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by
Thomas Merton

Edited with an Introduction by
Patrick F. O'Connell

Preface by
James Finley



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PREFACE

We are fortunate to have access to these notes that Thomas Merton made for the conferences he presented to the novices at the Abbey of Gethsemani. For me, personally, reading these notes awakens fond memories of being a novice at the monastery, listening to Thomas Merton speak from the notes that you are about to read in this book.

Thomas Merton gave conferences to the novices during the week in the small novitiate library. Then, on Sunday afternoons, before vespers, he would give a conference in the community chapter room. All the novices were expected to attend these Sunday afternoon conferences, and any professed members of the community were welcome to attend as well. Merton spoke seated at a small table with these notes open in front of him. He read from these notes when he was quoting from St. Bernard or whatever source he was reflecting on at the time. He would occasionally glance at his notes as he spoke to be sure he was keeping on track with the basic content he intended to cover. But, for the most part, he spoke from memory, passing on to us basic information about and insights into Saint Bernard and other classical sources of contemplative wisdom. Merton shared all this in a clear, sometimes funny manner that made it easy to relax and enjoy the richness of the spiritual wisdom that was being passed on to us as he taught.

The playful humor that was present when Merton spoke tends not to be evident in these notes. But what is present here are passages that resonate with that trustworthy guidance and insight that I treasured most in listening to Merton deliver his

conferences and in being with him in spiritual direction. I am referring to Merton's gift as a spiritual teacher to say things that were so beautiful and clarifying that I felt compelled to write them down so that I could reflect upon them later. I realized that what made these seminal sayings beautiful is that my soul recognized they were true. Resting in that truth provided inner clarity and reassurance that helped me to get my bearings in my own search for God. I would listen to Merton speak, waiting for those moments in which these soulful illuminations would pour out of him. In those moments I would feel grateful to God that this man existed, and for my good fortune in being in his presence, hearing him saying these life-giving things that guided and reassured me in my search for God. In reading these notes I found myself pausing to savor passages that resonate with that same depth and clarity that was Merton's gift to share.

When I left the monastery I was pleased to discover that I still had access to Merton's guidance in his writings that shed a steady light on solitude, silence, compassion, contemplative prayer, concern for the world, and other transformative themes of contemplative living. But there is something that tends not be overtly present in Merton's spiritual writings that is very present in these notes—namely, the extent to which Merton carefully studied and prayed with the classical texts of the monastic fathers and the mystics as sources of the wisdom that he passed on to us in his writings. When we try to read the sermons of Saint Bernard and other writings of the Christian mystical traditions on our own, we might become discouraged in realizing how hard it is for us to access by ourselves the depth and beauty these texts contain. It is precisely at this point that we can begin to appreciate these notes.

What makes these notes unique and helpful is that they allow us to look over Merton's shoulder, as it were, as we see how Merton mentors us in the art of reading and entering into the interior richness of the classical texts of contemplative Christianity. Better yet, Merton invites us to accompany him in his explorations. But we can join Merton in this way only to the

extent that we read these notes in the same careful, prayerful manner in which Merton wrote them. And it is here that we can learn from Merton how to enter into a particularly challenging and rewarding kind of contemplative spiritual reading.

What are we to look for in ourselves that allows us to discern that we are entering the ancient stream of contemplative wisdom that Merton is inviting us to encounter? It's hard to say due to the intimate manner in which the transition into this deeper place occurs. But we can look for certain aspects that tend to occur as we learn to read, study, and pray in this way. There is first the tendency to realize that we are entering deep water, and so we would do well to begin by asking God for guidance and to continue to ask for God's guidance every step of the way. We can also look for signs that we are beginning to discover that the very slowness that is required to understand what we are reading embodies the patience that grants entrance into the deep things of God. We can look for signs that we are beginning to realize that being perplexed is not an obstacle to understanding. Rather, perplexity, deeply accepted, embodies the experiential humility and unknowing in which the unseen light of God shines gently in our minds and hearts.

As we continue to read these notes in this patient, humble manner, we can begin to notice graced shifts in our awareness of God's presence in our life. We can begin to realize that our dependence on Merton in helping us to understand Bernard's sermons is falling into the background as we begin to see for ourselves and take to heart Bernard's profound teachings about the mysterious process in which we are transformed in God's love. We might find ourselves encouraged to further hone our mystic reading skills by seeking out other well-written introductions by other authors that help us to access the inner richness of the classical texts of contemplative Christianity.

As transitions such as these unfold within us, we are able to realize that Merton is such a good teacher because he was such a good student, and we are able to realize that in these notes Merton is being a good teacher in helping us to be good students

of the spiritual wisdom and trustworthy guidance that lies waiting to be discovered in the careful, prayerful reading of the classical texts of contemplative Christianity. Merton is teaching us in these notes how to be grateful and amazed that the ancient wisdom that shimmers and shines in the eloquent and beautiful things that mystics say is now flowing in our sincere desire to learn from God how to find our way to God.

James Finley

INTRODUCTION

Thomas Merton first encountered St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), the principal subject of the novitiate conferences found in the present volume, even before his conversion to Roman Catholicism. In his autobiography,¹ he recounts his purchase in February 1937 of Étienne Gilson's *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*,² his initial "feeling of disgust" when he discovered "it was a Catholic book," replete with *Nihil Obstat* and *Imprimatur* giving it ecclesiastical sanction, and his realization soon afterward that it provided an intellectually convincing explanation for the nature and existence of God. Chapter 14 of Gilson's book, "Love and Its Object," includes a substantial appendix entitled "Note on the Coherence of Cistercian Mysticism"³ that defends Bernard's teaching on "the problem of love," a discussion that Merton will call in the first version of these novitiate conferences "[o]ne of the best short introductions to St. Bernard."⁴ As Merton relates a few pages later in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, this topic interested him enough "that one day I had gone and looked up St. Bernard's *De Diligendo Deo* in the catalogue of the University Library. It was one of the books Gilson had frequently mentioned:

1. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948), 171–72.

2. Étienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, trans. A. H. C. Downes (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936) (Merton consistently presents the title as *Medieval* rather than *Mediaeval*).

3. *Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, 289–303.

4. See Appendix A, page 399, below.

but when I found that there was no good copy of it, except in Latin, I did not take it out."⁵

There the matter apparently remained until Merton made his life-changing Holy Week retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani in April 1941, having been baptized at Corpus Christi Church two and a half years earlier, on November 16, 1938.⁶ In the autobiography he mentions in passing that while at the monastery he "read St. Bernard's *De Diligendo Deo*,"⁷ and his journal from April 8 through April 12 (Tuesday through Saturday of Holy Week) is filled with passages quoted from this treatise (in the original Latin version!),⁸ accompanied as he nears the end of his reading by extended commentary on St. Bernard's insights on love:

Inseparable from the notion of charity is that of freedom. The *servus* and *mercenarius* are bound and restricted, one by fear, the other by self-love. Only charity is perfectly free. Love is loved for itself: that means, it is not drawn by any necessary attraction towards the satisfaction of anything less than itself, or conflicting with itself. Only in charity is love perfectly spontaneous, and free from determination or necessity. . . . All imperfect love, short of charity, ends in something not itself; perfect charity is its own end, therefore is free, because it is not determined by anything outside itself. Love that loves itself is God, and only God is absolutely free. . . . But we are constituted in His image . . . we are free to love Love for itself, and to find ourselves again in that truly perfect freedom of Love's own self-sufficing and eternal action. . . . Pride, self-love, are the love of death, because these turn away from God, in whom is all Being: therefore they necessarily turn to non-being, or death.⁹

5. *Seven Storey Mountain*, 184.

6. *Seven Storey Mountain*, 221–25.

7. *Seven Storey Mountain*, 331.

8. Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation. Journals*, vol. 1, 1939–1941, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995), 337–38, 342–43, 344–45, 349–54 (the transcriptions and accompanying translations are not always completely accurate).

9. *Run to the Mountain*, 352–53.

In such reflections on “find[ing] ourselves again” in authentic freedom by imaging God’s own love, which “is not a quality, or accident of God, it is His substance,”¹⁰ can be heard early articulations of Merton’s own characteristic exploration of the meaning of authentic human identity.

Having returned to the monastery to stay on December 10, 1941, Merton deepened his acquaintance with Bernard. He notes in *The Seven Storey Mountain*¹¹ that the “one small box” that “was to represent all the privacy I had left” included two books, “a volume of St. John of the Cross and Gilson’s *Mystical Theology of St. Bernard*.”¹² In a letter to his friend Robert Lax dated November 21, 1942, Merton mentions the Cistercian custom of listening to readings during meals and the wide variation in quality of the books read: “Sometimes very good, like St. Bernard’s sermons on the Canticle of Canticles—sometimes very bad like a few I forget”¹³—Merton, however, will later comment about these readings that “There was a time when I was tempted not to like St. Bernard at all (when the *Sermons in Cantica* were read in the refectory, during my novitiate, I was irritated by the breasts of the Spouse).”¹⁴ (!) Merton’s familiarity with Bernard was increased when he was given the task in autumn 1947 of cataloguing the manuscripts and early printed editions of Cistercian authors that had been collected by the previous abbot, Dom Edmond Obrecht,¹⁵

10. *Run to the Mountain*, 353.

11. *Seven Storey Mountain*, 384.

12. Étienne Gilson, *The Mystical Theology of Saint Bernard*, trans. A. H. C. Downes (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1940).

13. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989), 166; Thomas Merton and Robert Lax, *When Prophecy Still Had a Voice: The Letters of Thomas Merton & Robert Lax*, ed. Arthur W. Biddle (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 91.

14. Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer. Journals*, vol. 2, 1941–1952, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: Harper-Collins, 1996), 403 [1/27/1950].

15. See *Entering the Silence*, 106–19 [9/12–18/1947].

a job that would first bring him into contact with Dom Jean Leclercq,¹⁶ the great modern editor of Bernard,¹⁷ who would become a lifelong friend.¹⁸

Eventually the abbot assigned to Merton for his exclusive use a set of volumes of St. Bernard's works¹⁹ that he would annotate profusely,²⁰ and he began to study and write on Bernard extensively. His first substantial prose work, issued anonymously in 1948, was an annotated translation from the original French of *The Spirit of Simplicity*, an official report on simplicity in Cistercian life, approved by the General Chapter of the Order in 1925,²¹ to which he added "St. Bernard on Interior Simplicity," a translation and discussion of selected excerpts from Bernard's *Sermons on the Song of Songs* and his treatise *On the Love of God* on the topic

16. See Jean Leclercq, OSB, "Thomas Merton and St. Bernard of Clairvaux," *The Merton Annual* 3 (1990): 37–38, and Thomas Merton and Jean Leclercq, *Survival or Prophecy? The Letters of Thomas Merton and Jean Leclercq*, ed. Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2002), 3–6.

17. *Sancti Bernardi Opera, ad Fidem Codicum Recensuerunt*, ed. Jean Leclercq, C. H. Talbot, and H. M. Rochais, 8 vols., in 9 (Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1957–1977).

18. It was Dom Leclercq who was responsible for the invitation to Merton to participate in the meeting of Asian monastics in Thailand at which Merton died. See *Survival or Prophecy*, 162–63 (12/30/1967 letter of Leclercq to Merton).

19. J. P. Migne, ed., *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina [PL]*, 221 vols. (Paris: Garnier, 1844–1865), vols. 182–85.

20. See Chrysogonus Waddell, ocsa, "Merton of Gethsemani and Bernard of Clairvaux," *The Merton Annual* 5 (1992): 129; see also Jean Leclercq, OSB, introduction to *Thomas Merton on St. Bernard*, Cistercian Studies Series [CS], vol. 9 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1980), 19.

21. According to Waddell ("Merton of Gethsemani and Bernard of Clairvaux," 109), the report, also anonymous, was written by Dom Jean-Baptiste Chautard, the Abbot of Sept-Fons, whose famous book *The Soul of the Apostolate* had been translated anonymously by Merton and issued two years earlier in the same series as *The Spirit of Simplicity* (Trappist, KY: Abbey of Gethsemani, 1946); a new edition with a revised preface (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Image, 1961) would identify Merton as the translator.

of simplicity.²² While Merton calls himself the “translator and editor” of the volume in his introductory note, his extensive discussion of Bernard in part 2 qualifies him to be given the title of author as well, as is indicated by the reprinting of this material as the second part of the posthumously published *Thomas Merton on St. Bernard*.²³ Along with a brief foreword in which he summarizes the meaning of simplicity in the Cistercian tradition as “getting rid of everything that did not help the monk to arrive at union with God by the shortest possible way,”²⁴ that is, through charity, and explains that the discussion of interior simplicity based on the teaching of Bernard has been included as a complement to the official report, which concentrates principally on the externals of simplicity (in clothing, buildings, liturgy, etc.), and a briefer conclusion calling for a deeper acquaintance on the part of Cistercians with the sources of their tradition, ideally through reading of the texts themselves, Merton’s major contribution to the volume is a series of four sets of texts translated from Bernard with substantial commentary. After providing an overview of Bernard’s theology of image and likeness, which identifies natural simplicity as one of the main aspects of the divine image in the human

22. *The Spirit of Simplicity Characteristic of the Cistercian Order: An Official Report, demanded and approved by the General Chapter; Together with Texts from St. Bernard of Clairvaux on Interior Simplicity; Translation and Commentary by a Cistercian Monk of Our Lady of Gethsemani* (Trappist, KY: Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani, 1948). For discussions, see Paul R. Dekar, “*The Spirit of Simplicity: Merton on Simplification of Life*,” *The Merton Annual* 19 (2006): 267–82; Patrick F. O’Connell, “*Spirit of Simplicity, The*,” in William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen, and Patrick F. O’Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 446–48; M. Basil Pennington, “*Father Louis’ First Book: The Spirit of Simplicity*,” in *Thomas Merton My Brother: His Journey to Freedom, Compassion, and Final Integration* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1996), 65–78; Waddell, “*Merton of Gethsemani and Bernard of Clairvaux*,” 109–17.

23. *Thomas Merton on St. Bernard*, 105–57; this version does not include Merton’s foreword or conclusion to the volume.

24. *Spirit of Simplicity*, iii.

person, the section on “Man’s Original Simplicity”²⁵ stresses Bernard’s emphasis on the centrality of self-knowledge, of discovering one’s “real self, in the image of God” as well as on the necessity “to get rid of . . . the overlying layer of duplicity that is *not* ourselves”²⁶—the roots of Merton’s own understanding of the true and false self can be recognized here. The following two sections focus respectively on “Intellectual Simplicity,”²⁷ in which knowledge is seen as oriented toward love, which alone makes possible that union with God that is the highest knowledge, and on “The Simplification of the Will,”²⁸ divided into two subsections, the first emphasizing obedience as the key for overcoming self-will, the second focusing on the danger, both for one’s own salvation and for the peace of the community, of relying on one’s own judgment. Finally, the last set of texts, headed “Perfect Simplicity—Unity of Spirit with God,”²⁹ considers the full restoration of one’s likeness to God as a union not of substance but of wills, in which the soul, transcending multiplicity to become one spirit with God, can be said “*to become God*”³⁰ in so far as it loses itself in God: this is the perfection of simplicity.

The previous year, in a journal entry for May 14, 1947, Merton had written: “I read some St. Bernard on the Mystical Marriage. The tenth chapter of *De Diligendo Deo* and the last sermons *In Cantica* bring St. Bernard and St. John of the Cross into line together. When they reach their goal, they are together in their way of looking at things: we are made for the mystical marriage, it fulfills our nature.”³¹ This is the origin of Merton’s first article on Bernard, “Transforming Union in St. Bernard of Clairvaux and St. John of the Cross,” published in five parts in

25. *Spirit of Simplicity*, 81–91; *Thomas Merton on St. Bernard*, 111–20.

26. *Spirit of Simplicity*, 90; *Thomas Merton on St. Bernard*, 118–19.

27. *Spirit of Simplicity*, 92–110; *Thomas Merton on St. Bernard*, 121–36.

28. *Spirit of Simplicity*, 111–30; *Thomas Merton on St. Bernard*, 137–52.

29. *Spirit of Simplicity*, 131–35; *Thomas Merton on St. Bernard*, 153–57.

30. *Spirit of Simplicity*, 131; *Thomas Merton on St. Bernard*, 157.

31. *Entering the Silence*, 73.

the official Cistercian journal in 1948–1950³² and later reprinted in *Thomas Merton on Saint Bernard*.³³ Merton begins by indicating that the purpose of the essay is to show that while their terminology differs, for Bernard and John “the same goal lies at the end of both their journeys.”³⁴ It is on some level Merton’s effort to reconcile his predilection for the great Carmelite mystic with his own Cistercian calling, about which he felt some degree of ambivalence almost from the beginning.³⁵ The first section focuses on the two saints’ respective views of human nature, which initially seem incompatible, but only because “St Bernard is talking about nature in its essential definition, in itself” while “St John is talking about nature as it finds itself, *per accidens*, in its present, actual, fallen condition.”³⁶ In part 2, Merton compares Bernard’s description of the process of stripping away the false garments of sin that obscure the “naked” natural dignity of the human person to John’s doctrine of emptiness and annihilation in the experience of the dark night and concludes that despite the difference in imagery the experience described is the same. The third section notes that whereas John makes a distinction between two phases of the unitive life, the deep yet transient experiences of the divine presence in the spiritual betrothal and the incomparably greater state of transforming union he calls the spiritual

32. M. Louis Merton, “Transforming Union in St. Bernard of Clairvaux and St. John of the Cross,” *Collectanea Ordinis Cisterciensium Reformatorum* 9, no. 2 (1948): 107–17; 9, no. 3 (1948): 210–23; 10, no. 1 (1949): 41–52; 10, no. 3 (1949): 353–61; 11, no. 1 (1950): 25–38.

33. *Thomas Merton on St. Bernard*, 159–226; for a somewhat more extended discussion see Patrick F. O’Connell, “Thomas Merton on St. Bernard,” *Merton Encyclopedia*, 480–81.

34. *Thomas Merton on St. Bernard*, 161.

35. See the journal entry for August 14, 1947: “And so tomorrow we stars of the active life will celebrate Mary’s contemplation. So much activity in the spirituality of St. Bernard! Pure contemplation only for the weak. I don’t know, maybe that is common teaching. But I still prefer St. John of the Cross” (*Entering the Silence*, 98).

36. *Thomas Merton on St. Bernard*, 169.