

**Fr Louis' Mertonioia**  
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I hope you will excuse me if I bring into this talk some of my own personal reminiscences. I entered Mount Saint Bernard in 1947, six years after Merton entered Gethsemani, and from what I have read of his early ideals, I reckon they were very much the same as mine. I'll come to that in a minute.

Fr Louis lived in his monastery for about 26 years; St. Bernard was a monk for 40 years; I have been a monk for 47 years. Only one of these is not well known!

Now then, I was fascinated to read the account of Margie Smith and Fr Louis in 'The Hermitage Years' by John Howard Griffin. It brought me up with a jerk. The year was 1966. It was in that year that I too had a similar experience. For Fr Louis this 'love affair' began in April 1966 and lasted through in an active way until August or September - though the feelings were still there a year later. There is never a hint that they had an explicit sexual relationship, so we should leave that on one side - unless something further comes to light on the subject; but they were certainly caught up in an emotional and deep living relationship which knocked Fr Louis for six. In my case, I cannot say exactly when it began, maybe Christmas 1966, maybe earlier. Nor can I remember when it ended, except that I got a letter, literally out of the blue, from B telling me that she would be on a flight to Canada when I received it. That letter was one of the most shattering experiences of my life and I wept deep within myself as I have never wept before or since.

Fr Louis knew even in June, less than three months after this initial discovery of this intense attachment, that it just could not continue. 'I am taking a course that can be harmful to me as a monk, as a contemplative, and as a writer,' he wrote. Then, if the attachment was not in harmony with his vows, he would 'have to abide by the vows'.

What I want so say about this experience of love for Margie is that it was, for Fr Louis, an astonishing opening into a facet of God's love that he had never fully realised before. To be infatuated, even for a little while, is a true expression of a gift of God's love in an intense way. All of a sudden there was a richness in his experience of God's love that had not been there before. He was tempted to cling onto this gift, but he knew instinctively that it was a temptation, a something not for him. The answer to Francis Thompson's question, 'Surely for me?' was 'No'.

Fr Louis was always striving, always struggling within himself, and with others, always unsettled if you like. I suspect that he would have reckoned 'being settled' as a vice rather than a virtue. Until fairly recently I myself

have felt the same way about it. For all that, there were certain values and interests that were stable in his life as a monk. Like a butterfly hovering around a buddleia tree, he always came back to them however far he had flown away. Let me call them: a. His fascination for mysticism as an ideal to aim at; b. His longing for the solitude of the hermit's life; c. His fierce attachment to freedom.

#### A. Fascination for Mysticism

Before he became a monk, in the late 1930's, Fr Louis (or Tom, as he was then) read the mystical works of John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila. A bit later, in 1945 and 1946, I did the same. I was bowled over by John of the Cross, particularly 'The Living Flame of Love'. It brought me into the monastic life, as did 'The Interior Castle' of St. Teresa.

I don't remember Fr Louis saying anywhere that his novice-master forbade him to read these two great mystics. Mine did, and so I was forced to read the great monastic mystics, like St. Bernard, St. Aelred; and also De Caussade, Dom Marmion and so forth. Fr Louis soon fell under the spell of St. Bernard's unique rhetoric. He was also reading the Greek fathers, particularly Gregory of Nyssa. He must also have been fascinated by the nun St. Lutgarde. Remember his early book 'What are these wounds?' - which he later condemned. Fair enough, but it was right for him at the time.

While reading St. Bernard, he was beset with a problem. St. Bernard was the acknowledged mystic of the Middle Ages; John of the Cross was the definitive mystic, accepted by the modern Church. It was the latter who had defined most clearly the steps towards 'Transforming Union' and had described it most fully. Who was the greater mystic of the two? Or if you like, who was Fr Louis to follow in his search for God? Since he always seemed to put down all his thoughts on paper, he wrote those five amazing articles on St. Bernard and St. John of the Cross. For many years they were buried obscurely in the periodical 'Collectanea', very badly printed, unread by anyone except a few crazy monks and nuns, like me, greedy for the sensual pleasures of the divine promises.

Eventually I got Br Patrick to exhume them and republish them, which he did, and I suspect that very few people have bothered to read them. But, in my opinion, it is these articles together with his 'Ascent to Truth' which underpin the whole of his monastic life, his struggles, his ideals. He may have butterflyed off into many, many other interests, but somehow it was Bernard and John of the Cross who were his buddleia trees from then on.

You find this everywhere, right to the end. True, his insistence on 'Transformation of Consciousness' in his writings during 1964-68 was connected with his interest in Buddhism, yet the very word Transformation is

taken from St. Bernard's sermons on the Song of Songs (eg. S.24 5; S.62 5; S.31 7; S.69 7) 'We are transformed into the same image going from glory to glory'. (Cf. John of Ford 'Transformatio Gloriosa' 71, 202). It is used by John of the Cross in the phrase 'Transforming Union'. These Christian writers would of course have confined the idea to union of love with Jesus Christ. Fr Louis quite deliberately broadened the term to cover his Buddhist and Sufi interest.

In 1966 he had a visit from an Islamic teacher, Sidi Abdesalam whom he called 'a true man of God and an authentic representative of the very best in Islam'. This visitor assured him that he, Fr Louis, was very close to mystical union and that the slightest thing could accomplish that union. He was humbled but uplifted by this assurance. It was after all the real purpose of his desire for solitude and the hermit life. You find the same sort of thing in his interview with the Dalai Lama, and, just before he died, in his own visit to the great Buddhist statues in India.

In practice, his hermitage did very little to help this pursuit of mystical union. He tended to use it as a meeting place for all sorts of visitors, some invited, many uninvited. He was far too well known for his house in the woods to be anything else than a tourist attraction. The only way he could possibly have achieved solitude was to go back into his monastery and get a room in the enclosure where visitors would not be able to come and disturb him - not even with the permission of the abbot since nobody is allowed into a private room in a monastery. But he never ever thought along those lines. That is the contradiction in his life. What he really wanted to achieve he couldn't achieve because he could not take the only means of achieving it. I don't mean that as a criticism. Half the charm of Fr Louis is his interior struggle with his own psychological contradictions.

Yet perhaps nobody in recent years has written so movingly, or so deeply, about the mysticism of St. Bernard as Fr Louis. 'Nothing could be more clear,' he says, 'than that for St. Bernard mystical marriage is a state in which pure love is a continuous loving union with the Divine source of all love and joy, by whose life the soul now lives in perfect likeness, transformed into him by virtue of the very purity which it has received from him.'

I am convinced that Fr Louis had made a very intense study of those two mystical doctors precisely because he himself at the time was trying to enter, as they were, into a state of pure love of God. He insists in his fifth and final article, in spite of the contrary opinion of that celebrated thinker Etienne Gilson no less, that this is a state of pure love, not a passing or intermittent experience. This was what he was aiming at too. That was in 1949. Later on he might poke fun at his ideals, mock them even, but none-the-less they were and remained a deep aspiration all through - taking different forms no doubt, but still the underlying exigency of his desire for solitude on the spiritual

plane.

Fr Louis was intent on proving beyond doubt that St. Bernard was no less a mystic than John of the Cross. If not, it 'would mean that the "Mellifluous Doctor" who has been considered for many centuries as one of the greatest of mystical writers in the Church was preaching a relatively impoverished and limited doctrine.' This would mean too that the Cistercian ideals were not as high as the Carmelite ones and therefore Merton himself was in the wrong stream!

I don't think it ever struck me personally quite like that. However, I was, with my contemporaries at Mount Saint Bernard, aiming at the same heights of prayer and union with God, and Merton was after all only expressing what we were all searching for. I suspect that what we were really searching for, aiming at, was a continuous 'Cloud Nine', with a few uplifts into ecstasy. If so, we were to be very disappointed. However, if you are never aiming at 'Cloud Nine', never, then you haven't yet started understanding Fr Louis Merton. That's the point.

#### B, Fr Louis' longing for the Solitude of the hermit life.

This aspect of Fr Louis' aspirations puzzles me. I admit that I personally have no desire for a hermit life. I never have had. We have a hermit at Mount Saint Bernard, Fr Theodore, who has been living in his hermitage since the Christmas of 1966 - 28 years. Merton's hermitage was and is palatial compared with the squalid conditions Fr Theodore lives in - without running water, without electricity, without a decent roof or floor, and so forth.

No, it isn't that. What puzzles me about Merton's desire for solitude is the totally unpractical way he set about it. What I mean is this: He had every opportunity at hand to achieve a complete life of solitude, but he went to an enormous amount of trouble for years and years to create something, a hermitage, in which solitude would be virtually impossible, if not undesirable.

I mean: he didn't really want solitude, let alone achieve it. As soon as he had permission to go to his hermitage, he started inviting friends to see him, he invited strangers to see him, he got more and more involved with visitors, with non-monastic activities, and so forth. So much so that on occasions he had to hide away in the woods until they had departed. All this was totally unnecessary, and quite simply just the opposite of what he apparently set out to achieve.

Let me give an example. We have a monk at Mount Saint Bernard, Br John, who is our potter. He doesn't come to the Offices in choir ever; he works by himself six hours a day in the pottery. Nobody disturbs him there. When he is not working there, he goes up to his room in the monastery, next but one to

mine, locks the door and remains there. I can assure you that he lives a life far, far more eremetical and solitary than Fr Louis ever lived. But Br John just does it. He has never written about it or even consciously desired it. It was there for him. Anyone could do it. No big deal.

Then again, on several occasions he asked permission to go to various places. Dom James Fox, the abbot, said 'No'. Quite rightly too. Either Merton wanted a hermit's life, in which case accepting invitations to go out to meetings and so forth would have totally destroyed any real eremetical vocation - everyone would have wanted the great writer to come to a meeting - or else he didn't want it, in which case he should come back into the monastery. Dom James' letters to Merton about this are absolutely full of understanding of his monk's need and what was right for him.

But if it puzzles me, I agree that it was a long-standing ideal for Fr Louis. His early years at Gethsemani, as at any house in the Cistercian Order, were marked by an almost excessive insistence of communal living. We were all on top of one another. You couldn't get a moment to yourself. If you wanted to read, it had to be done in a scriptorium with a crowd of other monks, even if you did have your own desk to sit at. Of course, you had your own cubicle in the dormitory, but it had no door, only a bit of a curtain; and in any case you weren't allowed to go to the dormitory except to sleep, and, if I may say so, except to snore. Your cubicle was the size of your bed plus just enough space to get in and out - certainly not enough room for a chair. If anyone snored, it woke up the whole dormitory. I look back on it with revulsion. I remember Fr Patrick used to half-wake out of a nightmare and utter strangled animal cries like a hyena in distress. The only chance for privacy in those days was to find some dark nook in the Church and go there and pray, or fume.

There may have been something of this in his criticisms in 1955: 'It still seems to me that there is an inordinate hesitation and timidity about the solitary life in the Cistercian order, due to the fact that so many of the Superiors have an *a priori* and absolutist insistence on the common life as the universal solution for all problems'. (School: p. 92) He then mentions his own genuine call to solitude.

As early as 1949 you find him writing about this in a tentative way, when he is asking for a little chapel in the woods where novices and busy monks can go for a day. By 1951 it has become more prominent for he writes to his abbot, Dom James Fox, 'It seems that this solitude is the root of my gift of myself to God ... but once I have the reconciliation and detachment and interior freedom required to attend to God alone, I feel ready to do what He may ask of me, ...' (Actually that sentence is a contradiction in terms, but don't let us get too worried about it).

You will all know as well as I do, if not better, that a sea-change took place in Fr Louis towards 1955 when he became increasingly involved in matters that had very little to do with his monastic vocation and still less to do with his desire for solitude. He could hardly avoid it. All of a sudden he had become a centre of attraction for modern American youth, and was being sought out for his views on all sorts of questions.

What you may not realise quite so well is that a sea-change was also taking place in all the religious orders, and indeed in the Church. Probably rather more slowly than in Fr Louis' case, but we were all changing and by the early 1960's this change was making itself felt. It was dramatic, it was deeply unsettling, and in my opinion it was very healthy. *We were actually asked to give our opinion.* With increasing urgency we were being asked questions about long-standing traditions: silence, the Latin office, the chapter of faults, penances, holidays, involvement with the outside world, going to conferences in different monasteries and so forth. Whereas there had been no discussions before, now we were involved in discussions practically every day. Merton, incidentally, didn't like this; he preferred the old ways.

Cistercian life today is quite different from what it was in the early 1950's when Fr Louis wrote 'The Seven Storey Mountain'. It is impossible to go back to those days, difficult even to think about them. Now we have private rooms, now we talk together instead of making signs, now we have the Office in English, now the monks do no farming, now we go our much more frequently. Most of these changes were only beginning to come into effect when he went into his hermitage; indeed the change from Latin into English only really came about in 1968 just before he died.

Although in a sense Fr Louis pioneered some of these changes and welcomed them, I have a feeling that things went too far for him. I get the impression that he was a bit conservative about monastic life. Certainly he preferred to say his Office in Latin, when the rest of the Cistercians were moving over to English - or rather the vernacular.

It is at this point I should mention very briefly his interest in Zen Buddhism. You know, Fr Louis was not the only one interested in Zen. Dom Aelred Graham had already written a book on it; so had Dechanet, though his was really about Yoga; the Beatles had gone to India to meet the Maharaja; we were all trying to find out about these esoteric Eastern religions. I myself had read Murti's book on Mahayana Buddhism, *The Essential Philosophy of Buddhism*, long before Merton took it on his Asian trip and quoted from it in *The Asian Journal*. In any case he confined himself mainly to Rinzai Zen and hardly ever mentioned Soto Zen - his references to Satori, enlightenment, show a familiarity with the Rinzai school which is rather different from the Kensho of the Soto branch of Zen. His contact was with the Zen master Suzuki. There was nothing especially remarkable about this interest in

Buddhism. It was completely in line with his lifelong interest in mysticism.

The thing that *is* extraordinary about Fr Louis is his ability to grasp the very heart of Zen, to make it in some way understandable to Westerners, to place it in the context of Christian thought and mysticism; and he does all this with supreme confidence. To put it in another way, you have here two great systems of human thought and religion that seem at first sight to be completely incompatible, having no point of contact whatsoever. But Merton with his own insights into a particularly important aspect of the Christian tradition namely the mystical tradition, was able to demonstrate that both systems were intimately compatible in their perception of the Absolute. Not that they were united at the top, so to speak. I can't imagine a Christian mystic wanting to become a Zen Buddhist in the sense that he or she would reject Christian mysticism. But I can imagine a Christian mystic, like Merton, saying that he was already a Zen Buddhist and there was no need to abandon anything - except perhaps the more subtle dogmas of Catholicism. Fr Louis saw clearly that certain aspects of the Christian apophatic tradition, especially in its teaching about God, were so similar to the Zen perceptions of the Absolute that it would be quite difficult to see the difference - if indeed there *is* a difference.

Nevertheless, I find it a bit difficult to imagine who Merton was writing for in such books as 'Zen and the Birds of Appetite'. Of course, certain Catholics who wanted to find ammunition to say that Merton was on the verge of becoming a Buddhist might look in it for what they wanted. But their claim was just plainly absurd. If anyone has any doubts about this, he has only to read the article that Fr Louis wrote, in 1964, on 'The Humanity of Christ in Monastic Prayer' to see that the accusation is meaningless. This is a complete summary of Christian prayer and contemplation as seen through the eyes of the great spiritual writers of the early Christian centuries and as such is the very basis of all Fr Louis' teaching.

### C. His fierce Attachment to Freedom

You have only to glance at Fr Louis' style in 1948 and compare it with his writing in 1968 to see a truly fantastic change - and amazing liberation.

Merton's writing in the early period was hemmed in by various limiting constraints. He needed the permission of his Abbot to write, or rather to publish. Then it had to be submitted to the Censors of the Order, and clearly quite a bit of opposition came from one of them. Then there was the opposition of his fellow monks; some of them thought that writing personal reminiscence was not a good thing for a monk. On top of that there were the constraints of monastic life: the lack of privacy, the lack of a place to write in, the lack of ordinary writing materials. Add to that his youth and his need to study style, grammar, etc. For a person like Fr Louis, who needed a lot of

space and whose mind was bubbling over with new ideas all the time, he was in a no-win situation. As soon as the restraints started to slacken, he took immediate advantage of the new era, or maybe I should say that the frustrations reached such a pitch that he just had to break with the past.

It was in 1955 when in a sense he was at his most tranquil, having been made novice-master, that his life underwent a fundamental change. In a letter to Dom James in early 1956 he wrote: 'I am coming to a crucial point in my life in which I may make a complete mess of everything' and then: 'I put myself entirely in God's hands. I renounce my desire for anything but his will. I have plenty of peace and trust though everything is *really* dark. But I hope it is the darkness before dawn.' However in the August of the same year a very different note is sounded. He writes to one of the censors of his new book: 'I certainly felt that by your *demanding* some of the changes in *Basic Principles of Monastic Spirituality*, I was being unnecessarily cramped and the effect on the work, if this principle were pushed to its conclusion, would be a bad one.' Then the tone of his next letter to the Abbot General, Gabriel Sortais, (who was an imperious old so-and-so, as I recall him) was quite different and more assertive than in any previous correspondence.

Merton was becoming aware at this time that a change was taking place - in himself, in the Order, in the world around him, in the Church, indeed everything. He stretched out his hands and grasped in eagerly. He was helped in this by the young novices and postulants who were bringing in with them ideas that he had been innocent of in his earlier years - they asked awkward questions which were the questions he was most willing to listen to because they made him think.

You will notice, of course, that in 1955, 56 and 57 he did very little writing. He had 'given it up completely'. But in 1958 he published at least eight articles and five books that he had written previously. In 1959 this output hotted up to at least 18 articles, including two very significant ones on Boris Pasternak. So it continued until his death in 1968. For a few of these years he became too involved in affairs that affected him and his vocation only in a distant way. You will often have to search hard for any indication of an effort towards solitude or contemplation or even an interest in the metanoia which he called '*conversatio morum*'. But in all this there is a growing sense of freedom. Listen to what he says when writing about the Vietnam War and about Nhat Hanh in particular: 'We cannot let him go back to Saigon to be destroyed while we sit here, cherishing the warm humanitarian glow of good intentions and worthy sentiments about the ongoing war. We ... must also raise our voices to demand that his life and freedom be respected when he returns to his country. We demand this purely in the name of those values of freedom and humanity in favour of which our armed forces declare they are fighting the Vietnam War. Nhat Hanh is a free man who has acted as a free

man in favour of his brothers and moved by the spiritual dynamic of a tradition of religious compassion'. (Faith and Violence; p. 107)

It wasn't just that he was arguing for personal freedom or the freedom of an individual. He did that. But he was also now able to raise his own voice against the slavery that the ordinary American had fallen into by accepting the politically correct attitude of his political leaders who were themselves enslaved by their regard for popular opinion, and moreover popular opinion was often enslaved by the power of those running the gun lobby. Anybody who tried to oppose this put himself at risk, was liable to lose his life. This is precisely what happened to Malcolm X. Fr Louis was aware that something fundamental was at stake: the freedom of the Gospel that led to martyrdom. He comments on Malcolm X in words that must have been for him an echo of his own struggle for freedom, though the circumstances were slightly different: 'Malcolm X first outgrew the ghetto world of prostitution, dope and crime. He then outgrew the religious underworld, the spiritual power structure that thrives on a ghetto mystique. He was finally attaining to the freedom and fullness of understanding that gives some American Negroes the sense of belonging to a world movement that makes them independent, to some extent, of purely American limitations and pressures. Malcolm X grew too fast. He was made to pay for it.'

You can sense here his poignant admiration for a man who had done what Fr Louis was striving to do: to be free. His own personal growth was, I think, essentially more interior. What was it? 'I will try, he says, to make theology comprehensible to those who do not hold it with me. I will do it because it is my way of being "honest to God" and loyal to the grace which has, I believe, brought me to the awareness of the unknowable and unspeakable One who is present to me (I gladly agree here with Tillich and the Bishop) in the pure ground of my being. I will do it in my own terms, which may have something of St. John of the Cross, something of St. Thomas, something of the Greek and Latin Fathers, something also of Tauler and Co., of Christian existentialism, and something even of Zen.' (Faith and Violence; p. 237-8)

I hardly know what to say at the end of this talk. I would like to quote some deep insight that Fr Louis had but I find them all tinged with a kind of esoteric romanticism. I should quote from a letter to Br Patrick because there was a special bond between the two. I could quote from something in his hermitage days when the trees and the hills and the wild creatures of nature communed with him. But I will settle for one of those absurd enthusiasms that would never have come to anything, yet left him searching for something within himself that was an impossible dream - but still a dream. Here goes - to Flavian Burns: 'My feeling at present is that Alaska is certainly the ideal place for solitude and the hermit life. In fact it is full of people who are in reality living as hermits. Men who have gone far out into the wilderness with a stack of books and who get themselves a homestead, cut wood, read, and stay away

from everyone, living on moose, fish, caribou, etc. I don't plan it that way. But it gives you an idea of the character of the place. There is also an old Russian Orthodox monk who has lived for years as a hermit off Kodiak Island. In fact before him there was a Staretz who is venerated as a saint .... Unfortunately I was not able to get to Kodiak, and this old monk is now sick, but I hope to meet him someday before he dies'.

This is nonsense. It simply couldn't have worked for Fr Louis, and he must have known deep down that it is nonsense. But I guess it is the nonsense of his deepest dreams, his changeableness, his enthusiasms, his crazy Mertonioia.

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