

Lent, and also for group work. There is enough material within its pages to adequately cater for a Lent course, and I am quite confident that any group reflections would offer some varied and interesting responses.

Each chapter concludes with a set of between two and five questions, provoking the reader to reflect on what they have just read, both internally and externally - what response if any has the chapter effected, and how might we change because of it?

The author includes more than just Merton in this prayer journey, and utilises to great effect the words of Bonhoeffer, Beckett, Rohr, and Wordsworth, to name but a few.

I have been challenged and encouraged by this book, I have been surprised by how I have responded to it and I am likely to return to it again before Lent descends in February. I recommend it to anybody who is seeking to deepen their relationship with Jesus in a way that will also help to develop an understanding of themselves, and what it is to know and to love and nurture our true selves.

The Way of Thomas Merton, a book not just for Lent, but for life!

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Liturgical Feasts and Seasons: Novitiate Conferences on Scripture and Liturgy 3

Thomas Merton

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A happy memory from the time immediately before I became a novice of the Community of the Resurrection, Mirfield is of listening to audio recordings of Thomas Merton giving conferences to the novices at Gethsemani Abbey. The sing-song drawl of Merton's voice became a familiar travel companion as I drove from one monastery to the next

trying to find my own version of the cloistered life I was listening in to. I came to know Merton's little vocal tics quite well (e.g. ending sentences with '...see?') as well as some of the more enthusiastic of his novices.

Since 2005 these conferences have been published by Cistercian Publications as the *Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* series, and latterly by Cascade Books. They give us a wonderful resource, providing a profound insight into what Merton regarded as essential material for the formation of a novice monk. What is lost between these lively conferences and the published text, however, is the wonderful spontaneity of the interactions between Merton and his novices, as well as the small incursions of monastery life preserved in the recordings. Bells are often heard ringing in the distance, as well as the distant hum of machinery of one sort or another (about which Merton complained so bitterly in his journals). On one occasion a moth flies in through the window 'from the senior laundry room' and brings everything to a standstill.

Another conspicuous absence from the printed texts is the laughter, of which there is a great deal in the recordings. On one particularly memorable occasion Merton regales the novices with the story from Theodoret of Cyrillus' *History of the Monks of Syria* about a rich woman afflicted by morbid gluttony, who, until she was healed by the prayers of a holy Syrian hermit, was eating thirty chickens a day. Needless to say, the conference descends into gales of laughter. (I later discovered to my delight Merton himself recalling this story in one of his journals as an image of the endless surfeit of writing projects to which he had committed himself — 'the only hermit that can cure me is myself').

The present volume represents the latest fruit in this great labour of publication, bringing together those of Merton's conferences specifically on the theme of the liturgy and the cycle of the Christian year. As with the *Initiation* conferences, the published text is based on the notes from which Merton spoke to the novices and, like the previous conferences, the text is often quite condensed. The effect of this on the reader is rather a mixed bag. At times it allows for a treasure trove of insight to be condensed into the space of a single paragraph of text, such as Merton's marvellous reflections on Advent as a season of *desire*, as well as what he calls the 'first tremendous lesson' of the life of the Baptist, that:

If we are to receive the Lord, our whole spiritual universe must, in a sense, be laid waste. We are nothing, our ideals are nothing, when compared to the reality of which they are but a shadow. We must be able to relinquish the shadow in order to receive the reality (12).

At moments like this, the text demands to be meditated on slowly and prayerfully. Much the same can be said of Merton's profound reflections on the Blessed Virgin Mary in this volume. At other times, however, what we are presented with is little more than a string of copiously punctuated phrases or bare words, in several different languages, the connecting thread of which is not always easy to discern. Neither case suggests the text is designed to be read from cover to cover.

There is, however, a more fundamental problem, if you can call it that, about a text like this. What this text communicates is not so much the richness of the liturgy itself — though it certainly does that too — but the wonderful privilege of *participation* in it. In Merton's own words:

The liturgy cannot be understood by one who has not lived with the Church the Easter mystery. This understanding cannot be gained from books and conferences, even though they may be 'about' the liturgy. These may indeed open to us the way to a more fruitful participation, but *participation itself is the only key to the mystery* (76).

At its best the text gives the reader some idea of what it is like to step into a rich stream of liturgical life and practice in which multiple different elements — the stately melody of a hymn, the economy of a collect, the careful choice of nocturnal patristic reading — converge to draw the participant into the reality at the heart of the feast or season being celebrated, which, as Merton often reminds the novices, is always the 'great Mystery of Christ living and present in His Church' (303-4). About this the Novice Master sets out his stall in the very first words of the text:

The liturgy is the expression of the Church's love for God. Hence it is a school of love. It forms our hearts, minds, wills, sensibilities and taste. But this formation is not merely psychological. We are formed by the objective reality of God's love for us, acting upon us in and through the liturgy. The formation gives us a 'mind' and 'heart' greater than our own. It takes us above and beyond ourselves. We rise to the level of the liturgy, and this makes us greater than we were before. The liturgy elevates us; it broadens our horizons, makes us capable of greater things. Jesus Himself forms our souls as we pray and sing with the liturgy (4).

This splendid opening salvo, however, only serves to reinforce the point that a text like this is no more than an *artefact* of participation in the

reality it describes. If these texts fail to capture the spoken reality of Merton's novice conferences, then even more clearly do they fail as a substitute for participation in the liturgy itself. All of which would not be so much of a problem if this kind of experience of the liturgy was readily available to the reader, but the question is: Where is the Christian of today to find such an encounter with the liturgy? If an experience of the liturgy of the sort Merton describes here has very largely disappeared from the Church as a lived reality then it is not all that much comfort to have his field notes to pick over.

What then are we to say about this book? Does a text like this represent a morbid appetite for the publication of every last word Merton ever put to paper? Is this just one more chicken to feed the pathological appetite of the Merton industry? It is true that in other ways the book betrays signs of excess. At eighty-one pages the 'Introduction' is unnecessarily long. And much the same could be said for the thirty pages of textual variations at its other end. For all the book's virtues, then, it's hard to avoid the question: But is anyone actually going to read it? After working their way through the many, many volumes of Merton's published works, will there be any appetite left for *Novitiate Conferences on Scripture and Liturgy 3*? Will a text like this be purchased, if it is purchased at all, merely to satisfy a collector's mania for having 'the complete set'?

Concluding his story about the woman delivered from her pathological appetite for chicken, Theodoret tells us not, as we might imagine, that she never wanted to see another piece of chicken again as long as she lived, but that 'so completely did he [the hermit] blunt the excess of her appetite that thereafter a small piece of chicken each day satisfied her need for food.' And perhaps there is a lesson in this for us. Chicken, after all, is chicken, however much of it there is kicking about. So too with the text before us. However low down the list of essential Merton reading it may fall, taken in small mouthfuls, there is certainly still much to savour.

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