

A Window into Merton's Classroom

Review of

Cassian and the Fathers – Initiation into the Monastic Tradition

By Thomas Merton

Edited by Patrick F. O'Connell

Foreword by Patrick Hart, OCSO

Preface by Columba Stewart, OSB

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Reviewed by **Mary Margaret Funk, OSB**

This book is worth waiting fifty years for: as we are privileged with Scripture to live in our day with translations of the Gospels, rather than traveling on those dusty roads with Jesus during his public years, when we might have missed the significance of Christ and his teachings, so in this book we have Thomas Merton's lectures to his novices on John Cassian and his predecessors. Scholar Patrick O'Connell brings to us a thorough textbook with an extensive history to situate John Cassian and the monastic life in late antiquity. We read the written notes for lectures about the significant desert fathers: Origen, Anthony, Pachomius, Basil, Gregory Nazianzen, Gregory of Nyssa, Hilarion, Jerome, Macarius the Great, Pseudo-Macarius, Evagrius. Then there are the actual lectures on Cassian himself, followed by textual notes, a table of correspondences of the lectures with some of the more than 600 tapes of Merton's talks between 1962 and 1968, a bibliography for further reading, acknowledgments and an index.

The scholarship is impeccable, with Patrick Hart's foreword and Columba Stewart's preface contributing to the authenticity of this major work. *Cassian and the Fathers* will be a necessary reference for teachers of the monastic tradition and for serious contemplative practitioners. But for me it was a wake-up call, once again, not to gloss over Benedict's favorite teacher, John Cassian. The introduction of the desert elders with respect to people, places and political and dogmatic climate is given more than a context, but something for the students to learn and take to heart and stand firm in this lineage of monastic spirituality. If I were Luke Dysinger, OSB, our Master Web teacher, or Rev. Heng Sure, who teaches at Berkeley, this would be a required text.

In speaking of the importance of Cassian, Merton says that Cassian is not a mere compiler – he shows real literary talent and ability to organize ideas in an original synthesis valid for all (99). He propagated in the West the doctrine of the Active and Contemplative Lives. He is interesting, human,

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a good observer and psychologist, a prudent Master of the spiritual life – every monk should know him thoroughly. No wonder Benedict charged, in chapter 73 of his *Rule*, that after Scripture, the *Conferences* and the *Institutes* of Cassian, followed by the lives of the fathers and the *Rule* of St. Basil, are to be the evening *collatio* before Compline, as Merton points out.

Several times I paused in my reading the text and made notes to myself to say, “Meg, did you get this?” This book is not simply *about* Thomas Merton’s teachings, but *is* his actual teaching on John Cassian and his tradition. Sometimes when I listen to the tapes of his conferences I get lost in his charm, wit and the interpersonal dynamics of the monks, asking questions, poking fun at life in the 60s. It has a light-heartedness and is wholesome food for the soul, but when we read the text itself Merton’s teachings are clear and compelling. In a time of virtual reality, with all the media now available, we might think that somehow this traditional material is for someone else of yesteryear. On the contrary, you’ll find immediacy in this text.

I’ll share a few insights that seemed the stuff of compunction:

- About food: “Fast of the body must be coupled with fast of the soul – fasting from the evil food of anger, detraction, envy. . . [Cassian] says, ‘by detraction we devour our brother’” (161).

- About sex: “Extremes and violence in our asceticism perturb the soul and stir up the flesh. Also we must remain always *humble* and *patient*, and *resist anger*. For the passions are so connected together that when one is stirred up it arouses the others” (166).

- About things: avarice cautions us against accumulating private property, which is “*opus peculiare*.” This “means private *work*, a job undertaken by the monk, without knowledge of the Abbot, to provide for himself money to go elsewhere.” This, in turn, disturbs the mind – “how to make more money – how to sell his products secretly – where to keep the money safely, etc., etc., thoughts of investments and speculation (buying something else and selling at a higher price).” This is all about a train of thoughts – of *logismoi* – that is a distraction leading away from a recollected life of continual prayer (169).

- About vows: Cassian’s application is that “it is better not to attempt renunciation of all, frankly admitting one does not mean business, than to take back what one has given (as someone else has said – to place the victim on the altar and then weep when it is consumed). It is better not to make a vow than to make one, then infect others with faintheartedness and tepidity, withdrawing also the substance of *their* gift from the altar. Throughout one’s whole religious life one must firmly cling to a spirit of simple faith and avoid hesitation, double-mindedness and fear – we cannot serve God and Mammon (Matt. 6), and the ‘double-minded man is inconstant in all his ways’ (James 1)” (171).

- About anger: hidden anger is also a sin: “It is not enough to reduce our anger to a cold, non-violent form of expression. We must get rid of it, and replace it by charity. Cassian says, ‘The fury that is held back and pent up under a calm exterior may not offend the men around us but it certainly offends the Holy Spirit’” (175).

- About sadness: “Sometimes instead of trying to react against sadness, we submit passively to it, saying, ‘it is a cross – God wants us to feel that way.’ No, God does not want us to submit to the sadness which eats the heart out of our virtues and of our interior life. This is a sin. It is a great self-deception to submit to this sadness and feel virtuous over our self-pity” (179).

These few cuts provide enough of a taste to invite you to read this book. We are blessed in our times to know great teachers through their spoken and written words, but this book is more than another translation – this book is a transmission, an “initiation into the monastic tradition.”