

# Religion Revealed in Silence

**"The Silent Life,"** by **Thomas Merton** (Farrar, Straus & Cudahy 178 pp. \$3.50), is a reply of a Trappist monk to the challenge of all who wonder why men should choose to live in a monastic community. Father LaFarge, who reviews it here, is a member of the editorial staff of the Jesuit weekly America.

By John LaFarge

**T**HE Carthusians, the most intransigent of the many monastic orders, have, says Thomas Merton, "an uncommon distaste for publicity." They take no steps to ensure the canonization of their saints. "When a monk of exceptional virtue dies, the highest public honor he receives in the Order is the laconic comment: *laudabiliter vixit*. In good American we would translate this as: 'He did all right.'" Monks in general are content to go their own quiet way, while they pray for the rest of humanity.

However, people continue to be interested in everything that pertains to "the silent life." Popular misconceptions about religious orders—monastic

and non-monastic—make some explanation necessary. Chief error is the notion that men—or women—enter the cloister because they are frustrated, unhappy, wanting to escape and get away from it all. On the contrary, they embrace this severe but astonishingly cheerful discipline precisely because they have the courage to look the reality of their individual existence square in the face, and see the greatness to which God has called all men, if they will but work with His grace.

Practical curiosity wants to learn something of the grammar of the monastic life, for, as a Lutheran Pennsylvania Dutch farmer once remarked to this reviewer, as we talked across the fence bounding a newly established monastic community: "It's beyond belief how 100 gentlemen can always be living under one roof." So Thomas Merton, alias Father Louis of the Reformed Cistercian Order (O.C.S.O.), comments in authentic, sober language upon the history and the distinctive spirit of certain Roman Catholic monastic communities.

**S**TARTING with a short study of St. Benedict of Nursia, the founder of the cenobitic brethren, or those who most stress life in common, he selects for description several of the older Benedictine houses, such as the abbeys of Solesmes and La Pierre Qui Vire in France, with the flowering of the Benedictine foundations in this country; and then the branches of the Cistercian rule, which trace their way back to Benedict through St. Bernard of Clairvaux. The Carthusians—of whom I believe there are only 600 in the entire world, represented here by a new, small, and still somewhat precarious Vermont community—belong to the hermit category.

More important than the grammar is the word the monks' silence speaks. This word, Merton insists, is not primarily the rhythm and melody of the liturgy; the *opus Dei*, the ancient church prayer offered unceasingly day and night. Nor is the monastery primarily the home of spiritual estheticism, culture, or educational enterprise, or of missionary activity. Its language is above all the language of spiritual liberty. The whole monastic life tends toward this summit of liberty, and it is in the light of this freedom of spirit that we must see and understand all the discipline of the

monk, his austerities, his sacrifices, his rules, his obedience, and his vows.

Moreover, it is not just a psychological liberty gained by victory of mind over matter, or cold reason over sensual passion. (The Devil can teach you some tricks in that line, for his own devious ends.) It is the liberty of the Spirit of God, the victory of faith-inspired humility and love over the "flesh"—in the wide Biblical sense of selfishness, wilfulness, and hate. And this victory is achieved by the disarmingly simple yet bafflingly subtle method of cooperation in community: "under their Abbot for a common end," men helping one another to practise Christ's poverty and obedience, and by that token, working for the liberation of all mankind. For to love God, as Denys de Rougemont says, "is to obey God, who commanded us to love one another."

Life in a religious order, Thomas Merton explains, is always life in the desert. Men are drawn to deserts, for there they meet God face to face. But people not secluded in monasteries may discover deserts in most unexpected places: sometimes right in their own homes. And if you don't know your way around in the desert, you may be chasing mirages or stepping on scorpions, instead of meeting God. So they are grateful that men of prayer like Merton show them how humility and charity are the true guides—for the monks and for us all.

## FRASER YOUNG'S LITERARY CRYPT NO. 725

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 725 will be found in the next issue.

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## The Spanish Character

*"The Yoke and the Arrows,"* by **Herbert L. Matthews** (Braziller, 203 pp. \$3.75) and *"Kings Without Castles,"* by **Lucy Herndon Crockett** (Rand, McNally, 220 pp. \$3.95), are reports on present-day Spain, the former by a journalist who has followed it since the Civil War, the latter by an American making her first visit.

By Harriet de Onis

**E**XTENSIVE as is the bibliography on Spain since the Civil War, including works of fact and fiction, objective—if any account of events of this nature can be objective—and partisan, the number still grows. The reason undoubtedly is that the issues in conflict in that struggle which tolled the bell for all mankind, whether they knew it or not, are still hot to the touch.

"The Spanish Civil War," writes Herbert L. Matthews in his excellent survey and analysis "The Yoke and the Arrows," "was an explosion at the end of a long powder train. We simplified it in our minds at the time, one way or another, but . . . It drew into itself all the threads of Spanish life and character, all the social conflicts that wrack our industrial age, all the ideologies that soon were to be tearing the world apart, and that are still doing so." In addition to being the over-

ture, the rehearsal for World War II, it was one more episode in Spain's struggle to align itself on the side of freedom.

But the Spanish concept of freedom is not quite that which we associate with democracy. As G. K. Chesterton said: "Democracy declares that a man should have liberty indeed, but should have the liberty which other men have." But what primarily interests the Spaniard is the liberty other men do not have, the liberty of the individual who aims not merely at being free, but at being uniquely so. Every Spaniard is basically an anarchist. Moreover, the absolute is the Spaniard's goal, nor is he given to compromise or settling for half a loaf. Granted the errors and ineptitudes of the Republic that Mr. Matthews points out; but whether it would have been able to harness all the centrifugal forces it was called upon to weld into a working body, even if every member of the government had been a Solon, is a moot question. The permanent solution, however, cannot be a dictatorship, a general sitting on a lid. Lids have a way of blowing off, as Spain has demonstrated again and again, and many, many people get burned by the steam.

The accurate, lucid, nostalgic account Mr. Matthews gives of the Civil War—"it had quality, that war"—is by way of background. He has revisited Spain several times since he covered the war as correspondent for the *New York Times*. What interests him now is an assessment of the eighteen years of General Franco's regime, and the new relationship to Spain in which the United States finds itself as a result of the acquisition of air and naval bases there, with our consequent involvement with that country's affairs. For involved we are, to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars, and will remain so for a long time. And this backing and aid Franco has received from us on his own terms. In many of his traits the *Caudillo* may depart from established Spanish norms, but not in believing himself always right. "We have had to make a bargain with one of the most tenacious and outstanding enemies of democracy . . . in order to defend democracy."

What keeps Franco in power as absolute ruler of Spain? He has not

achieved this, says Mr. Matthews, by balancing Army, Falange, Church, and Big Business against each other. He is stronger than any or all of these factors taken together. What keeps the Franco regime essentially unchallenged, in spite of the recurring strikes of workers and students, in spite of the ambitions of the Monarchists, the opposition among the younger elements of the army and the clergy, regional aspirations which though silenced are far from dead, and the grinding poverty the mass of Spaniards endure? It is, Mr. Matthews concludes, the lack of any visible alternative. The fear of the consequences of an overthrow of the regime, another civil war, makes Spaniards accept what the majority condemn and deplore.

But one day Franco's government will come to an end, and however long it has lasted, it will be but a moment in history. His plan for his succession is a restoration of the monarchy, but will the Spanish people accept this? When the time for a change comes, the problems the country must face will be tremendous, for Franco has not so much made as paralyzed the history of his country. Though cautious about making predictions, Mr. Matthews does discern hopeful signs in a tempering of Spanish fanaticism, a tendency to let civil war bygones be bygones, and the emergence of a more stable, balanced, middle-class point of view. The number of Spaniards who go abroad for study or work, returning with a new political and intellectual vision of the outside world, can be a source of strength for the future.

**L**UCY HERNDON CROCKETT's "Kings Without Castles" is another sort of report on Spain. It has the aroma of a love affair. This was Miss Crockett's first visit to Spain; she travelled the length and breadth of the country by car, most of the time alone, and wherever she went she encountered courtesy and kindness. In the field of human relations she is a most perceptive person. It is apparent, both from her pictures and the results she achieved, that she has the gift of *simpatia*, that key that opens Spanish hearts. She talked with everyone she met, and she was clearly a good listener, a gift highly esteemed in Spain, though more honored in the breach than in the observance.

Miss Crockett's political and historical judgments leave something to be desired. But with becoming modesty, she admits these shortcomings and promises to repair them before she goes back again. With this in mind I recommend Mr. Matthews's book to her.

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