

Thomas Merton and the Human Future

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An edited version of a lecture given in December 2008 in the Anglican Diocese of Liverpool on the fortieth anniversary of Thomas Merton's death.

Shortly after the publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain* Merton wrote,

'I want to be a forgotten and unknown saint, hidden in God alone. I feel entirely out of sympathy with all the activity and noise of our day and age.

All that is not for me. May God preserve us from it and keep us for himself alone in silence and prayer—a life of obscure suffering and devotion to him in the humblest things'.¹

There was no chance that this would ever be likely. At the time of writing, four years after Hiroshima, some of the challenges of the nuclear issue had not yet totally kicked in, nor had the race question emerged so forcefully. In these he was to be a resonant voice. Written in the year in which he was ordained deacon and priest, perhaps this is the idealism of a monastic ordinand. There were insights to gain and paths to travel before he could come to the self-recognition and integration just before his life ended,

'Hence the curious fact that there are two Mertons, one ascetic, conservative, traditional, monastic.

The other radical, independent, and somewhat akin to beats and hippies and poets in general. Neither one of these appeals to the current pacesetters for Catholic thought and life in the US today. Some of them respect me, others think I'm nuts, none of them really dig me. Which is perfectly all right'.²

In my beginning

1929 lives for ever in the American consciousness as the year of the Wall Street Crash and the beginning of the Great Depression. So it was for Thomas Merton, but in a more intimate sense. In 1929, sixteen years old and staying with his aunt and uncle in Ealing, he received a phoned telegram message from his father Owen, terminally ill in London.

'I sat there in the dark, unhappy room, unable to think, unable to move, with all the innumerable elements of my isolation crowding in upon me from every side: without a home, without a family, without a country, without a father, apparently without any friends, without any interior peace or confidence or light, or understanding of my own—without

God, too, without God, without heaven, without grace without anything....'³

It must have brought back vividly earlier memories of when he was just six:

'One day Father gave me a note to read. I was very surprised. It was for me personally, and it was in my mother's handwriting. I don't think she had ever written to me before—there had never been any occasion for it. Then I understood what was happening.... mother was informing me, by mail, that she was about to die, and would never see me again. It was not the grief of a child, with pangs of sorrow and many tears. It was something of the heavy perplexity and gloom of adult grief, and was therefore all the more of a burden because it was, to that extent, unnatural. I suppose one reason for this was that I had more or less had to arrive at the truth by induction'.⁴

These bereavements had incalculable effects on Merton. My suspicion is that they left a considerable vacuum in him, later unsuccessfully filled by his carousing and friends. The impression one gets from both *The Seven Storey Mountain* and his journals is that this void was only capable of being filled by his vocation and possibly later by his love for M.

However much he loved the brethren, and indeed loved God, human love, with M, and human intimacy I sense were important, given that loss at such an early age usually marks one for life. I wonder if

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we are distant enough and insightful enough to regard the later relationship with M as a gift of grace, which at the time Merton certainly did.

It is his experiential awareness of the human condition and his ability to articulate this which is I think one reason why readers are drawn to Merton. As William Shannon puts it:

'So much of him was like what we all are. But... what makes him different is that he had the uncanny ability to articulate the human struggle with a clarity and precision'.⁵

There is that intriguing passage in which his brother, John Paul, serving in the Canadian Air Force comes to Gethsemani and Merton goes looking for him:

'At the end of the long nave with its empty choir stalls, high up in the empty tribune, John Paul was kneeling all alone, in uniform. He seemed to be an immense distance away, and between the secular church where he was, and the choir where I was, was a locked door, and I couldn't call out to him to tell him how to come down the long way round through the Guest House. And he didn't understand my sign.

At that moment there flashed into my mind all the scores of times in our forgotten childhood when I had chased John Paul away with stones from the place where my friends and I were building a hut. And now all of a sudden here it was all over again: a situation that

was externally of the same pattern: John Paul, standing confused and unhappy, at a distance which he was not able to bridge.

Sometimes the same image haunts me now that he is dead, as though he were standing helpless in purgatory, depending more or less on me to get him out of there, waiting for my prayers.⁶

This idea of the influence of others upon our lives is a recurring one, and it is difficult not to miss in this passage the resonance of the 'long search' and the longing for human interaction, as well as silence, which is something of a contradiction I guess, but I wonder if it isn't the contradiction in all of us.

Those who prayed me where I now am

At the end of that passage is the comment 'waiting for my prayers.' Reading Merton one comes to realise just how strong in him is this idea of connectedness, the communion of saints, and the effect of prayer for one another. In some sense he sees human relationships as connected by the intention of our prayers, and this appears at several points in his writings. Just after his 26th birthday, before writing to Gethsemani to make a retreat in Holy Week, he writes,

'How can anyone tell how much he owes to the goodness of those who love him? If we knew what people in their love for us do to save us from damnation by the simple fact of their friendship for us, we would learn some humility. But we take for granted we should have friends, and are not at all

surprised they should come seeking our company and liking us; we imagine that we are naturally likeable, and people flock to us to give us our real due, as if we were angels and attracted them by our great goodness to love us. And it is only love that gives us life, and without God's love we would cease to be, and perhaps without their good, natural love and charity which argues for us always in God's sight without their anyways knowing it, he would long ago have given us up to our punishment and turned his face away; and let us hurtle over the edge of the abyss, where love of friends still holds us in their spoken or unspoken prayers.

Whose prayer made me first pray again to God to give me the grace to pray?

Someone must have mentioned me in some prayer: perhaps again the soul of some person I hardly remember—perhaps a stranger in some subway, or some child—or maybe the fact that someone as good as Lily Reilly happened to think I was a good guy served as a prayer...

These things are inscrutable, and I begin to know them better than I can write them... How many men have become Christians through the prayers of Jews and Hindus who themselves find Christianity terribly hard?

We cannot know the movements

of Christ's grace; we only know one thing, that in the Church it is sure—that everywhere else where there is grace it is Christ's grace, but we can't be sure it is grace.⁷

I wonder if we often give a thought to the affect of others' prayers for us, even the prayers of those unknown to us. Merton reflects on his days as a young boy wandering around the countryside of the Pyrenees near Prades,

'There were many ruined monasteries in those mountains. My mind goes back with great reverence to the thought of those clean, ancient stone cloisters, those low and mighty round arches hewn and set in place by monks who have perhaps prayed me where I now am.'⁸

Who was it prayed us where we now are? We find the same perspective when Merton arrives at the monastery:

'Presently the window opened, and Brother Matthew looked out between the bars, with his clear eyes and grey beard.

"Hullo, brother", I said.

He recognized me, glanced at the suitcase and said: "This time have you come to stay?"

"Yes brother, if you will pray for me," I said.

Brother nodded, and raised his hand to close the window.

"That's what I've been doing", he said, "praying for you".⁹

Towards the end of his life Merton

wrote, 'I am here in answer to someone's prayer'.¹⁰

Monasticism: ideals and reality

Merton considers the monk's place in the world sometimes over optimistically, for example in that passage where he describes Gethsemani as almost the spiritual centre of America, even what keeps America from being totally consigned to perdition. At other times he feels the frustration of community life. For example,

'I cannot evade the fact that the intense activity which fills this whole house and in which I myself am engaged is actually creating obstacles to my deeper union with God. I feel exactly in the same predicament as a person working in the active ministry in a town or city'.¹¹

Seven years later similar feelings are still present,

'I think the monastic life as we live it here warps people. Kills their spirit, reduces them to something less than human. The way people verbalise like parrots in sermons and theological conferences seem to me to indicate a perilous falsification of their spirit. Many of them are no longer quite sane'.¹²

and later:

'Saw the Christmas folder advertising our cheese and hams etc. It is revolting—at least the copy is. "Many porkers are called but few

are chosen to provide our luscious hams..” A few words like that are enough to say all that needs to be said about what has happened to this monastery.¹³

This may be the necessary *labora* that goes with *ora*, for the Cistercian reform focused upon the restoration of manual labour to the monk's life, whether chopping wood, brewing beer, pruning trees or making cheese.

This is Merton's critique in relation to institution and charism, particularly the neat distinction here between obedience and doing what one is told. He writes in 1964:

‘The root question is the question of the authenticity of our monastic vocation....

That is the trouble with the great overemphasis on monastic institutionalism. In fact the monk comes to be for the sake of the monastery, not vice versa. The monk as a member of the organisation. He cannot be fired, but he can be urged to work hard for the purposes of the organisation, whatever they may be: from cheese making to liturgical renewal and ‘contemplation’.

This is not to say that obedience is not the heart of the monastic asceticism. It is. But merely doing what you're told is not obedience.¹⁴

It is of course his reaction to the routine at Gethsemani and the frustrations which he regards as impedimenta. Yet it has wider implications. How do we sustain a

charism when it has become institution? It is an ecclesiological problem of how to let the Spirit breathe in the church, and indeed in us. By the end of 1964 we can hear the exasperation:

‘I am clearer than ever that I am not a monk, still less a Cistercian monk, and that I have no business making statements that directly affect the conduct of the Cistercian life (except to try to help my novices live without going nuts immediately. I leave them to go nuts when they get into the Juniorate). With this unpleasant clarity I expect to try to live for a few more years, hoping that I will not go nuts myself... If on top of this the Lord sees fit in his mercy to admit me to a non-monastic corner of heaven, among the beatniks and pacifists and other maniacs, I will be exceedingly grateful. Doubtless there will be a few pseudo hermits among them and we will all sit around and look at each other and wonder how we made it. Up above will be the monks, with a clearer view of their own status and more profound capacity to appreciate the meaning of status and the value of having one’.¹⁵

Many thought that Merton might leave Gethsemani; indeed for many years Merton longed to move to another community or found a new one.

‘The whole question of my relationship to the community is something I can't formulate and

I'll just let it go for the moment—except that the community to me is a curious, sometimes funny, sometimes crazy phenomenon which does not even understand itself.’¹⁶

A week or so later the friction between vocation, spirituality and community is evident and he has come to terms with his role as a kind of monastic *enfant terrible*.

‘I will no longer worry...about having a somewhat disruptive influence in the monastery. I do not have to rock the boat, but I think it is good to do so anyway. I think I really do the community a service by keeping many people unsettled, and raising dangerous questions.

Also by being something of a temptation and a scandal.’¹⁷

The relationship with M is finished or finishing and it may be that this adds to frustration, or is his *agent provocateur*

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view some kind of self justification for being the naughty boy of the community, a defensive riposte to being found out?

What then might the role of monasticism be in the human future? Monastic

communities possess the freedom to critique society. Possessing nothing, they should have nothing to lose. We need only think of the role of Buddhist monks in Burma in the struggle to gain political freedom for its people; of Merton's role in the nuclear issue and among the anti-war protestors, and his run-ins with the traditional Catholic establishment.

The place of the church

Merton's critique is reflected in the wider engagement of the church with the world, perhaps a timely comment when the church becomes so self concerned for ‘mission’ as a self-sustaining obsession,

‘When Christian perspectives are warped, Christianity turns from a religion of hope into an obsession with guilt, and in order to evade the pressures of intolerable self blame, we fling ourselves into activities which are supposed to change the world and ourselves with it.’¹⁸

In the light of this one has only to read the several passages about his critique of the liturgy, its wordy exclusion of the sense of the numinous and its colloquial earthbound chatter to the big Friend, which also might be a pertinent critique of much of what passes today as contemporary worship:

‘Respect for mystery, sense of the mystery of God, veneration of the sacredness of mystery, awe and humility in approaching the ineffable holiness of Him who can be known in Himself only by his own revelation of Himself—and

these are essential virtues of a truly religious soul. To lose these characteristics is to lose our religious spirit. To grow in them is to grow in the interior life. The gabby objectivity of a relationship in which familiarity has destroyed all sense of the reality of God's Tremendum Mysterium [Tremendous Mystery] is almost as bad as agnosticism'¹⁹

The human future

People sometimes ask what Merton would have done or thought about women priests, or the place of gay, lesbian and transgendered people and the church. What would he have thought of current inter-religious dialogue, and the so called 'clash of civilizations', in an ecumenical

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winter? There are perhaps some trajectories in Merton's writing that give us clues, but prophecy on behalf of the deceased—even those in eternity—is a risky business. One could point to his early 'Catholic' years and his statements about celibacy being integral to the Gospel and how Protestants have got it wrong in allowing

pastors to marry, and that the Catholics have it right.²⁰ Yet turn to the pages of his journals following on from 1966, and the experience of his relationship with M, and you find him changing his mind. He considers someone else's proposal for an order of married priests and whether he and M might find a future place in such a context. I don't think we can disentangle Merton's experience of encounter and human love from his experience of grace and his understanding of God. It is the human encounter which often leads him to change his mind, and this ought not to be seen as weakness, but genuine *metanoia*, experience of grace which alters one's view and direction in living. It is surely this dialogue between experience and theological reflection which makes him such an engaging writer.

'I have to accept the fact that my life is totally paradoxical. I have also had to learn gradually to get along without apologising for the fact, even to myself. I have become convinced that the very contradictions in my life are in some way signs of God's mercy to me, if only because someone so complicated and so prone to confusion and self-defeat could hardly survive for long without special mercy. And since this in no way depends on the approval of others, the awareness of it is a kind of liberation.'²¹

In this hope for special mercy Merton gives us encouragement not to lose heart in the complex and often contradictory business of living.

Contemplative vocation

Merton's encouragement to us to engage with the vision of God in the world comes from both his solitude and from meetings with others in the hermitage. Here the balance of solitude and occasional colloquium sets him free from the constraint of spirit he often felt in the coenobitic life.²¹ If Merton was able to glimpse the presence of God in the natural world he was as emphatic about God's presence in humankind, not only in his well known 'Fourth and Walnut' passage, but in his advice to a fellow priest threatened with suffocation under parish duties,

'I don't see that you have to stop being a priest just because the routine machinery of parish organisation is bugging you.... See your priesthood not as a role or an office but as just part of your own life and your own relation to other persons. You can bring them to Christ in some quiet way, and perhaps you will find yourself reaching people that the Church would not otherwise contact.'²²

For Merton the sense of delight in humankind should moderate the severity of monastic commitment:

'You can see the beauty of Christ in each individual person, in that which is most his, most human, most personal to him, in things which an ascetic might advise you sternly to get rid of. But these attachments too, are relevant to your life in Christ, and I have noticed that novices who try to be too grimly detached from parents

and friends, and from other people in general, often lack a most important spiritual dimension in their lives and frequently fail altogether as monks. Those who are more 'human' make better monks precisely because they are more human and because they simply do not believe the injunctions of those who try to tell them that they must be less human'.²³

It is among his human relationships that Merton finds the providence and grace of God most present. Reflecting on his past he has the distinct sense that his friends and relationships were a remarkable gift. Perhaps Merton's appreciation gives us pause for thought to treasure the people given to us, possibly when we least appreciate them.

Other faiths, ecumenism and the future

In Merton's dialogue with Buddhism and Zen he could acknowledge the spiritual depths and the distinctive integrities of these traditions. This respectful engagement is something Merton points us to in the context of Christian ecumenism and in the wider perspective of the *oikoumene* of inter-faith dialogue. As a Methodist I was reminded of this in the Merton archive at Bellarmine when listening to the tape of Merton's conferences with his novices in which he criticises the Methodists. He says something like 'pity these poor Methodists with their doctrine of assurance, never quite sure whether they are saved or not.' It's a pity he wasn't around for me to write to him, particularly in the light of what he writes in his journal, 'Here I am a priest with all the world as my parish.'²⁴

I suspect that now Merton and Mr Wesley have had that conversation, and that both have since made common cause in the discussion of the relation of charism to institution. If heaven ever happens to be institutional such an alliance promises the angels a hard time.

The Merton legacy

There is enough in Merton's own writing about the living springs of faith to prevent his own work and memory ever being institutionalized. Of the emerging Merton archive he writes:

'The hermitage—OK.... But the Merton Room—to which I have a silver key, and where I never go, but where the public go—where strangers are and will be. But the Merton Room—a place where I store away endless papers, in which a paper self builds its nest to be visited by strangers in a strange land of unreal intimacy. The Merton Room is a kind of escape from Gethsemani, a protest against their messing up, destroying, losing, frittering away, dispersing, rotting, canning, feeding to mice everything I have put my heart into'.²⁵

Merton early indicated his heart's desire,

'What I need—as far as I can interpret the desire in my heart, is to make a journey to a primitive place, among primitive people, and there die. It is at the same time a going out and a 'return'. A going to somewhere where I have never been or thought of going—

a going in which I am led by God, a journey in which I go out from everything I now have'.²⁶

As we remember Merton so we pray he has found his heart's desire, as his words remain to guide us and lead us to ours.

Notes

1. To Abbot James Fox, *School of Charity: letters on religious renewal and spiritual direction*, Thomas Merton, Patrick Hart (ed.) (Harcourt Brace, 1990) p.12.
2. To Sister JM, June 17th 1968, *School of Charity*, p.385.
3. *The Seven Storey Mountain (SSM)*, Thomas Merton (SPCK London, 1975) pp.71-2.
4. *SSM*, p.14.
5. *Silent Lamp*, William Shannon, (SCM Press, 1993) p.14.
6. *SSM*, pp. 398-99.
7. *Run to the Mountain: The Journals of Thomas Merton, Vol. I*, Patrick Hart (ed.) (Harper Collins 1995) pp. 304-5.
8. *SSM*, p. 6.
9. *SSM*, p.371.
10. *The Other Side of the Mountain: The Journals of Thomas Merton, Vol. 7*, Patrick Hart (ed.) (Harper Collins 1998) p.182.
11. To Dom Humphrey Pawsey, September 11th 1952, *The School of Charity*, p.40.
12. *A Search for Solitude: The Journals of Thomas Merton, Vol 3*, Lawrence S. Cunningham (ed.) (Harper Collins 1998) p.285.
13. *Ibid*, p.339.
14. To Father Ronald Rolof. February 14th 1964, *The School of Charity*, p.201.
15. To Father Callistus (Jorge) Peterson.

August 4th 1964, *The School of Charity*, p.225.

16. *Learning to Love: The Journals of Thomas Merton. Vol 6*, Christine M. Bochen (ed.), (Harper Collins 1999) p.263.

17. *Ibid*, p.268.

18. Original preface to *The Ascent to Truth* in *A Thomas Merton Reader*, Thomas P. McDonnell (ed.) (Lamp Press 1974) p.372.

19. *A Search for Solitude: The Journals of Thomas Merton, Vol. 3*, Lawrence S. Cunningham (ed.), p.82.

20. *Run to the Mountain: The Journals of Thomas Merton, Vol I*, Patrick Hart

(ed.) (Harper Collins 1995) pp.48-9.

21. *First and Last Thoughts*, author's preface in *A Thomas Merton Reader*, Thomas P. McDonnell (ed.) (Lamp Press 1974) p.16.

22. To Father D., March 14th 1968, *The School of Charity*, p.371.

23. *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Thomas Merton (Doubleday, 1968) p.213.

24. *A Search for Solitude*, op. cit., p.33.

25. *Learning to Love*, op. cit., p.296-97.

26. *A Search for Solitude*, op. cit., p.318.

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