A World-Embracing Prophet: Catholic Imagination and the Transcultural Believer

Fred W. Herron & Michael J. Herron

More than 100,000 people recently gathered in Trafalgar Square to protest the war in Iraq.[1] Some estimates suggest that nearly one billion children across the planet live in poverty, and nearly the same number of people entered the twenty-first century unable to read a book or sign their name.[2] Meanwhile, self-described "geologian" Thomas Berry argues that "the Great Work now... is to carry out the transition from a period of human devastation of the Earth to a period when humans would be present to the planet in a mutually-beneficial manner."[3] As we look to a world racked by war, poverty and disease, it becomes increasingly difficult for the world to have any sense of where the Catholic community stands and how it intends to act in beginning to nudge humanity one step closer to the reign of God. Joseph Komonchak correctly notes that "the subculture of Roman Catholicism has largely been fractured, and this disintegration has made it very difficult to speak of the church as providing a unified community of response to contemporary challenges."[4]

After the election of Benedict XVI it has become a commonplace to locate the roots of this divide in the difference, already apparent in Vatican II, between understandings of the notions of *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento*, two key notions in play at the council. The French term *ressourcement*, meaning a return to the sources, and the Italian term *aggiornamento*, meaning updating or modernizing, were two ways of speaking about the tasks of church reform and renewal at Vatican II. Once closely linked, they came to serve as distinct terms that identified different views of the council. The former, more closely associated with the world-view of Augustine of Hippo, places a strong emphasis on the corruption of human nature by sin, and the absolute necessity of grace for salvation. The latter, more commonly associated with Thomas Aquinas, does not deny sin or the need for grace, but places greater emphasis on the goodness of nature, including human nature.[5]

Pope Benedict is clearly more comfortable with that Augustinian world-view and with its associated personalism. Commenting on Aquinas, Benedict indicated his impatience with his "crystal-clear logic" which he believed was "too closed in on itself, too impersonal and ready-made." He preferred, instead, "the passion and depth of Augustine's personalism."[6]

Theologian Dennis Doyle remarks that the idea that there is "something very negative about the human experience if we consider it apart from God's grace... is a very strong characteristic of (Ratzinger's) work."[7] Pope Benedict noted, in a German theological review in 1969, "Augustine has kept me company for more than 20 years. I have developed my theology in a dialogue with Augustine, though naturally I have tried to conduct this dialogue as a man of today." As early as 1967, writing on the council, Father Ratzinger repeatedly criticized *Gaudium et Spes*, calling it "unsatisfactory" and saying it "is not at all prepared to make sin the centre of the theological edifice."[8]

His academic work on the ecclesiology of Augustine and the theology of revelation in Bonaventure located Ratzinger firmly in the camp of theological renewal staked by Henri de Lubac and Jean Daniélou, both advocates of a return to the sources. He showed little interest in the other camp, represented by such figures as Karl Rahner, Bernard Lonergan and Marie-Dominique Chenu. Their approach, inspired by Aquinas, proposed a positive engagement with modern intellectual and cultural movements and a true dialogue rooted in "the signs of the times."

From Pope Benedict's point of view, the tragedy of post-Vatican II theology is that, "... after dethroning the inadequate neo-scholastic vision, it has turned, not back to the ancient wisdom displayed in the church fathers and the medieval masters, but to various forms of modern philosophy." Joseph Komonchak, reflecting upon Benedict's approach, argues that Benedict sees the results of this disastrous choice all around us, "... in a church that has become indistinct from its surrounding worlds and has lost its sense of identity and mission, and in a world in which the triumph of positivism has led to ever-growing dissolution and alienation."[9]

The distinction between Thomistic and Augustinian, *aggiornamento* and *ressourcement*, may be summed up in two anecdotes. The first comes from Joseph Komonchak: "When a bishop complained about some of the books being published after the council, Paul VI replied that the best way to oppose bad books is with good books." He notes, however, that "Joseph Ratzinger has been of the view contrasting with Paul VI's patient attitude with regard to theological developments after the council failed, and that, as in the thirteenth century, it is the task of ecclesiastical authority to intervene."[10] The second anecdote comes from John Allen of the *National Catholic Reporter*, reporting on an editorial cartoon in *L'Unità*, the newspaper of the old Communist Party in Italy. Allen remarks: "Understanding the cartoon requires a bit of background. In Italy, perhaps the most revered pope of modern times is John XXIII, know as *il papa buono*, 'The Good Pope'. One treasured memory of John XXIII is an evening in October 1962, the opening of the Second Vatican Council, when the Catholic Action movement organized a torchlight parade that finished in St. Peter's Square. The pope was not scheduled to address the crowd, but when the crowd arrived, John XXIII wanted to speak. He said something that burned into the consciousness of most Italians, repeated endlessly on television and radio. Smiling down on the crowd, he said: *Tornando a casa, troverete i bambini. Date una carezza ai vostri bambini e dite: questa è la carezza del Papa.* That is, 'When you go home, you'll find your

children. Give them a kiss, and tell them that this kiss comes from the pope'. It summed up the legendary love of the man. Thus the *L'Unità* cartoon showed Benedict XVI at the same window, saying, 'Tonight, when you go home, I want you to give your children a spanking, and tell them that this spanking comes from the pope'.[11]

Against this background, the object of this present discussion is (1) to examine the resources offered by our understanding of the Catholic imagination for some insights into the present situation; (2) to consider Thomas Merton as a world-embracing prophet who may act, in Donald Grayston's words, as an "icon of Christian wholeness" in this fractured situation, anticipating and articulating some of the strengths and weaknesses of each approach; and finally (3) to suggest that Merton's understanding of prophecy serves as a lynchpin holding these two points of view together, highlighting the power and the problems associated with the challenge of being a trans-cultural believer in the church today.[12]

I. Ressourcement and Aggiornamento in Light of the Catholic Imagination

The streams of thought represented by the work of Augustine and Aquinas in one age, and by Ratzinger and Rahner in another, are attempts to articulate a Christian faith that begins with our experience of a graced reality renewing hope. Those experiences are encoded as pictures or symbols pointing beyond themselves toward that hope. It is at this point that those pictures or symbols of our experiences are shared with others through stories. Once those stories are told, we are challenged to reflect upon them. They evoke parallel experiences in others and call those others to share their own experiences of hope. Consequently, our stories build solidarity and community with others. We become part of a storytelling community.[13] This is the point at which we can begin to identify the storytelling communities of Augustine and Aquinas, Ratzinger and Rahner.

Our challenge is to identify those storytelling traditions and to consider them in the light of our understanding of the religious imagination. David Tracy, in studying the "classics" of the Protestant and Catholic traditions (the works of Luther, Calvin, and Aquinas, for example) attempted to discover the underlying imagery and stories that shape their work.[14] He suggested that the Catholic imagination is "analogical" and the Protestant imagination is "dialectical." The Catholic classics assume a God who is present in the world, disclosing Himself in and through creation. The world and all its events, objects, and people tend to be somewhat like God. The Protestant classics, on the other hand, assume a God who is radically absent from the world and who discloses Herself only on rare occasions, especially in Jesus Christ. The world and all its events, objects, and people tend to be radically different from God.

Tracy argues that the two approaches to human society - each radically different from the other - are shaped by these imaginative pictures. Catholics tend to see society as a sacrament of God, a set of ordered relationships, governed by both justice and love, revealing (however imperfectly) the presence of God. Society, in this view, is natural and good and our response to God is social. Protestants, on

the other hand, tend to see society as "God-forsaken" consequently unnatural and oppressive. The individual stands over against society and is not integrated into it. The human person becomes fully human only when she or he is able to break away from social oppression and relate to the absent God as a completely free individual.

Catholics, says Tracy, will be more likely than Protestants to value social relationships because they see not sin but sacramentality, however flawed, in such relationships. Catholics will be more likely to value equality over freedom because equality makes for smoother social relationships. Protestants will value the virtues of initiative, industry, and thrift in

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their children, whereas Catholics will tend to emphasize loyalty, obedience, and patience. Protestants will be especially likely to deplore vices diminishing personal integrity, honesty, and sense of duty. Catholics are more likely to be offended by actions such as adultery, prostitution, and suicide that violate the integrity of relationships. Given these differences in worldview, existing in a continuum rather than in a zero-sum manner, we can begin to identify some fundamental principles of a Catholic or analogical religious imagination.[15]

Richard McBrien argues that Catholicism, at its core, is sacramental, mediated and communal.[16] He claims that "no theological principle or focus is more characteristic of Catholicism or more central to its identity than the principle of *sacramentality*. The Catholic vision sees God in and through things, other people, communities, movements, events, places, objects, the world at large, the whole cosmos. The visible, the tangible, the finite, the historical - all these are actual or potential carriers of the divine presence." A corollary to the principle of sacramentality is the principle of mediation. Sacraments cause what they signify. McBrien reminds us that "...created realities not only contain, reflect, or embody the presence of God; they make the presence of God effective for those who avail themselves of these activities." Finally, McBrien argues that Catholicism affirms the principle of communion: that our way to God and God's way to us is a communal way. There is no relationship with God, no matter how intense, that dispenses entirely with the communal context of every human relationship with God.

Andrew Greeley extends this discussion based upon his sociological research regarding religious commitment and imagination. He reported that "Catholics liked being Catholic because... Catholic images of God as present, and the world as good, and society as sacrament were benign and appealing." He suggested that "Catholics... imagined differently in part because they couldn't help themselves. Their pictures of God as present and the world as good - flawed but still good -

had been on average absorbed early in life and were unchanged in later life because they were unchangeable."[17] Beyond the disagreements of left and right, of *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento*, it is this religious imagination, emanating from the profound transformative experience of the resurrection, which is the Catholic community's treasured heritage.

Greeley argues that it is this rich imaginative vision - not creed or doctrine - that continues to attract people to the church. The story of Christmas and the infant Jesus in a manger, a story which St. Francis understood would evangelize Europe, is more powerful than catechisms and dogma. Pope Benedict XVI wrote of his parents: "I know of no more convincing proof for the faith than precisely the pure and unalloyed humanity that the faith allowed to mature in my parents and in so many other persons I have had the privilege to encounter."[18] While creed and doctrine are necessary, they are derivative and only remind us of something more essential, the experience of God and the stories of that risen God restoring our hope. These stories form the core of the lives of families that, year after year, remove their nativity set from the attic, place it under the tree, and "... who believe in something, although they are not sure what; people who feel that in a world of precious little history or tradition, this is theirs."[19]

James Keenan unpacks that imaginative vision, arguing that Catholics may be identified by what they love. He suggests that Catholics love saints, the physical, the sacramental, devotional activities, mentoring, conscience, narratives of moral growth, and the ordinary.[20] Thomas Groome articulates that vision in a slightly different way. He describes eight characteristics of a Catholic imagination: a realistic optimism about the human condition, a belief in the sacramentality of life, an understanding of humankind as made for each other, a commitment to history and tradition, a wisdom rationality encouraging a reflective way of knowing, a dedication to the search for holiness, a commitment to working for justice and the social values of the gospel, and an inclusive vision of humanity.[21]

The benefit of those approaches which begin at the level of religious imagination is that they start at a level of profoundly transformative religious experience. Such approaches do not begin in the ideological conflicts that have been the bane of many Catholic parishes and, indeed, of many schools of theological approach through the church's history. They may offer instead a more inclusive model which better accounts for the diverse experience and relative emphasis which appears in the Catholic community.

It may be fair to suggest that the growing interest in concerns related to religious imagination and experience is connected to the impasse which seems to have paralyzed much of the conversation in ecclesial and academic circles. Religious experience and the richness of our storytelling traditions are areas of common ground which bring people of various ideological stripes together.[22] The experience of many contemporary attempts at linking *aggiornamento* and *ressourcement* may offer impetus for a re-evaluation of the character of Catholicism and may demand that we accept the rough categories of a description of the sacramental imagination as a defining principle of the Catholic intellectual tradition.[23]

2. Thomas Merton: Transcultural Believer

We need look no further than Thomas Merton to find a model of a contemporary believer committed to a theology done on one's knees and still committed to the broadest possible integration of the Catholic imagination. Such a vision may prove uncomfortable to some who prepare textbooks and catechisms for children, but it may be essential to bring the good news to men and women in a postmodern era. [24]

In a paper delivered last September at the University of Notre Dame some key elements of the Catholic revolution that Thomas Merton embodied were highlighted. These elements included:

1. A belief that reality is unfinished, in process, and a matter of on-going creation; 2. A turn to the subject; 3. A heightened awareness of the interconnectedness of humanity and all creation; 4. A renewed and heightened awareness of history; 5. A deeper appreciation for the sources of the Christian tradition and their role in contemporary life.[25]

Here I would like to suggest that Merton's life and thought provide a useful bridge which might serve to integrate the disparate visions of *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento.* At some points, Merton anticipates the strengths and the weaknesses of each approach. At others, he points the way for a more profitable and prophetic approach toward the coexistence of these significant insights from Vatican II. We shall focus briefly on seven elements of the Catholic "cat's cradle":

1. A theology of experience; 2. The Significance of Sacred Scripture; 3. A Return to the Sources; 4. Culture and the Humanistic Tradition; 5. Thomas Aquinas; 6. Renewal in the Church; 7. A Transcultural Believer.

1. A Theology of Experience

If Andrew Greeley and others are right in locating the roots of the religious imagination in profound experiences which generate hope, then it is essential for us to look at a theology which is rooted in religious experience as essential for dialogue with the postmodern world. Postmodernism rejoices in smaller narratives of individual experience. Thomas Merton placed a strong emphasis upon theology as "discourse about the 'experience' of God's presence, love and right to praise."[26] This theology, growing out of the practice of *lectio divina,* was developed less in a library than on a kneeler. Anne Carr puts the matter this way: "... he sought to explain a form of thought which did not separate the head from the heart.... Or, if we locate Merton within the Western context of the medieval distinction between *ratio* as discursive reasoning and *intellectus* as a higher understanding by conaturality (participation and experience), the heart of Merton's thought lies in the latter realm." That is, "his writing speaks to a need, felt by so many, to explore a personal realm of experience that includes but goes beyond the intellectual and is sometimes spoken of as the realm of imagination, intuition, or wholeness."[27]

2. The Significance of Sacred Scripture

Thomas Merton pointed to the central and foundational place of scripture in a Catholic vision. Speaking of the challenge of monastic renewal he argued that "... the monks are finally coming face to face with Luther's challenge. In 'returning to the sources,' they are doing in a more thorough and systematic way what Luther himself did by re-examining his vocation in the light of the Gospel and the Pauline Epistles."[28] It seemed to him that "someone should be able to find the living God in scripture...and then lead others to him there, and all theology properly ends in contemplation and love and union with God - not ideas about him and a set of rules about how to wear your hat."[29]

Merton exhibits an awareness that the Bible needs to be interpreted in a variety of ways and at a variety of levels. He goes beyond a traditional monastic way of reading the Bible while building upon such an approach. Those who read his

...any authentic reading of the Bible has to be existential, engaged, and transformative

Bread in the Wilderness or *The Living Bread* can find ample evidence for this.[30] His much later *Opening the Bible,* clearly a more mature discussion of the meaning of scripture, also draws from and interacts with a wide variety of thinkers including Bonhoeffer, Faulkner, Fromm, and Marx, as well as a variety of classical Eastern texts. Here he argues that any authentic reading of the Bible has to be existential, engaged, and transformative. That is, a detached scholarly reading of the text or a simple allegorical or mystical approach would likely be necessary but insufficient.[31] When taken together these three books offer a powerful sense of Merton's belief that the Bible is an important and authoritative source and that it needs to be read and interpreted in a thoughtful and nuanced way. Merton is careful to reject a narrow scientific approach to scripture which he says offers a "low-protein diet" for spiritual nourishment and a fundamentalism that diminishes and distorts the Christian message. He favors, instead, a kerygmatic approach that challenges the reader to respond intellectually and with the whole self.[32]

3. A Return to the Sources

Merton makes it clear that he saw it as a part of his vocation "... to retrieve for modern readers some of the richness he had himself uncovered in his studies of the writings of the church and monastic fathers...."[33] Jean Leclercq, writing about Merton's developing attentiveness to the sources, maintained that "when he went back to the sources, Merton shook off the hampering shackles of the very recent past which grew out of the nineteenth century, and he did much in the way of liberating his immediate background from such various confines."[34] He displayed a fondness for the Alexandrian tradition of Christianity as it is expressed in Clement and Origen. He wrote a book about Clement, and described Origen in one poem as:

> ...this man
> Who thought he heard all beings
> From stars to stones, angels to
> elements, alive
> Crying for the Redeemer with
> a live grief.[35]

Both *The Wisdom of the Desert* and his conferences on *Cassian and the Fathers* argue that the patristic tradition is deeply

relevant for the modern world.[36] It may well be argued that this passion for the patristic tradition suggests that Merton be read as "deeply conservative", in the sense that he meant to conserve and keep clear the ancient paths. At the same time he read these sources in a radical way, viewing them as demanding guides for the modern spiritual journey.[37]

4. Culture and the Humanistic Tradition

Clearly, Merton's intellectual roots were planted firmly in the expansive cultural milieu of Western culture. He declared himself "deeply in sympathy with... the traditional religious culture of the West."[38] The varied background of his parents and the Dionysian, Victorine, Franciscan, and Thomistic cultural streams combined to enable him to declare that "the sign of Paris is on me, indelibly."[39] In an essay published in *Love and Living,* Merton attempts to unpack the meaning of the Christian humanistic tradition in an age which he describes as fundamentally anti-human.[40] Christians, he argues, are called to "a service of love," which is sorely needed in an age which has turned its back on humanity.[41]

Merton found himself turning to the larger intellectual and philosophical world, abandoning the narrow scholastic manuals of his early training. He came to see his monastic mission, at least in part, as one of outreach to that wider world of philosophy and culture. Writing to Pope John XXIII, he came to prepare what some have referred to as his personal mission statement:

> I have to think in terms of a contemplative grasp of the political, intellectual, artistic and social movements in this world - by which I mean a sympathy for the honest aspirations of so many intellectuals everywhere in the world and the terrible problems they have to face. I have had the experience of seeing that this kind of understanding and friendly sympathy, on the part of a monk who really understands them, has produced striking effects among artists, writers, publishers, poets, etc. who have become my friends without having to leave the cloister.[42]

Merton interacts with major writers, political thinkers, poets and spiritual leaders in creative and dynamic ways. The whole world of experience and learning would be brought to bear on any question. For example, in an essay on Prometheus he unpacks the Prometheus myth, seeing in him a Christ-like figure.[43] Reflecting on Herakleitos he focuses his attention on a key pre-Socratic thinker and finds hints of the aphoristic and wisdom ways of Zen, Taoism and the Christian desert tradition.[44] Simply put, reading Merton sometimes requires, and frequently rewards, a liberal arts education in his readers. More importantly, Merton displays an openness to the evocative and revelatory power of other cultures and ways of undertaking the human journey.

5. Thomas Aquinas

Influenced by his early reading of Etienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain, as well as by his teacher Daniel Walsh, Merton played his own part in the popular renewal of Thomistic thought in the later part of the twentieth century. In his *The Ascent to Truth* he attempted to bridge the gap between the theology of Aquinas and the mystical theology of John of the Cross.[45] Merton quickly came to find the scholastic trappings in which Aquinas' thought had been all too tightly bound to be much too constricting. In his preface to the French edition of *The Ascent to Truth,* published in 1950, he indicated that if he were to take on the same subject again, he would approach it quite differently. He noted that he "... would prefer to draw more upon Scripture and the Fathers and to concern (himself) a little less with scholasticism which is not the true intellectual climate for a monk."[46]

Merton was taken by the vision of Aquinas which he found embodied in his teacher Daniel Walsh. In *The Seven Storey Mountain* Merton described Walsh this way: "He, like Gilson, had the most rare and admirable virtue of being able to rise above the petty differences of schools and systems and seeing Catholic philosophy in its wholeness, in its variegated unity and its true Catholicity."[47]

6. Renewal in the Church

Thomas Merton sometimes nudged and at other times propelled the church in directions it was not entirely comfortable going. He pointed the way to political and interfaith places that many Catholics resisted. For example, his position regarding nuclear war and publications such as his "Chant to Be Used in Processions Around a Site with Furnaces" raised serious problems within the Cistercian community.[48] He was silenced on this topic for a while and there were those who called on him to leave the monastery in order to more actively enter the fray. On the other hand there were moments when he responded poorly to the liturgical reforms of the day, arguing that "our great danger is to throw away things that are excellent, which we do not understand, and replace them with mediocre forms which seem to us to be more meaningful and which in fact are only trite."[49] He was unimpressed with the English translations of the scriptural readings, calling them "extremely trite and pedestrian."[50] He wrote in 1966 that he continued to say the old office and read the Vulgate for his *lectio divina* remarking that "I am horribly conservative in these respects."[51] Commenting on the changes in the liturgy he concluded, "Somehow I think the new is really better," but added, "I have nothing against the old."[52]

7. A Transcultural Believer

Looking at other cultures, Merton argued that there must be a willingness to recognize and respect the integrity of those cultures. Our openness to them is ultimately a reflection of our receptivity to the divine, present in the other. He argues that:

> God speaks, and God is to be heard, not only on Sinai, not only in my own heart, but in the *voice of the stranger....* We must, then, see truth in the stranger, and the truth we must see must be a newly living truth, not just a projection of a dead conventional idea of our own - a projection of our own self upon the stranger.[53]

Once we have made a commitment to patient listening we are able to move from comprehension to convergence and synthesis. Early generations of Christians, he argued, saw the benefits that the questions raised. The answers given by those with other worldviews provided Christians for

whom Platonism offered "a language and a sensibility that were equipped to penetrate in a specially significant way, the depths of the revealed mystery of Christ."[54] This experience characterized the flowering of medieval Christianity which was greatly enriched by "turning to the non-Christian world - to Aristotle and to Islam."[55] We can go beyond considering another culture on its own merits, he suggests, and begin to recognize a kinship that transcends cultural differences and becomes rooted instead in the humanity which we all share. He argues that his aim is "not merely to look at these other traditions coldly and objectively from the outside, but, in some measure at least, to try to share in the values and the experience which they embody."[56]

It is this capacity to become "in a certain sense identified with everybody" that Merton calls "final integration."[57] He concludes that "the man who has attained final integration is no longer limited by the culture in which he has grown up.... He accepts not only his own community, his own society, his own culture, but all mankind.... *He is fully 'Catholic' in the best sense of the word. He has a unified vision and experience of the one truth shining out in all its various manifestations, some clearer than others, some more definite and more certain than others. He does not set these partial views up in opposition to each other, but unifies them in a dialectic or an insight of complementarity.*"[58]

Even though such interpenetration of various traditions is critically important, Merton maintains that "the path to final integration for the individual, and for the community lies... beyond the dictates and programs of any culture...."[59] This is true, he argues, because all culture, all human achievement, is provisional and partial. "For the Christian," he writes, "a transcultural integration is eschatological.

"The rebirth of man and of society on a transcultural level is a rebirth into the transformed and redeemed time of the Kingdom...."

The rebirth of man and of society on a transcultural level is a rebirth into the transformed and redeemed time of the Kingdom...." That is, "it means a disintegration of the social and cultural self... and the reintegration of that self in Christ, in salvation history, in the mystery of redemption, in the Pentecostal 'new creation'"[60]

III. The Transcultural Believer Between the Rock and the Hard Place

Joseph Komonchak, reflecting on the experience of the progressive bishops and theologians at Vatican II, noted that even among those who held so much in common there were significant, substantive disagreements as well. He illustrates one such difference in the contrasting evaluations that appeared regarding the overall achievement of the council as offered by Yves Congar and Joseph Ratzinger. Congar, noting the diminished presence of Thomas Aquinas in the final texts, argued that "St. Thomas... furnished the redactors of the dogmatic texts of Vatican II with the foundations and the structure of their thought." Ratzinger saw things differently: "those forces that really made Vatican II possible and shaped it" were derived from "a theology and a piety which essentially were based on the Holy Scriptures, on the church fathers, and on the great liturgical heritage of the universal church." For Congar, following the influence of M.D. Chenu, who for decades urged the church to read "the signs of the times," the foundation of this approach was the incarnation as the "assumption into Christ of the whole of human existence, including the social, political and cultural." Ratzinger, differing from Karl Rahner in this regard and intent upon placing the cross at the heart of the church's evaluation of society, argued that "an orientation of the church toward the world which would mean a turning away from the cross would lead not to a renewal of the church but to its decline and eventual decay." Ratzinger was critical of the authors of some conciliar texts for preferring Thomism and the Greek fathers as well as Teilhard de Chardin to those, like Martin Luther, who preached the cross.[61]

Komonchak rightly reminds us that we ought to remember "... that neither would have agreed to the absurd choice between the two necessary mysteries." At the same time, however, he argues that "the differences between Augustinians and Thomists have their parallels in the way Catholics approach the modern world, whether they look for points of contact, whether they set up sharp dichotomies, how they conceive the task of preaching and catechesis, etc."[62] He suggests that "the Thomist typically works with an elaborated theory of human nature that beyond which grace elevates us, that below which sin sinks us." A typical Augustinian, on the other hand, would tend to suggests that the "signs of the times" are mostly or all negative. Komonchak, following Bernard Lonergan, argues that "where the Thomist sees the need for three conversions" - religious, moral and intellectual - the Augustinian typically is content with a religious and moral conversion.

David Tracy compares these distinctions with what he describes as 'correlation' and 'epiphanic' theologies. Correlation theology involves a conversation between the biblical and traditional heritage and the questions and assumptions of a particular culture or age. Epiphanic theology aims to present faith in its beauty and wisdom with the ideal that the Gospel does not need to be culturally mediated.[63] One reading of this distinction suggests that the alliance between Catholicism and modernity forged by theologians like Rahner, Lonergan and Küng (among others) after Vatican II had threatened to destroy even the uneasy alliance between Catholicism and modernity forged at Vatican II. Bonaventure, rather than Aquinas, was seen as providing the best classical model for Catholic theology. Both Balthasar and Ratzinger argue that Bonaventure envisions a Catholic theology that clarifies and affirms its own identity and not in correlation with the ever-shifting experience of each contemporary situation. It should be noted, however, that not all readers of Bonaventure view his thinking as non-correlational and that much of Ratzinger's early work in this area remains open to a more correlational view

of Bonaventure.[64]

An approach which begins with religious experience, along with the symbols and stories to which this experience gives rise, begins to meet the expectation which Frederick von Hügel set when he observed that every great religion is comprised of three fundamental elements: the mystical, the institutional, and the intellectual.[65] This approach attempts to account for philosophy and theology, but it needs to account as well for myths, rituals, symbols and symbolic forms of the Catholic tradition.[66]

David Tracy has quite rightly remarked that "it's harder for us Catholics to be counter-cultural because our whole tradition ordinarily leads us to adopt a positive attitude toward the surrounding cultural reality and tries to find its positive elements before making judgments, especially prophetic, evangelical judgments." He goes on to argue that "I think we need to be stronger on [prophetic critiques and counter-cultural stances]. American culture can overwhelm us. It has strengths and weaknesses, and some of those weaknesses demand counter-cultural moves from any committed Christian...."[67] Thomas Merton, approaching that Catholic tradition from a different cultural and religious stance, brings fresh eyes to the relationship between Catholicism and the prophetic tradition. He argues that "the real challenge to Christianity today is...above all the recovery of a creative and prophetic iconoclasm over against the idols of power, mystification and super-control."[68] This involves two movements: denunciation and annunciation. By denunciation Merton means a clear-sighted critique of the different forms of illusion, for the sake of the defense of the human person as the image of God. At the same time there must be a clear annunciation of the good news of the God of love and liberation. Merton argues that "the great historical event, the coming of the Kingdom, is made clear and is 'realized' in proportion as Christians themselves live the life of the Kingdom in the circumstances of their own place and time."[69] This dual movement of denunciation and annunciation helps to hold the forces of *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento* together in a creative and dynamic whole which better articulates the fullness of the Catholic imagination than either one is capable of doing on its own. This was and remains one of Thomas Merton's unique contributions to the life of the Catholic community in the post-Vatican II era. His gift, in Sister Mary Luke Tobin's words, was that "...he moved in both private and public expression to a world-embracing attitude that was truly prophetic."[70]

In his essay "He Is Risen," Merton advises us that "we must never let our religious ideas, customs, rituals, and conventions become more real to us than the Risen Christ. We must learn, with St. Paul, that all these religious accessories are worthless if they get in the way of our faith in Jesus Christ, or prevent us from loving our brother in Christ."[71] Christians from the left and the right, Catholics of the *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento* schools, pray before the cross as a sign of contradiction and a sign of reconciliation.[72] The cross, Merton reminds us, helps us to recall the contradictions within ourselves and within our society. We can resolve these in unity and love with Jesus Christ: "True unity is the work of love. It is the free union of beings that spontaneously seek to be in the truth.... True unity admits the presence of obstacles and of divisions in order to overcome both by humility and sacrifice."[73]

Reflecting on the theme of the "old man" and the "new man" in 1959 Merton observed: "For the new man everything is new. Even the old is transfigured in the Holy Spirit and is always new...." The new man "... is he who can find reality where it cannot be seen by the eyes of the flesh.... The new man lives in a world that is always being created and renewed. He lives in this realm of renewal and of creation. He lives in life."[74]

The challenge confronting the Catholic community today is to focus on the big picture, the transforming story of God's love inspiring hope two thousand years later, a story that begins with an angel who says "Do not be afraid," and tells of a child in a manger. It is a story still challenging us to take one more step toward bringing about the reign of God. That story tells of a cross standing as a sign of unity and reconciliation while demanding this community live together while the body of Christ, "lovely in limbs not his," is still racked by war, poverty and disease. Geologian Brendan Keevey reminds us that "the problem with most people seeking common ground is that they don't realize they are standing on it."[75] C.S. Lewis provides what seems to be a sound vantage point from which we might begin to tell this story today. He correctly notes that:

> we are all rightly distressed, and ashamed also, at the divisions of Christendom. But those who have always lived within the Christian fold may be too easily dispirited by them. They are bad, but such people do not know what it looks like from without. Seen from there, what is left intact, despite all the divisions, still appears (as it truly is) an immensely formidable unity.... That unity any of us can find by going out of his own age. It is not enough, but it is more than you had thought till then.[76]

Joseph Ratzinger echoed these sentiments in his memoirs. Reflecting upon the challenges of the years 1967-68 he remarked on his work with two Lutheran theologians: "We saw that the confessional controversies we had previously engaged in were small indeed in the face of the challenge we now confronted, which put us in the position of having, together, to bear witness to our common faith in the living God and in Christ, the incarnate Word."[77]

Thomas Merton stands in that uncomfortable place reminding us that if we are to be "fully Catholic in the best sense of the word," we need to avoid these partial views set up in opposition to each other and to unify them in a dialectic of complementarity. Those who are willing to stand as signs of unity in this fallow time in the church's history "face the anguish of being a true prophet." The alternative, however, is to accept the current divisions as the best we can do or, even worse, to rejoice in the notion that one or another stance is sufficient. To do so in the current situation is to "enjoy the carrion comfort of acceptance in the society of the deluded by becoming a false prophet and participating in their delusions". [78]

see over for Notes

Notes

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4. Joseph A. Komonchak, "The Church in Crisis: Pope Benedict's Theological Vision," *Commonweal* 132 (June 3, 2005), http:// www.commonweal.org/article.php?id_article 1249. (Accessed June 6, 2005).
5. Joseph Komonchak, "Is Christ Divided: Insights From Vatican II for Dealing With Diversity and Disagreement, *Origins* 33 (Accessed July 17, 2003), http://originsplus.catholicnews.com/ (Accessed November 18, 2005).
6. Joseph Ratzinger, *Milestones: Memoirs 1927-1977* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1997), p.44. See also Aidan Nichols, O.P., *The Thought of Benedict XVI: An Introduction to the Theology of Joseph Ratzinger* (London: Burns and Oates, 1988), p.27-50.
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9. Joseph Komonchak, "The Church in Crisis."
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13. Ronald Pasquariello, *Conversations with Andrew Greeley* (Boston: Quinlan Press, 1988), pp.99-100.
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17. Andrew M. Greeley, *The Catholic Myth: The Behavior and Beliefs of American Catholics* New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1990), p.49.
18. *Milestones*, p.131.
19. Anna Quindlen, *Living Out Loud* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), p.159.
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38. *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p.293.
39. Ibid., p.163.
40. *Loving and Living*, pp.135-170.
41. Ibid., p.150.
42. William H. Shannon, (ed.), *Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985), p.482.
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59. Ibid., p.217.
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61. "Is Christ Divided?"
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Fred Herron is a member of the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at St John's New York, and the author of *No Abiding Place: Thomas Merton and the Search for God* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2005).

Michael Herron is a student in the combined BA/MA programme in theology at St John's University, New York and was selected as a 2005 Daggy Scholar by the International Thomas Merton Society.