

Living With Wisdom

A Preface

by Jim Forest

[The text that follows is the preface to the new Russian translation of Jim Forest's classic introduction to the life of Thomas Merton. *Living with Wisdom* was published in Moscow in October this year by Istina i Zhisn (Truth and Life).]

Though well known in many countries, I cannot think of any community of readers Thomas Merton would rather know and appreciate his books than Orthodox Christians in Russia.

Thomas Merton was Roman Catholic and a member of one of Catholicism's strictest monastic orders. Nonetheless, throughout his religious life one notices the remarkable influence of traditions of Christianity best preserved within the Orthodox Church: iconography, the Jesus Prayer, the apophatic spiritual path linked with Mount Athos and Sinai. He treasured the sayings and stories of the Desert Fathers and was familiar with the *Philokalia*. Insofar as it was possible for someone living in our day, he identified with the Church before the Great Schism. (The first icon I was ever given was his present to me – a gift which proved a significant moment in the slow process that finally led me to join the Orthodox Church.)

His artist father was drawing icons on his death bed the last time his son visited him. Merton was only fifteen. Two years later, visiting Rome's most ancient churches, icons were again to touch his life this time in so powerful a way that he was moved to buy a Bible and to pray with tears.

Many years later, in a letter to a friend who was baffled by the importance of icons in his life, Merton explained: "When I say that my Christ is the Christ of the icons, I mean that he is reached not through any scientific study but through direct faith and the mediation of the liturgy, art, worship, prayer, theology of light, etc., that is all bound up with the Russian and Greek tradition." The letter was written only two years before his accidental death while attending a monastic conference in Thailand in 1968. One of the few items of personal property he had carried with him on that journey was a

handpainted icon of the Theotokos and Savior that came from Mount Athos.

Among the influential figures in his life when he was still searching for his vocation was a Russian, Catherine de Hueck Doherty, known in America and Canada to many people simply as "the Baroness" because she had come from an aristocratic family in St. Petersburg. Her passionate Christian faith and her awareness of Christ's presence in others led her to found an inter-racial community, Friendship House, in New York City's Harlem. Attending a lecture by the Baroness at the college where he was teaching English literature, Merton decided to become a part-time volunteer at Friendship House. One of the hardest decisions he made in his life was choosing to become a monk rather than a full-time member of the community in Harlem. Late in 1941, only weeks after the United States entered World War II, he arrived at the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky.

Two years after the war ended, Merton's autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, was published. It became one of the most widely read autobiographies of this century, translated into many languages and in print ever since. It was a book that made Merton famous and yet in later years distressed him. He came to regret the way he had dismissed all forms of Christianity but Roman Catholicism and also regretted his condescension regarding non-monastic vocations.

"I have learned," he wrote in 1963 in the preface to the Japanese translation of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, "to look back into the world with greater compassion, seeing those in it not as alien to myself, not as peculiar and deluded strangers, but as identified with myself. In freeing myself from their delusions and preoccupations I have identified myself, none the less, with their struggles and their blind, desperate hope of happiness."

Fourteen years after beginning monastic life, Merton began to immerse himself in Russian literature and religious writing. At the time in America, Russia was linked with the newly launched Sputnik, but what attracted Merton was the Russian spiritual tradition. He became convinced that restoring oneness in the church began within oneself:

If I can unite in myself the thought and the devotion of Eastern and Western Christendom, the Greek and the Latin Fathers, the Russian with the Spanish mystics, I can prepare in myself the reunion of divided Christians. From that secret and unspoken unity in myself can eventually come a visible and manifest unity of all Christians. If we want to bring together what is divided, we can not do so by imposing one division upon the other. If we do this, the union is not Christian. It is political and doomed to further conflict. We must contain all the divided worlds in ourselves and transcend them in Christ.

Here we see a theme at the heart of his writings throughout the last decade of his life and implicit in much of his earlier work: the longing for unity, not merely a bureaucratic or theoretical unity, but a unity of shared mystical life in Christ, whom he sometimes referred to as "the hidden ground of love," and at other times "as Mercy within Mercy within Mercy."

Unfortunately Merton never experienced the Divine Liturgy in the form familiar to Orthodox Christians; he knew Orthodoxy chiefly through its iconography and writings (the books of Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, Paul Evdokimov, Vladimir Lossky and Olivier Clément were dear to him) plus occasional correspondence with Orthodox priests and lay people. He was inspired by Orthodoxy's fidelity to tradition, which he saw in dynamic rather than static terms. As he wrote in an essay on "Monastic Spirituality and the Early Fathers":

If for some reason it were necessary for you to drink a pint of water taken out of the Mississippi River and you could choose where it was to be drawn out of the river -- would you take a pint from the source of the river in Minnesota or from the estuary in New Orleans? The example is perhaps not perfect. Christian tradition and spirituality does not become polluted with development. That is not the idea at all. Nevertheless, tradition and spirituality are all the more pure and genuine in proportion as they are in contact with the original source and retain the same content.

Merton was among the first in the United States to read Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*, having obtained the Italian edition months

before the novel was published in English. Astonished by the “striking and genuinely Christian elements” marking Pasternak's writing, Merton wrote to Pasternak in August 1958:

Although we are separated by great distances and even greater barriers, it gives me pleasure to speak to you as one with whom I feel to be a kindred spirit. It is as if we met on a deeper level of life in which individuals are not separate beings. In the language familiar to me as a Catholic monk, it is as if we were known to one another in God. This is a very simple and to me obvious expression for something quite normal and ordinary.... I am convinced that you understand me perfectly. It is true that a person always remains a person and utterly separate and apart from every other person. But it is equally true that each person is destined to reach with others an understanding and a unity which transcend individuality. Russian tradition describes this with a concept we do not fully possess in the west -- Sobornost [conciliarity].

Merton told Pasternak he hoped to study Russian “in order to try to get into Russian literature in the original. . . . I would much prefer to read you in Russian.” It was a hope he never realized, but it is striking that he was touched by such a longing.

Given CIA and KGB control of all mail that passed through the barriers created by the Cold War, it must be counted a miracle that the letter reached Pasternak's dacha at Peredelkino, and yet another that a response from Pasternak reached Merton several months later. Six letters were exchanged before Pasternak's death two years later. For Merton, it was an experience of oneness cutting through all the walls of politics and ecclesiastical division. Shortly after his expulsion from the Soviet Writers Union, Pasternak told a friend that Merton's “high feelings and prayers have saved my life.”

We see the influence of Orthodoxy in Merton's deep love for *Hagia Sophia* -- Holy Wisdom. Inspired by Russian authors, he began thinking about *Hagia Sophia* not as an abstract concept but as the deeply mysterious Person whom the Book of Proverbs describes as “playing in the world before the face of the Creator.” Ardently devoted to the Mother of God as Merton was, he rejoiced to see how

the Church identifies *Hagia Sophia* as being both revealed and fulfilled in the *Theotokos*.

Perhaps this small book's greatest virtue is that there are many quotations from Merton's own writings. In them you will meet a great writer, a devout and courageous follower of the Savior, a man searching day by day for God's will, even if he found himself led in directions that were often surprising, sometimes shocking, to his superiors and his fellow Roman Catholics.

Perhaps most puzzling to many people was his interest in other forms of religious life, not only within Christianity but in other cultures. He corresponded with Protestant Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Moslems, and sometimes received them as visitors. While traveling in Asia shortly before his death, he had a series of meetings with the Dalai Lama.

Such activities led some to imagine that Merton had “outgrown” Christianity. Yet during his Asian pilgrimage, Merton was following his usual schedule of daily monastic offices, often saying Mass and praying the rosary. He was not only a Christ-centered person but even a missionary -- not the missionary who seeks to force his faith on others but only to bear witness, most of all in silence.

It is not my intention to present a perfect Merton. As you come to know his life, you will find a man who at times made mistakes. In his first year as a student at Cambridge, he fathered an out-of-wedlock child. Late in his life there was a period when he fell deeply in love with a nurse he met while in the hospital for surgery. He had only recently been given permission by his abbot to live as a hermit and, no longer sharing in the rhythm of cenobitic monastic life, was more vulnerable than ever. After writing an autobiography that presented his monastery in an idealized way, he suffered many temptations to escape to another “better” monastery. As you will see in some of his letters, at times he gave free reign to scathing sarcasm in regard to his abbot and other members of his community.

Yet no one was more aware of his faults than Thomas Merton, as one sees even more clearly in his journals. (The seventh and final volume was recently published.) Aware of the many contradictions in himself, he sought to his last breath to surrender completely to God's mercy.