

## APOSTOLATE OF FRIENDSHIP

A man's letters reveal his whole character, feelings, judgements, motives, personal history and the various ramifications of his interests. They disclose the man as he is known to his friends, not in the constrained expression of one sitting for a portrait, but in the written conversation of the whole man, manifested in a series of constantly varying and unconstrained expressions.

In 656 pages of selected letters, mostly from the last decade of his life, William Shannon gives us a variety of Thomas Merton's unconstrained expressions. They reveal the character, feelings, and judgements of this remarkable monk, writer, poet and contemplative critic, as they are painted on the wide canvas of his interests. It is remarkable that a hermit-monk, living out the paradox of contemplation and action could attract such a variety of correspondents. The attraction was a form of writing which became a way of contemplation, the expression of a reality that was lived before being written about. The ensuing correspondence became for Merton a literary form of self-expression in which he further shared his contemplation.

Contemplative experience is the heart of the matter, the only reality being the union of God with men and women in contemplation. Merton believed that one's relationship with God determined one's relationship to others. This is the essence of what it means to be human and this union is the basis for all constructive social action. The problem of our time is how to recover the ability to love ourselves and one another in that ground of love which is God.

The seeding and flowering of this way of living is critically expounded in the revised edition of William Shannon's Thomas Merton's Dark Path. A summary of Merton's writings on contemplation are arranged around a centrepiece of unpublished material, "The Inner Experience". An apologetic

prologue prefaces the work, in which the author extends his earlier exposition, making the point that for Merton his most important discovery was his fellow human beings at the depth of his solitude, the experience of a new solidarity in the depths of his silence. There where he was most alone he found the basis of community, not God alone, but God who is together with all humankind. From this vantage point he could engage critically with the world and be involved in the social issues that occupied America at that time. This was no betrayal of monastic and contemplative vocation but rather its fulfilment.

"Thomas Merton's Dark Path" is a pilgrimage in the way of negation, the apophatic way, a journey into the painful discovery of his own identity. It is an experience that is continually effecting personal growth and change and a revision of thinking in the dispelling of illusions. It engages the reader with the spiritual foundations of Merton's thinking, the Greek and Desert Fathers, Augustine, Aquinas, Eckhart, The Cloud, John of the Cross, to name but a few in the Christian mystical tradition by which he was being formed. Beyond the solitude of space the contemplative meets with the deeper solitude of his own inner self to seek the ground of his own being, 'searching his own heart and plunging into the heart of the world, of which he is a part, that he may listen to the deepest and most neglected voices that proceed from the depths of what is most truly real'. (p.171)! This enables the 'letting-go' of the masks and illusions of the false self so that one can live in the true self firmly rooted in one's own inner truth. Beyond such falsity and illusion one discovers in the ground of one's being the love and light of God. The end is the transformation of the whole character into a state of full spiritual identity.

Modern existentialist writers who had explored the dark side of the human psyche provided insights. Merton used their language, Kierkegaard's dread and Sartre's

nausea, to describe tracts of contemplative experience, and agreed with them that knowledge of living truth begins in one's own personal being in the search for self-knowledge.

His explorations into the contemplative experience of oriental religion led him into an increasing concern for the Transcendent self. To exist everywhere he had to become no-one, the no-one who has gone beyond the individual self by compassion, purity, love and humility, and in consequence is united to all by an intuitive sympathy. The end is nothing less than a deepening of his own consciousness of faith, of union with Christ in God.

This deepening of fundamental human experience in contemplation, convinced Merton of the need for dialogue between East and West on every plane of life from the mystical to the political. The discovery of the absolute value of human life led to a refusal to be involved in the practices of a world that degrades humankind. Monasticism, contemplation in a world of action, become a rejection of and protest against, the crimes, injustices, and political tyrannies of the contemporary world. It was inevitable that his writings would attract correspondents and natural for him to respond to people of faith, prayer, and social concern, great or small, wherever they might be. His letters find their context in this wider ecumenism beyond the ecclesiastical, and the letter to Pope John XXIII on his election explains his mission.

"It seems to me that, as a contemplative, I do not need to lock myself in solitude and lose all contact with the rest of the world; rather this poor world has a right to a place in my solitude. It is not enough for me to think of the apostolic value of prayer and penance; I also have to think of the 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 my having to leave the cloister.....I have exercised an apostolate; and it has been quite simply an apostolate of friendship."

"The Letters" begin with Catherine de Hueck Doherty where the early vocational doubts and aspirations are glimpsed, the connection between love and political action, and the fundamental conviction of Merton's life, that living experience must precede creative writing. Prefaces of biographical information give a context to an alphabetical arrangement of individual series of letters, enabling the reader to follow a sequence of thought, advice, comment and question. Interest in the "Shakers" is shared with Edward Andrews; with Reza Arasteh, a Persian psychoanalyst and Sufi, final integration of the personality. Anglicanism is discussed with Canon Allchin and Etta Gullick and advice given to Sister Penelope CSMV on the translation of texts. Sixteen correspondents dialogue on War and Peace sharing their frustrations and obstacles, and receive theological reflection with positive and practical encouragement. His letters on religious experience cover Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Sufism, Taoism and Zen, and reflect his concern that these Oriental traditions can add a whole new depth and dimension to our understanding of God in Christ and enable us to rediscover the full meaning of our own traditions.

With Erich Fromm, who accepted Merton's description "atheistic mystic", there is true dialogue amidst fundamental difference, but common concern for a society based on truth and wholeness. His first letter to the Zen-Buddhist scholar

D.I. Suzuki retrains from the pretence of understanding Zen, but confesses to feeling a profound and intimate agreement on reading his book. A common interest in Pasternak brings a ten year correspondence with John Harris a Devonshire teacher whom he encourages into the RC Church and is sensitive to the halting steps of the new convert; but humorous on hearing of the monk who dropped 'Zhivago' when adultery cropped up, suggesting he would have to drop 'Genesis' when bigamy came up. His humanity comes through in the fictional letter he writes to Harris's 12yr old son Arthur which he signs with his laundry number. There are letters to public figures such as President Lyndon Johnson, Pope Paul VI and to Jacqueline Kennedy and Coretta King on the assassinations of their respective husbands. The contemporary world of Protestantism, Roman Catholicism and

Orthodox Christianity feature, as also do Mysticism and Racial Issues.

Merton's concern is to find the God of the whole world present and active in places where hitherto we had presumed him absent, in the struggles of humanity for justice and peace and in those places where poets and artists are sensitively questioning. These two works are very readable and appealing in style and method, and also timely in being published together, in that they put before the reader the completeness of Merton's vision and mission. We can be grateful to Fr. Bill Shannon for conveying the message of one who in journeying into his own inner darkness found the

Light in which he could bring discernment, hope and Life, to the agonies and darkness of the contemporary world.

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