

## Feasts and Seasons to Savor and Celebrate

Review of  
*Liturgical Feasts and Seasons:  
 Novitiate Conferences on Scripture and Liturgy 3*  
 By Thomas Merton  
 Edited with an Introduction by Patrick F. O’Connell  
 Foreword by Paul Quenon, OCSO  
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Reviewed by **Bruce H. Lescher**

Patrick F. O’Connell, Professor Emeritus of English and Theology at Gannon University, is no stranger to the readers of *The Merton Seasonal*. In addition to being editor of the *Seasonal*, he has served as President of the International Thomas Merton Society and has edited a number of books featuring both Merton’s published and unpublished works. This current contribution is the third and last in a series of Cascade Books publications of critical editions of Merton’s conference notes for novices, joining the nine earlier conference volumes issued by Cistercian Publications.

Given the nature of the texts contained in this volume, O’Connell’s introduction is very helpful in guiding the reader. These conferences date from 1955 (Advent) to 1958 (Epiphany). In 1955, Merton had been named master of novices, and in these talks, he primarily discusses parts of the divine office (such as antiphons, psalms and readings) and parts of the mass (such as introits, collects and scripture readings). By 1955, he had been praying all of these texts in choir for over a dozen years, so he knew them well and had ample time to reflect upon them. He sought to convey how the theology and spirituality embodied in these texts should shape the monastic life of the novices. As Br. Paul Quenon, himself a novice under Merton, points out in his Foreword, “These notes and reflections are spiritual instruction for newcomers to the monastic life, men who are already liturgically initiated as Christians, but generally are unformed in a contemplative assimilation of the daily liturgy and divine office. These notes . . . take us into one man’s lifetime of reflection and seasoned experience of the Church Year” (ix).

The production of these texts followed this procedure: Merton’s typed or handwritten notes were given to his literary friend, Sr. Thérèse Lentfoehr, SDS, for typing; Sr. Thérèse would then send Merton a typed copy for his review before she typed them again on stencils to be mimeographed. Such a procedure presents challenges to obtaining a critical edition of the texts. O’Connell notes

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that there are five versions of these conferences in different archives. He concludes, “Thus the present critical edition of *Liturgical Feasts and Seasons* provides for the first time a text that reflects Merton’s actual intentions as they developed, determined by examining each relevant witness to each particular conference” (xxi).

After commenting on the content of the conferences (xxii-xlix), O’Connell also includes helpful material on Merton’s liturgical writings after 1958 (xliv-lxxx), including his response to *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Vatican II’s Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy (1963), his later book, *Seasons of Celebration* (1965) and a mimeographed essay, “Christian Worship and Social Reform” (c. 1963), which, O’Connell notes, “provides important insights on Merton’s conviction of the integral relationship between ecclesial worship and work for justice” (lxxiv). While Merton generally approved of liturgical changes introduced by Vatican II, in his hermitage he preferred to continue to pray the Office in Latin, writing in a 1964 letter to a Benedictine correspondent: “I came here with a good knowledge of Latin and a love for the Psalms, the Bible and the Fathers. I have never had any trouble understanding the office, or ‘getting something out of it’” (liii).

There are a total of 133 conferences, given as needed when a particular feast occurred (that is, not as a regular weekly class). O’Connell presents the conferences in three sections: following a division that Merton used, Part I (1-157) contains fifty-five conferences arranged according to the seasons of the liturgical year, beginning with the First Sunday of Advent and ending with the Last Sunday after Pentecost, while Part II (159-300) includes forty-four conferences, mainly following the cycle of the feast days of saints; O’Connell then adds a Part III (301-80) consisting of thirty-four conferences not found in the mimeographed text, designated as “Additional Materials,” largely dealing with liturgical feasts but also including related topics, such as how to pray the rosary.

O’Connell’s scholarship is thorough and provides a great deal of assistance in following Merton’s notes. His footnoting demonstrates one aspect of this scholarship. During the 1950s, the Trappists prayed the Office in Latin. So, in commenting on various sections of the office and the mass, Merton usually quotes the Latin. O’Connell provides English translations of all these references. In addition, when Merton quotes the work of another author, be it a Church Father in Migne’s *Patrologia Latina* or a contemporary writer, O’Connell provides the full citation, so that the reader could find it on one’s own. If, in his notes, Merton says to read a passage (usually from Scripture) to the novices, O’Connell provides the full text of what Merton would read. If Merton quotes a French author, O’Connell provides both the French text and the English translation. Most impressively, he also corrects Merton’s occasional mistakes, as in Part I, note 219, when he points out that a reading for the office is actually from St. Ambrose, not, as Merton said, from St. Jerome (see 47).

In addition to the abundant notes, O’Connell also provides two appendices to indicate how he arrived at a critical final version of the conferences. Appendix A (381-90) lists how the various versions of the text differ from one another. Appendix B (391-420) shows how O’Connell chose additions and alterations from the various versions to arrive at a critical text. Finally, he includes a thorough bibliography (421-27), an index of scriptural passages (429-43) and a general index (431-527).

All of O’Connell’s scholarly work assists the reader in following the conferences. I can think of at least three levels on which a reader can engage these texts. At the most basic level, a

reader can read for the typical Mertonian gems that seem to leap off the page. Here is just a sampling:

- “The liturgy is the expression of the Church’s love for God. Hence it is a school of love. It forms our hearts, minds, wills, sensibilities and taste. But this formation is not merely psychological. We are formed by the objective reality of God’s love for us, acting upon us in and through the liturgy” (4).
- “Let us not ruin our spiritual life with a program of continual self-condemnation and self-frustration. Let us stop calling ourselves evil and dare to *be good*” (109).
- “We *must* go forward into the midst of contradictions. We must advance in darkness, without knowing where we are going, without seeing any evident hope of arriving, yet trusting in God and abandoned to Him” (194).
- To the novices: “{you are} not here to learn merely rules and exterior practices, or how to sing psalms, etc., or how to get along without responsibility, but truly to *live* in Christ” (213).

Another level of reading could involve exploring the many themes that Merton alludes to in these conferences. Again, here would be just a short sampling:

- The hermeneutic of participation: Merton is clear that one deepens one’s understanding of the liturgy by participating in it. “The liturgy cannot be understood by one who has not lived with the Church the Easter mystery. This understanding cannot be gained from books and conferences, even though they may be ‘about’ the liturgy” (76).
- The theme of light vs. darkness, which permeates Merton’s vision: “The Easter Vigil will reawaken our minds to the great truth that each day, in our Mass, we share in the *pascha Christi*, the Easter mystery, and death is vanquished by life, darkness by light, hatred by love” (84).
- How the liturgical year alters the experience of time, from a sense of meaningless repetition to an openness to mystery: “The Word of God having entered into time by His incarnation, His birth of a Virgin Mother, has changed the cycle of seasons from an imprisonment to a liberation” (303).
- Merton’s devotion to Mary: especially in Part II, many of Merton’s conferences deal with feasts of Mary, whom he sees as a role model of monks; “{With regard to} Mary, our vocation, {both} religious {and} priestly, {is} in her hands” (377).

Finally, one could savor these conferences by reading them meditatively and prayerfully, appreciating the theological knowledge, spiritual depth and downright human wisdom that are packed into them.

This book would not serve as an introduction to Merton’s thought, but O’Connell has given readers familiar with Merton a book that will significantly enrich their understanding of Merton’s deep integration of liturgical feasts.