

A Vivid Trappist Snapshot

Review of

*Charter, Customs, and Constitutions of the Cistercians:
Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 7*

By Thomas Merton

Edited with an Introduction by Patrick F. O'Connell

Preface by John Eudes Bamberger, OCSO

Collegetville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2015

Ixii + 263 pages / \$29.95 paper

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Cistercian Publications has now issued the seventh volume of Thomas Merton's class notes, the shorthand writings which were the basis of his conferences to the novices at the Abbey of Gethsemani. Like the previous six volumes, it is edited by the editor of this journal; unlike most of those volumes (Volume 5, *Monastic Observances*, being the exception), it covers classes about legal texts which for the most part are now obsolete in the Trappist Order. So what would anyone, other than the historian or the most avid Merton fan, find of interest in this book?

Quite a bit, as it turns out. For starters, a great writer remains a great writer even in shorthand notes on superseded texts. To write well requires not only facility with words but clear and penetrating thinking, both of which Merton had in abundance. And as a teacher, still more as a "formator," he knew well the need to engage the interest of those he was responsible for guiding, and that instinct does not fail him here. Moreover, as Dom John Eudes Bamberger notes in the Preface, Merton "had a way of conveying teachings rooted in the past so as to render them suited to our current times" (viii).

The writings presented in this volume are essentially commentaries on three different but related texts. The first, the *Carta Caritatis* (*Charter of Charity*), is the best known but also by far the shortest of the three, and Merton's presentation takes a mere 14 pages. At the time he was preparing his classes, the question of the dates of the *Charter's* various early versions had recently become the subject of lively scholarly debate, a debate which as of 2015 simply leaves the matter unsettled, perhaps permanently. Merton was up-to-date on the state of this new debate in the 1950s, but his interest lay more in applying its teachings to contemporary monastic life. For the most part his comments on the *Charter of Charity* do little more than summarize the text.

The second of the three texts is called by its English translation, "Customs," in the volume title, and by the Latin *Consuetudines* in the Table of Contents. In actuality it deals with a part of the ancient text which in the twenty-first century is known as the *Ecclesiastica Officia*, but which for

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many years was printed together with a separate work, the *Usus Conversorum* (i.e., *Lay Brothers' Usages*), under the title *Consuetudines*. The *Ecclesiastica Officia*, a much longer work than the *Charter of Charity*, is another twelfth-century Cistercian text, in this case giving details of the ritual elements of a monastery's daily life and liturgy. The original text is organized in five large sections, and Merton skips the first two of these sections, which deal with the liturgy proper (Mass and Divine Office), and begins with section three, on the monastic observances.

Here Merton's scholarship manifests itself immediately – as does the excellence of Gethsemani's library, which gave him access to such works as Canivez's collection of the statutes of the General Chapters. The bulk of Merton's commentary on the *Ecclesiastica Officia* is a brief chronology, for each topic, of subsequent regulations of the General Chapters (especially those of the twelfth–thirteenth centuries) and of more recent documents such as the *Usages of La Trappe and La Val Sainte*. Topics covered include the daily morning chapter, reading, meals, the dormitory, the horarium, shaving, silence – to give only a sampling. The result is a fascinating picture of daily Cistercian life through the ages.

The topic of monks travelling outside the monastery is the first to call forth serious comment on Merton's part. Clearly he feels that some abuses of the past, and the mental states of the monks who committed them, are a real danger in the modern era as well. This seems to be not only because he was writing in the era when monks (but not nuns) were beginning to be sent out for lengthy studies (especially to Rome). In fact, he doesn't mention studies and seems to connect the potential for abuse primarily with particular jobs in the monastery: "it is most important to cultivate the spirit of enclosure and stability and not deceive ourselves by indulging in vain desires for which there is an apparent 'reason.' Above all, avoid pretexts for travelling later on [he is speaking to novices], when in office" (41).

Merton's notes on the third and final document, the *Constitutions* of the Order, take up three-fourths of the volume. The *Constitutions* in question were those of the monks only (the nuns' *Constitutions*, however, were similar). Here Merton is commenting on what would seem to be the text of least interest in our time, as this 1924 legislation was very soon to be superseded by some temporary post-conciliar legislation and then by completely new *Constitutions* (a joint project of the nuns and monks) in 1990. The *Charter of Charity* and the *Ecclesiastica Officia*, as foundational documents of the Order, are still studied by scholars and monastics alike, but the pre-Vatican II *Constitutions* are not exactly a hot topic. So it came as a real surprise to find this easily the most valuable part of the volume: it is here that Merton really spreads himself and starts commenting in earnest.

The *Constitutions* were grouped in three large sections: on Governance, on Observances and on Entrance to the Order (which covers departures as well). After dealing rather briefly with the first section, Merton gives a great deal of attention to the latter two. As he is in the business of guiding newcomers into the way Cistercian life is lived specifically at Gethsemani, he naturally draws attention to local customs and understandings. But given the uniformity of observance in the Trappist world at the time, his commentary on the observances gives a very vivid snapshot of Trappist life in general in the mid-twentieth century. And his spiritual interpretation of the matter at hand is of course timeless.

Although much of the pre-Vatican-II Trappist way of life is well known, I for one was surprised to learn of some details specifically legislated in the *Constitutions*. For manual work, agriculture was the legal norm; industries were not, and were subject to the control of the General Chapter of monks (there was no chapter of nuns at the time, nor did they participate in the monks' chapter). The care for separation from the world, and even from current events, meant that only minimal levels

of information were allowed to enter the monastery – no newspapers, for example. This concern has by no means disappeared from Trappist life, but the amount of information which comes in now is enormous, as the Order comes to grip over time with the incursion of the internet. Ministry to guests was minimal and Merton notes that retreat work at the guest house must not be at the expense of contemplative life (see 111). He also seems not to be very enthusiastic about some of the mitigations – in quality of food, for example – being considered at recent visitations at Gethsemani.

In discussing the section of the *Constitutions* on “Entrance to the Order” Merton has some pertinent material on the signs of a true vocation and on vocational discernment. Although the legislation has changed, much of his commentary goes to a depth that still applies. For example, commenting on novices sharing the same diet as the professed, he notes “It is desirable that the novices should learn to live the life just as it is lived by the professed, and it is above all beneficial to them to keep the whole rule exactly. . . . Inability to keep the rule would be a sign of lack of aptitude” (163) – succinct and still applicable.

The editor seems to have gone to the trouble of checking every single one of Merton’s innumerable references, and correcting them on (rare) occasion. One might quibble, in this volume as in others in this series, with the formatting: how headings, subheadings, interior chapters etc. are formatted is quite inconsistent (in use of capitalization, in line spacing, in numbering etc.). If the original typescript was inconsistent, correcting it in the transition to print would have been a huge help for the reader, as would a more detailed table of contents. On the other hand, the additions to Merton’s teacher’s text to make it readable (completing sentences, for example) are ideal: so natural as to seem inevitable, but also clearly marked for the sake of strict accuracy.

Most of the long Introduction is a chapter-by-chapter summary of Merton’s text, with useful notes, such as precise comparisons of the length of Merton’s text relative to the length of the text on which he is commenting – useful not only for showing what sections Merton considered of most importance for his novices, but also which sections are simply digests of the original material and which sections instead give more of Merton’s own thinking. The Introduction also locates the material within the likely dates in Merton’s life, and contains excellent footnotes with relevant and fascinating information from Merton’s biography. The editor notes that Merton gave so many courses that “no single group of novices actually heard more than a relatively small proportion of the material” during their novitiate (xvi). It is a great service that so many people now have access to all of this material, at our leisure.