FOREWORD

The first book I read by Thomas Merton was *Seeds of Contemplation*. I was only ten years old, and I must confess I didn't understand a word of it, but I knew I was in the presence of someone who had a profound spiritual depth. Over the years I moved from art to philosophy to biblical studies, but I continued to read Merton. I marveled, not only at the depth of his understanding of spiritual matters, especially prayer, but also at his prophetic insight into American society and his challenge to that society with respect to racial injustice, the proliferation of nuclear arms, the horror of war, and the deadening impact of consumerism on the human soul. Lately I have learned to appreciate Merton as an artist, a poet, and a photographer. With this volume of Merton's novitiate conferences on the books of Genesis and Exodus I must add teacher and biblical interpreter to my list of what I admire most about Merton.

This edition of Thomas Merton's class notes brings us into the workings of a great spiritual leader's mind as he reflects upon Scripture. His notes on Genesis are well-developed; regrettably those on Exodus are incomplete. His audience consists of the novices at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, but all who are on a spiritual journey can gain from his insights and the lessons he draws from Scripture. Even contemporary biblical scholars who take a very different approach to Scripture can benefit from engaging Merton's perspective.

Biblical interpretation has been spoken of as a science in the past two centuries—not a science in the sense in which biology and chemistry are sciences, but a science in the sense of employing a rigorous method with the expectation of agreed-upon, well-grounded results. It may be debated as to how successful this approach has been, but it is clear that this modern venture into interpretation of texts moved away from more traditional methods of interpretation that have dominated for more than

two thousand years. Thomas Merton's unraveling of the meaning of Genesis and Exodus takes place at the point of transition within Catholicism between the use of traditional methods of interpretation and adoption of the more recent historical and literary critical approaches that insist on the necessity of understanding texts from within their historical and literary contexts.

At the risk of oversimplifying the history of two millennia of Christianity, we may say that the search for meaning in the biblical text has been concerned with two senses of the text: the literal and the spiritual. The literal sense focuses on the meaning of the words, that is, the surface meaning of the text. This became the dominant focus of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with the rise of historical and literary-critical methods of interpretation. Merton is conversant with the adoption of historical and literary criticism by Catholic biblical scholars of the late 1940s and early 1950s and often makes reference to their work. Contemporary biblical scholars will find this aspect of Merton's notes dated and superseded by the work of later scholars, but they can nevertheless appreciate how aware Merton was of the biblical scholarship of his day.

Where Merton excels is in his treatment of the spiritual sense of the text. The spiritual sense is concerned with a presumed deeper meaning hidden within the text, now revealed to those of faith. The spiritual sense has been divided into several subcategories, but by the end of the medieval period biblical interpreters had settled on three: the allegorical/typological sense, the tropological or moral sense, and the anagogic sense. The moral sense focused on the lessons drawn from the text that guided the Christian in living a Christian life; the anagogic sense focused on the heavenly goal of Christian life and afterlife issues.

The allegorical/typological interpreters sought to discover a deeper meaning that allowed ancient, and sometimes obscure or offensive texts, to have meaning for readers of later centuries. Biblical characters were identified with virtues to be pursued or vices to be avoided. Names, numbers, measurements, and mundane details were given a significance far removed from their original context. We tend to distinguish allegory from typology, but this was not done until the early twentieth century. The deeper meaning we label typology has to do with the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament. The persons and events that preceded Christ in the Old Testament are seen as "types" which anticipate or foreshadow the "antitypes" later found in the New Testament.

Merton sees the Scriptures as "letters from God in which He awakens in us love for our homeland" (35). He characterizes every person's life "as an apostolic journey. To be called by God is to start on [that] journey" (41). Thus, it is not surprising that he often draws moral lessons and speaks of the goal of human life as he works his way through the narratives of Genesis and Exodus. The lives of biblical characters (e.g., Adam, Eve, Noah, Abraham, Sara, Lot, Jacob, Joseph, Moses) become exemplars of various behaviors, such as obedience or disobedience, recklessly moving forward or patiently waiting, an ordinary spirituality or a spirituality guided by God. Merton reveals a profound understanding of human nature in his treatment of Adam's and Eve's sin, of Cain's murder of his brother, and of the flood narrative, to mention but a few examples. Time and again Merton leads us through these biblical narratives, calling our attention to what can serve us on our own journey back to God.

It is with Merton's focus on the allegorical/typological sense of Scripture that the depth of his understanding of Christianity comes to the fore. Of many examples, one in particular comes to mind: Abraham's suffering in offering his beloved son Isaac becomes a template of God's experience in offering his beloved Son. Merton connects Abraham's longing for his son with God's longing for sinful humanity and his desire to recover them through Christ (see 73). Over and over again Merton leads us through his analysis of the narratives of Genesis and Exodus into the depth of the mystery of redemption in Christ.

Allegorical/typological interpretation of the Bible continues today in the Mass, for the Old Testament and Gospel readings are regularly set in typological relationship. It is visually represented in stained-glass windows and in great works of Christian art. The church affirms the value of this particular form of patristic interpretation for the service that it has provided and continues to provide to the church, but it has been largely abandoned. Indeed the church acknowledges that such interpretation "runs the risk of being something of an embarrassment to people today."[1] It becomes an embarrassment when it disregards the literal sense of the text. Without a firm grounding in the literal sense there are no controls over flights of fancy in the discovery of meaning in texts. Merton's discovery of deeper meanings is well-grounded in the literal sense of the text. He makes a seamless movement from literal sense to hidden meaning, building upon what the text actually says. The breadth and depth of his

1. Pontifical Biblical Commission, *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, #173 (*Bible Documents*, 175).

understanding of Christian reality and spiritual life are interwoven into his spiritual interpretation of Genesis and Exodus. We find in Merton's notes the best of spiritual interpretation. There is much in these notes to meditate upon and much that can be used to guide us on our own spiritual journey. Beyond this, Merton's notes stand as a challenge to biblical scholars to remember that the Bible is a living text; it is a sacred text. Thus, biblical scholars have a responsibility to make their research accessible to the "people in the pew" and meaningful for their lives.

We are indebted to Patrick O'Connell for his expertise and meticulous work in bringing us this edition of Thomas Merton's notes on the Books of Genesis and Exodus. I am personally grateful to him for inviting me to write this foreword, for it has led me to appreciate even more Thomas Merton's legacy.

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