

Listening to Merton the Man and the Mentor

Review of

Thomas Merton on the 12 Degrees of Humility

Introduction by Fr. Anthony Ciorra

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Reviewed by **Suzanne Zuercher, OSB**

This box set of 8 CDs is a collection of 16 lectures given by Thomas Merton to Gethsemani's novices in the summer and fall of 1962. It represents the collaboration of the Merton Legacy Trust and the Thomas Merton Center with Now You Know Media, Inc., in an effort to bring more of the archival recordings of Merton's classroom lectures to the public.

Over the years I have listened to other similar recordings of Merton as he presents material, most of them on the topics of the spiritual life in general and monastic life in particular. The previous ones were also in the format of a half-hour class presentation. In this series we have an extended and focused series about Chapter 7 of the *Rule of Benedict*, "On Humility," surely a topic of interest to young Cistercians and others, lay and religious, whose spirituality is formed by the Benedictine monastic tradition. The heart of Benedict's teaching is found in this chapter on humility which describes both the interior attitude and its exterior bodily expression characteristic of the authentic follower of the *Rule*. The titles of the session topics indicate not only references to Benedict's text, but also some of the side topics relevant to them which Merton explored. I found the introduction by Anthony Ciorra a helpful focus to the lectures that followed. I list them here: "The Holy Rule"; "Humility in the Monastic Life"; "The Conversion of Manners"; "Benedictine Spirituality"; "The Development of Conscience"; "Humility in Modern Times"; "The Augustinian Degrees of Humility"; "Heroic Humility"; "Humility and St. Therese of Lisieux"; "Confession and Christian Mysticism"; "The Vow of Poverty and St. Francis"; "Interpreting and Living the Holy Rule"; "Disrespect of Others, Real or Imagined"; "Humbling Ourselves in Christ's Grace"; "The Four Exterior Degrees of Humility"; "Humility and Interior Peace."

What value beyond the one of formation for lay and religious monastics might this set have? What might it offer to people whose major interest is in broadening their knowledge of Merton himself? Surely it expands the corpus of research about his writing and his teaching. However, having listened to the entire series, I also found other reasons to include it in my library. For me,

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as for most others I know, there is a desire to learn more about Merton the man. As the years go by and there are fewer people who knew Merton personally, many welcome any avenues they can find to meet the human individual who became so prolific and beloved an author and, even more, an inspiration. Information from those who knew Merton personally is probably the most satisfying way to achieve such a goal, one followed, of course, by reading his letters and journals.

CDs provide another aspect of this search for the flesh-and-blood Merton. They give us his ideas, his way of relating to his students and his practical and lived spirituality. We also hear inflections in his voice speaking about these things; we experience his witty (and not so witty) asides; we observe his teaching style, and get a picture of how he interacted with his brothers in the monastery community. All of the above benefits are present in this CD collection more fully than I had found them in previous CDs.

Of course, some of his ascetical and theological comments are clearly from his time in a pre-Vatican II era. This fact leads at least this listener to wonder yet one more time what Merton might say on these subjects were he alive today. But, aside from this limitation, we hear the way he used humor, often in off-hand comments, and how much he enjoyed the jokes he made, occasionally more than his students did. We hear how he dealt with the distraction of novices who came late for his class as well as with interruptions of other kinds. We observe his unique teaching style of asking a student to finish a sentence with the exact word that was in his mind. Those in class often did not find his precise word but rather one of their own, and their choices rarely satisfied him. When this would happen he sometimes answered his own questions in order to get on with his topic. Perhaps the limited class time of a half hour contributed to this dynamic.

I found that the greatest gain from listening to these tapes as one searches for the real Merton is rooted in the knowledge we have today of his personal life. Many of his examples and comments reflect issues we recognize as his own because he has addressed them in journals published later. While clearly he was not invested in self-revelation during these classroom sessions, there is a level of communication beyond the sharing of information. We find here the Merton who, as formation director, saw himself responsible to mentor those new to monastic life. How to live the day-to-day of community becomes more practical and concrete in later segments as he talks about the external degrees of humility. He seems to come alive as he describes competitiveness, singularity, jealousy, denial and other pitfalls on the path to a deep monastic spirituality. Merton reveals how well he knew his own psychological terrain. I find these last segments the richest in the series.

These CDs, then, enlarge and offer more dimension to the person of Thomas Merton. There are many written texts – journals, articles, poems, books, letters – where we can find what this man thought and how he described his reactions to things. While we still have a few people who can tell us what he looked and sounded like, how he was when responding spontaneously, and how he expressed his emotions, such sources are dwindling and will soon be gone. This series is all the more valuable in light of our vanishing pool of primary sources. Where else can we look to learn more about the timbre of his voice, the quality of his laughter, his sudden surprise at incongruities, his on-the-spot enthusiasm, his irritation, and all the other manifestations that add up to show us Merton as a human being? If such are the things you value in your search for Merton, you will not be disappointed in this CD series.