

A Twenty-First-Century Prophet

Review of

Thomas Merton: A Spiritual Guide for the Twenty-First Century

By Fr. Anthony Ciorra

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12 25-minute Lectures on 5 CD Set / \$29.95

Reviewed by **Hans Gustafson**

In this five-hour lecture series, Fr. Anthony Ciorra invites the listener “to develop a relationship with Merton and choose him as a spiritual guide in the twenty-first century.” To assist with this process, Ciorra recommends adopting two of Merton’s spiritual disciplines: solitude and journal-keeping. His accessible and inviting lectures are accompanied by a broad study guide, course outline, and questions for journal reflection. He recommends that *The Seven Story Mountain* and *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* be read concurrently with, or prior to, the course. Overall the series functions as a good introduction to Merton’s life, concerns, and chief works. Each module consists of two 25-minute easily digestible lectures designed to be engaged during one’s commute or a brief period each day. Ciorra successfully blends a thematically arranged outline with a chronological tracing of Merton’s life and key moments. The six modules focus on Merton’s importance for today, Merton as prophet, Merton’s spirituality, Merton’s contemplative method and struggle for solitude, Merton’s concern for social justice, and Merton as guide for interreligious dialogue.

Module one asks: who is Thomas Merton and why is he important for today’s world? In addition to a basic historical overview of Merton’s life, Ciorra ventures beyond the introductory texts and offers some words about Merton from those who knew him the best. These individuals include Thich Nhat Hahn, Ernesto Cardenal and Robert Lax. Nhat Hahn took Merton as a brother, and in their relationship we learn about Merton’s ability to connect with people across cultures and traditions. Cardenal’s relationship with Merton demonstrates Merton’s interest in Latin America and further, his openness to all things beyond his own immediate social sphere. Merton’s relationship with Lax, who Ciorra suggests knew Merton the best, shows his ability to make and keep friends. Overall, the first module functions successfully as an introductory teaser to the rest of the course while encouraging the listener to be ever mindful of applying Merton’s prophetic vision to his or her own twenty-first-century context.

Hans Gustafson is assistant director of the Jay Phillips Center for Interfaith Learning, a joint institute of the University of St. Thomas (St. Paul, MN) and Saint John’s University (Collegeville, MN), and also teaches theology at both schools. He was a presenter at the ITMS Twelfth General Meeting at Loyola University, Chicago in May 2011 and is currently a Ph.D. candidate in philosophy of religion and theology at Claremont Graduate University.

Module two explores Merton as a prophet. Ciorra borrows from Walter Brueggemann's *The Prophetic Imagination* and defines the prophet as "one who criticizes but also energizes." Part one looks at Merton the critic and part two at Merton the energizer. Merton became critical of the world, the Trappist order and the Church, but continued to love them as a parent loves a child. In his criticism of these entities, he also energizes them, for a prophet calls us "to see in a new way." Ciorra highlights the metaphor of the journey in Merton's restless quest. His is an ongoing conversion process over peaks and valleys with each valley set higher than the previous one. An effective prophet employs symbol and metaphor, and Ciorra suggests Merton himself is to be understood as a symbol, for "Merton reveals us to ourselves" by articulating some of the human's deepest concerns and longings. In this way, the prophet energizes, for a mark of an "authentic spirituality" is one that prods the individual to "move beyond itself" to charity in the world.

Module three examines the spirituality of Merton. Ciorra begins with a brief history of the term spirituality and offers the following definition: spirituality describes "those attitudes, beliefs, [and] practices, which animate people's lives and help them to reach out towards realities beyond themselves." It is what one does with the energy of God that exists within, which for Merton entails allowing his rootedness in Christ to open him to other traditions. Merton respected spiritual practices but never lost sight of the central role of God, who worked in and through him. Ciorra summarizes Merton's spirituality with the phrase "the Paschal mystery," which is an entering into and participation in the dying and rising of Christ. For "the more we die to self . . . the more God seems very absent to us . . . but the more others are able to see God in us." For this reason, Ciorra illustrates Merton as "a finger pointing to the moon"; that is, he serves as a model for not only American Catholic searchers, but for all religious seekers in the twenty-first century. Amidst his exposition of Merton's spirituality, Ciorra recounts Merton's key spiritual experiences such as the Byzantine mosaics in Rome, the vision at Fourth and Walnut, and the encounter with the Buddha statues at Gal Vihara.

Module four, set in three parts, inspirationally addresses Merton's longing for solitude and the fruit of contemplative life. In a sense, the module serves as Merton's critique of the modern world while offering the remedy of solitude and contemplation. Ciorra suggests that the modern world has "lost the Sabbath" – the ability to rest. This results in what Ciorra, quoting Thomas Friedman, refers to as a loss of what it means to be human – that is, we are flirting with Huxley's *Brave New World* and need to recapture the need and desire "to be alone." Ciorra suggests finding "a place to un-tether yourself from the world." Merton, in seeking solitude, took his inspiration from desert spirituality and monasticism. The result of authentic solitude and withdrawal from the world is gentleness of spirit and the ability to make a difference in the world. In this way, Ciorra suggests, Merton's spirituality and concern for social justice are intimately wrapped up in one another in mutual interdependence, for contemplative solitude entails becoming truly aware of the presence of God and the ills of the world.

Module five tackles Merton's concern for social justice. Ciorra articulates clearly Merton's commitment to justice as it grows out of his contemplative method. His contemplation led him

to God, God led him back into the world, and there he was confronted with the reality of social injustice. These social concerns grew out of years of contemplation; thus Ciorra suggests we do not find them articulated in the early writings. A healthy contemplative method and concern for social justice require one another, for contemplation without social concern risks becoming illusory and narcissistic, while social action without contemplation runs the risk of being reduced to “raw anger” and shallow narcissism. Ciorra suggests Merton had become, in his later years, the “chaplain for the peace movement,” and addresses his main social concerns: racial justice, ecumenism, non-violence, and ecology. Finally, Ciorra offers the phrase “spirituality of non-violence” as the best summation of Merton’s teaching on social justice.

Module six offers a look into one of Merton’s strongest interests in his last years: interreligious dialogue. Ciorra deems interfaith dialogue as “the most important agenda item for the church of the twenty-first century,” and Merton serves as the “apostle for unity” in this regard. If authentic interfaith dialogue is that which takes place between religious persons and not between religions as such – that is, it takes place between Christians and Buddhists, not between Christianity and Buddhism, then Thomas Merton serves as an authentic model of one who did just that. His model for interfaith learning is both inspiring and constructive for those seeking to do the same in the twenty-first century. It hinges on the simple attitude that the more we are able to affirm the tradition of the other, the more real we become ourselves. Merton suggests, “I would be a better Catholic not if I can refute every shade of Protestantism, but if I can affirm the truth in it and still go further. So too with Muslims, the Hindus, and the Buddhists.” This does not equate to affirming everything in every tradition, but rather encourages us to begin with affirming everything we can in other traditions, because if we reject everything in the other religions, then we will not have much to affirm in our own tradition. In this manner, interfaith dialogue begins with affirmation.

Overall, Ciorra successfully manages to offer an effective introduction to Thomas Merton and his work. Assuming no prior knowledge of Merton, this highly inspirational and educational series will function well in the context of faith-study groups, introductory academic courses, and personal study. The audio format is appealing but has its limitations. It can be conveniently listened to “on the go” and Fr. Ciorra’s voice is both articulate and engaging. However, one limitation is the absence of citations and the opportunity to follow up on the many provocative quotations from the works of Merton and others. Additionally, the outline and accompanying documents lack strict adherence to the audio lectures, but nonetheless succeed in assisting the listener in grasping the main thrust of Ciorra’s presentation. Though clearly crafted for the beginner of Merton studies, this lecture series will offer fruitful reminders and help make connections for even the most experienced scholar of Merton. Fr. Ciorra’s work will assist in making Merton accessible to those of us who lack the time to read through his many works. Perhaps it will help provide some solitude, reflection, and contemplation in our otherwise busy modern lives.