

A Two-Way Translation

Review of
Thomas Merton and St. Bernard of Clairvaux
 Introduction by James Finley
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Reviewed by **Isaac Slater, OCSO**

Jean Leclercq speculated that Bernard of Clairvaux composed his masterpiece, the Sermons on the Song of Songs, as a fictional representation of chapter talks delivered to his monks – “fictional” in that the sermons were often far too long and involved to have actually been endured by monks in chapter. In choosing to present his material in this way, Bernard was counting on the attraction a chance to eavesdrop on the exclusive world of Cistercian monks would hold for a readership that included, he knew, many non-monks. The ideas and images in the sermons are likely polished elucidations of talks given originally in a rougher, briefer and more spontaneous form as live chapter talks.

This collection of conferences to novices by Merton may hold a similar attraction. Listeners are able to overhear live talks to cloistered monks (and to travel back in time to the '60s!). Unlike the refined and literary sermons of Bernard, Merton's conferences are very much “off the cuff,” spontaneous, even improvisatory. They may not provide a lot of information about St. Bernard but they are generally a pleasure to listen to. Tastes in teaching style vary, but for my part I much prefer listening to the digressions of a gifted speaker as he gropes his way toward a fresh insight, than to reading aloud of a text prepared safely in advance. The present talks use material from texts by or about Bernard as springboards for rambling spontaneous meditations that are occasionally tedious, usually enjoyable, and sometimes brilliant. In fact that somewhat describes how Bernard employs the text of the Song of Songs in his sermons: with great freedom and playfulness, in a way that speaks to the needs of his audience.

Novices in a Cistercian monastery are in a doubly vulnerable position. Socially they find themselves in a community with new routines and expectations. There is a shared history of which they have yet to learn. Everyone else has resources and experience for interpreting personalities and situations that they as yet lack. Inwardly the constant silence, the fasting and immersion in scripture start to work on the heart and bring to light all kinds of conflicts and feelings formerly submerged. Merton speaks

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with great sensitivity and humor to the real situation of his audience. He consistently demystifies and pokes fun at the elements of the life a novice might take too seriously. Throughout his approach is *humanizing* and *balanced*, characteristics every monastic novice master needs to demonstrate.

While the purported topic of the conferences is Bernard of Clairvaux, the more prominent theme is the need to translate Christian monastic tradition into terms one can find meaningful today. Merton shows himself very much in tune with the Vatican II project of *ressourcement*. He continually weaves between the world of Bernard and that of his audience. He also and relatedly seeks to provide for his monks the basics of critical thinking. So for instance in the first conference, reading William of St. Thierry's hagiographical portrait of Bernard, Merton gets his listeners thinking about image-making: what motivates William's presentation of St. Bernard? What are his readers' expectations? Merton uses two contemporary examples of image-making (the hagiography of Thérèse of Lisieux, and a recent *Time* magazine piece on Lyndon Johnson) to help his listeners grasp the genre. Consistently he is able to do this kind of thing in a way that both opens the medieval text and makes one look at the contemporary world in a fresh way.

In part this springs from a judicious selection of texts. In the first conference he zeroes in on the experience of conversion that brought St. Bernard to the monastery, inviting his listeners to reflect on their own corresponding stories. He manages to find value in most of what he discovers in the medieval text while sifting and adjusting its vision for contemporary monks, unafraid to notice when a given perspective is simply time-bound. In the second conference he explores "monastic theology" as the reality of the divine encountered in the daily life of community – "our life is a manifestation of God" – and not apologetics for the institution of monastic life. Reflecting on Bernard's description of monastic conversion as rest from falsity and taking up the yoke of truth, Merton circles towards a deep insight into monastic practice as learning to live with the contradiction in oneself – the contradiction between the beauty of the life to which one has been called and the banality of the failings one finds, in oneself and one's brothers. The challenge is to remain with the contradiction, not sweeping it under the carpet. Merton returns to this theme in the third conference in a discussion of the place of sorrow in monastic life. He begins with a comical bit of medieval hagiography (a saint who always carried a hankie about because continually weeping) and ends with a superb reflection on sorrow as a way to acceptance. The sorrow born of repentance allows one to find (not create) the contradiction in oneself and face it bravely, learning empathy for the struggles of others. Merton again models the modern translation of traditional Christian texts in way that is both playful and discriminating.

This feeds into a third conference on monastic asceticism today: living with contradiction; not sweeping anything under the carpet means that "perfection" today consists not in a bifurcation of soul and body but wholeness and integrity. Merton sketches for his novices what such a modern monastic asceticism might look like. (His late journals provide a portrait of a pioneer trying to live it out.) In the fourth conference Merton dips into Bernard's letters. He steers his listeners down the way of critical thinking by having them reflect on the genre of letter writing, then proceeds to bring Bernard's letters to life by fleshing out the situations that gave rise to them.

The conferences begin with an introduction by James Finley which is quiet and unremarkable. He mentions that he was a novice at Gethsemani, present during these conferences, and one wishes he had spent more time filling out the picture of what that was like and less rehearsing the basic outline of Merton's story, readily available elsewhere.

Daniel Berrigan once wrote of Merton:

I remember him as a quintessentially modern man to his fingertips: his slang, his ironies, the bravery that kept him on the move, his skepticism about big claims and names, his mind's cat prowling in the long night of the world, his skill at putting his finger on a sore spot, an illusion, a put-on. He was a monk; he was in touch. He was never, not for a moment, *relevant* or *efficient*, those catch basins for waste and want. Indeed he would shoot fire when such words came up, on monastic lips or others. He met phoniness in high places with a barely controlled fury whose second phase on good days was hilarity and mockery. On bad days, there was no second phase. Then he simply lived with what he was forced to, knowing bad days do not last forever.

These conferences catch Merton on good days. They are funny, engaging and allow a glimpse into the novitiate of a Cistercian cloister in the period of Vatican II with a novice master who expertly grasped the Council's program of renewal, returning to the sources while reading the signs of the times. Both in his popular works and conversely in his talks to monks, this talent for mutual translation between the contemporary world and Christian spiritual traditions was one of Merton's greatest gifts.