

A Window on Tradition

Review of

Monastic Observances: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 5

By Thomas Merton

Edited with an Introduction by Patrick F. O’Connell

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Reviewed by **James Stephen Behrens, OCSO**

I entered the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance in July of 1994, after having served for twenty years as a diocesan priest in the Archdiocese of Newark, New Jersey. Much had changed by that time in the Church at large and by the time I had arrived here, to speak of the life that was lived in my monastery prior to Vatican II, one used the phrase “the old days.” I have often wondered what those days were like and the senior monks here are very generous with their memories of those days, days which had been unchanged for centuries. In this volume I now have a well-researched and clear window into the way life was lived here.

Thomas Merton based his conference talks to his novices on the Cistercian Book of Usages, which was still in use at the time he was novice master. Along with the *Rule* of Benedict and the Statutes of the Order, these sources served as the main points of reference for the conferences. The Usages as a norm gave way to the Statute of Unity and Pluralism, which went into effect in 1969, giving each house the freedom to tailor the rule within specified limits according to the needs and personality of each monastic community. Much therefore changed – things about this life that I never experienced but have heard a lot about. The practice of silence and the use of sign language as a means of communication gave way to “brief oral communications” after permission was granted by the General Chapter of 1967. The use of the discipline and the chapter of faults in which one proclaimed his own faults or the faults of others ceased in 1967. The shift from the use of Latin as the official language for the Offices and Mass to English occurred at about the same time. The practice of daily chapter, which gave way to chapter once a week on Sunday, also was discontinued. In short, the Order greatly relaxed much of its rigidity and formality. We are still “in process” but the change after the Council was enormous. This book offers many insights into a way of life that was soon to undergo tremendous and far-reaching changes. Merton probably saw the changes on the horizon and there is a tone of temperance in his approach to some of the

James Stephen Behrens, OCSO, a monk of Holy Spirit Monastery, Conyers, GA, is the author of *Grace Is Everywhere: Reflections of an Aspiring Monk* (1999), *Memories of Grace: Portraits from the Monastery* (2001) and *Be Gentle, Be Faithful: Daily Meditations for Busy Christians* (2007).

more vexing practices of the day. Merton noted in the text that this was to be Part One of the conferences. He never got around to writing the rest of the conferences, probably because he realized that the Usages would no longer be in effect and also due to the fact that he moved on from his position as Master of Novices.

The conferences offer a detailed description of the day-to-day life of the monk as it was lived in Trappist monasteries throughout the world from the medieval era up until the major changes introduced and promulgated by the General Chapter of the Order, changes which started in the late fifties and continued through the sixties. Merton gave his novices a thorough treatment of the life as he knew it from his own experience, the life which formed him and which he loved. It was and is a life that embraced a discipline which hopefully led an aspiring novice to the service of God and community through humble submission to the guidance of the abbot and the spirit of the community.

Dr. Patrick O'Connell, who edited these conferences, has done so with great care and a detailed background as to the historical context for the times in which they were first written. I found this a great help and often went back to his introduction to navigate myself through dates, times, practices and the like that Merton either referred to or developed in the talks.

The conferences cover only part of the monastic day, the hours of the early morning, from rising to the morning chapter, which was held immediately after the office of prime. Merton held the job as Master of Novices from 1955-1965. It was a decade that was to begin with a fairly settled inheritance of the previous centuries' wealth of monastic tradition. By 1965, much of that tradition was re-evaluated and set aside in favor of changes necessitated by the Order's reclaiming of its originating roots and the task of pruning them in the light and moisture of present-day needs. The book offers a fascinating and many-faceted look into the rhythm and spirit of Trappist life as it was lived in Gethsemani before all the changes. Customs such as bowing, the meaning of the bells, the mystery of the Eucharist, the importance of spiritual direction, the proper behavior at shared meals, the importance of being on time; these and more were given more than adequate treatment in the conferences. The novice classes in those days were large and many of the men whom Merton taught were coming from little or no familiarity with the Trappist way of life. They were very fortunate to have Thomas Merton as the compiler and teacher of these notes. And we are as fortunate to have them now as a way of better understanding "where we come from" as a heritage and a living part of our tradition. As a historical source, this collection of conference talks is of prime value.

Walter Cardinal Kasper said in a recent interview that the Church might be likened to an "irreversible trajectory" – the wondrous and ceaseless movement of God in and through history. Spiritual seekers have for ages been seized by this sense of the divine in our midst and have attempted to articulate it, using the best available words and images that were offered by their respective ages. Merton was one of the finest spiritual writers of the twentieth century and, at first glance, this particular book may seem in part dated. The writing reflects the ethos of his time. But it was, at the time, the finest that there was in terms of being faithful to the Usages of the Trappist tradition while at the same time carefully showing the underlying spiritual groundwork of the daily activities and home of the monk.

I feel more at home here after having read this book with care. I better know what has lived before me in the lives of those monks who lived these pages. These talks formed many humble and outstanding men and women who in turn took these words to heart and did the best they could in bringing the Order to its present spirit and form.