

Merton as Prophet and Spiritual Gadfly

Review of

Prayer and Growth in Christian Life

By Thomas Merton [5 CDs]

Introduction by Fr. Anthony Ciorra

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Reviewed by **Nass Cannon**

A spiritual gadfly, Thomas Merton buzzes and sometimes stings as he hovers over themes concerning his views on religious vocation for the Sisters of Loretto in the CD set entitled *Prayer and Growth in Christian Life*. The thirteen talks are identified as focused on thirteen topics. Although Merton certainly touches on these topics, listeners should not expect a well-organized lecture dedicated to each but expect instead the creative mind of Merton to be meandering through these themes as if through a meadow of wildflowers, pollinating some while occasionally stinging the religious gardeners of institutional life. The editorial labeling comes later.

In these 1967 recordings, Merton raises difficult questions and speaks with a prophetic voice. He challenges us to move beyond our complacent and tired view of the world and to gain our religious and human freedom as true sons and daughters of God. Similarly, he challenges the Church, which he thinks is at risk of being an ally of the political order and an instrument of the state. Because he believes that the religious establishment is embedded within a society of power, might and wealth, which is under the judgment of God, he thinks religious, and particularly cloistered religious, must become free and prophetic witnesses opposed to the status quo. In so doing, they would identify with Jesus chasing out the moneychangers, or with saints like St. Joan, who was tried and executed with the complicity of the Church establishment. From his perspective, too many view religious life as being synonymous with institutional life and are trapped (a word used by Merton throughout these talks) into overwork and meaningless routine. Their lives may be beaten down and shaped into the image and likeness of an institutional norm rather than the image and likeness of God. By contrast, Merton thinks the real purpose of religious life is to provide space and solitude for nurturing the spiritual and human growth of the individual, to allow the individual to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit and so to become a creative and unique son or daughter of God. He thinks such a religious should not only be outside society but also in some measure a prophet and rebel.

Nass Cannon is a Clinical Professor of Medicine at the University of Alabama School of Medicine and former Chief of Staff at Cooper Green Mercy Hospital. He has a particular interest in the writings of Thomas Merton on contemplation and the formation of the contemplative with their implications for integrative medicine, and has spoken at numerous Merton conferences in the US and in Great Britain.

On the first disc, Merton touches on the topics of “Balance and Grace,” “Religious Virginity and Communal Love” and “The Institutionalized Church.” For the theme of “Balance and Grace,” he circles about the life of prayer. For him, prayer is a relationship with God through which we are most ourselves. He is concerned about the complexity we make of prayer where prayer is something we do apart from our everyday existence. He suggests we often think that prayer is a role we play rather than being something as simple as breathing, a natural state of living. He suggests prayer comes from the very ground of life itself, at the very core of our existence and not something apart from it. Through prayer we come to the realization that we belong to God and live as children of God in consciousness of this belonging. We also come to understand ourselves not in an obsessive way, preoccupied with our faults, but as someone who is liberated to have free speech with God, as son to Father without fear. Prayer lessens our ambiguity and frees us from being double-hearted. Prayer brings us to acceptance of ourselves as we are and even to accept our ambiguity. Prayer is a response to a personal call from God, resulting in an inner awakening of our God-intended self to recover our sight and freedom. Through prayer we become open to God and thereby become open to everything else. He thinks that the life of prayer is an end in itself.

Merton then responds to questions from the sisters on the role of emotions in prayer; the issue of evil and hell; consecrated virginity; and the institutionalized Church. Since Merton views prayer as core to our everyday life, emotions are natural during prayer. He does recognize that they may not be accepted by the community at public prayer but recommends some solitary moments to give them expression. Evil he sees as a potentiality in us, which with satanic help may be expressed in the horrors witnessed during the Vietnam War. However he agrees with Julian of Norwich that God is absolutely free and all may be well even with regard to the notion of hell, though we may not understand it. In regard to consecrated virginity, Merton emphasizes the centrality of relationship rather than the absence of sex. He points out that in marriage the relationship of two loving persons is what is important. In religious community that personal relationship is with God. Those in religious communities should not look for identity or love from others but rather in their spousal relationship with Christ. He agrees that the institutional Church is the sign of Christ’s presence in the world but points out that we may have too limited a view of what this means. In the institutional Church, too much emphasis may have been given to hierarchy and rules. A consequence of this may be that one interprets love of neighbor in community life as being focused on correcting one another’s faults. In a less institutionalized Church, the responsibility to love falls back on the shoulders of the individuals who will have to take responsibility for one another.

On the second disc, Merton reflects on the themes of “Our Dedication to God,” “Escaping Entrapment,” “Ecstatic Life in the Spirit” and “Education, Learning and Success.” He states that Christ came to bring us a more abundant life and that our vocation is to live this life fully. He contrasts secular life to a dedicated life. He thinks secular life may be a trap in which man is defined by society and has the freedom only to make money. A unit of production, a person is rewarded for being a nonperson. One must play the role society defines, which forces a person to be untrue to oneself. Merton believes individuals often attempt to flee this trap with false escapes. He mentions hypochondria, the abuse of medications and alcoholism as examples. A dedicated life should make false escapes unnecessary. He points out that a dedicated life is not synonymous with institutional life. He cautions that institutional life may become a trap as well if it attempts to remove a person

from life, if it eliminates spontaneity and limits expressions of love or if it defines one's life by the rules of the institution. Merton emphasizes that the freedom of the religious life arises from continuous conversion, which enables a free and spontaneous self-donation, rather than one imposed by the institution. A religious order should be open to human possibilities, allowing space and time for the Holy Spirit to heal and for the individual to express his or her creative possibilities. This would include attentiveness to the physical life as well. For example, more attention must be paid to healthy physical activities such as tennis or swimming, and time should be allocated for them. The religious life should be a place that nurtures a self-definition of the person in freedom with openness to the Spirit. The religious life is for the liberation of the deep things of the Spirit. It is for ecstasy, an inebriation of love, joy, jubilation and creativity. Merton notes that the function of both the monastery and the university is to be a place where we learn to live. The purpose of education is for a person to define oneself in relationship to the world. The world is more real as the people are free to choose their own lives and save their souls by arriving at a mature identity, discovering their radical self after discarding their masks. Learning to be oneself is to rise from the dead. This inmost self is stripped naked, where life and death are equal. Free from the ego, this true self is a spark, which is the Absolute recognizing itself in us. The purpose of all education and indeed all of life is to find that spark.

The themes of disc 3 are "Christian Non-Violence," "The Privilege and Obligation of Religious," "Camus: The Status Quo" and "Religious Freedom." Merton believes we find our identity in addressing the critical issues of mankind such as poverty, world peace and civil rights. Merton thinks these fundamental issues of mankind should occupy more of the institutional Church's time rather than what he considers secondary issues such as clerical celibacy or the expansion of parochial halls. He fears that religious have chosen privilege, security and respect to live comfortably in a society that is under the judgment of God. Renewal of the religious life may require prophetic witness and entail serious dissent, which will not be popular. Religious have often been apologists for society instead of prophetic witnesses and may have an obligation to be outcasts and to lose their privileged place in society. As an example, he points to the accusation of Camus in his book *The Stranger* that the Church through the prison chaplain opts for society over the individual by using the coercion of the death penalty as an argument to force the prisoner's conversion rather than confronting the societal injustice of the death penalty. The Church thereby uses religion to justify man's subordination to society, which for Merton is a form of idolatry. He cites Joan of Arc, condemned in the name of God, as another example in which justice was sacrificed to politics. In such instances, the Church becomes deeply involved in the hypocrisy of the state by insisting that the activities of the state are done in the name of God. Instead, Merton thinks we have to grope for prophetic solutions that stand for life and justice and for man made in the image and likeness of God. This will require religious communities to allow for the inner freedom of the religious to be open to the Holy Spirit and to be open to the whole world.

The fourth disc focuses on "Monasteries and Contemplation." For Merton, the ideal monastic vocation allows sufficient freedom for the individual to follow a personal path to union with God, like the early desert fathers who worked out their relationship with God after an initial period of training. For him, this charismatic freedom, which is learned through contemplation, is an essential component of monastic life. It is bought by the renunciation of other freedoms, such as desire for

worldly pleasures, and is thereby bound up with restrictions, but monastic law cannot dominate monastic life. Instead, this freedom is more like the declarations of St. John that the truth shall make you free, and of St. Paul referring to the freedom of the sons of God. Monastic renewal cannot be effective without this freedom, which is expressed by Mary sitting at the feet of the Lord. Merton acknowledges that there is tension between the Martha and Mary types in the monastery. However, more importantly, he emphasizes that this conflict exists within contemplatives themselves, who are called to make an act of preference for the apparent unproductiveness and uselessness of sitting at the feet of Jesus and listening. This preference is in defiance of those in the world – and some in the monastery – who think that this is worthless. He believes that remaining quietly in the presence of God and listening to Him requires grace and is the highest ascetic discipline. He refers to St. John of the Cross who comments about the soul in solitude striving to attain perfection and union with the Word by allowing the Spirit to move her will freely and fill her memories with divine knowledge. He reminds all of us that there are many mansions in the Father's house and many ways to union with God. Jesus alone is necessary. To live in Him takes care of everything, answers everything, and to see Jesus is to see the Father. If we are living in Christ, we are face to face with the Father but we do not understand or see this. Through abiding in Christ's love, we will experience that Jesus in us does the will of the Father. Christ in us doing the will of the Father brings the community with its diverse talents and activities into oneness. Christ is the unifying principle, which makes not only monastic and Christian communities but also all of mankind one.

The final disc addresses "The Contemplative Life So-Called," in which Merton suggests love is sufficient unto itself, and a deeper experience of God through loving attentiveness to Him is part and parcel of love. The emphasis is on the contemplative's relationship with God and one's dependency on Him in which everything is received as gift. It is a life of faith above works. A contemplative life is a life of freedom and therefore must be a life of penance. By penance, Merton does not mean the arbitrary rules he encountered at Gethsemani, like walking with eyes down or sleeping in his habit. He suggests that real penance gets at the deep roots of pride, which is to die on the cross and rise with Christ. This is not simply the penance of ascetic routines but instead the penance of transformation by the Spirit. From this transformation flows the freedom the contemplative seeks, which is the freedom to follow the Spirit, to follow Christ and to listen to His personal message to them. With this freedom comes peace. The root of this peace is faith in Christ, faith in the contemplative vocation and faith in the promises of Christ, including the admonition that Mary has chosen the better part. Renewal in the contemplative life requires zeal in the contemplative's prayer for faith, which gives one the vision to see the true path and come to a deeper dependence on Christ. Merton concludes these recordings with a voice filled with charismatic enthusiasm by stating that the most fundamental issue for contemplatives is to pray for faith and entrust themselves completely to a Love who is God.

Listening to these CDs would be beneficial to anyone in the religious life who desires Merton's perspective on his or her vocation. However they would also appeal to anyone who wishes a clearer grasp of the contemplative way, or more broadly anyone who wishes an audio taste of Merton to sample his clarity of thought, wisdom, wit and prophecy. Merton's thinking as expressed on these CDs also has a contemporary relevance as a harbinger of Pope Francis' vision of the Church for modern times. The pope's apostolic letter *The Joy of the Gospel* guides the institutional Church to be more involved in those issues of passionate concern to Merton, such as the dangers of the

free-market economy, income inequality, spreading unemployment, the environment and war and peace. Merton, prophet and gadfly, raised these issues throughout his monastic life. Through Pope Francis, one senses that the Spirit is leading the institutional Church in a direction foreshadowed by a prophetic Thomas Merton – a Church described by Pope Francis as “bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security.”