

# The Gospel without Fanfare

Review of

*The Rule of Saint Benedict: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 4*

By Thomas Merton, edited with an Introduction by Patrick F. O'Connell

Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2009

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Reviewed by **Rachel M. Srubas**

First, a few words about this book reviewer, so the reader may know who is speaking. In 2000, the year I was ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church (USA), I also made my Benedictine oblation. The General Assembly of my denomination is headquartered in Louisville, Kentucky, not far from the site of Thomas Merton's famous epiphany at Fourth and Walnut. While attending a triennial gathering of Presbyterian women in Louisville a few months after my ordination, I read Joan Chittister's *The Rule of Benedict: Insights for the Ages*, then made a pilgrimage to Gethsemani Abbey and paid my respects at Father Merton's unremarkable gravestone. I review Thomas Merton's *The Rule of Saint Benedict: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 4* as one whose Christian spirituality has been formed by Benedict, Merton and Chittister, among others.

The book opens with a spirited preface by Joan Chittister (vii-x), who meditates on the necessity of change and of constancy. She portrays the *Rule* of St. Benedict as a document of enduring dynamism, a classic of spiritual meaning around which many centuries of varying communities have fruitfully revolved. Chittister implies that like Benedict, whose teachings persist in forming religious people 1500 years and more after their publication, Thomas Merton is a thinker and writer capable of distinguishing timeless wisdom from historical ephemera and of presenting the former accessibly to ordinary spiritual seekers and practitioners.

Chittister's prefatory praise of editor Patrick O'Connell's scholarship readies the reader for O'Connell's deeply informed Introduction to the volume (xi-lxi). The reader in question will not likely be the casual consumer of mass-marketed Merton materials, but the more serious student of Benedictina and of Merton's opus. O'Connell demonstrates a comprehensive knowledge of Merton's published and unpublished works, situating the present volume within the context of the conferences Merton presented during his tenure as novice master of Gethsemani Abbey from 1955 to 1965.

The book consists of texts Merton composed in preparation for talks on Benedict and the *Rule* that he gave to monks in formation. O'Connell notes that Merton emphasized the practicability and present-day relevance of Benedict's teachings, and he then analyzes the structure and content of Merton's text, highlighting its most prevalent themes. These themes include Merton's conviction that Benedict's *Rule* is neither a rigid behavioral manual nor a theoretical treatise, but a guide for

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monastics dedicated to loving and serving their God. O'Connell outlines the structure of Merton's conferences on the *Rule*, tracing the latter's treatment of the following: study of the *Rule*; the life and character of Benedict the man; and finally, the conferences' largest segment, devoted to the content of the *Rule* itself, especially the Prologue, chapters on the abbot and other officers of the monastery, and the extensive discourse on humility. The closing, heavily footnoted section of O'Connell's Introduction to the conferences attests to the editor/scholar's exquisite attention to such details as Merton's handwritten marginalia in the original typescript. Less academically scrupulous readers may be inclined to skim ahead to Merton's own words.

Thomas Merton is an academically rigorous yet earthbound prose stylist whose lecture notes make for richer reading than a lesser author's polished, published work. Merton's intellectual instincts are large and irrepressible, as is evidenced by the conferences' profusion of Latin terminology (helpfully translated by O'Connell). However, Merton's erudition never overshadows his passion for the dailiness of faithful living. Without excessive hagiography, Merton upholds Benedict (as portrayed by St. Gregory the Great) as "our monastic Father and lawgiver" (9) who was dedicated to "living the Gospel without fanfare" (37).

In celebrating Benedict's humility, Merton in no way "dumbs down" monastic formation. Indeed, his conferences elevate the education of Benedictine monks to a higher level than some novices may have otherwise pursued. A distrust of scholarship, Merton argues, "leads to ossification and stupor in the spiritual life" (46). No engaged hearer of the learned, reverent talks Merton gave from these notes could have returned to his monastic cell feeling bone-headed or spiritually stupid.

Merton's treatment of the *Rule*'s Prologue alone is a theological disquisition on free will and grace, fallen and saved humanity, the Word of God and the good works of Christians. Merton portrays the monastery, according to Benedict, as "a school of the Lord's service" characterized not by martial severity but by "liberty, peace, interior quiet, indeed a certain happiness" (69). Nevertheless, Merton affirms the authority in Benedict's *Rule* of life of the abbot as the spiritually wise and preeminent leader who "takes the place of Christ in the monastery" (81). As such, the abbot, for Benedict and thus for Merton, serves to evoke the collaborative contributions of each obedient monk, who "must learn to strike the happy medium, in humble, peaceful and productive activity of mind and body" (132).

Obedience and humility are chief Benedictine virtues, not to be confused with slavishness and degradation (as the book's preface writer, monastic feminist Joan Chittister, would be quick to point out). Though Merton predates slightly some of the libratory sociological concerns that infuse Chittister's Benedictinism, she affirms his demonstration of "how it is that a document written for Roman men in the sixth century can still have meaning for both women and men in our own day" (ix). Merton lodges Benedict's treatment of humility not in a past or present historical epoch, but in eternity, asserting that "Our salvation and sanctification as monks depend primarily, in [Benedict's] eyes, upon humility and obedience" (159). These virtues express the Benedictine renunciation of self-will and practical submission to God's will, which ultimately culminate in the person's mystical affiliation with God and resultant ability to love others. Indeed, Merton opens his conferences on the *Rule* with a loving emphasis by promoting the spirit of filial piety (or brotherly and sisterly devotion) that ideally founds and pervades all Benedictine practice.

Merton concludes the conferences on a comparably ardent note, observing that all the degrees

of humility on which Benedict expounds in the *Rule* lead to this spiritual summit: “a certain fullness and maturity of love which gives one a whole new attitude toward life and *casts out fear*” (214). Disciples of Jesus, Benedictines, admirers of Thomas Merton generally aspire to nothing less than such spiritual holism and peace. In presenting to the public Thomas Merton’s conferences on *The Rule of St. Benedict*, Patrick O’Connell and Cistercian Publications offer monastic and non-monastic readers alike a vital aid to contemplative, compassionate Christian living.