

## Heart Speaks to Heart

Review of  
*Thomas Merton's Great Sermons*  
 Introduction by Fr. Anthony Ciorra  
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Reviewed by **Lars Adolfsen**

It is always pleasing to hear the voice of Thomas Merton, and now a new double CD is launched with the courageous title *Thomas Merton's Great Sermons*, with an introduction by Fr. Anthony Ciorra, Ph.D. To measure the right proportions when listening to the two CDs, this review falls into two halves, the first considering the introduction made by Dr. Ciorra and the second concerned with the sermons of Merton themselves.

In his introduction Dr. Ciorra sadly misguides the listener in a couple of ways. The first is more or less a misinterpretation of the significance of the recording, when Dr. Ciorra declares that he has chosen the four greatest sermons of Merton and forgets to mention that these are the only ones that are recorded! The other sermons by Merton that we know about are manuscripts. The second, more important mistake is that it is doubtful that one of the recordings is a sermon at all, rather than one of Merton's conferences from the middle of the 1960s (see reasons for that below). The overall suggestion made by Dr. Ciorra that we should close our eyes and imagine that we are in the choir in the Abbey of Gethsemani during the Eucharistic celebration with Merton in the pulpit is also misleading, as most of Merton's homilies were presented to the novices in their own chapel rather than to the monastic community as a whole. The four recordings on the CDs are: "The Sermon on the Trinity," "Sermon on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception," "Prose and Poetry on the Passion of Christ" and "The Sermon on Easter." For each one of these Dr. Ciorra provides a brief commentary. And it is in this way, as his comments to the homilies, that we can best benefit from his introduction.

"The Sermon on the Trinity": this brief sermon follows a classic monastic structure with a presentation of the *theme* and with aspects explaining this *theme*. When delivering the sermon on the Trinity Merton develops the theme of mission and of the kingdom. At the same time he connects this theme with the liturgical and dogmatic theme of the Trinity. The essence of both is communication and communion, whereas communion is regarded as the better one. The root for communion is the relations developed by the person. In other words I would suggest that we hear Merton show his theological foundation for his notion of the true self. The hope for the true self is in

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Christ and in openness. The communication of the world can be turned into communion. Dr. Ciorra gives another interpretation to the sermon. He sees the sermon as mainly focused on the dogma of the Holy Trinity and through his own words more than Merton's wants the listener to put Merton's words in relation to the Trinity. In adaptation to this he leads the listener to focus on the relation to the world by giving reference to *Contemplation in a World of Action* and quoting at length the Fourth and Walnut experience from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, which is a bit problematic as the Fourth and Walnut experience is not obviously on the Trinity, and by connecting his own view on the Trinity with that experience he is actually doing an over-interpretation.

“Sermon on the Immaculate Conception”: this second sermon is on Mary. First of all we can note that the text is in rewritten form published in *Seasons of Celebration* as the “Homily on Light and the Virgin Mary,” a fact not mentioned by Dr. Ciorra. The differences between them are that in *Seasons* the clear connection to the dogma of the Immaculate Conception is omitted; otherwise they follow each other rather closely. When comparing the two we can however learn a bit about how Merton worked with his texts. He obviously uses the same material for both the homily on the recording and the written text. They are both good examples of adaptations to their specific situation. In the homily it is heard through his intonation of the voice and his choice of words and how he weaves his basic material into the context of the Immaculate Conception, truly elegant and sophisticated in my opinion. My suggestion for further reading together with the homily would therefore be *Seasons of Celebration*. Another example from Merton is given by Dr. Ciorra. He focuses on the concept of light in contradiction to darkness and sees the homily in more dualistic terms between sin and holiness. His example is the chapter “Called out of Darkness” in Merton's *Life and Holiness*. Even though Dr. Ciorra prefers this understanding of the homily it clearly points towards what is also significant in Merton, Mary as a role model for the Christian life.

“Prose and Poetry on the Passion of Christ”: Dr. Ciorra places the last two pieces together even though they are clearly very different in style and also in context. The third piece we hear by Merton is not actually a homily at all. Toward the end of his time as novice master Merton presented a series of conferences on poetry, and it is clear that this presentation is part of that series. What we hear, when Merton speaks, is a more relaxed atmosphere and also some questions asked and words with comments and this would not have happened during a proper homily in church. And as a matter of fact even the nuance of the voice of Merton is clearly different from the next piece that we hear on the recording. In this talk Merton is speaking directly with his audience about how he reflects on the passion with the help of poetry. The main theme is the vocation and the cross. It is through the cross that the Christian discovers his/her vocation, and it is through the cross that Christ is revealed. In his talk Merton makes the audience, and hopefully the listeners, reflect on how poetic language is more useful to describe this experience in their own lives.

“The Homily on Easter”: this sermon, which was published in almost identical form as *He Is Risen* (again, not mentioned by Dr. Ciorra), is also structured in a classical monastic way, with a *theme* and its variations and explanations. Merton begins by stating that the homily is based on the scripture passage of Mark 16 and that it is about Easter and the empty tomb. From that point he develops the theme on different levels. It is worth noting that Merton during the sermon deliberately uses dogmatic language, but also connects this with the life of experience. The Easter-day experience should be and can be an everyday experience in the Christian life. The tomb is empty. Christ is risen. Christ

speaks to us personally. The death on the cross is, with the resurrection, the dynamism of love that is also shown in our lives. If we dare to leave all superstition behind and live the resurrected life, we also discover that the tomb is empty and that Christ has truly risen. In his introduction Dr. Ciorra proposes that this homily is an example of Merton's Christology and that it could be described as a high Christology. Dr. Ciorra may have good reasons for his proposals when reading other texts by Merton (even if I disagree with him), but when listening to the sermon Merton does not just lift up Christ and make him life and light; he also puts Christ in the center of our lives' experience and does this through the experience of the empty tomb. Christ in the sermon is really a person engaging with us and our lives.

Summarizing this somewhat critical review of the new CDs of Thomas Merton's homilies leads me to conclude that the recordings are good and it is stimulating and nurturing to hear the voice of Thomas Merton, and I certainly agree with Dr. Ciorra when he says that in the sermons we should let heart speak to heart. The introduction is a secondary thing, as is this review, and we should finally leave it all to Merton.