

A Lively Monastic Dialogue

Survival or Prophecy? The Letters of Thomas Merton and Jean Leclercq

Edited by Patrick Hart, OCSO

Foreword by Archbishop Rembert G. Weakland, OSB

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Reviewed by **John Farrelly, OSB**

This collection of letters exchanged between Merton and the Benedictine Jean Leclercq between 1950 and 1968 will raise many associations for readers of Merton's journals. Leclercq (1910-1993) was a monk of the Benedictine Abbey of Clervaux in Luxembourg, and is known best in the United States for his book on medieval monastic spirituality, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*. He was an eminent scholar of medieval monasticism; he published a critical edition of the works of St. Bernard in eight volumes over a period of thirty years and wrote some forty books and a thousand articles. Leclercq taught part-time at San Anselmo, the international Benedictine theologate and center for liturgical and monastic studies in Rome, and spoke at many monasteries and meetings of scholars on monastic topics throughout the world. In the 1960s and following, on behalf of the Aide Inter-Monastères, an international group seeking to support monasteries in the developing world, he also visited monasteries in Asia and Africa, and wrote about them.

In his very interesting and informative foreword, Archbishop Weakland shows the context for this correspondence in the post-World War II resurgence of monasticism, and the search for renewal in the sources of monasticism found in St. Bernard, the Rule of Benedict, patristic writers, and even the parallel Asian monasticism. Merton and Leclercq were very important figures in this renewal, along with Benedictines like Adalbert de Vogüé, Jean Gribomont, and Bede Griffiths. Weakland also gives pen sketches of Leclercq and Merton, very different personalities, as he encountered them when he was Abbot Primate of the Benedictines.

Merton and Leclercq were drawn together by their common Benedictine life and culture, and their interest in the burgeoning monastic renewal and the direction it should take. They discuss, for example, some of their writings as these were in process, e.g. Leclercq's work on the teaching of Blessed Paul Giustiniani on the eremitical life and Merton's *Thoughts in Solitude*. The restoration of the eremitical life in western monasticism was a major personal concern for Merton, and it was a project that Leclercq supported by his writings and his many contacts with Benedictine and Cistercian abbots.

Merton shares with Leclercq the various stages of his crises in this area of his life, his seeking admittance to the Camaldolese, his efforts to live an eremitical life at Gethsemani and elsewhere, and the resistance and final acceptance that he experienced. Some of this, as Weakland writes, is a bit tedious, but there are interesting passages in the correspondence on this topic. For me it was interest-

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ing that Fr. Thomas Verner Moore, the main founder of my own abbey and later a Carthusian, supported Merton's desire to be a Camaldolese, and that Merton precipitously dropped his intense desire to become a hermit when he was appointed novice master late in 1955. In 1957, he wrote that he had spent a happy year, though he was, by his standards, writing little. This suggests that the love and interaction between Merton and his novices filled an empty place in his life. The desire for the eremitical life recurred, and we must acknowledge Abbot James Fox's efforts in seeking to give Merton some satisfaction in this desire of his. There was the place for him to spend strictly limited periods of time as a hermit, and eventually the building of his hermitage and the gradual process which led to Merton's being allowed to spend almost all his time there. Then, in the summer of 1966, Merton acknowledged to Leclercq that he was not an ideal hermit; this is his only allusion to his deeply emotional relation to M., the student nurse, that occurred at that time, and his other absences from his hermitage.

In fact, there is much in these letters that is mentioned only in passing, such as Merton's visit to St. John's Abbey in Collegeville in 1956, and much that is not mentioned at all, such as his visit to Suzuki in 1964. But the references and the very absence of them do call to the mind of one who has read other writings of Merton the larger picture of his life at a particular time. Then there are the asides, such as Merton writing in October 1950 that there were 150 novices at Gethsemani, and his acknowledgement that he is a mystery to others and to himself.

Both Merton's and Leclercq's evaluation of monasticism in the United States and in Europe are of interest. Leclercq wrote in 1953:

Here, in this old, too old, Europe, we are all sophisticated, intellectual, complicated; we are dying of erudition. We have no spontaneity anymore, nothing of the *spiritus libertatis* [liberty of spirit] which is necessary to any creation or renovation. There is in your monasticism something of ingenuousness that we are tempted to despise; but you are right. . . . You have more liberty of mind, and more courage. We may have more austerity, more science, more culture. But the sources of life are with you (44-45).

In 1967 Merton expressed his own quiet desperation about that year's General Chapter of the Cistercians. And Leclercq answered in agreement, but he was at that time more encouraged by the Benedictine leadership: "We are leading now. You have more fervor, but we have more culture. And piety does not meet every need" (153). It was Leclercq who helped organize the international monastic conference in Bangkok in December 1968, and extended the invitation to Merton to attend. In his July 23, 1968 letter to Leclercq accepting the invitation (the last in the volume), he agrees to speak on Marxism and monasticism and concludes, in words that provide the collection with its title, "The vocation of the monk in the modern world, especially Marxist, is not survival but prophecy. We are all too busy saving our skins" (175).

An interesting dimension of Merton that comes across in these letters is Merton's labile temperament. It is shown, for example, in the number of times, after Abbot Flavian succeeded Abbot James in 1967, Merton changed his mind about how frequently and for what lengths of time he should be absent from Gethsemani.

The book has very few extended treatments of a theme, but it is of interest for the frank discussion between these friends who have a great respect for one another and feel they are comrades in a common cause. We are now in a place quite different from the pre-conciliar Church or the Church in the immediate and somewhat manic aftermath of Vatican II. One may wonder what Merton would say in our present ambiguous circumstances.