

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS A Day in the Life of Thomas Merton

CANON A.M. 'DONALD' ALLCHIN

LOOKING BACK OVER the two years since our first meeting at Southampton I can only rejoice at the steady development of our society during this time. I want, at the very beginning, to express my own gratitude, and I am sure the gratitude of all our members, to the officers and committee of our society, especially to Danny Sullivan and Paul Pearson, for all the work that they have put into the development of the society, to the publication of our admirable journal and to the preparation of this conference.

Once again we are delighted to have such strong support from the International Thomas Merton Society in the USA. It is a great joy to have with us Brother Patrick Hart from Gethsemani itself, the general editor of the Merton Journals. It is good that no less than three of those who have edited those journals are with us today. It is good too that Father Basil Pennington is able to be with us. I first collaborated with him in an ecumenical Cistercian conference in Oxford just twenty-five years ago. Amongst our other American visitors I must mention especially Tommie O'Callaghan, one of the trustees and one of Merton's closest friends, and Anne McCormick, for many years secretary to the Trustees and now one of the Trustees herself.

I had the joy of staying with the O'Callaghans in Louisville last October; I had gone to the opening of the new Thomas Merton Center in the library of Bellarmine College. It was a visit memorable for many things, not least for the fact that Bob Daggy, the former director of the Center, though critically ill, seemed to have a few days of partial remission in his illness. Thus he was able to enjoy the festivities, to greet many of his friends and above all to be present at the official opening of the new Center, which included the naming of a room in his honour. All those who knew him well have a sense of loss at the death of a man who was so generous with his time and energy, who was so careful and helpful as a scholar and who was so full of unexpected humour and zest for life. Like many others from many parts of the world my memories of Louisville and Bellarmine

will always be associated with him. We are particularly happy today to have his successor, Teresa Sandok with us.

At our first meeting at Southampton, I said that we were bringing Merton home to England. Merton was of course never more than very partially at home in this country. But in his earliest years, Ripley Court and Durston House in Ealing, a school where I happen to have gone fifteen years later, were for a time a kind of home for him. The same thing would be true of this school during his teens. Here at least he could feel in part that he belonged. Our being here will, I am sure, help us to become more aware of what Oakham meant in Merton's life and how much he gained, of his initial formation as a writer of the English language, by his education in this place. This is where he began to acquire those skills as a writer which he was to develop throughout his life. It was not a very long life; it was cut short in full flight. But it was an extraordinarily full life; he lived every minute of it. That is what I want to think of in this address; the way in which, especially in his last decade, he filled his days with seeing and doing, with faith and struggle, with love and knowledge.

Some years ago, when I was working in the Thomas Merton Center in Bellarmine College in Louisville, I came across, in one of the working notebooks, two or three pages of notes which were dated Pentecost 1967. Merton was reading that day St. Jerome's *Life of St. Paul of Thebes*, St. Paul the Hermit. He made particularly full and detailed notes of the account of the meeting between St. Anthony and St. Paul which took place at the very end of St. Paul's life. It is a fascinating story, this meeting of the two old hermits, and it is one which was particularly important in the earliest centuries of the church in these islands. It is an incident which you can find depicted in prominent places on the high crosses in Ireland, from the eighth and ninth centuries. You can find it also on the Ruthwell Cross in Anglo-Saxon Scotland. You can also find it referred to with particular emphasis in one of the earliest theological praise poems in Welsh.

From the quality of Merton's notes and from the fact that he dated this entry, a thing which he didn't usually do, I felt that this reading had some rather special meaning for him. Perhaps, I thought, he was intending to write something about this moment in the life of the two first hermits of the Egyptian desert. It certainly seemed to me a highly appropriate subject for him to take for his study and meditation on the feast of Pentecost.

So, needless to say, when the appropriate volume of the journals came out, Volume Six, *Learning to Love*, the volume which covers the period of 1966 and Merton's love affair with M, one of the first things I did was to turn to this day to see what Merton had written in his journal. I was not at all disappointed, for I saw that the reading of St. Jerome had spoken to Merton even more deeply than I had imagined. But I found that he began his entry for the day, not with his reading but with the dawn. It is a brief but fine Merton dawn-scape:

Lightning, thunder and rain, on and off all night, and now at dawn there is still more of it. The lovely grey-green valley, misty clouds sweeping low over the hills and forest out there in the south, iron-dark clouds heavy above them. The rainy gloom full of pale yellow irises and the cloudy white blossoming green masses of the rose hedge. I went out a while ago and a hawk flew fast away — it had been waiting on the cross or in the big poplar tree.

And then we come to Merton's reflection on the text of St. Jerome:

As I have been asked to do a piece on Paul the Hermit, I re-read Jerome's *Vita* today. A work of art, really. With plenty of monastic theology in its symbolism. A beautiful piece of writing, with deep mystical and psychological implications so that whether or not it is 'historical' is irrelevant. It awakens a kind of inner awareness of psychic possibilities which one so easily forgets and neglects, the return to unity, to the ground, the paradisaical inner space where the archetypal man dwells in peace and in God. The journey to that space, through a realm of aridity, dualism, dryness, death. The need of courage and decision. Above all faith, obedience to the inner voice of the Spirit, refusal to give up or to compromise.

And then one turns the page and finds a longer and deeper application of the text to Merton's own life, a passage not at all untypical of the second half of this particular volume. In that second part, one feels that Merton is reaffirming within himself the basic direction of his life, which the previous summer had so unexpectedly and so powerfully questioned, threatened and, in the end, renewed.

What is wrong in my life is not so much a matter of 'sin' (though it is sin too), but of *unawareness*, lostness, slackness, relaxation, dissipation of desire, lack of courage and decision, so that I let myself be carried along and dictated to by an alien movement. The current of the 'world,' which I know is not mine. I am always getting diverted into a way that is not my way and is not going where I am called to go. And only if I go where I must go can I be of any use to the 'world.' I can serve the world best by keeping my distance and my freedom.

And Merton turns interestingly, from Jerome to Athanasius, and to the life of Anthony itself.

In the *Vita Antonii*, 'virtue' is within us not outside us, and we find it when we return to our 'original nature' our 'natural state' the state proper to ourselves as we 'came into being' one might add our true identity in the mind of God. The soul, says Anthony, "came into being fair and perfectly straight," so the prophet says, "Make straight your paths unto the Lord God of Israel" and St. John the Baptist, "Make straight your paths"... So the job is (as St. John of the Cross says) "Keeping the strength of the mind, of one's thought and desires for God. Having received the soul as something entrusted to us, let us guard it for the Lord that he may recognise his work as being the same as he made it."

So Merton has made his Pentecost around a return to two basic monastic texts of the early centuries, Jerome and Athanasius. He has summed up his meditation with a reference to St. John of the Cross. It has been, one might suppose, a quiet but full day of retreat and reflection.

And then we read on to May the 17th, the following Wednesday, and we are in for a good Mertonian surprise. Everything that I have quoted so far, together with the copious notes and translations from Jerome's life which I have not quoted, was written between, say, four in the morning, or whenever Merton got up, and about half past eight or nine. Because, as we find in the Journal entry for May 17th, the day had hardly begun.

On Pentecost, drove in to Louisville with Reverend Father in the rain, found St. Thomas' seminary way out in the fields somewhere towards Cincinnati, walked in long halls this way and that and found a sacristy. And waited, and had pictures taken.

This is not going to be a day of silence in the hermitage. It is going to be a day of activity and celebration in Louisville. It is the day of Dan Walsh's ordination. Dan Walsh had been Merton's teacher back at Columbia and had followed him to Gethsemani, and he was now to be ordained in his sixties. For those days it was a late ordination and it had been largely arranged and promoted by the former Archbishop of Louisville, Archbishop Floersch, who had himself only recently retired.

Merton sketches in the event briefly:

The concelebration was fine... a great enthusiasm filled the large bright chapel, crowded with people, friends and students of Dan, including some former monks with their wives etc. Archbishop Floersch moved and moving. Dan nervous at one point. A great celebration though. Then we went on to the O'Callaghan's — this time I with a carload of ex-monks. The day stayed grey but we could sit in the yard at metal tables, where I talked too much, drank too much champagne and generally misbehaved, going against what I had in mind earlier Pentecost morning.

Now it really ought to be Tommie herself who should tell you about the Pentecost party. There were anxieties at the practical level, that it would continue to rain and that they would have to try to bring everyone into the house. But it didn't continue to rain. They could go out and sit in the garden. It was a great party, such as only the O'Callaghans can give, a party especially for Dan Walsh whom Tommie too had known since she was a student, and who was the person who had first introduced Merton to the O'Callaghan household. Tom was certainly very much there.

He gives us a more highly coloured account of the occasion in letters to his friends. In the letter to Jim Forest for instance he wrote:

Pentecost was a big day down here, as my old friend Dan Walsh was suddenly ordained, in his sixties, with all sorts of dispensations, and there was a lot of celebrating. In fact I celebrated on too much champagne which is a thing a Trappist rarely gets to do, but I did a very thorough job. At one point in the afternoon I remember looking up and focusing, rather uncertainly, upon four faces of nuns sitting in a row looking at me in a state of complete scandal and shock. Another pillar of the church had fallen.

Next morning Frank O'Callaghan presented Tom with an empty champagne bottle with a message tied round its neck, which said, "In memory of Father Louis, with apologies from Frank."

It had been a memorable and diversified Whitsunday, starting in the hermitage, continuing at the ordination, concluding with the party. It had been a day of celebration on many levels, inner and outer, divine and human, sacred and secular, sublime and ridiculous.

The following day was almost as full. I will describe it only briefly. In the morning Merton went to the Louisville Carmel and concelebrated with Dan Walsh.

It was deeply moving, a sense of light and joy and of spiritual reality, a most beautiful Eucharist ... I was very happy about it, preached homily,

later we had a half-hour or so with the nuns in their speak room and again I talked too much, but everyone seemed very happy.

They lunched with the Fords, and Tom met some of the younger priests who were teaching at Bellarmine.

"Later I went down to the Chancery and had a very good talk with the new archbishop, McDonough..." Merton was relieved to find that the Archbishop was happy about his writing and particularly about his contacts with Muslims. The Archbishop was also able to tell Merton that the Apostolic Delegate in Washington seemed highly interested in his work.

But the day ends on a personal, not a public note, a note which seems to draw together the disparate material of the two previous days:

Coming home late called M., who had had the day off, had been reading Robert Frost ("Bereft") and kept saying we should go on talking to each other as before (with love) and that she had dreamt of me. But I still have doubts about writing her with much affection, also frequently, and I know she has hesitations about our seeing each other — or at least about her driving down here. So it is calming down anyway; but I was glad to talk to her and on the phone she sounded happy.

So the storms of the previous May were subsiding. Just a week before this entry Merton records that he had phoned her from the airport and that she had told him of her intention to get married in the autumn; and that they both had been happy and peaceful about that decision. Certainly things were not yet fully resolved, but looking back, perhaps already Merton was beginning to see how much he had gained from that new, if sometimes tumultuous experience of love. Looking back now, after thirty more years we can surely see in the continued and so admirable silence of M. a sign that for her too, however painful and perplexing parts of the episode must have been, it had not in the end been destructive or harmful.

Writing in his Journal ten years earlier, in 1957, commenting on the theology of Bulgakov and Berdyaev, Merton says that our life is called to be "a powerful Pentecost, in which the Holy Spirit, ever active in us, seeks to reach through our inspired hands and tongues into the very heart of the material world." Well, Pentecost '67, with its ups and its downs, with its joys and its sorrows, had been a new discovery of that constantly renewed, mysterious fact.