

Walking the Bible

Review of

Thomas Merton on Pilgrimage to the Holy Land

Introduction by Fr. Anthony Ciorra

3 Conferences on 3 CDs or MP3 files

Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2016

\$19.95 (sale price); \$89.95 (list price)

Reviewed by **Marilyn Sunderman, RSM**

Fr. Anthony Ciorra provides an excellent introduction to the three conferences in this audio CD series presented by Thomas Merton at the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1964, the year Pope Paul VI went on pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Ciorra is of the opinion that the pope's journey is what triggered Merton's desire to provide reflections on the fourth-century Spanish nun Aetheria's pilgrimage to the Holy Land. In his remarks, Ciorra discusses three periods in Merton's own life pilgrimage: monastery, church and world. Ciorra notes that during the monastic period (1941-51), Merton embraced a lifestyle of stability and solitude at the Abbey of Gethsemani. During the Church period (1951-58), Merton's presentation of lectures to the scholastics and novices at the abbey enabled him to continue his own monastic formation. Also at this time, Merton's pivotal Fourth and Walnut revelation of his oneness with all humanity led to his commitment to write about social issues such as racism and nuclearism. Finally, during his "world" period (1960-68), Merton studied various non-Christian religions; he integrated his learning into his spirituality and writings and deepened his understanding of the interrelationship between contemplation and social justice issues.

Next, Ciorra provides some background information regarding Aetheria and her travelogue in which she describes her three- to four-year Holy Land pilgrimage. Considering why Merton was interested in Aetheria's pilgrimage, Ciorra reflects that, for Merton, a geographical, sacred pilgrimage, in reality, exteriorizes an interior journey in search of one's home in God. Thus, according to Ciorra, Merton sought to relate Aetheria's journey to the Holy Land to each monk's interior, ongoing pilgrimage of an ever-deepening experience of Divine Mystery.

In his first lecture in this series, Merton begins with a discussion of German Christian existentialist philosopher Karl Jaspers' understanding of the meaning of "God is." For Jaspers,

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all reality points to the truth that God exists and the being-ness of all creation serves as the underpinning for belief that God is the source of, transcends, and is, at the same time, immediately present to, all creation.

Continuing his lecture, Merton next introduces Aetheria, a woman of simple and deep faith who believed it was God's will that she go on pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Merton notes that during her extensive journey, Aetheria was accompanied by an official Roman guard that enabled her to navigate various dangerous areas in the Holy Land. At each sacred site she visited, Aetheria ritualized her experience by reading and pondering passages from the Bible. As she moved about from place to place, Aetheria spent time with monks who were present at each holy shrine. Merton sees a connection between Jaspers' discussion of "God is" and Aetheria's pilgrimage. However, in his reflections, this nexus is merely implicit, which results in a certain disjunction between Merton's discussion of Jaspers' thought and his subsequent portrayal of Aetheria's pilgrimage. What Merton needed to articulate is that, as a pilgrim, Aetheria evidenced profound faith in God, which is essential to Jaspers' understanding of the appropriate human response to "God is."

In his second lecture, Merton turns to Protestant theologian Rudolf Bultmann's treatment of Christianity and humanism. For Bultmann, humanism relates the human mind to the true, the good and the beautiful in the cosmos. That being said, Merton points out that, for Bultmann, rather than through use of the mind, for Christians knowledge of God occurs in and through contact with God's offer of the grace of mercy to each person who is a sinner, and this experience, in turn, entails the call to action, that is, engagement in loving response to the needs of the neighbor now. Merton stresses that, for Bultmann, through their labors Christians contribute to the building of God's Kingdom. For Merton, the value of Bultmann's thought for Trappists and, for that matter, for all Christians, is that they commit to doing what loving others demands of them now. Merton emphasizes that Christians need to be detached from what they believe is supposed to happen and, thereby, let the future take care of itself according to God's plan. Merton artfully ends his discussion of Bultmann's thinking regarding Christianity and humanism by noting that, for Bultmann, humanism has a significant role to play in the lives of Christians and that, without Christianity, humanism would be nihilistic, i.e., lacking in moral standards. At the end of the second lecture, Merton briefly returns to the topic of Aetheria's pilgrimage and asserts that she had no problem understanding the relationship between Christianity and humanism. However, Merton provides no rationale for this statement but rather simply notes that, in her journeying, Aetheria visited places where Biblical events had occurred and where she believed God's power could once again manifest itself.

In his third lecture, Merton concentrates on Aetheria's pilgrimage, which Merton claims provides an eye-witness view of Near Eastern monasticism at that time, since, as already noted, Aetheria encountered monks wherever she ventured and, consequently, learned about how they embodied their monastic lifestyle. Merton points out that these monks extended "*humanitas*," i.e., hospitality, to Aetheria during her pilgrimage years. Merton views such "*humanitas*" as essential to contemporary monastic life.

The lectures in this series that Merton presented at the Abbey of Gethsemani include humorous comments and various questions posed by Merton in order that he might enter into dialogue with his Trappist audience. Though the content of these talks is rich and quite interesting, it is somewhat

disappointing that Merton did not treat Aetheria's pilgrimage in a more in-depth way, including reading and commenting on passages from her travelogue and then reflecting on the spiritual dimensions and meaning of pilgrimage in the Christian life.