

Monastic Observances

Thomas Merton
 Edited by Patrick F. O'Connell
 Cistercian Publications
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 \$32.95

I would hesitate to recommend this book to anyone who is not interested in the minutiae of Cistercian life as it was lived by those following the reform initiated by Abbot Rance when he re-founded La Grande Trappe. Merton's conferences to the novices of Gethsemani Abbey examine in detail the life lived by the choir monks prior to the Second Vatican Council and demonstrate his profound knowledge of the background to the monastic usages followed and their *raison d'être*. However, the series of conferences is incomplete and only cover about one third (seven hours) of the monastic day.

While Merton deals with the daily routine of the monastery in detail, he, nevertheless, seeks to convey to his novices that every detail of the monastic way of daily life has only two objectives, to cultivate a spirit of prayer at all times and to deepen real humility of spirit. Faithfulness to this very exacting way of life is a means of surrendering oneself totally to God and to the other members of the monastic community. The present reader suspects that for most readers the content of

these conferences would be found boring and bearing little relation to the sort of life that most people lead.

Since these conferences were given, of course, the monastic life has changed enormously as a result of the invitation given by the bishops of the Second Vatican Council to all those living the monastic life and, indeed, to all those living a dedicated life in community, to return to their origins and to seek to be more faithful to the spirit of their founders and their tradition. It seemed to this writer that Merton was struggling to present elements of the Cistercian life as it was being lived at Gethsemani, in as good a light as possible in spite of his underlying dissatisfaction with many of them. This was felt, I think, for instance, when he was explaining the multiplication of masses in the monastery.

The appendix on spiritual direction makes interesting reading but is quite beyond the experience of ordinary Christians. It made the present reader feel that monks live in a somewhat rarefied atmosphere with a spiritual father to support them, while most Christians are fortunate if they can find a friend with whom they can share some of their spiritual journey. Sadly, little help seems to be given in the homilies and the sermons that they hear. Having said all this, if the reader is willing to persevere, there is a great deal of Merton's teaching on prayer to be found here together with in-

struction on *lectio divina* and the reading of the Scriptures generally. Some of Merton's teaching on the mass and particularly on transubstantiation seem very outdated and to come more from the text book than from Merton himself. It is a long read and one has to dig to find those things which would be of help to most of us.

I am a Roman Catholic priest ordained for over fifty years with a deep attachment to the monastic life and to the liturgy, and Merton has been a very helpful guide to me in much of his writing. However, this is not a book that I would recommend to an ordinary lay person seeking to live the Christian life in the world.

Derek Reeve was a parish priest for nearly forty years in the diocese of Portsmouth and retired at the age of seventy-five. He is also an Oblate of the Benedictine monastery of Prinknash.

Hidden in the Same Mystery:

Thomas Merton and Loretto
 Bonnie Thurston, General Editor
 Sr. Mary Swain, SL, Loretto Editor
 Fons Vitae
 Louisville, Kentucky, 2010
 ISBN 9781891785603
 Paperback, 108 pages
 £14.99

When Mary Luke Tobin was asked if there was a new interest in Merton, she replied without hesitation:

'I think that an increasing number of people are interested in his thought and especially in his search. Many seem to be looking for a way in which their active response to the critical issues of today can somehow be integrated with a life of faith.' This was in 1978, in an interview which is included in this valuable addition to Merton studies. Anyone present at the latest Thomas Merton International Conference, meeting there the latest generation of students and followers of Merton, would say that that remains just as true today.

We must be grateful therefore to the dedication of those who saw this volume through the press. It is elegantly presented and attractively illustrated. In it we are allowed to watch the progress of a friendship between a monk and nun, something that was often a mutually enriching feature of medieval monastic life. Here we have Trappist men and Loretto women side by side, in a lonely Kentucky valley, who share much in common because of their shared experience of communities begun in the opening up of the American West, and Merton's comments on this are a fascinating insight for British readers: 'a triumph of hope over despair . . . people who accepted as perfectly normal the incongruity and solitude which is the lot of the pioneer'.

In commenting on the talks which form part I of this book Bonnie Thurston makes a parallel with