

Listening to the Masters

Review of

A Spiritual Masters Retreat [CD]

By Donald Goergen, OP

Chevy Chase, MD: Now You Know Media, 2011

9 CDs / \$69.95

Reviewed by **Elizabeth M. Kelly**

This collection of CDs includes 24 25-minute lectures on four twentieth-century spiritual masters: Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Thomas Merton, Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta, and Blessed John Paul II. The collection also contains study guides for each “spiritual master” with questions for discussion, biographical data, and lengthier passages from source material. Each set of lectures includes an overview of the life and major formative events of the master, with a focus on those things which were most influential in developing the seminal thought and particular charism of each subject.

The publisher encourages listeners to use these CDs on their commute, for example, as “retreats,” claiming:

This series of four sets follows more of a retreat format than a systematic presentation of a particular individual’s thought. We pray along with the spiritual emphases and wisdom of four modern spiritual giants. . . . We often look to the past for guidance from “the great cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1) who have gone before us, but there are also remarkably holy men and women of our own times who give witness to profound spiritual and mystical depth, who put flesh and blood on the Christian life for us. And there are many from whom we can choose, and that choice is difficult, but the four we have chosen here to guide us both complement each other and at the same time strike some very similar as well as varied chords. Let us see them as guides for ourselves in our own journeys toward God as we attempt to glean the spiritual wisdom by which they lived.

Which is all well and good, but perhaps slightly misleading. For one thing, if your commute is anything like mine was (especially when I lived in Boston), you’re unlikely to enter into retreat mode – no matter who might be flowing through your speakers. This is often heady material.

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Goergen himself refers to his talks as conferences, which is perhaps more fitting. Most of them are much more akin to a university lecture than a talk you might hear on “retreat.” You might be better served to think of the talks as precursors, or invitations, or supplements to retreat, “conferences” in the truest sense of the term when applied to retreat exercises. In this way the title might be slightly confused, but this is no indication that the quality of material is poor or lacking a contemplative undercurrent.

Rather, Goergen reflects on John Paul as “a scholar-pope,” Teilhard as “a priest-scientist,” and Merton as “a monk-writer.” Blessed Mother Teresa is the only figure – and necessarily so – that he does not address in a fairly academic manner. You should be prepared to study as much as you “retreat” or pray, possibly with the exception of the talks focusing on Blessed Mother Teresa. And to be frank, as a university professor, I’m all for it. One is often led into right-praying through right-thinking. Most of us simply do not study enough or may have forgotten how. Fr. Goergen’s project could be most useful in this context.

That said, one of the strengths of the collection is how closely Fr. Goergen relies on primary sources: published writings, letters and first-hand accounts. In this way, as with any good spiritual director, Goergen rather disappears from the calculus and allows the “masters” to remain the true guides throughout the conferences. Reading primary texts so closely and further offering longer passages in the study guide is especially helpful for works like Blessed John Paul II’s *Fides et Ratio*. Here Goergen addresses some of the more difficult concepts examined in the series, such as maintaining a “consistent ethic of life,” where one seeks a greater integration of Catholic social thought and its teaching on sexual morality, pro-life teaching and issues of justice.

For the Merton lovers in the audience, it is unlikely that you will find tremendously fresh insights into Merton. Let’s face it, most Merton lovers are a bit like baseball fanatics who can quote statistics executed across decades in minute detail – only they quote chapter and verse of Merton monographs. However, you will find a fine synthesis of his thought, particularly with respect to Merton’s work in social justice, non-violence and peace, and a respectful and competent contextualizing of his contributions to the Church during an incredibly tumultuous and difficult age.

Goergen gives special emphasis to Merton’s life as a writer and correspondent, noting that Merton “couldn’t really think without writing,” and how this was particularly compatible with contemplative life, and paradoxically the means by which he would not remain cloistered, but rather reach out across the world and into multiple other religions and the lives of an unlikely menagerie of correspondents including Thich Nhat Hanh, Joan Baez, Erich Fromm and others. Indeed, Merton was probably never more Merton than he was in his epistolary pugilism.

Fr. Goergen does draw on other religious traditions and other religions from time to time and is frank to say he has an interest in inter-religious dialogue, and this may be appealing to Merton readers, but perhaps of less interest to those studying Blessed John Paul for example, but it’s a mild flavor on the set as a whole.

The series assumes that you will listen to the lectures in order, but you will not miss much if you choose not to do so. Considering the wealth of knowledge Fr. Goergen brings to the project and the general breadth of the series, it is quite reasonably priced – available from Now You Know Media for \$69.95 (the Merton section is now also available by itself for a measly \$19.95).