

Thomas Merton: A Celebration of the Person

Fernando Beltrán Llavador

“The law of our life can be summed up in the axiom:
“be what you are.””

Thomas Merton, *The New Man*, p.152

Thomas Merton has been approached from as many angles as the areas of his concerns as a contemplative human being immersed in a world of action, and this is why ‘he remains hard to categorize.’¹ And yet, ‘the many-sided Merton has a center’, for his was ‘a person-centered view of life.’² Merton himself defined Christian personalism as ‘the sacramental sharing of the inner personality in the mystery of love’,³ a discovery of self and neighbour in the eyes of Christ, in the light of God’s call ‘to be to ourselves and to others signs and sacraments of mercy.’⁴

I would like to highlight how the above translated in a unique way in Merton’s own life and message by bringing to the fore some salient aspects which I have found both strikingly touching at a deep personal level and very relevant for our world. This is precisely because, in his monastic praxis, solitude and society are inextricably bound up together in ways both overt and covert, manifest and invisible, as he experienced God as being ‘at once infinite solitude (one nature) and perfect society (three persons).’⁵

I travelled to the United States for the first time in 1990 when I was in the process of finishing my doctoral research on Thomas Merton and the New American Adam. There I could empathize with the young Merton as he came to see Gethsemani’s church as ‘the

court of the Queen of Heaven' and 'the centre of all the vitality that is in America.'⁶ Although it has been pointed out that this statement was one of Merton's many hyperbolic claims in his first perhaps naïve yet sincere imagination of America⁷ – and in my view he purposefully reimagined both Americas – Thomas Merton was indeed both pointing towards and appealing to the hidden and sacred potential of a unique land and its peoples. It seems to me that Merton began by conveying a very clear message which he would later qualify and transform into often harsh but honest and compassionate criticism out of love for the country of his elected silence. The core of his finding, which albeit not new demanded a new voice, was that for any radical, social, cultural and political human change to be constructive and truly effective in the long run it has to stem from *le point vierge*, 'a point of nothingness' 'at the center of our being', which is 'the pure glory of God in us.'⁸

For Merton, the presence of God has the power to transform a group of individuals or a set of social structures, a whole country or even the world at large into a community. 'It is only persons that can create the fullness of community.'⁹ Places of prayer are schools of charity, and in their different fashions, they can be likened to power plants and suppliers of a kind of energy capable of changing 'individuals' into 'persons', to use Merton's apt distinction. In realizing the manifold implications of this, he started to bridge the gap between spiritual contemplation and engaged social action.

Merton came to oppose and resist the scourges of our age (the rage of racism, the devastation of war, the unjustified madness of the atomic bomb, the banal pyrotechnics of mass media, the burning cruelty of rampant capitalism) with the fire of prophecy stemming from this spark of nothingness and utter poverty within the soul, *scintilla animae*,¹⁰ daring to pursue with other committed persons the spiritual roots of protest.¹¹ He devoted his monastic life to tracing back the radiance of an unfathomable sun, an inner light which streams out from deep within the springs of contemplation and allows the human family access to the divine loving gaze which is

the very foundation of the world and, indeed, the stamp and breath of our human condition. He discovered in Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, that were we to love as we are loved, to see as we are seen, to create as we are created and to shine as we are being shined upon, there would be no more wars, no more self-deceptions, no more feelings of abandonment or scarcity.

During my stay in Louisville and in my visit to Gethsemani I also became aware of the fact that landscapes – natural and cultural geographies – can exert a tremendous influence on the inner development of men and women, and Merton was no exception. It was then as a result of my research on Merton and thanks to his own personal voice that I came to reassess and appreciate all the more the richness of Spanish spirituality, a process of assimilation which has no end. Since I live in Salamanca and work in Ávila, I had been privileged to be immersed in the climate of St John of the Cross and St Teresa of Ávila (of whom the 500th anniversary of her birth is also celebrated in 2015) but until then I had had no perspective to appreciate it from a distance. However, on my return from the United States, on the way from Toledo to Segovia and from there to Ávila, in passing through certain areas which are completely flat and naked, huge stretches of bare land under an uninterrupted sky, the image of the ascent to Mount Carmel described by St John of the Cross as 'nada, nada, nada, y en el monte nada' ('nothing, nothing, nothing, and on the summit nothing') started both to take shape and to make complete sense. It was not abstract theology but concrete, almost material truth: Reality (with a capital 'R') within plain reality.

And if landscapes are expressions of soulscapes, Saint Teresa's images of the thresholds and the abodes of the soul, her images of water, her whole Castilian outlook and nobility have also been attested to fit perfectly well in the town of Ávila. The walls surrounding the granite historical buildings, seemingly unaffected by the frantic rhythm of our times, help create the impression of a cloistered urban setting. In *Interior Castle*, Teresa of Ávila described the soul as follows:

The soul is like a castle made entirely out of a diamond or a very clear crystal, in which there are many rooms, just as in heaven there are many dwelling places ... The soul of the just person is nothing else but a paradise where the Lord says He finds His delight. So then, what do you think that the abode will be like where a King so powerful, so wise, so pure, so full of all good things takes His delight? I don't find anything comparable to the magnificent beauty of a soul and its marvellous capacity (C 1.1.1).

Due to Merton's tremendous capacity for empathy and insightful perceptions, he grasped at once and intuitively the inner core of St John's and St Teresa's teachings. Thus, many now also benefit from their spirituality through Merton's lens.

While one of my modest agendas concerning Merton and Spain has been to contribute to making Spain more sensitive to Merton – for, through him, Spanish mysticism can be reassessed and throw new light upon the present preoccupations of modern men and women – it is equally noteworthy that at least three of our saints, Ignatius of Loyola, Teresa of Ávila and John of the Cross, also played a vital role in the shaping of this monk with a thousand names and no title.¹²

An axial realization that Merton shared with John of the Cross, for instance, with similar existential poignancy, is that the most real thing for us is our need for God. For the Carmelite Ian Matthew, 'our anxiety is itself language enough: to be with Christ, holding that before him, is communication. It provides its own way of prayer.' In his oft-quoted prison poem, John of the Cross wrote: 'I know so well the fountain, rushing and flowing, though it be night.' And Merton made the following lesson from the Spanish mystic the very flesh and bones of his religious call:

John confidently proposes prayer to us, not as an escape from the darkness that lies beyond our threshold, but as a

journey into it. Prayer renames that darkness, not chaos, but the inner cavern, the space within the heart of the risen Christ.¹³

In 1965, Merton wrote: 'I dare to hope for change, not only quantitative but qualitative too; such change must come through darkness and crisis, not joyous painless adventure.'¹⁴

Merton's spiral flow of spirituality from contemplation through action to compassion, however, was to have a universal projection and it ran parallel to his assimilation of, participation in, and contribution to the essential cultural qualities embodied by European, American and Asian mystical traditions. His unique individual story somehow recapitulated, interpreted and added new insights and fertile shades of meaning to our collective history.

As Thomas Merton went deeper into the source of his own and all life, his prophetic vision grew more universal, for the embrace of the within and the beyond go hand in hand in the realms of the Spirit. I have elsewhere likened the circle of his life to the cycle of water – from a first encounter with the springs of contemplation in Europe, through a committed involvement in the streams of action in America, to the finding of an ocean of compassion in Asia – to suggest that a convergence of the three aspects of contemplation, action and compassion, which have been accorded different emphasis in specific religious traditions, is absolutely necessary for the survival of our world.

Today, we are asked to take a collective leap of faith towards the creation of a new heaven and a new earth based on the convergence of these three axial attitudes: a hearing in depth, an acting in obedience to the call of the Spirit and an overcoming of the split between the sacred and the secular.

Merton seemed to embody a pioneering response to this prophetic call because his theologically experiential grasp of *parrhesia*, a symbol of the perfect communion of Adam's will with God by

charity¹⁵, was founded upon an assimilation of his own contemplative tradition and an active recognition of the face of Christ in others, a balanced sense of meekness and protest, and an unshakable loyalty to the truth glimpsed in his initial conversion together with a readiness to shake off shallowness and callousness from the original light and transparency of his faith-filled gaze.

His appreciation of religious sensitivity in Europe, America and Asia was at the same time innocent and subtle. He saw their providential place in God's design but he did not trust any discourse based on abstract essences when that meant neglecting people's own responsibility as the subjects of their own story. Since history is the arena where the freedom of the sons of God is most exerted, for him a sapiential reading of the signs of God's good time demands a sustained effort to remember as well as an exacting tension towards a vision of ultimate hope that can help us discern and choose appropriate courses of action. And it is here that Pramuk's question may be conducive to an urgent shift in our consciousness:

What would be the effect on the Christian (and human) community of remembering God not only as a 'Person' (as in Jesus Christ) but as a Woman, calling out tenderly from the crossroads, urging the peoples of the world to come together and to recognize one another as members of one diverse, but radically interdependent, family? As a Mother, bent over her children in fierce protection, or crowning them with purpose and strength for the difficult journey ahead? As a Child, playing joyfully in the mountains, deserts, and watercourses of creation? As a Lover, not abstract and fleshless, but as one who loves us precisely in and through our bodies, and who despite our many failings, still recognizes and calls forth something strong and beautiful in us that (as Merton wrote to Proverb) we have 'long ago ceased to be'?¹⁶

Historical and psychological memory together with sacred, eternal, and numinous remembrance support prophecy, which infuses vigour into contemplative action and engaged spirituality.

Merton did not ignore what this entailed:

A prophet is one who lives in direct submission to the Holy Spirit in order that, by his life, actions and words, he may at all times be a sign of God in the world of men. Christ the Incarnate Word was of course the supreme Prophet, and all sanctity participates in this prophetic quality.¹⁷

As a true inheritor of the kind of patristic critique exerted by the founding fathers in the face of Roman imperialistic claims, whenever similar agendas threatened the human dignity of the American and European peoples, Thomas Merton openly denounced attitudes of dubious morality on the part of the economic and military superpower of America and cautioned Europe against its cultural decadence and the risk of fossilization of impressive, yet obsolete (disabled and disabling) monastic structures.

In 1968, Merton addressed a group of contemplative nuns and told them that 'not just individuals but the community itself should be prophetic. That's an ideal, of course. But that's our task: not to produce prophetic individuals who could simply end up as a headache, but to be a prophetic community.'¹⁸ In the light of present events, rather than having to choose between survival and prophecy¹⁹ we may well collectively realize that survival is no longer possible without prophecy 'in the sense that we are so one with the Holy Spirit that we are already going in the direction the Spirit is going.'²⁰

Even if Merton's pilgrim progress finds many correspondences in universal forms of literary expression, they can all be seen as mirroring the archetypal narrative of the prodigal son, be it in its Biblical version, or in the poetical variations of Blake's lost and found boy or in Zen

master Hakuin's *Song of Zazen*. The life of his works and the works of his life describe a path that started in his youth from an experience of solitude in society – seen as alienation within a mere collectivity – and ended with a different experience of society in solitude – now seen as non-duality within community

The final aspiration of the monk, for Thomas Merton, is fully convergent with that of the 'finally integrated' human person,²¹ in the image that the Trappist would adopt from the distinguished Iranian psychiatrist Reza Arasteh, who held that

the attainment of final integration in the adult personality is marked by intense awareness of various spheres of reality: the existential reality of essence versus the natural reality of appearance, the reality of meaning versus the reality of forms, and the cultural reality of many versus the reality of oneness.²²

Throughout his life, Merton strongly insisted that the state of inner vision that constitutes final integration entails an opening, an 'emptiness', a poverty similar to that described in great detail, not only by the Rhenish mystics, St John of the Cross and the first Franciscans, but also by the Sufis, Taoists, and Zen masters past and present.

Thomas Merton's contemplative response is, in a way, representative of the universal monastic journey as well as of an itinerary for human growth and fulfilment. His life's design followed a pattern of vital choices from self-centred control to a completely personal response to every concrete need; from an impulse to know himself, others and God's transcendent reality to the weaving of a deep, and profoundly Trinitarian, relationship with the heart of the world and with the world of the heart.

Trinitarian relatedness is the very foundation of the Christian approach to self and other as 'person'. And it is this unique, specifically Christian trait, which paradoxically became for Merton the meeting

point of saintly people from other religious traditions in their shared search for peace of mind and peace on earth.

Thus, for instance, at a stage of monastic maturity Merton discovered in the 'void' of Hui Neng (the Sixth Patriarch of Chinese Ch'an or Zen) a 'surprising Trinitarian structure' which for him meant 'inevitably a fulfillment in love'²³. As a Catholic and Zen practitioner for three decades, I find this an unprecedented spiritual articulation of what Christians may experience in their zazen practice. This is of enormous universal consequence at a time when economic globalization needs to be regulated by policies congenial with moral behaviour and planetary ethics. Such policies need to be nurtured by sustained practice, and will develop as the natural outcome of *contemplata tradere*, that is, they may become the ripe fruits of religious wisdom and contemplative awareness on a universal scale.

Acknowledging a Trinitarian foundation at the centre of another religion should give us enough reason for hope in the universality of the Gospel's promises: '...many will come from the east and west to take their places with Abraham and Isaac at the feast in the kingdom of heaven' (Matt. 8.11). In his seminal work on a theology of the Trinity, Greshake defines God as relational and the Three Persons as three distinct yet inseparable relationships. Rather than an isolated, individual and objectified entity, a person is defined by his or her love and openness to the radical Other as much as to the neighbouring others in a bond of communion. Similarly, better than the modern or postmodern 'I' – defined by its power to think autonomously and instrumentally – from a Christian perspective the 'I' can only be true to his or herself by breaking its boundaries in an attempt to reach out towards 'you' and 'him/her', thus becoming a 'we' whose way of thinking is decentred and altruistic. The basic assumption is, therefore, not that 'I think' but that 'I believe in love', which has a threefold meaning, namely, that God loves me, that you are for me as important as I am to myself because I find Christ in you, and that we want to love each other as He loved us. In short, we are one, and

He is always in our midst. What is more, according to Greshake, this does not merely apply to the individual person but it also provides hermeneutical keys for other 'formations of unity' in the created world, such as cultures, religions and societies. This realization opens up new avenues of understanding, collaboration and dialogue within the great human family, a plural yet singular unity of love.²⁴

When 'persons' are regarded from a Trinitarian standpoint, the uniquely interrelated play of freedoms which constitutes the reality, relatedness, and indeed the charitable rationality and the ineffable beauty, goodness and truth of each and every loved-lovable-and loving human being is liberated. The very fact that a person, in the real Christian sense, cannot but conceive self-interest as inclusive of the interest of the others, explains the miraculous and paradoxical condition of universality and uniqueness, the unity and differentiation of the human condition.

Merton's journey inside the belly of a paradox had allowed him to see the promises of his baptism in the flesh fulfilled. And yet, the holy water of his first entrance in the Church had to be further transmuted into fire; a new baptism in the Spirit awaited him in Asia. Thus, Merton had first recognized the voice of the Father calling his prodigal son back home in contemplation; his obedience had prompted him to act as a new-born man on the face of this earth. Finally, his ultimate surrender and his readiness to meet 'the Christ of the burnt men',²⁵ opened the doors of compassion for him. John Moses concludes his book on Merton's 'divine discontent' by affirming that his very contradictions 'might be seen in retrospect as his credentials to a world that struggles to come to terms with its persistent and enduring experience of alienation.'²⁶

Personal, social, ecumenical, interfaith and even intrareligious encounters in the heart,²⁷ like those attempted by Merton, in silent prayer, in written form and in face to face interactions, may promote joint spiritual and ethical alternatives to power politics as well as compassionate social action based on genuine contemplative practice,

that is, based on *charitas* and *karuna*, for Christ and cosmos 'are but one single self-expression of God':

Just as 'no one can come to the Father except through the Son' (John 4:6; Matt. 11:27), so too there is no way of meeting the Son save by being a conscious part of his cosmic body. This is the sacramental approach to creation, which only a symbiosis of gnosis and agape – 'East' and 'West' – can restore to the Church in the West. It is the 'cure' that Merton recommends to an ailing Christianity ... This is first of all a plea for change: a command to return to Assisi. But it often comes across in the form of a cry of pain in peace marches, antinuclear demonstrations, and ecological movements, which disrupt the mechanized monotony of 'advanced' societies.²⁸

Merton acted according to the pivotal finding of mercy as 'that which the Gospel reveals to be the divine-human heart of reality.'²⁹

Today Merton's multifarious legacy can greatly contribute to untie the knots and dilemmas of personal and social conflicts by providing ever new symbolic 'pray-grounds' for voicing, and therefore building, personal, communal, value-bound and valuable modes of being, seeing and acting in our times. It is in this Trinitarian dynamics at the root of the Christian notion of 'person' and in the experience of truly personal while at the same time unconditional love, where both criticism of selfishness and the seeds of hope³⁰ for true relationships, lasting communion, and a merciful civilization lie.

Notes

1. Rowan Williams, 'Foreword', in John Moses, *Divine Discontent: The Prophetic Voice of Thomas Merton* (London, New Delhi, New York, Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2014), p.xi.

2. Robert Imperato, *Merton and Walsh on the Person* (Wisconsin: Liturgical Publications, 1987), p.144.
3. Thomas Merton, *Seasons of Celebration: Meditations on the Cycle of Liturgical Feasts* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965), p.22.
4. *ibid.*, p.179.
5. Thomas Merton, 'We Are One Man', in *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1962).
6. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948), p. 325.
7. '...How extraordinary his imagination must have been to see it the way he saw it – as the center of the universe, a stray shard of medieval France, a Kentucky equivalent of an outpost of prayer in the Himalayas', observed Paul Elie, in *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), p. 466.
8. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1966), p.158.
9. Gordon Oyer, *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest: Merton, Berrigan, Yoder, and Muste at the Gethsemani Abbey Peacemakers Retreat* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2014).
10. Thomas Merton, 'Sacramental Illumination' (133), in *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1961).
11. Thomas Merton, 'The Man of Tao', in *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (New York: New Directions, 1965), p.92.
12. William H. Shannon, 'Person', in *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*, eds William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen, and Patrick F. O'Connell (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books), p.357.
13. Ian Matthew, *Impact of God. Soundings from St. John of the Cross* (London, Sydney, Auckland: Hodder & Stoughton, 1995), pp.152–3.
14. Thomas Merton, *Vow of Conversation: Diary 1964-1965*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988), p.137.
15. Thomas Merton, 'Free Speech' (47), in *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1961).
16. Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2009), pp.208–209.
17. Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1960), p.223.
18. Thomas Merton, *Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani*, ed. Jane Marie Richardson (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1992), p.134.

19. Thomas Merton, *Survival or Prophecy: The Letters of Thomas Merton & Jean Leclercq*, ed. Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002).
20. *Springs of Contemplation* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1992), p.49.
21. Thomas Merton, 'Final Integration: Toward a Monastic Therapy', in *Contemplation in a World of Action* (New York: Doubleday, 1973), p.225.
22. A. Reza Arasteh, *Toward Final Personality Integration* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1975), p.81.
23. Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1967), p.40. Not surprisingly, contemporary Zen teachers and Catholics today can provide testimonies like this: 'In this contemplative practice we awaken to none other than the reality of the divine Love itself that permeates the universe. Sitting in stillness, we simply bask in the light of this Love, letting it take hold of us and take over our entire life, empowering us to offer our life in loving service to others. The more we give our lives in loving service, the more we experience the intensity of this dynamic Love that underlies, guides, and empowers all our thoughts, words, and actions.' Ruben L. F. Habito, *Zen and the Spiritual Exercises: Paths of Awakening and Transformation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2013), pp.214–15.
24. Gisbert Greshake, *El Dios Uno y Trino: Una teología de la Trinidad*. (Barcelona: Herder, 2001), p.312.
25. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948), p. 423.
26. John Moses, *Divine Discontent: The Prophetic Voice of Thomas Merton* (London, New Delhi, New York, Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2014), p.211.
27. 'Intrareligious dialogue, by helping us discover the 'other' in ourselves – is it not written, love your neighbour as yourself, as your 'same' self? – contributes to the personal realization and mutual fecundation of the human traditions that can no longer afford to live in a state of isolation'. In Raimon Panikkar, *The Intrareligious Dialogue*, revised edn (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), p.xix.
28. Aloysius Pieris, *Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1988), p. 16.
29. Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2009), p.266.
30. Fernando Beltrán Llavador, 'Thomas Merton and 'the Great Feast of Christian Hope'', in *Seeds of Hope: Thomas Merton's Contemplative Message*, eds Fernando Beltrán Llavador and Paul M. Pearson (Ávila: Cistercium-Ciem, 2008), pp.1–16.

Fernando Beltrán Llavador is an advisor to the International Thomas Merton Society. He co-directed, with Dr Paul M. Pearson, the First International Conference on Thomas Merton in Ávila, Spain in October 2006.