

# Thomas Merton and the Experience of Contemplation

by

Elizabeth Rimmer

## Introduction

In 1941, when Thomas Merton entered the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, monasticism was already experiencing a revival. At the end of the Second World War, this hotted up to the point where he referred to the numbers of postulants arriving as 'an invasion', as men left the army and asked to be admitted, some of them still in uniform. Despite making foundations in 1944 and 1947, there were 200 monks in a monastery built for 120 by 1949, and between 1950-52 the postulants had to eat their meals in a corridor because there was no room anywhere else. Yet by the end of Merton's life in 1968, many of these young men had left, some as postulants, some as novices, some even after final profession. In 1967 he wrote in a letter to Dom Francis Decroix, "I have seen over a thousand young men of our time, or rather nearly two thousand, enter and leave this monastery, coming with a hunger for God and leaving in a state of confusion, disarray, uncomprehending frustration and often deep bitterness".

The pressure of numbers, the bustle, the workload involved in housing, farming and supporting so many new monks led Merton to speculate on the conditions a monastery needed to sustain the contemplative life in *The Sign of Jonas* in 1951. But the loss of so many vocations, some of them apparently well-founded and sincere, led him to reexamine the question in a more fundamental way. The monastery, he concluded, did not merely exist to provide a suitable lifestyle and ambience in which the monk could, simply by conforming, perfect his prayer life. He wrote: "Monastic life should provide . . . a special awareness and perspective, an authentic understanding of God's presence in the world and His intentions for man" (*CWA* p.10). In dealing with this subject, three themes recur over and over again in his works: personal integrity, intimacy with God, and compassionate openness to the world.

I shall be exploring these themes in this paper, drawing on several of Merton's works, but with particular reference to *The Inner Experience* (written 1959, published in *Cistercian Studies Quarterly (CSQ)* 1983-4), *Seeds of Contemplation* (revised edition, 1962). *What is Contemplation?* (1960). *Contemplative Prayer* (1969) and *Contemplation in a World of Action* (1972).

## Part One: Personal Integrity

The question of obedience is more difficult for us now than it was for previous generations. Thomas Merton spent a long time meditating on the phenomenon of the Nazis who murdered millions of Jews in concentration camps and then said they were "only obeying orders", and he was convinced that the almost orgasmic self-surrender of the individual to political mass movements was one of the biggest threats facing the human race. He distinguished this sort of abnegation of personal integrity sharply from the genuine obedience and self-giving of love. In *Contemplation in a World of Action*, he writes:

Let us not imagine that this "existing for another" is compatible with perfect love. The alienated man cannot love. He has nothing to give. Nothing is his. The lover is able to give himself completely to another precisely because he is his own to give. He is not alienated. He has an identity. He knows what is his to surrender. The alienated man has no chance to surrender. He has simply been taken over by total control.

Genuine love has nothing to do with allowing yourself to be manipulated by the self-seeking expectations of another. It has nothing to do with turning yourself into something you are not simply to pacify the unreasonable demands of someone else. It does not absolve you from responsibility for your own conscience. To be authentic, love has to be a genuine gift of what you really have to offer. Therefore, in order to give myself, I have first to *be* myself. But who is that? In the West, we live in an intellectual climate which thrives on analysis, differentiation, classification. We understand what things are by separating them out from what they are not. We break things down into little bits to see what each is in isolation

from the rest, and try to understand how it will affect the other bits by seeing what is its own intrinsic nature. We even try to do this with our own personalities. We identify ourselves with lots of social roles or activities; "I am a gardener", "I am a mother", "I am a teacher, doctor, lawyer..." each of which we try to keep separate from the others, and each of which is more or less of a performance to be evaluated separately. I heard of a relationship breaking down because a young man did not know "what role she wanted him to play". There are magazines for "women who juggle their lives". We are insisting that the private and public lives of prominent persons should be kept separate and judged by entirely different principles, as if each were no more than a matter of skill, like being good at French but bad at Maths.

In this situation we are tempted to see our prayer life as just another role, another performance, but as Merton points out, there is nothing more fatal. We will only finish up stressed out, bewildered, narcissistic and more artificial and false to ourselves than ever: "The first thing you have to do... is to try to discover your basic natural unity, to reintegrate your compartmentalised being into a co-ordinated simple whole and learn to live as a unified human being" (*IE CSQ*, 1983, p.3)

We have to abandon all our roles, our projects and all kinds of self-preoccupation and learn to live from our deepest "inner self" who "has no projects and who seeks to accomplish nothing, not even contemplation. He seeks only to be and to move (for he is dynamic) according to the secret laws of Being itself, and according to the promptings of a Superior Freedom (that is God) rather than to plan and to achieve according to his own desires" (pp.4-5). There is no trick to this, no technique or spiritual discipline that can bring it about, but certain cultural environments do nourish the inner self, and foster the necessary inner silence, humility, and detachment from passing whims, disordered cravings and fantasy. Merton believed that the concern to develop the inner self was common to all the higher religions but that this cultural environment was more common in the East than in the West. In a useful digression, he compares the awakening of the inner self - on its natural, most basic level - with the Zen concept of *satori*: "self-discovery". In this experience, after a long period of quiet and self-discipline, the pupil discovers that the outer self - the myth that we perpetuate about ourselves and try to impose on others - is simply a

fabrication, and in a blinding flash of insight, he finally begins to accept himself as he really is "in all his homeliness" (poem of Chao-pien).

Nevertheless, for the Christian, the discovery that we have an inner self, that we are not simply the sum of all our roles, activities, passions and pretensions, is only a preparation. The discovery of the inner self is "simply a stepping stone to the awareness of God" (p.9). We believe that we are made in the image of God and God is "reflected" in our inner selves as in a mirror. Therefore, in our inner selves there is a deep and silent communication with God who lives within us. The aim of Christian mysticism is to pass beyond the inner self to awareness of His Presence. Perhaps the nearest equivalent to Chao-pien's discovery "there sits the old man in all his homeliness" is the Magnificat where Mary proclaims:

My Soul glorifies the Lord;  
my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.  
He has looked on His servant in her nothingness,  
Henceforth all ages shall call me blessed. (Luke 1:48)

We cannot discover our "true selves" by separating ourselves from all the other beings in the universe; we find ourselves when we are "looked on" by God, and our nothingness is blessed because it glorifies Him.

There are two conclusions which we can draw from this. The first is, that for a Christian, the inner self is not itself God. The mirror is not the image. God dwells within it and is its source, but when we become aware of His presence, we become aware of a great metaphysical gap between Creator and creature, and that we cannot cross it by reason, imagination, emotion, analogy or any other ordinary human capacity. For this reason, the intuition of God's revelation of Himself to us depends on faith alone. This experience is not 'special'. It does not make *us* special. It carries no reward, no powers, no consolations with it. Thomas Merton could not say often enough how poor, simple, humble and unassuming the inner self is. He stresses that one cannot 'find one's inner centre and know God there as long as one is invoked in the preoccupations and desires of the outward self . . . Freedom to enter the inner sanctuary of our being is denied to those who are held back by dependence on self-gratification and sense satisfaction, whether it be a matter of pleasure-seeking, love of comfort, or

prone to anger, self-assertion, pride, vanity, greed and all the rest". (IE, p.12). We will discuss the implications of this in Part Two.

The other conclusion we can come to is this: although we become aware of God as different, other, unknown, greater than our minds and heads and imaginations can cope with, we do not perceive Him as separate. He is with us. He is within us and we draw our very life and being from His closeness. The contemplative awareness may depend on faith but it is expressed in love. Our identity is not found in isolation and separateness, but in relationship. We cannot live as who we are unless we are willing to make a gift of ourselves in love. For this reason, we cannot make self-discovery a narcissistic and self-indulgent withdrawal from relationships which baffle or confuse us by the demands they make on us. The solitude and silence we require is not simply the freedom to follow our own illusions in preference to those of anyone else. It is not the fact of having to deal with other people that compromises our integrity; it is precisely this lack of integrity which compromises our relationships. As we will discover in Part Three, this means that for Merton, being a contemplative did not invoke flight from the world, but a deeper and more compassionate concern for everyone in it.

## Part Two: Contemplative Intimacy with God

Thomas Merton's most precise definition of what contemplation is occurs in *The Inner Experience, Part IV*: "An immediate, and in some sense passive intuition of our inmost reality, of our spiritual self and of God present within us". It is something that God does in us, without any effort on our part and is sometimes referred to as 'pure', 'mystical' or 'infused' contemplation.

However, Merton also writes about another state of prayer, a kind of 'active' or 'masked' or 'acquired' contemplation:

Here the soul, aided by ordinary grace, works in the familiar natural mode. One reasons and one uses one's imagination and elicits affections in the will. One makes use of all the resources of theology and philosophy and art and music in order to focus a simple and affective gaze on God. All the traditional means

and practices of the interior life come under the heading of 'active contemplation' to the extent that they help us to know and love God by a simple gaze on Him (*What is Contemplation* p. 95)

Although it also is primarily a work of grace and it too leads to a loving knowledge and intimacy with God, it differs from infused contemplation in that it depends to a certain extent on our efforts and co-operation.

Unlike many other writers who tended to disparage it, at least in relation to the infused state, Thomas Merton values active contemplation very highly. It demands, he thought, "a deliberate and sustained effort to detect the will of God in events and to bring one's whole self into harmony with that will". It is the mature fruit of a thorough immersion in liturgy, Scripture, the sacraments and the life, culture and tradition of the Church, and a humble, generous and self-forgetful living for others; not out of empty conformity to the rules and norms of a particular institution. but from a genuine love based on integrity. It develops when, after a lifetime of learning, meditating on and responding to the message of God for us we suddenly appear to 'get the point'. All the things we have been juggling for so long trying to make a balanced picture out of our lives suddenly come together and we are able to live out of this insight without the stress of constant self-evaluation. Indeed, we are no longer particularly interested in ourselves, our lives, our miserable performance of our duties, because this is not simply an intellectual or aesthetic experience, a moment of 'enlightenment' simply for our own personal benefit. In order to be called contemplation at all, this must be an overwhelming experience of reverence, awe and love for God who is thus obscurely revealed as the heart of our lives.

Merton actually describes this as "one of the simplest and most secure ways of living a life of prayer." (*IE Part V*). He recognised that most of his novices were ideally suited to a life of active contemplation and would find the demands of a more explicitly contemplative life frustrating and sterile and he had a great respect for the level of holiness they attained. Active contemplation is less inclined to be self-conscious, more likely to be free of pretension and affectation, less tempted to pride and self-conceit. An active contemplative gradually frees himself from any form of self-

concern "abandoning himself to the will of God . . . one can swim with the living stream of life and remain at every moment in contact with God in the hiddenness and ordinariness of the present moment with its obvious task". And he comments that such people "live for God and for His love alone. They cannot help knowing something about Him". (*IE Part V*).

Merton felt that everyone was called to the experience of active contemplation, but also that for some people it was the most appropriate preparation for "occasional and unpredictable visits of infused or passive contemplation". However, if we imagine it is like preparing for a parachute jump by jumping off the kitchen table we would be wrong. It is not, and cannot be anything like we have thought, felt or imagined before, because God is greater and more wonderful than we can possibly comprehend. In infused contemplation God communicates Himself "as He is in Himself", by-passing concepts, emotions or analogies, in an experience that mystics variously describe as 'darkness', 'emptiness' or 'unknowing'. It is an experience that it is impossible to convey accurately; Thomas Merton says at one point that it is nearly like nothing at all, but in *Contemplative Prayer* he adds:

True emptiness is that which transcends all things and yet is immanent in all. For what seems to be emptiness in this case is pure being. Or at least a philosopher might so describe it. But to the contemplative it is other than that, it is not this, not that. Whatever you say of it, it is other than what you say. The character of emptiness, at least for a Christian contemplative, is pure love, pure freedom.

It is not surprising then, that the first signs of the beginning of this state are not feelings of peace or clarity, but rather of helplessness, isolation and frustration. What we want no longer comes to us through the natural faculties as it used to. We don't know exactly what it is, though we persist in believing it has to do with God. All we know is that all the things that used to remind us of God and fill us with delight in His work no longer do anything for us. It is like drinking Tizer or re-reading the comics we used to love as children – still pleasant, we still know why we used to like it, but any appeal they have is nostalgic – we wouldn't spend any time on them



now we are adult. Merton speaks more strongly. He describes it as like eating the kind of pre-chewed food that is given, as an honour, to guests at Arab banquets.

This often produces a feeling of serious conflict. Sometimes we are aware that everyone else is getting on fine with liturgies, retreats, prayer groups or whatever, and we wonder what is the matter with us that we can't get anything out of them. At other times we may become painfully aware that sermons are actually tedious or ill-prepared, that the retreat given is patronising or that the meditations we are asked to use are juvenile, superficial or sentimental, and we hurl ourselves into plans of reform on the off chance that it will make us feel better about them. But we soon realise that nothing is actually going to bring back the satisfaction we used to feel: we are out on our own in the unsupported darkness of faith.

This can be very painful. Merton writes of the 'anguish' suffered by the soul that wants to serve God and finds itself helpless to do anything for itself. He warns against two particular temptations. The first is to morbid and hypochondriacal self-analysis. We are out of our depth here and cannot make reliable assessments of how we are doing. The best guides are faith, patience and obedience to help us carry on quietly without becoming self-conscious and hence either conceited or despairing. The second is more common. We really do not like this feeling of helplessness and obscurity and dependence on something we cannot fully understand, and we are tempted to build up ever more rigid and demanding schemes and timetables and rituals that are meant to deaden the sense of emptiness and fill us so much with the conviction that we have at least *tried* to serve God that we drown out the genuine invitation of the Holy Spirit towards a deeper interior life. Greater flexibility and spontaneity is required now as we progressively simplify our prayer and are drawn towards more solitude and silence.

The chief danger of this stage in our spiritual journey is what is technically known as 'illuminism' – swallowing one's own myth, imagining that every whim of self-indulgent fantasy is the will of God, and gradually abandoning any responsibility for sincere dialogue with teachers, colleagues, spouses or spiritual directors. Genuine contemplative experience makes us more individual, more independent and less conformist, but it also makes us more open to the wisdom of others, not less, because it is based firmly

on humility. In this darkness and detachment from our own prejudices and illusions we cannot help but experience most profoundly our failures in love, our betrayals of the most profound truth of our lives. We become aware, over and over again, that we do not give what is asked of us, that we reject – or more often simply neglect – the grace that is offered. Merton's language about this is extreme; he writes of 'dread', 'spiritual death', of being in hell, comparing it to Christ's three days in the tomb awaiting resurrection, and in this he has the support of the classical mystical writers, particularly St John of the Cross and the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*. But he is also at pains to stress the experience of mercy, the paschal journey from death to life, the need over and over again for the virtue of hope. When he touches on his own difficulties, which were prolonged and severe, he also says that the difficulties are outweighed by an underlying peace and gratitude for the love and mercy of God.

Because of this experience of 'dread', of the conviction of our own sinfulness, it becomes impossible to see oneself as spiritually gifted or as in any way superior to anyone else. We are implicated in the injustices of our times because we share the greed, the fear, the anger that brings them about and we develop compassion towards the sufferings borne by everyone else, because we feel in ourselves the needs that cause their grief. In the latter part of his life, Merton became convinced that his contemplative vocation, far from removing him from concern with such things, actually compelled him to care passionately about racism, nuclear disarmament and conservation, and his personal letters to people who disagreed with him, to black victims of racism, to Jews hurt by the insensitivity of some of the documents of Vatican II, to young people alienated from their parents' generation show not only kindness and understanding, but also a profound sensitivity.

This is what we would expect of a genuine contemplative. Merton was quick to reject the kind of solitude which simply involved getting away from everything distasteful about community life and every possible confrontation with what is distressing in oneself. The solitude of contemplation was for him the emptiness of the desert but it was also . . .

Pure love, pure freedom. Love that is free of everything, not determined by anything or held down by any special

relationship. It is love for Love's sake. It is a sharing, through the Holy Spirit, in the infinite Charity of God. (*Contemplative Prayer* p.119)

### Part Three: Prayer, the World and Daily Life

Readers who come to Merton's work via his autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain* often get the impression that his acceptance by the Abbey of Gethsemani was the end of his spiritual quest and that he had finally found the life he wanted and to which God called him. While there is a sense that this was so – even at the end of a turbulent monastic career he still asserted that he felt called to remain a Cistercian and attached to Gethsemani – on a deeper level, nothing could be further from the truth. It is worth pointing out that the book dealt with his life up to the age of twenty seven and was published when he was only thirty-two, but even at that stage Merton was beginning to experience in a very deep way and one which was to be very fruitful for the process of monastic renewal that was just beginning, the difference between the discovery of what your vocation is supposed to be, and the hard-won, slow-dawning realisation of how you are meant to live it out. It was like the difference between falling deeply - and genuinely - in love and learning day by day to live with a partner who turns out, after all, to be only human.

It was clear, by the end of *The Seven Storey Mountain* that Merton was racked by the sort of questions which plague everyone who tries to take prayer seriously: the relationship and the balance to be struck between prayer and work, the contemplative attitude to the world, and particularly those Christians remaining in it; the responsibility of the contemplative to the world, particularly over the questions of poverty, oppression and war; the tension between the call to solitude and the need to communicate the insight gained through solitude.

These questions were given an added edge by the fact that as a Trappist, he was supposed to have renounced the world for a life of solitude, silence and prayer. And yet on his Abbot's instructions, he wrote books which became world-wide best sellers. Hollywood tried to buy the film rights to *The Seven Storey Mountain*; imposters attempting to obtain money pretended to be Merton claiming that he had left the monastery; the

centenary celebrations at Gethsemani were overshadowed by the fact that the media were far more interested in Merton than in his abbey, and he had to give up saying Mass for the general public. Neither Merton nor his abbot seemed to have any idea how to cope with this phenomenon, and it is not surprising that relationships got a little strained.

Also in the years leading up to the Vatican Council it became obvious that monasticism was in need of renewal. It seemed to Merton that monasticism in general and Gethsemani in particular was trying to preserve a rigid facade of medieval European culture, regardless of its new setting. This produced ambiguities of all kinds, from the artificiality of preserving out-dated customs which reduced the contemplative life to a fancy-dress masquerade, or the inappropriateness of pseudo-gothic architecture to the American landscape, to the regulations about dress and hours of work which took no account of differences in climate and led to monks suffering tortures from prickly heat in the hot humidity of a Kentucky July. As novice-master, Merton became increasingly concerned by the numbers of young men who entered the monastery with what seemed to be genuine vocations, but left feeling that the monastic experience was some kind of holy charade with no serious point of contact with real life.

Merton believed that contemplation was not some strange and extra-worldly experience to be gained by leaving ordinary living behind. He felt that it was, on the contrary, a grasp of the deepest and most vital truths of human nature, and that therefore a true contemplative had a contribution to make to the debate on the most profound human questions. It was not that they had a grasp of the intricacies of politics, economics or ecology, but they were familiar with the dynamics of fear, greed and self-loathing that provide the excuses for violence and injustice, and prevent us from working out sensible solutions.

However, although plumbing the depths of the contemplative life is a specialised activity, it did not follow that contemplation itself is only for the elite. Merton stressed that active contemplation – which is in practice often the utmost a person heavily involved in the active life can cope with or find time for – should be the goal of every serious adult Christian. He saw a role for monasteries in offering help, guidance and inspiration for lay people, and even, in a limited way, an opportunity to share in the peace of an environment ordered simply for contemplation.

All of this involved rather more contact with the world than many people were prepared for, and to those who adulated him on the basis of *The Seven Storey Mountain* it sometimes seemed that Merton had lost his way. One psychiatrist accused him of wanting to live in a hut in Times Square with a neon sign over it saying "Hermit". This is a caricature. Merton was the first to assert that a contemplative had no right to dialogue unless he was first committed to the genuine desert experience of solitude, simplicity, humility, obedience to a rule, and sincerity in prayer. A monastery had nothing to share with the world unless it was genuinely giving a priority to living out its contemplative vocation: to prepare monks for a life of active contemplation and openness to infused contemplation if that should be the will of God. For this reason he demanded that the work, liturgy, asceticism, environment and the formation of the monks should be thought of primarily as a means to this end, rather than becoming in themselves objects of obsessive, and often self-serving, concern.

The first pre-requisite for a life of contemplation was an atmosphere of genuine peace, silence, solitude and simplicity. He did not want monks to be idle or indigent, but felt that too great a stress on efficiency, on performance and success in the work undertaken in the monastery or even in the liturgy, produced undue tension and distraction. He recommended this to lay people too, pointing out that though one could not escape the pressures and demands of family life – and neither should any one want to – it was possible to increase one's opportunities for peace by, on one hand

reducing [one's] needs for pleasure, comfort, recreation, prestige and success and embracing a life of true spiritual poverty and detachment (*Inner Experience Part VII* p.227)

and on the other, accepting freely and wholeheartedly all the pressures, difficulties and conflicting demands on our time and patience as the particular means which God will use for our spiritual development.

Then, Merton demanded of those about to undertake the contemplative experience a solid foundation of intellectual, cultural and emotional maturity pointing out that one cannot transcend one's nature before one has had a chance to understand it. His aspirations for a

twentieth century orientation for a monastic life are idealistic, almost romantic:

A life that is quiet, lived in the country, in touch with the rhythm of nature and the seasons. A life in which there is manual work, the exercise of arts and skills, not in the spirit of dilettantism but with genuine reference to the needs of one's own existence. The cultivation of the land, care of farm animals, gardening. A broad and serious literary culture, music, art . . . a genuine and creative appreciation of the way poems, pictures etc are made. A life in which there is such a thing as serious conversation and little or no TV... Here the postulant is going to occupy himself not with facts, or even skills – though he may have to learn the Latin he needs. He is going to learn to go through normal human experiences and to be aware of them and of himself with a certain amount of depth. He is going to learn to be alone with himself and with his thoughts. To sit still. To work at making something. (*The Inner Experience Part VII*. pp. 273-5).

For the lay person this may seem hopelessly out of reach, but although we may have to do a certain amount of cutting our coats to fit our cloth, a certain element of peace, simplicity, serious thought and genuine creativity is open to us, even if it is only learning to respect the level of skill and attention it takes to iron a shirt, put up a shelf or mow a lawn correctly. However there is no denying that in homes dominated by TV, personal stereo's and the telephone, and workplaces constantly disturbed by meetings, fax machines and VDU's, it is hard to retain a sense of perspective.

Merton suggested that lay people should not only be free to visit monasteries for help, but should also form support groups to pray together, lend each other books, organise conferences and perhaps find a place to hold retreats. Above all, we might develop a contemplative spirituality centered in the mystery of marriage: Merton commented in the late fifties, that "the development of such a spirituality is very necessary and much to be desired." Perhaps, in the mid-nineties, we might agree that this is more true than ever.

Thomas Merton was always conscious that he was not a typical monk, not a typical hermit, much less a typical Cistercian. In an era which was overwhelmingly concerned to hang onto what was felt to be tried and trusted, he was an anomaly which many found hard to cope with and this was, in part, his intention. In a letter to Rosemary Reuther he described what being a hermit meant to him:

not an ideal status or a condition of 'striving for spiritual perfection', but a reduction to the bare condition of man as a starting point where everything has to begin: incomplete and insufficient in the sense of being outside social cadres. But then, entering into these in a free and tentative way, in an explorative way, to establish new and simple relationships. As one who is not a doctor, a banker, a politician or this or that, but a 'mere man'.

It seems however that in this very reduction to the basics of the human social condition, Thomas Merton became free to speak to everyone.

### Notes and References

Selected passages from *The Inner Experience* were published by the *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* and are available as an off-print from Sr. Sheryl Frances Chen OCSO, Santa Rita Abbey, HCI Box 929, Sonoita, AZ 85637-9705, USA