

Notes on 'The Poorer Means' by Stephen Dunhill

On 12 December 1963 Mother Mary Margaret of the Holy Cross Convent wrote to Merton: 'For several years now we have been publishing a series of meditations on Christian Unity, and I am writing to ask if you will very kindly allow us to use part of a chapter in your book *New Seeds of Contemplation* for a meditation.'

The Community of the Holy Cross, an enclosed Anglican Order, was then located at Haywards Heath in Sussex. At that time the Order embraced the full Latin Benedictine Office with prayer and Christian Unity being of especial importance. They published a series of meditations which they sent to their oblates, supporters, and those of like mind. As Mother Mary Margaret points out in her letter, 'I should mention we are Anglicans, but the meditations are sent all over the world to Roman Catholics and other Christians of various denominations – in fact to all sorts and conditions of men.'

On 16 January 1964 Merton replied granting permission, and further offered: 'Perhaps some day I can write a brief meditation for you, on the spirit of Ecumenism or some such thing.'

Who could refuse such an offer? In November 1964 Mother Mary Margaret sent copies of the meditation from *New Seeds of Contemplation* that they had produced, and gladly took up Merton's offer: 'In your last letter you asked if we would like you to write a meditation specially for us. We would indeed.'

Five months later, on 29 April 1965, Merton replied, enclosing the text of 'The Poorer Means'. Explaining why there had been such a delay, he wrote: 'However, as you might imagine, I do have a fair amount of work and so it was necessary for me to wait until the meditation took shape peacefully, in its own time. I would hardly want to send you a few mad ideas dashed off on the spur of the moment.'

The essay was duly published by Holy Cross Convent, number 28 in their series of *Meditations on Christian Unity (from various sources)*. In thanking him for the meditation Mother Mary Margaret wrote: 'Your meditation breathes the spirit of our own convent, a spirit which we know and understand so well. We find that even very active ecumenical workers realise that the great thing which is needed is prayer.' In a letter of 17 September 1965 she told Merton that she had sent under separate cover some copies of the meditation, and asked Merton if 'you would mind if we now ask the Holy Spirit that you again be inspired in the same cause?'

On 17 December 1965 Merton sent her a possibility, a reprint of an

article on the contemplative life that had already been published in a magazine in India, 'and I will write another if you suggest a good topic!' In the event this was not published, as in her reply of 20 April 1966 Mother Mary Margaret pointed out that, 'we like it [*the article*] immensely and it was read in the refectory, but it is not quite suitable for a series of meditations which are sent out to "all sorts and conditions of men", many of whom are not known to us personally.' But she also repeated her request for another article: 'If and when you are able to write another meditation we would be delighted to have it.' But she mentioned no specific topic.

In Merton's final letter to Mother Mary Margaret, he sent her some 'little notes on Prayer and Action, and they do refer to unity in the sense of our unity within ourselves – no unimportant matter.' He asked for their return if not used. No further meditation by Merton was produced – indeed this is the last known item of correspondence between them – so one can only infer that the notes were duly returned.

In the essay Merton points out that 'the expression poorer means is inspired by "les moyens pauvres" of Louis Massignon ... who was such a devoted apostle of fraternity between Christians and Moslems.' But aside from expanding briefly on this theme of unity between Christians and Moslems, the essay is concerned with unity between Christians. Merton distinguishes between, to borrow a phrase from William Shannon, 'professional ecumenism' – public dialogue between theologians and church dignitaries towards narrowing points of difference – and the task of recovering an original unity that has been lost due to human failings. This unity can only be recovered at the level of personal experience, through 'the poorer means, the hidden means, the ones which are accessible to all'. These Merton identifies as silence, prayer, meditation and contemplation, and fasting.

In writing for an English readership Merton includes several specific references. At the start he states the date of the essay as St George's Day. In addition he includes in brackets a whole paragraph extolling Anglicanism's spiritual heritage, with its 'respect for the dignity of the personal conscience', mentioning writers and mystics of Anglo-Saxon and medieval England, Eliot and Donne, ending with a mild critique of Anglo-Catholicism.

In his journal for St George's Day, 1965, Merton records that he is reading Tertullian and *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, the latest novel by Flannery O'Connor, but there are no references around this time to writing this essay. One week earlier, on Good Friday, he records

starting to read *Religion in the Modern World* by Lord Northbourne, which he considers 'really excellent'. The last pages are 'remarkably good. ... Northbourne is most insistent on not mixing up traditions, on *not* being syncretistic.'

After finishing the book Merton wrote an extensive letter to the author dated Easter 1965. Merton mentions 'the rather slapdash ecumenism that is springing up in some quarters'. He continues:

It is most important first of all to understand deeply and live one's own tradition, not confusing it with what is foreign to it, if one is to seriously appreciate other traditions and distinguish in them what is close to one's own and what is, perhaps, irreconcilable with one's own. The great danger at the moment is a huge muddling and confusing of the spiritual traditions that still survive.

These ideas are mirrored by passages in 'The Poorer Means', particularly those towards the end of the first section.

But for Merton ecumenism was more than healing the wounds of Christendom. In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1965) he wrote: 'I will be a better Catholic, not if I can *refute* every shade of Protestantism, but if I can affirm the truth in it and still go further.' This phrase would not be out of place in 'The Poorer Means'. But by now Merton had moved so much further, to a much wider vision. He continues: 'If I affirm myself as a Catholic merely by denying all that is Muslim, Jewish, Protestant, Hindu, Buddhist, etc., in the end I will find that there is not much left for me to affirm as a Catholic: and certainly no breath of the Spirit with which to affirm it.'

Finally, in an informal talk given in Calcutta in October 1968, Merton shows us, using a phrase from the essay's moving final prayer, 'the true path to Unity':

And the deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words, and it is beyond speech, and it is beyond concept. Not that we discover a new unity. We discover an older unity. My dear brothers, we are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are.

Notes:

- Born Margaret Spicer in 1894, Sister Mary Margaret was clothed in 1923 and professed in 1925. She died in 1974 in the 49th year of her profession. She was Novice Mistress from 1931 until 1962 when she was appointed

Reverend Mother, resigning on the grounds of ill health in 1970.

- The Thomas Merton Centre at Bellarmine University holds ten different items of correspondence between Merton and Mother Mary Margaret, five from each. Three of Merton's letters are included in *The School of Charity*. I am grateful for Mary Julian CHC for providing me with copies of Mother Mary Margaret's letters to Merton, and for Paul Pearson for providing scans of the remaining letters to fill in the gaps.
- The text used is that as published by Holy Cross Convent. I am grateful to Anne McCormick who, on behalf of the Merton Legacy Trust, gave permission for *The Merton Journal* to republish this article.
- It has also been republished in *Thomas Merton - Essential Writings*, selected and edited by Christine M. Bochen, Orbis Books 2001, under the title, 'Spiritual Ways to Unity'.
- The letter to Lord Northbourne may be found in *Witness to Freedom - The Letters of Thomas Merton in Times of Crisis*.

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Advent with Merton

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based around Merton's life, work and witness

led by Fr Dan Horan OFM

This year the Society is holding its Advent event in London in conjunction with the World Community for Christian Meditation 10.30am – 4.00pm

The cost is £30, concessions (including Society members) £20

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The event will be held at St Mark's, Myddelton Sq., London EC1R 1XX

Tel: 020 7278 2070 email: meditatio@wccm.org

On-line bookings and further details:

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