

In Praise of Anti-Sainthood

Danny Sullivan

Thomas Merton, in his fine essay, *A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichmann*,¹ comes to the conclusion that the most disturbing aspect of Eichmann is that he was discovered to be sane. Should he have been found to be insane we perhaps could have dealt with the horrific atrocities he oversaw, but Eichmann's sanity is a much more chilling challenge to us and our understanding of human nature.

Merton develops this concept of sanity by indicating that before you realise it it becomes the norm and even Christianity can start behaving "sanely" - thus the Church will bless war planes and bombs whilst anti-war demonstrators are clearly "mad".

Merton argues that this concept of sanity is about as much use to us as the ageing bones of the dinosaur and that to be sane on the world's terms is the ultimate insanity. Merton states that we need to learn to doubt more, to be less sure of ourselves and to discover the meaning of authentic love, that is, to have profound compassion for our fellow women and men.

I was reminded of this essay of Merton's and his astute analysis of what stands for sanity as we approach the fortieth anniversary of his death which of course is this year. I assume there will be a focus on celebrating his life and work but I wonder if there will be any time and

space given to standing back critically from and genuine reflection on what Merton may have taught us. Merton himself once compared the vocation of the monk to that of the authentic hippy in that the role of both was to be outsiders and sit at the edge of the world and be critical.

Will there be, I wonder, something of that radical spirit in reflecting on forty years since Merton's death and the veritable industry that has grown around his life and writings?

A good place to begin that exploration would be the kerfuffle surrounding Merton's inclusion and ultimately exclusion from the new American Catechism² which appeared in 2006.

Firstly, we have to recognise that the production of the Catechism emanated from the Catholic Bishops' Conference and that this was an initiative by the institutional Church. Institutionally the Roman Catholic Church is not renowned for its sense of inclusion, its gender equality and a spirit of openness. This is not an argument based on political correctness, simply a recognition of how difficult institutional Christianity finds it to be true to the transparent and inclusive spirit of the Gospels. Added to this is the lack of freedom of any "local" (national) Catholic Church. The principle of subsidiarity has long been abandoned within institutional Catholicism and any "local"

church initiatives remain subject to the scrutiny and approval of the men (sic) in the Vatican.

Having initially included Merton as a positive model for young Catholics in the opening chapter of the draft Catechism the Bishops were assailed by two critics in particular - Monsignor Michael Warren, Dean of Students at St. Joseph's Seminary in New York and Kenneth D Whitehead a former US Assistant Secretary of State for Education. Warren and Whitehead display an abject understanding of Merton's life and work when they assert that his "investigation" of eastern religions towards the end of his life make him a poor role model for faithful Catholics. This of course in itself begs the question as to what makes for a faithful Catholic. Warren and Whitehead also display a startling ignorance of *Nostra Aetate*, Vatican II's fine document on engagement and dialogue with people of other faiths - something of course which had been integral to Merton's life and work even before Vatican II.

Warren and Whitehead further compound their ignorance by describing Merton as a lapsed monk (there is no such thing as a lapsed monk) which is as insulting as it is unreal. With the tiniest piece of research these two critics could have discovered for themselves why Merton was in Asia when he died and that indeed he was there with the blessing and approval of his abbot.

Bishop Wuerl, Chair of the Catechism Committee, trying to justify Merton's eventual exclusion from the Catechism argued that "the generation we were speaking to had no idea who he was" whilst at the same time singularly failing to apply that principle to any of the other

models of American Catholicism whose biographies were to be included in the Catechism.

So far so bad but unfortunately it gets worse. Up pops the International Thomas Merton Society (ITMS) with a letter to Bishop Wuerl urging him and the Bishops' Conference to revoke their decision to exclude Merton from the Catechism.³ This letter receives the endorsement of over one thousand people some of whom copy it to their own local bishops.

The letter itself opens in a somewhat uncritical and fawning manner praising the Bishops for their initiative in producing the Catechism. It then argues for Merton to be included as this would be:

".....a significant way to extend the powerful witness of his life and writings to a new audience."

The authors of the letter don't say why this is really necessary and nor do they tackle head on the spurious criticisms of Merton's inclusion put forward by Warren and Whitehead. Further, they manage to contradict themselves by at one point arguing for Merton's inclusion for "a new audience" and then later suggesting that Merton is "far better known to the target audience" than any of the other figures profiled.

The letter continues to make the case for Merton by relating how widespread the teaching about him is at secondary, collegiate and graduate levels. It also refers to the growing and broadening interest in Merton's life and writings worldwide. The authors state:

"We believe that Merton remains a figure of great fascination and

attraction, and will continue to serve as an outstanding model of faith, wisdom and compassion for many years to come.”

The letter concludes with a robust defence of where Merton was spiritually at the end of his life and makes presumptuous comments about “reputable Merton scholars” and “careful readers of Merton”, no doubt thus implying that there are disreputable Merton scholars and careless readers of Merton.

Finally, the authors of the letter recall how Merton was banned from publishing on peace issues in 1962 and argue that his voice is

“once again being ‘silenced’ by leaders of a Church that is in vital need of his continued witness.”

If we return to Merton’s essay on Eichmann and his exploration of the concept of sanity on the world’s terms his insights are very telling in relation to other people arguing whether he should or should not be a model for contemporary American Catholics.

We have the “sanity” of an all male Bishops’ Conference deciding whose lives will inspire American Catholics - subject to Vatican approval of course. Here we have a group of mature people who have neither the courage nor the imagination to be their own people but instead accede to the central and controlling arm of the Church.

The ITMS in its letter to Bishop Wuerl simply reinforces this notion of the “sanity” of the new Catechism. In putting its case for Merton to be included

in the Catechism it becomes uncritical of the exercise itself. The ITMS failed to have the nerve to actually declare how unimportant it was whether Merton was included or not. Instead it presumed to own him, iconise him, have a sense of possessiveness and preciousness about him which seemed to take no account of who he was and whether this would have been an issue for him. In over dramatic terms it described Merton being “silenced” again which reflects scant awareness of those within the Church who have been truly silenced and marginalised under this papacy and that of John Paul II. No voice is heard here with any radical edge similar to that of Merton and his thoughts on the shared vocation of the monk and the authentic hippy.

Both the American Bishops’ Conference and the ITMS fall into the trap which Merton warned us about in his essay on Eichmann, of trying to be sane on the world’s terms. “We the bishops shall decide who you contemporary American Catholics should look up to”...and “we the ITMS will make the case for our man Merton to be there”. Ultimately both look foolish for they have been seduced by a sense of their own importance, the bishops in thinking they are all knowing and powerful and the ITMS in trying to “canonise” Merton through the Catechism.

Whilst the whole affair may be dispiriting one can also be amused at the folly of it all and then be reassured and inspired by things going on in a world not dictated to by this false sense of sanity. For example, Jim Forest emailed friends in the autumn of 2007 telling them the story of the High School students in America who took over the office of their Principal in

protest at the war in Iraq. The youngest student was 13 years old and the students had in their possession a copy of Merton’s anti-war piece ‘Chant to be used in processions around a site with furnaces’. The value and worth of this action in the longer term would be worth more than the sale of endless copies of the new Catechism and it would not take too much working out as to which issue Merton would be most empathetic with.

Many people will continue to read Merton for themselves and will integrate what they read, reflect upon and learn into their daily lives and engagement with their fellow women and men. They will need no reputable scholars or careful readers of Merton to help them with this as they are quite capable of doing it for themselves. They will have no interest in Merton as a model for others or as a potential saint, for if Merton had a gift it was to point you to the unknown mystery that is love and compassion which is God. Merton never led you to himself. The essence of spirituality is the silence which leads to the radical, unreserved love of and service to others.

Given that we are already in 2008, the fortieth anniversary of Merton’s death, perhaps some early thinking could go into what could be done to celebrate the centenary of his birth in 2015. All the Merton societies could work together at planning an inter-faith retreat/conference led by the leaders of the world religions and this could be replicated in local faith communities across the world. Social justice issues could be identified and supported in the spirit of Merton’s radicalism. A moratorium could be declared on anything published or written about Merton during 2018 with the emphasis being

on silence, meditation and social action instead of endless streams of words.

Two people who truly understood Merton and sustained their friendship throughout his life and beyond were Bob Lax and Ed Rice. They have been unfairly criticised at times for their perceptions of him and most tellingly of course by people who never knew or met Merton but who feel they could judge those who did.

I believe Lax and Rice would have found the whole insanity of the in or out of the new American Catechism hilarious. They had a deeper understanding and awareness of who Merton really was and the depths of his journey.

As Bob Lax once said:

“Some people are in the light, some are in the dark and some are in a kind of grey. Keep trying to work towards the light. Don’t try to convert or confront people. Just shine.”⁴

Three cheers for anti-sainthood.

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, New Directions, 1964.
2. *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*, St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2006.
3. Open letter to Bishop Donald Wuerl from the International Thomas Merton Society.
4. James Harford, from *Merton and Friends*, Continuum, 2006.

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