

## Reading Merton Reading Bernard

Review of

*The Cistercian Fathers and Their Monastic Theology:  
Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 8*

By Thomas Merton

Edited with an Introduction by Patrick F. O'Connell

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Reviewed by **Grace Remington, OCSO**

What was it like to be in one of Thomas Merton's classes? With the publication of Merton's conference notes, as well as the availability of audio recordings of many of his conferences, those of us who have wondered this are allowed to experience Merton the teacher in some small measure. This book is the eighth volume in the series of Thomas Merton's conference notes for those in formation at Gethsemani Abbey, and includes a set of classes that were given to the newly combined choir and lay novitiates, those in simple vows, and some professed brothers (who Merton believed were there under duress).

The volume's title, which is that given by Merton himself to these conferences, is misleading. The conferences deal almost exclusively with works of St. Bernard of Clairvaux. Only works by Gueric of Igny, Isaac of Stella, Baldwin of Ford and Adam of Perseigne also get any treatment, which is brief and considers only one work of each in the appendices to the main text. The conferences are, in fact, a reworking of an earlier series of conferences Merton gave entitled *The Life, Work, and Doctrine of St. Bernard of Clairvaux*. Had he originally intended to incorporate more material from other Cistercian Fathers and not found the time or inspiration to do so? Regardless, *The Life, Work, and Doctrine of St. Bernard of Clairvaux with Some Thoughts on a Few Selections by Other Cistercian Fathers* would be a more accurate, if less pithy, title.

Merton himself explains his purpose for these conferences: "The best thing to do with St. Bernard is to read him together and explain what he is trying to do. A mere 'course on' St. Bernard is practically useless in our monasteries" (48). The objective, he says, is "to enter into the *mind* of Bernard" as much as we moderns can, in order to tap into his experience of the sacred. Most of the conferences, therefore, are essentially a guided reading of the texts of Bernard. He is teaching the monks, and now us, *how* to read Bernard. As such, the text can read a bit like a set of Cliff's Notes, with much of the material devoted to simply paraphrasing the work at hand. This methodology also creates a bit of a strain on the format of the current volume. Often Merton will make a note to himself to "READ" a certain

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passage. These passages are provided in the footnotes, resulting in pages where one or two lines are given to the conference text and the rest of the page is taken up with a footnote providing the text in discussion. It makes for awkward reading, but at the same time the provision of the texts is not only helpful but essential to what Merton is doing. One becomes aware, however, that surely Merton could not have read all of the text cited, as it would have taken up almost the entire class time on its own, and it is hard to believe that Merton did not spend some time throwing in a few thoughts of his own!

Merton introduces each work with some background material that is pertinent to the text at hand, and these are perhaps the most noteworthy and valuable sections of the book. Before delving into Bernard's *Homilies on the Missus Est*, for example, Merton lists the places in earlier patristic sources where Mary is described as "the star of the sea" (63-66), an image Bernard famously makes use of in these homilies. The *De Diligendo Deo* is introduced with a wonderful summary of "the theology of love" (70) found in Guigo the Carthusian's underappreciated *Meditations* (81-107), since the last part of *De Diligendo Deo* was written as a letter to Guigo (and Merton is following the opinion of scholars who believed Bernard had read these meditations). There is a great introduction to the life and thinking of Abelard (167-96) that precedes his conference on *De Conversione* and following the *De Praecepto et Dispensatione* he provides a concordance of sorts of the places in Bernard's letters where Bernard is advising monks who are thinking of transferring to other communities (224-33). One becomes very aware in these sections of Merton's serious chops as a scholar, and for the scholar of Bernard these prefaces are likely to be the parts of the book which are of the most interest.

The scholar of Merton will find in the conferences insights into how Merton saw his own monastic spirituality in continuity with that of St. Bernard and the other early Cistercians. The conferences on Bernard's Sermon III for Paschal Time (234-37) and the one on his Twenty-third Sermon on the Song of Songs (299-306) stand out in particular in this regard. The material Merton added to the revamped Bernard class is included as a set of appendices, and this is where the conferences on works by other Cistercians as well as some additional material on Bernard's works are found. These appendices are often more interesting than the main body of the conference text, perhaps because here the guided reading approach is somewhat set aside, and Merton instead takes a topical approach on themes such as self-will, spiritual rest, the ordering of love and contemplation, all themes in which we see Merton the monk most in relationship as the son of his twelfth-century fathers. For example, when speaking on Isaac of Stella and obedience Merton says, "Obedience to God is simply adaptation to reality – the consent to conform to what *is*," and that therefore the acceptance of reality is the "key to the problem of liberty in obedience" (312), the line between what is the thought of Isaac and what is the thought of Merton seems suddenly indistinguishable. Merton's continual desire throughout the conferences to make a connection between Bernard's theology and that of St. John of the Cross, however, is perhaps somewhat revealing of his own continual working out of his Cistercian identity.

The editor's introduction provides a wealth of information that serves to flesh out the conferences. It contains a thorough and helpful summary of all the places in Merton's published writings where Merton talks about Bernard and the other Cistercian Fathers. Having recreated a timeline of when the conferences were given, the editor cross-checked the journals to see what thoughts Merton was jotting down about Bernard or the classes during that time. These little bits of illumination into the mind of Merton as he prepared and gave these conferences add to the experience of reading them. The editor's comprehensive knowledge of Merton's works and the thoroughness of his research are

evident in the quality of the footnotes, which likewise add a lot of value to the text.

One could wish that there were a more thorough Table of Contents. The conferences themselves divide up neatly as they go through various works of Bernard, but there is no way to easily look up Merton's conferences on a particular work since no divisions are given in the Table of Contents, nor do the titles of Bernard's works appear as separate entries in the index (all are found in the main "Bernard" entry). This, along with the practice of referencing the places in the works only by their *Patrologia Latina* numbering, or by the page numbers of the out-of-print translations Merton used, without also including the standard modern designations for citing these works, makes the book a little clumsy and frustrating to use.

Reading the book, I was struck by the thought of how much St. Bernard and Thomas Merton had in common. Both were prolific writers whose works earned great acclaim in their lifetimes, both were extremely charismatic figures who attracted many to monastic life, both were drawn into speaking out on the political situations of their times, and so both were "chimeras" (to use Bernard's self-description) in being cloistered public figures. Reading Thomas Merton reading Bernard, I felt like it was the closest I could come this side of heaven to being present at an encounter between these two men who are in a real sense brothers as much as father and son. The study of the relationship between the spirituality of these two Cistercians seems like an area ripe for exploration. The publication of this book would be an invaluable resource for the person who was interested in taking up this challenge.