

From Carmel to Carmel

Review of

Living Contemplatively: Addresses to the Carmelite Sisters of Savannah (1967)

By Thomas Merton [4 CDs]

Introduction by Fr. Anthony Ciorra

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Reviewed by **Edward Lawrence**

In September of 1967, in response to questions on monasticism presented to him by the Carmelite Sisters of Savannah, Georgia, Thomas Merton in his hermitage (which he had named St. Mary of Carmel) tape-recorded his reflections on the topic in a manner comparable to a stream of consciousness. When he intermittently turns the recorder off and on the sound quality suffers, but other than that Merton is easily heard. At times, the reflections may seem off-target as Merton relates a topic of personal interest, but he somehow manages to connect the thought to a deeper understanding of the religious life in general and monasticism in particular. As is usually the case, Merton's reflections equally apply to anyone trying to lead a Christian life.

Fr. Anthony Ciorra's introduction prepares the listener with an overview of the taped lectures. He divides the area of interest into three columns: Merton's thoughts on culture; Merton's thoughts on poverty in relationship to culture, especially poverty of spirit; and Merton's thoughts on the Resurrection in his Easter homily. Fr. Ciorra rightly points out the timing of the reflections as indicative of the more mature Merton. Recorded two years after the close of Vatican II and a year before his death, they provide some of Merton's last comments on these topics. Those people who question Merton's interest in non-Christian religions would do well to hear how he integrates a simple understanding of those religions as healthy for a Catholic monastic community. As Ciorra notes, because the relationship between the Church and culture has changed so often throughout the years, we need to develop a "trans-cultural consciousness." Merton did not abandon Western culture; he criticized it in reference to social issues and did so in the hope of positive change. The East could help balance out the West, and, this "transcultural integration" is eschatological by nature, offered not by design, but certainly by the Spirit.

Merton then presents the Easter homily he was composing at the time, later published as *He Is Risen* (1975). Furthermore, he tells the nuns he was just testing the homily for length and that "maybe they can get something out of it." It seems Merton woke up one morning, knew that he had to continue his taped recordings for the nuns and that he wanted to work on this homily. Not surprisingly, then,

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he decides to try out the homily on the nuns. Nonetheless I found the message to be most relevant to a religious community grappling with the changes brought on by Vatican II.

Merton begins his talks with the concept of contemplative life. He notes that in Greek philosophy, the contemplative was the highest state, was highly aristocratic and highly intellectual. While modern theologies have repudiated this model, Merton remarks that contemplative life is in trouble because it does not mean much to modern man. Stated in 1967, Merton seems prophetic when one looks at the scarcity of monastic vocations today. Still, the questions relevant to the monastic are also relevant to every human. What are we called to? What are we here for? These are everyman's questions. For Merton, we must step back and gain perspective on the cross in its scope and universality. We must die and rise with the Christian everyday life and liberate ourselves from the past. The contemplative must delve deeper into a total devotion to God, but not in such a way that the contemplative feels superior to others. The call does not mean automatic perfection.

Merton notes how there is a frenzy for the spiritual life especially among the young who use drugs like LSD to achieve a mystical state. As a high-school religious studies teacher, I see the same searching among my students. Sex, drugs and rock-and-roll have been slightly altered to sex, drugs and rap, and in contrast to the youth of 1967, with more than a little consumerism thrown in for good measure. For those searching for a religious experience, on many occasions it occurs outside the Catholic Church – a reality the New Evangelization must address.

Nevertheless, Merton sees the youth of 1967 revolting against lies, fraud and the unreal, and he offers instead, the contemplative life, which repudiates the false life. Thus, we follow Christ into the desert where we are called to solitude without the approval of human assurances. It is a risk worth taking but Merton also warns the Carmelites that some things can go wrong. The community should monitor superstition and any almost child-like approach to religious experiences as well as the danger of narcissism. Some in the contemplative life become so wrapped up with the tranquility and peace of their own life that they fall in love with themselves. Merton counsels them that God will send disturbances to break this up. The phrase “pride goes before a fall” reflects this observation. In what I think is a beautiful section, Merton explains how simple faith and fidelity to God will take care of these occurrences. If we are faithful, God will do the rest. Through our contemplative memory, Merton again puts the emphasis on our relationship with the Transcendent. Chanting the psalms makes one more aware of the great deeds of God, and at Mass we are told to “do this in remembrance of me.” As Merton remarks, through contemplative love, the fact of the cross and resurrection takes the emphasis off ourselves, and we make a reality in our lives by going out in charity to our brothers and sisters. When we do so, all things become prayer.

In the sections on poverty one sees Merton trying to grasp the reality of this issue. He admits that he does not have the answer by questioning what we even mean by “the poor.” For example, the poorest people in America look rich compared to the poor of the third world. Our society is noted for its consumption and even cutting back does not solve the problem because, it seems, Merton sees the problem as systemic. I found one of his conclusions to be a somewhat ill-fated prophecy. He said that it is theoretically possible for the rest of the world to reach our standard of living in twenty or thirty years. Sorry Tom, you were too optimistic. As long as greed and selfishness dominate society, it will take much longer to reach economic parity. Nevertheless, Merton contends that we should be able to deal with questions of personal poverty in a more detached way and asks for prayers because of it. This honesty and humility is what makes Merton real. Like many of us, Merton recognizes personal flaws,

though he contends that there are no ideal solutions. Rather, his constant commitment to honesty and authenticity acknowledges the importance of and need for prayer in the process.

At this point, Merton introduces the cargo cult movements, which he is studying at that time, as an example of a messianic movement in which people renounce what they have for what they will get. He then compares it to poverty in the religious life where for that vow, we are promised a hundred-fold. Wisely, Merton cautions the listener to be careful when dealing with this.

Merton then announces that he is going to present his Easter homily and admits that it was not part of his original plan. In fact, at various times, you can hear him scratching things out on his paper. Based on the gospel reading of Mark 16, Merton points out that Christ loves us and we should love one another and build a new future. Therefore, the Kingdom of God is a present reality that still requires work to be done. Merton really connects the Easter homily with the conference reflections for the Carmelite community when he reflects on St. Paul's proclamation that we die to the law to live with Christ. The first obligation of the Christian is to renounce taboos and religious formalism and Merton urges them to read Paul's letter to the Galatians. The Christian must be willing to disagree with the majority, just like a dangerous radical. Indeed, we must remove anything, whether it is religious formalism or legalism, that blocks us from our faith or from loving our brother. In that spirit, we can see a parallel between the changes the early Christian had to make in order to renounce the old (the Law) in order to experience the new (life with Christ) with changes the religious communities will make after Vatican II. In other words, prune away the unnecessary to appreciate the reality of God in our life and lives of others.

After the Easter homily, the last two sections seem almost anticlimactic. In the section on educating the contemplative, he notes that though a more mature candidate is preferred, you have to work with what you have. Upon reflection on the average age of a novice in today's monastery, one can see how Merton's judgment reflects his experience as novice master. Merton sees three areas of necessary education in the monastery: first, on human culture, because a person needs to know about the culture in which they live; second, on the philosophical level, where a person can learn ethics, metaphysics etc. and other viewpoints, not just Catholic; third, theology, especially the Bible, because our lives are a response to God's word. If we do not understand God's word, we cannot be true contemplatives. In fact, constant theological teaching of the Bible is essential and should be a priority. Merton lists the Church Fathers and all of the mystics and spiritual masters we should study. He points out Sts. Ephrem, Basil, Jerome and Augustine, along with St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross. In the modern era, he says wonderful things about Romano Guardini but he dismisses Hans Kung as already out of date. Merton also notes that it would be beneficial for the community if someone were familiar with non-Christian writers.

The last section, on the solitary life, essentially describes how Merton is living it. For example, he admits that he often eats at the monastery because he is not a great cook, though he makes a great fried egg. He also remarks that not every contemplative is called to a solitary life, where one has a confrontation with God. He remarks that real maturity takes place in a society where we give up selfishness for the sake of others, and that requires fidelity to God's grace.

Whether teaching novices, giving a homily, or responding to questions about the contemplative life in the aftermath of Vatican II, Merton always has something profound to say. The timing of an Easter homily, practiced on a captive audience of nuns, was divine inspiration. The homily reminds us to keep focused on the cross and the risen Christ, a message most appropriate to anyone at any given time.