

The editorial work on the volume is admirable. Each of the thirteen selections has its own substantial introduction, generally two-three pages in length, describing the genesis of the work and its publication history (where applicable). The editor also details the circumstances of Merton's life at the time of writing or recording, mentions related reading Merton was doing, and gives quotations on the subject at hand from Merton's correspondence, journals or other published writing. Merton's own rather minimal footnotes appear duly at the bottom of the page, but the editor has added his own, and far more substantial, endnotes to each selection. Within the text the two can readily be distinguished as the endnotes are indicated by Roman, rather than Arabic, numerals; this works quite smoothly and does not distract. Non-Latin readers will be happy to note that the editor has also provided English translations of the texts that Merton cites in Latin, texts generally untranslated in previous editions of these works.

Kathleen O'Neill, OCSO

MERTON, Thomas, *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*, Foreword by Sarah Coakley (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2018), pp. xvi + 156. ISBN: 978-0-81466-357-8 (hardback) \$19.95.

The Climate of Monastic Prayer is the original title of the book published in

the Cistercian Studies series (Cistercian Publications) in 1969 that quickly gained the twin title *Contemplative Prayer* when published by Herder and Herder under that title in the same year, the change reflecting the hope to attract a wider audience than just monastics, as Sarah Coakley notes in her cogent Foreword to this attractive Fiftieth Anniversary hardback edition from Liturgical Press. *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*, “the last manuscript that Merton put together” (xi), illustrates at least three of Thomas Merton’s charms: his considerable research abilities, his exuberant spirituality and his provocative teaching voice – all converging in this treatise on this form of prayer that was his life’s calling.

Is it coincidence that Merton’s “last manuscript” coincides with the dawn-break of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65)? Indeed, among the benefits of reading this volume is its reminder of the vitality and freshness of the spirit of renewal that was the impetus for Vatican II. Writing in the 1960s, Merton indeed was an agent of the “sacred Synod,”¹ the “Opening Message” (Abbott 1) of which noted “two issues of special urgency” (Abbott 5): the first, “peace between peoples” (Abbott 5), and the second, “social justice” (Abbott 6), as exemplified by John XXIII’s 1961 encyclical *Mater et Magistra*.

It is no surprise that amid the early ripples of Vatican II, Merton hallmarks “the present era of monastic renewal” (15) and gives voice to a spirit yearning to open wide the doors and windows to allow the faith of love to flow more freely. Combine this instinct with his literary bent and facility for language – both holy and worldly – and his love of good writing, and it is also no surprise that in the first chapter of his treatise, Merton draws from Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* to illustrate two different kinds of monks who reflect two different approaches to Christianity: first, there is Therapont, the “rigid, authoritarian, self-righteous” monk; and, second, Zossima, “the kind, compassionate man of prayer” (15).

Today, fifty years later, from among the signs of the times and in our continual need for renewal, Therapont could be a priest in South Carolina who denies the Eucharist to a public figure – a *presidential candidate* – as a judgment against conscience; while Zossima could be a priest in Rome – even a *Pope* – who responds, “Who am I to judge?” to a reporter’s question about the limits of the Church’s relationship to people who are gay.

In this time of renewal, Merton says,

we are more and more concerned with the Zossima type. And this kind of monastic spirit is charismatic rather than institutional. It has

1. *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, SJ (New York: Guild Press, 1966) 14; subsequent references will be cited as “Abbott” parenthetically in the text.

much less need of rigid structures and is totally abandoned to one need alone: that of obedience to the word and spirit of God, tested by fruits of humility and compassionate love. Thus the Zossima type of monasticism can well flourish in offbeat situations, even in the midst of the world. Perhaps such “monks” may have no overt monastic connections whatever. (15)

Now, Merton isn't ready to overturn the monasteries; he is recognizing that deep prayer of the pure heart is something everyone should pursue – and can pursue, in whatever circumstances they may find themselves. Although he claims to write “primarily for monks” (1), Merton characterizes this type of prayer with an inclusive caveat:

the kind of prayer we here speak of as properly “monastic” (though it may also fit into the life of any lay person who is attracted to it) is a prayer of silence, simplicity, contemplative and meditative unity, a deep personal integration in an attentive, watchful listening of “the heart.” The response such prayer calls forth is not usually one of jubilation or audible witness: it is a wordless and total surrender of the heart in silence. (18)

This is not only the prayer of the monk, it is the prayer of all Christians, the pure prayer of love. “In the language of the monastic fathers,” Merton writes,

all prayer, reading, meditation and all the activities of the monastic life are aimed at *purity of heart*, an unconditional and totally humble surrender to God, a total acceptance of ourselves and of our situation as willed by him. . . . Purity of heart is the enlightened awareness of the new man, as opposed to the complex and perhaps rather disreputable fantasies of the “old man.” (77-78)

The *new man* arrives in purity of heart, seeing his life as a seamless garment, not as fragments frantically stitched together at the end of the day to make out some sense. “This purity, freedom and indeterminateness of love,” Merton surmises, “is the very essence of Christianity. It is to this above all that monastic prayer aspires” (121). Furthermore, the only way to get there is through meditation that yields humility that yields compassion that yields love; that is, as Merton says, “to gradually get free from habitual hardness of heart, torpor and grossness of mind, due to arrogance and non-acceptance of simple reality, or resistance to the concrete demands of God's will” (83).

Early in his book, Merton announces that “we are going to concern ourselves particularly with personal prayer, especially in its meditative

and contemplative aspects” (14); and from this context, he launches into his work in which “We will appeal to ancient texts on occasion, but our development of the theme will be essentially modern” (7).

Well, ancient texts *are* ancient texts: they have a heft and voice unique to their provenance – and Merton delivers a litany of references to them throughout the book, providing tantalizing excerpts that entice readers to want more. The “essentially modern” theme derives from Heidegger and other writers of existentialist philosophy – with its analyses of human emotions and such topics as guilt and alienation – experiences that become, when applied to prayer, what Merton calls “existential dread” (11). Merton, of course, is fascinated by philosophical inquiry and reasoning, and with his irrepressible voice of faith provides rich commentary for private meditation. Interestingly, it seems the more “modern” he gets in his commentary, the more he quotes St. John of the Cross to illustrate a contemplative response to whatever dilemma may present itself. Perhaps that is because Merton knows, along with Hamlet, that “there are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy,”² and that, at some point, it becomes imperative to take stock, buckle up, and carry on in honest, sincere and serious seeking to be open to the will of God by becoming aware of the *living* God; and perhaps, along the way, get a little help from some friends, such as those “ancient texts” may provide.

Merton situates and describes prayer in history and tradition, as he continually leads readers into fellowship with the *communion of saints*. And the roster of saints – *dozens of them* – Merton cites in the nineteen short chapters of *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* is tantamount to the Catholic Church’s Mystical Doctors’ Hall of Fame. In calling upon saints from earliest Christian times to St. John of the Cross, Merton engages texts that illustrate the persistent tradition of contemplative prayer that is the heartbeat of the living Church and that offer practical guidelines to deeper personal prayer. Merton’s book is in the tradition of the much-written-about wordless, imageless prayer, and in large part is a commentary on the “doctrine of purity of heart” (100), that is, the *via negativa*. As Merton says: “This teaching of St. John of the Cross is not to be set aside merely as a peculiar form of ‘Carmelite spirituality.’ It is in the direct line of ancient monastic and patristic tradition, from Evagrius Ponticus, Cassian and Gregory of Nyssa on down through Gregory the Great and the followers of Pseudo-Dionysius in the West” (97).

Merton writes that “the depths of the spiritual life are mysterious and inexplicable” but that we can look to “the poetic and symbolic language of

2. William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, ed. G. B. Harrison (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 2001) I.v.169-70.

the Fathers of the Church and of the Mystical Doctors” for encouragement (89); and indeed, another beautiful benefit of reading Merton’s discourse is the provocation to delve into the ancient and not-so-ancient writers he mentions, those saints from throughout the ages who have written wonderful texts about prayer that illustrate a fervent, consistent faith in something so believable as to make unbelief impossible, such as Macarius, Cassian, Benedict, Bede and Aelred, along with the medieval Rhenish mystics Ruysbroeck, Eckhart and Tauler. Although not mentioned in this book but discussed elsewhere,³ a contemporary Middle English work on contemplative prayer that a modern reader could be stirred to study is the anonymous fourteenth-century *The Cloud of Unknowing*, in which the very personable author talks about the importance of time, of being aware how we use it, how “in one tiny moment heaven may be gained or lost,”⁴ how “In love all things are shared and so if you love Jesus, everything of his is yours” (*Cloud* 51), how

No one can claim true fellowship with Jesus, his Mother, the angels, and the saints, unless he does all in his power with the help of grace to be mindful of time. For he must do his share however slight to strengthen the fellowship as it strengthens him. And so do not neglect this contemplative work. Try also to appreciate its wonderful effects in your own spirit. When it is genuine it is simply a spontaneous desire springing suddenly toward God like spark from fire. (*Cloud* 51-52)

These words are richly compatible with what Merton is describing in *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*. And through an admixture of Church history, that is, tracking Christian contemplative prayer through the centuries, and insights from his own spiritual experience gleaned, lest we forget, from his many years as monk at the Abbey of Gethsemani, Merton makes clear that “What matters is the *contemplative orientation* of the whole life of prayer. . . . Prayer must penetrate and enliven every department of our life, including that which is most temporal and transient. Prayer does not despise even the seemingly lowliest aspects of man’s temporal existence. It spiritualizes all of them and gives them a divine orientation” (150). The result is a non-compartmentalized life in the irreducible crucible of Christian faith where love of God and love of neighbor are one and where “the mystery contains, within its own darkness and its own silences, a presence and a

3. See Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967) 137-40.

4. *The Cloud of Unknowing and the Book of Privy Counseling*, ed. William Johnston (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Image, 1973) 50; subsequent references will be cited as “*Cloud*” parenthetically in the text.

meaning which we apprehend without fully understanding them” (147).

This is important work. This is the climate of prayer the Church needs both communally and individually, that is, prayer that strikes an attitude of love as it seeks truth, prayer that expands rather than constricts. This is the climate of prayer that has sustained the heartbeat and spiritual essence of the Church ever since Our Lord told us, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you” (Jn. 14:27), the climate that spawned Vatican II’s hope for “a spiritual renewal from which will also flow a happy impulse on behalf of human values such as scientific discoveries, technological advances, and a wider diffusion of knowledge” (Abbott 5).

Merton’s “last manuscript” is a *prayer book* for every prayer-prone person who knows that the way of the seeker is the way of prayer. It speaks to the heart of the Christian aware that the way to Christ’s peace is the way of prayer, a path with milestones, signposts and fellowship, a journey on which the faithful follower finds solace, consolation and, ultimately, salvation. Merton observes that “Religion always tends to lose its inner consistency and its supernatural truth when it lacks the fervor of contemplation” (149). That is why we need more Zossimas than Theraponts to enliven our current climate of renewal. This book could be a resource for nurturing more Zossimas. With more Zossimas, the fellowship can thrive, and faith will continue to flourish.

George G. Kehoe

MOSES, John, editor, *The Art of Thomas Merton: A Divine Passion in Word and Vision* (Cincinnati OH: Franciscan Media, 2019), pp. xxv + 162. ISBN: 978-1-6325-3184-1 (paper) \$15.99.

An exhibition of Thomas Merton’s photography in Toronto several years ago sparked my interest in his art. I pursued the interest by reading *Angelic Mistakes: The Art of Thomas Merton*.¹ The title of John Moses’ book, *The Art of Thomas Merton: A Divine Passion in Word and Image*, led me to hope I might investigate further Thomas Merton’s visual art. I was both right and wrong. The book is actually an anthology. Merton’s drawings, calligraphies and prints form the heart of the book, but they do so not as subjects of analysis and critique, but as points of departure for prayer and meditation with Merton’s writing.

The author, John Moses, is an Anglican priest, the Dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral in London from 1996 to 2006 and currently the John Macquarrie Professor of Anglican Theology at the Graduate Theological Foundation

1. Roger Lipsey, *Angelic Mistakes: The Art of Thomas Merton* (Boston: New Seeds, 2006).