

Book Reviews

Medieval Cistercian History - Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 9

Thomas Merton

Edited by Patrick F O'Connell

Preface by William R. Grimes

Cistercian Publications, Collegeville, 2019

ISBN 978-0-87907-043-4 (pbk) lxxix + 310 pages

£22.75

We are indebted to Patrick O'Connell for his work on Merton's scripts both in this volume and elsewhere, as he allows us to read Cistercian history and spirituality through Merton's eyes. This present volume comprises Merton's conferences for his novices in the latter part of 1962.

These talks deal with the foundation and beginnings of Cîteaux, also covering the editions of the early Cistercian documents such as the *Carta Caritatis* and the *Exordium Cistercii*. Merton charts the rise and decline of the order and the privileges which may have accelerated this. He draws upon existing Cistercian histories, including texts from King, Knowles, and Chenu which he could access so readily in French, as also with the history of Cistercian nuns (p.118), as well as the original Latin texts in Migne's *Patrologia Latina*.

Merton analyses Cistercian origins with unique insights such as on the return of Robert to the abbacy of Molesme. [p.xxviii] O'Connell's remarks enable us to glimpse Merton's comprehensive grasp of his own tradition:

The next conference begins ... by providing a framework, drawn from his introduction, of the evolution of the Order, from being ahead of its time from its foundation until about 1130, to being reflective of its time, no longer 'inspired', through the rest of the twelfth century, to falling behind the time, living on its reputation, and getting involved in matters it was incapable of handling from 1200 on. [p.lxx]

Not only is this a cautionary retrospective recounted by Merton concerning his order, it has within it his implicit critique of every tradition of faith, and more intimately, of the faithful. In the process there is some telling reflection upon Merton himself, something not missed by O'Connell's perceptive eye:

Merton comments that any monk worth his salt has at some point a sense that he should be living a more intense spiritual life, impossible where he now is, but adds that this doesn't mean that everyone should become a founder – what is partly grace is often partly temptation, and there is a need to be receptive to one without succumbing to the other: plenty of people, he warns, lose everything for wanting more – 'Don't get ahead of the Holy Ghost.' [p.xlv]

Those familiar with Merton's own story will agree with O'Connell: 'His listeners probably have little idea to what extent this bit of advice is the fruit of Merton's own personal experience.' [p.xlv] In this there is the unmissable echo of Merton's unsettlement at Gethsemani during his pre-hermitage years. What is illuminating is just how much of Merton's text, as in previous volumes of this series, reflect what we know of his own character and struggles. In his teaching of Cistercian tradition there is insightful analysis in which we hear his authentic voice.

Cistercian scholars will value greatly Merton's take on the developing problems of the Order – growing wealth, a huge influx of novices – the latter echoed in Merton's time at Gethsemani. O'Connell has a clear grasp of Merton's reading and exposition:

As the complex circumstances surrounding the founding of Citeaux and the early expansion of the order discussed in the other set of history conferences make clear, it is not simply a matter of an initial period of prevailing sanctity giving way to an ethos of compromise and mediocrity, but of a vision and articulation of a way of Christian discipleship that remains an invitation and a challenge to be actualized in the concrete circumstances of each unique time and place. This ultimately is Merton's main lesson for his readers and listeners here. [p.lxxv]

Given his early years in England it is noteworthy to find Merton charting

the course of Cistercian history from early monasticism in England via the *Regularis Concordia* towards Cluny in the developing context of eleventh century reform in France. [pp.114ff] Not only does he recount the familiar Cistercian topos of the early abbots, Robert, Alberic and Stephen but he analyses and draws upon the foundational documents *Exordium Magnum*, *Exordium Parvum*, *Summa Carta Caritatis*, *Carta Caritatis Prior*, *Carta Caritatis Posterior*, the *Instituta* and the *Usus Conversorum*. This is done not simply to recount history, but also as a means of investigating in depth the spirituality of these foundational texts. [pp.80ff]

Merton narrates the history of the decline of Cistercian order [pp.99ff] and its causes: intellectual, spiritual, business, tithes, the lay brothers crisis, the crusades – both the Albigensian and fourth crusade [p.210], as well as the decline of holy poverty and the contest between the abbot of Citeaux and the abbots of the early filiations, marked by the ascendancy of Clairvaux. As might be expected Merton leads us to Cistercian spiritual writers such as Isaac of Stella and Aelred of Rievaulx.

Readers may know much about the beginnings of Citeaux but a particular benefit is that Merton explores the period from the death of St Bernard to the reform of Benedict XII (1153-1335). [pp.139ff] Here he advises us that from 1098 until around 1130 Cistercians were ahead of their time in every sphere [p.142], noting however, that in 1152 a restriction was placed on foundations and that among the large numbers received into the order comparatively few were destined to be contemplatives. [p.150] He uses Knowles extensively to evidence how contemplative fervour waned, excepting those Cistercian convents allied to the Beguines in the low countries. [p.151]

Merton describes the *Parvus Fons* 1265 as a serious compromise in regulating the hierarchy of abbots in a *definitorium*, a body which 'destroys the autonomy of the individual house'. This he cites as the culprit for the destruction of the traditional Cistercian framework and its originality. From here it is downhill via the debt incurred via the wool trade and the eventually somewhat inevitable establishment of the Cistercian procuratorship in Rome. However Benedict XII's reform, *Fulgens Stella* (1335), can still insist on the three occupations of the monk, *opus Dei*, *lectio divina*, *opus magnum*. [p.227]

These conferences are not only Merton's perspective on his order as we might expect given their original audience, they explore some of the basic grounding of what it is to be a Cistercian – what helped to make and influence his own vocation.

Kenneth Carveley

Fr. Louis has performed a valuable service to his novices and to his readers – his detailed overview and insights into his own tradition are a considerable help. Patrick O’Connell’s meticulous editing of these conferences is a great gift. They reveal to us Cistercian origins and developments but even more, we hear them in Merton’s voice.

Kenneth Carveley is a Methodist presbyter, a church historian and liturgist. As a Cistercian scholar he has taught and researched widely in the Cistercian tradition and in Merton’s life and work.