

Ways of a Prayerful Life

Review of

Ways of Prayer: A Desert Father's Wisdom

By Thomas Merton

Introduction by Fr. Anthony Ciorra

14 Lectures on 7 CDs

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Reviewed by **Hyeokil Kwon**

Ways of Prayer: A Desert Father's Wisdom is a collection of the recordings of Thomas Merton's thirteen conferences on John Cassian, which were delivered to the novices of the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1962, with an introductory lecture by Dr. Anthony Ciorra. A 7-CD set of these conferences was given to me for review at the Scholars Retreat at Gethsemani in the late summer of 2012. For me, the retreat was an invaluable opportunity to immerse myself in a climate of monastic prayer and to touch the legacy of Thomas Merton. Being able to listen to these conferences even after returning from the short retreat has extended the grace of the monastic climate of prayer to my urban life, and has helped me to be on intimate terms with Fr. Louis (as his novices knew him). Thus, I have realized Dr. Ciorra's "prediction" from his introduction to this series: "As you listen to him, you will get in touch with the person of Thomas Merton, because . . . he is not just passing on information [but] he is also sharing himself. He is sharing in the way in which he himself is trying to integrate this material."

But Dr. Ciorra spends a good deal of his time in his introduction explaining Cassian and the *Conferences* rather than Merton's conferences on the *Conferences*. As such, the introduction fits an audience which is unfamiliar with the ancient monk and his text. More detailed information about Merton's lectures on Cassian can be found in Patrick F. O'Connell's introduction to *Cassian and the Fathers: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition*, a compilation of Merton's notes for conferences on the Early Fathers and John Cassian (xlvii-liv). Merton's novitiate conferences were recorded on audiotape to be played for the brothers who worked in the abbey kitchen, and the dating of the tapes is not definitive. Because Merton had already reached the third and final section of his Cassian conferences when his lectures began to be recorded on April 27, 1962, only the last part of

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the lectures is in his actual voice. However, the remaining notes for the lectures published in the above book show the outline and contents of the lectures and enable us to compare the last part of his notes (226-55) with the actual conferences. Thus, Prof. O’Connell, in his introduction, makes some comparisons focusing on Merton’s teaching method. O’Connell writes, “[Merton] knows that the novices will eventually have a copy of the written lectures (in 1962 they were distributed on July 21, the third last class), so he feels no pressure to include everything that appears in the text in his oral presentation. He shows a good deal of flexibility, and a willingness on occasion to follow out a particular line of thought” (liii). Therefore, I am certain that many zealous listeners will keep the text before their eyes while lending their ears to the lectures, in order both to enjoy the vivid atmosphere of the classroom and to grasp the dense details of Merton’s text.

As Gregory J. Ryan points out in his review of *Thomas Merton on Contemplation*, another series of Merton’s lectures recently published by NowYouKnowMedia, most of the NowYouKnow recordings of Merton’s lectures had previously been released by other companies under the same or different titles. All of Merton’s lectures in this collection have also been separately released by Credence Communications and/or Electronic Paperbacks since 1982 (a Table of Correspondences is included in *Cassian and the Fathers* as Appendix B, pp. 281-82). However, it is the first time for Merton’s Cassian conferences to be made available together. When I compared the last two talks of *Ways of Prayer*, “Prayer of Fire, Part II” and “Frequent and Constant Prayer” (NowYouKnowMedia, 2012) with *Does God Hear Our Prayer?* (Credence, 2004), I realized that good improvements have been made in reducing background noise so that listeners can better concentrate on Merton’s voice. Another change made in the NowYouKnow recordings is chopping the preliminary period of each lecture. As O’Connell describes in his introduction, Merton often began his conferences by taking up practical matters or by informing his students of various social issues (xlvi). For example, on July 9, 1962, Merton in the beginning of his lecture mentions the U.S. testing of an anti-missile method, which was sparked by the deployment of Russian missiles in Cuba. By cutting out such parts from the conferences, NowYouKnowMedia seems to intend to make the lectures intensive and neat. In my view, however, such changes keep listeners from tasting various aspects of the monastic life and from grasping the deep relationship between a prayerful life and social issues.

As for the contents of Merton’s talks, Dr. Ciorra informs us that Merton is focusing on the *Conferences* rather than the *Institutes*, Cassian’s other influential document on the monastic tradition. But in fact, he had discussed the *Institutes* extensively before the classes had begun to be recorded, as the printed text of *Cassian and the Fathers* makes clear. Specifically, in the recorded conferences Merton covers the early chapters of the Fourth *Conference* in the first talk given on April 28, 1962 and the Ninth *Conference* in the rest of the twelve talks given between May 14 and August 4, 1962. Thus, those who are eager to read “the text of Merton’s class” can either purchase or borrow the *Conferences* or access a free online copy of the book at: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/cassian/conferences>. Generally speaking, Merton faithfully interprets and explains the thoughts of John Cassian contained in the Fourth and Ninth *Conferences*. However, Merton sometimes states his views confidently, to appropriate Cassian’s thoughts for himself and his audience.

First, in the talk entitled “Desires of the Flesh and the Spirit,” Merton introduces an anecdote narrated in the Fourth *Conference* in which Cassian and Germanus ask Abba Daniel, a representative of the most humble man, why our thoughts are so mobile and unstable. Merton explains that Cassian

addresses this topic from the point of view of balance rather than of power to control the desires of the flesh and the spirit. Cassian, like other ancient writers, viewed a natural fleshly desire as good to a degree, while on the contrary, an excessive desire for the things of the spirit created opportunities for the devil. Merton therefore urges his novices to develop and to preserve a balance and freedom between the desires of the flesh and the desires of the spirit, in order to make a wise decision. He continues that God permits us trials to test “the seriousness of our desire to stand in the middle and to exercise our freedom for the love of God.” Thus, Merton concludes, “What you are supposed to have is good will and a certain manner of intelligence and a certain manner of an enlightened exercise of your freedom which makes use of both these things.” Such teachings of Merton, as well as of Cassian, are based on their understanding of human nature. Merton explains that we, as human beings, swing like a pendulum from one extreme to the other, and so are sometimes pulled in the direction of the flesh and sometimes in the direction of the spirit.

In the second conference, “The Life of Prayer,” Merton again considers human nature when he deals with the issue of constant prayer. He states that God did not make us “to pray explicitly at every moment of a day” and that we cannot “keep constantly before our mind a conscious definite concept of God.” Rather, “one of the fundamental laws of our nature is a constant alternation between different things.” To pray constantly, therefore, is “a way of living, in which in the series of the alternations of prayer comes in more frequently.” He goes back to this topic in the final lecture, “Frequent and Constant Prayer.” Merton contends that the constant prayer of Cassian and the Desert Fathers is a frequent renewal of an ejaculatory prayer, a short sentence, which sums up what is in the pray-er’s heart. The *ejaculatory prayer* is not only the easiest form of prayer but also a crucial way that enables human beings to pray constantly. To quote a phrase from Merton’s notes for the Cassian conferences, the “summit of prayer” is constant prayer rather than a prayer of fire, a higher prayer that he repeatedly mentions in the subsequent lectures. He extracts, in the second talk, a fundamental principle of the monastic life from the words of Abba Isaac: “The purpose of the monastic life is purity of heart, and the purpose of purity of heart is constant prayer.” The balance between spiritual and bodily works, and between desires of the flesh and of the spirit, promotes this true prayer. Then, Merton deals with various practical matters in the life of prayer, such as its relationship with the life of virtue, belief and activity, and sources of distraction, in the third and fourth lectures, entitled “Virtues and Distractions in Prayer,” which are extensions of the second lecture. Therefore, it is certain that in his Cassian conferences Merton is talking about the life of prayer or a prayerful life and not simply about some techniques of prayer. In this sense, a more proper title of this series of lectures is, in my view, “Ways of a Prayerful Life” rather than “Ways of Prayer.”

The rest of the talks should also be understood from the perspective of a life of prayer. Following the flow of Abbot Isaac’s discussion in the Ninth *Conference*, Merton explains four kinds of prayer in the fifth and sixth lectures. First, supplication (*obsecratio*) refers to petitions concerning sins. Second, prayers (*orationes*) are regular prayers in which we offer God a promise or vow, or make a resolution. The third is intercessions (*postulationes*), which spring from love for others and the world. Lastly, the fourth kind of prayer is thanksgiving (*gratiarum actio*), gratitude for the gifts of God that wells up “in an indescribable transport of the spirit.” Merton does not remain in the informational explanation of the various kinds of prayer. Instead, he goes further by addressing a practical topic of when and how one moves to a higher state of prayer, the prayer of fire, and so he encourages

his students to advance in their life of prayer. He quotes from Abba Isaac's teaching: "Out of these four kinds of prayer arises the loftier state of prayer. . . . Here the mind throws itself into love for God and converses familiarly with him as with its own Father." At this point, Merton, following Cassian, passes to "The Our Father," which he annotates in detail using Cassian and Tertullian from the seventh to the tenth lectures. Merton summarizes that the Lord's Prayer is a basic source in the contemplative life and is itself a perfect prayer. This prayer nonetheless "leads those who practice it well . . . at last to that prayer of fire, *ignita oratio*, burning prayer, . . . which is an inexpressibly high degree of prayer" and which is wordless and indeed passive. In this way, Cassian and Merton do not simply give us knowledge on various kinds of prayer, but lead the readers/listeners to the ascent in the life of prayer.

In conclusion, I would like to give an example of how Merton adapted Cassian's wisdom to his audience. In the eleventh and twelfth lectures, entitled "Prayer of Fire," Merton raises two fundamental questions: "What are the sources of fervor in prayer, in the monastic life?" and "How do we know that God hears our prayer?" After summarizing Cassian's thoughts on the sources of fervor, Merton mentions a big source that Cassian did not consider at all. According to Merton, "Texts of scriptural readings are the great sources of fervor . . . because they contain God's promises, revelation of His will, revelation of His mercy, revelation of His love. These are the big sources of fervor." Merton prefers the scriptural text, the text of liturgy, as the chief source of fervor in prayer and the monastic life, more so than the sources Cassian gave us, because Merton thinks that the latter are more or less subjective. As for the second question, he again cautions his novices that depending unduly on subjective experiences is extremely dangerous in the spiritual life. Cassian teaches, through Abba Isaac, "Firm and unshakeable confidence in God is a sign that He has heard our prayer." Merton comments that Cassian can say this because he has his eyes fixed on God, and so is objective to his experience. "Now we," Merton says, "haven't even got an eye fixed on God. We've got eyes looking more at ourselves." Thus, he states that "our prayer is heard, if we believe that [the prayer] is heard. And when I say 'believe,' I mean I believe on an objective faith." To conclude, Thomas Merton, a Desert Father of our times, guides his novices – and also those who participate in his class through this collection of his Cassian conferences – to the simple ways of a prayerful life taught by an ancient Desert Father.