

As novice master of the Cistercian Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky, Thomas Merton presented weekly conferences to familiarize his charges with the meaning and purpose of the vows they aspired to undertake. In this setting, he offered a thorough exposition of the theological, canonical, and above all spiritual dimensions of the vows. Merton set the vows firmly in the context of the anthropological, moral, soteriological, and ecclesial dimensions of human, Christian, and monastic life. He addressed such classical themes of Christian morality as the nature of the human person and his acts; the importance of justice in relation to the Passion of Christ, to friendship and to love; and self-surrender as the key to grace, prayer and the vowed life. Merton's words on these topics clearly spring from a committed heart and often flow with the soaring intensity of style that we have come to expect in his more enthusiastic prose. The texts of these conferences represent the longest and most systematically organized of any of numerous series of conferences that Merton presented during the decade of his mastership. They may be the most directly pastoral work Merton ever wrote.

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