

## Thomas Merton, Cistercian Monk

M. BASIL PENNINGTON OCSO

TODAY, IN THE WEST, there is certainly a widespread interest in monastic tradition and the spiritual riches it has to offer. To what extent this is due to Thomas Merton, our Father Louis or Uncle Louie as some of his confrères fondly called him, could be a subject of considerable discussion. He has contributed to it, without a doubt, with millions of books distributed in dozens of languages. Other monastics have made their contribution: another Thomas — Keating by name, John Main, William Menninger, Benedicta Ward, to mention a few. While many from outside the monastic tradition have reached into it: Esther de Waal, Canon Allchin, Parker Palmer, William Shannon and many others.

This year, Merton's Cistercian family joyfully celebrates the 900th anniversary of the founding of Cîteaux on March 21, 1098. Tom loved his Cistercian heritage. His writings give ample witness to this. I had opportunity to experience it personally as I worked with him in the founding of Cistercian Publications whose primary aim was to publish the Cistercian Fathers and Mothers in English and make the Cistercian heritage better known and more readily available. I think then it is a good time to look at Father Louis precisely as a Cistercian — in my estimation one of the truly great Cistercians of this century. I would even go so far as to say, in some real way, he is the Saint Bernard of our times.

When *The Seven Storey Mountain* suddenly became the astounding and totally unexpected success that it was and continues to be, his publisher, Bob Giroux, quickly signed Tom on to produce three more books. Tom in his own mind planned one of those books to be a volume about one of his favourite Cistercian Fathers, Aelred of Reivaulx. While he made considerable progress in preparing this volume, in the end it remained one of his unfinished works. It has

been published in five parts in *Cistercian Studies Quarterly*, a review Tom was instrumental in establishing. Tom's study of Aelred is prefaced by an overview of the Cistercian Fathers. With a conciseness and clarity that characterized some of his more incisive writing, Father Louis sums up the Fathers' literary physiognomy:

The rich and elegant vitality of Cistercian prose — most of which is sheer poetry — betrays an overflow of literary productivity which did not even need to strive for its effects: it achieved them, as it were, spontaneously. It seemed to be second nature to St. Bernard, William of St. Thierry, Adam of Perseigne, Guerric of Igny to write with consummate beauty of prose, full of sound and colour and charm. There were two natural explanations for this. The first is that the prolific Cistercian writers of the Golden Age were men who had already been thoroughly steeped in the secular literary movements of the time before they entered the cloister. All of them had rich experience of the current of humanism that flowered through the twelfth-century renaissance...

There is a second explanation for the richness and exuberance of theological prose in the twelfth-century monasteries of Cîteaux. If contact with classical humanism had stimulated a certain intellectual vitality in these clerics, it also generated a conflict in their souls. The refined natural excitements produced by philosophical speculation, by art, poetry, music, by the companionship of restless, sensitive and intellectual friends merely unsettled their souls. Far from finding peace and satisfaction in all these things, they found war.

The only answer to the problem was to make a clean break with everything that stimulated this spiritual uneasiness, to withdraw from the centres in which it was fomented, and get away somewhere, discover some point of vantage from which they could see the whole difficulty in its proper perspective. This vantage point, of course, was not only the cloister, since Ovid and Tully had already become firmly established there, but the desert — the *terra invia et inaquosa* in which the Cistercian laboured and suffered and prayed...

The tension generated by the conflict between secular humanism and the Cistercian humanism, which seeks the fulfilment of human nature through ascetic renunciation and mystical union with God, was one of the proximate causes of the powerful mystical writing of the Cistercians. However, once these two natural factors have been considered, we must recognize other and far more decisive influences, belonging to a higher order...

It is the relish and savour that only experience can give that communicates to the writings of the twelfth-century Cistercians all the

vitality and vividness and impassioned sincerity which are peculiarly their own...

The White Monks speak with accents of a more personal and more lyrical conviction that everywhere betrays the influence of an intimate and mystical experience...

It is the personal experiential character of Cistercian mysticism that gives the prose of the White Monks its vivid freshness...

Since the theology of the Cistercians was so intimately personal and experiential, their exposition of it was bound to take a psychological direction. All that they wrote was directed by their keen awareness of the presence and action of God in their souls. This was their all absorbing interest.

I don't think any one would have any difficulty in seeing how well the Cistercian of Gethsemani described himself in describing his Fathers of old:

The rich and elegant vitality of Cistercian prose...an overflow of literary productivity which did not even need to strive for its effects... had already been thoroughly steeped in the secular literary movements of the time before [he] entered the cloister...had rich experience of the current of humanism...contact with classical humanism had stimulated a certain intellectual vitality...refined natural excitements produced by philosophical speculation, by art, poetry, music, by the companionship of restless, sensitive and intellectual friends merely unsettled [his] soul... The only answer...get away somewhere, discover some point of vantage from which [he] could see the whole difficulty in its proper perspective ... the desert ... seek the fulfilment of human nature through ascetic renunciation and mystical union with God ...

It is the relish and savour that only experience can give that communicates to the writings...all the vitality and vividness and impassioned sincerity which are peculiarly their own...

The White Monk(s) speak[s] with accents of a more personal and more lyrical conviction that everywhere betrays the influence of an intimate and mystical experience...

It is the personal experiential character of Cistercian mysticism that gives the prose of the White Monk(s) its vivid freshness...

All that [he] wrote was directed by [his] keen awareness of the presence and action of God in [his] soul(s). This was [his] all absorbing interest.

In 1953, on the occasion of the 800th anniversary of the death of Bernard of Clairvaux, Merton undertook, largely on his own impetus, to publish an English translation of Pope Pius XII's encyclical honouring the Master of the Cistercian School, providing the twenty-two page document of the pope with a ninety-page introduction. Again we are struck at how well Merton describes himself in speaking of his Father Saint Bernard:

Yet like other complex and many-sided characters, he suffered a rapid and disconcerting fragmentation at the hands of his fame. Perhaps he was too great to be remembered in his entirety. It has ended with history celebrating one side of him, theology another, piety a third, his own monastic Order a fourth.

This morning I am admittedly seeking to bring forth one side of this great man or perhaps more truly the foundation or inner core which expressed itself so diversely in his multifaceted life. Merton in introducing the encyclical on Saint Bernard goes on to write:

Not the least of the services that have been performed by this publication is the return to the whole and integrated picture of Saint Bernard, with emphasis not on the secondary and accidental phases of his career, but on the most important thing of all: his sanctity, his union with God, his conformity to Christ by perfect charity, and his teaching inspired as much by his study of Scripture and the Fathers as by his own experience of mystical union.

This short paper cannot hope to accomplish so much. But may it fill out the picture of Father Louis by showing his teaching and life as inspired by his study of his Cistercian Fathers and most notably Saint Bernard, whom Merton saw "as an organ of the teaching church and a sure witness of Christian tradition" and yet as one who "struck an altogether new note of hope and encouragement...in spirituality... the clean fresh sweetness of the fields and the forest." How all this appealed to and reverberates in Merton! He also notes of Bernard (as can be said of himself): "There were, indeed, times in his life when he had to be angry in the cause of justice. And he could be splendidly angry."

Yet another note Father Louis makes in regard to Bernard can be applied to himself:

The essentially monastic character of all Saint Bernard's writing is what gives it a very special quality of its own. It is this character that especially recommends his books to us now, in an age that is proving

itself hungry for the spiritual provender that has lain hidden, all these centuries, in Christian monasticism.

This little book, *The Last of the Fathers*, is undoubtedly Father Louis' crowning tribute to his great White Father whom he hails as "the greatest man of his time."

If we discount a couple of small volumes of poems, *The Spirit of Simplicity* is the first volume published by Merton. It is the work of a young man, still in temporary vows as a Cistercian. It was assigned as a simple translation job, the third volume in a series, *The Cistercian Library*, inaugurated by Dom Frederic Dunne. But the enthusiasm of the young monk turned it into a significant volume, gracing the General Chapter report which he was to translate with a rich spiritual commentary, as long as the translated report and far more significant — a commentary that was as much Saint Bernard's as it was Frater Louis. Dom Frederic could not have been surprised at this for it was he himself who had urged the gifted young man to read all of Saint Bernard, a task beyond the capability of most in those days when Bernard was largely available only in the tightly printed columns of the Migne edition in the *Patrologia Latina*. What is surprising to mature students of Saint Bernard is the incisiveness with which the young monk drew out from the Saint's very extensive and rich corpus those passages which are commonly accepted as holding the essence of Bernard's theological anthropology and mystical theology. And these include not only what today might be thought of as the more obvious passages, those in the final sermons of Bernard's commentary on the Song of Songs, but a rich array of texts from many other sermons and treatises.

Frater Louis sums up Bernard's teaching:

The soul was created in God's image and likeness. St. Bernard's whole treatment of the fall can be summed up in this: that man lost his likeness to his Creator and Exemplar, but retained the image, ingrained in and inseparable from the very essence of his soul. To understand all that is implied by this is to possess the key to the whole mystical theology of St. Bernard... The whole tragedy of fallen man, from the point of view of his own spiritual condition and the proximate cause of all unhappiness is the constant self-contradiction generated within him by the confronting of the essential image of God in his soul with the lost likeness that has been unutterably disfigured by sin.

He goes on to say:

St. Bernard has really vindicated the fundamental goodness of human nature in terms as strong as have ever been used by any philosopher or theologian. And if the first step in the Cistercian ascent to God is for the monk to know himself we may reasonably say that, in some sense, the whole life of such a one will consist in being himself, or rather trying to return to the original simplicity, immortality and freedom which constitute his real self, in the image of God.

A few years later, in his introduction to the papal encyclical, Merton would state this same truth:

...the eighty-third sermon on the Canticle of Canticles, written shortly before Saint Bernard's death, and representing the highest development of his thought... Now the opening lines of this sermon, which Pope Pius quotes extensively, declare that every soul, no matter how burdened with sins, no matter how conscious of its exile from God, and no matter how close it may be to damnation and to despair, can nevertheless find in itself a reason for hope not only for pardon, not only for mercy, but even for perfect union with God in "the mystical marriage." The context of these lines shows that Saint Bernard was here developing his doctrine of the soul as the image of God, created for the most perfect union with Him.

What Frater Louis got hold of in his reading of Saint Bernard is the fact that the essential dignity of the human person lies not in something that is accidental to the person but in the person's very essence. We are essentially the image of God. And no matter what we do or how far we stray, we never lose that essential dignity. It belongs to us in our common shared humanity. Thus every human person deserves respect, no matter what be our race, colour, sex or sexual orientation, religion or lack of religion, because of our common shared participation in human nature which is the image of God. In this humanity we are one and it is our highest dignity.

Merton did not only insightfully discern the foundational texts of Saint Bernard and comment on them with clarity and preciseness. He incorporated them deeply into his own outlook on life and reality. He did this instinctively under the Holy Spirit because the grace of his vocation was precisely a sharing in the Cistercian charism. There was a working together here of nature and grace. Sometimes I think in our appreciation of Merton's wonderful humility (the basic Benedictine virtue) which made him so approachable, so much of an "ordinary Joe" — something he came to rejoice in — we fail to appreciate we have here a man of extraordinary genius. His facility



in Medieval Latin enabled him to move quickly through the hundreds of columns of Migne's edition of Saint Bernard. He quickly grasped the central ideas. And he retained key texts in his memory, able to call them up and relate them with texts from very diverse parts of the Saint's corpus, drawing them together in a powerful synthesis.

Thomas Merton, the poet, had a great love for Saint John of the Cross. The Saint's mystical poetry spoke deeply to his soul. Yet the post-Tridentine, more rationalistic presentation in the Saint's treatises did not integrate easily with the holistic anthropological mysticism of Father Louis' Cistercian Father Bernard. Merton struggled with this. In a series of articles he sought to reconcile the two. In loyalty to his earlier love, he sought to write a synthesis of the teaching of John of the Cross. This labour led to Merton's only experience of writer's block. After a near nervous breakdown he did finish the volume in a very unsatisfactory way at least unsatisfactory to him — and resolved never to undertake this sort of task again. John of the Cross, the poet, remained with Merton till the end — Tom cites him in the last book he prepared for publication, *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* — but it was Bernard who grounded his theological outlook as he moved toward what is his own most masterful treatise in mystical theology and Christian anthropology, *The New Man*.

As important as was Bernard's influence on the formation of Merton's theological outlook, the Saint's influence on Merton's basic stance on life, on the life he chose to live, on the meaning of his life, is more fundamental. Shortly after his enlightening experience at Fourth and Walnut, Merton assembled what could appear to be a rather disparate collection of essays for publication as *Disputed Questions*. In the introduction Merton indicates what he sees as the uniting force: they all address "the relation of the person to the social organization." The last essay in this volume and perhaps the oldest — reflecting much of the piety of the young monk — is one on Saint Bernard: "Saint Bernard, Monk and Apostle." In this essay Merton enumerates and quickly lays aside Bernard's many achievements, not the least of which was peacemaking, and devotes most of the essay to underlining Bernard's pre-eminent contribution as a person who is a sacrament of God's love in this world. This ultimate statement of the book on the person's relation to the social institutions of this world

I believe expresses how Merton under the influence of Saint Bernard and sharing his vocation ultimately saw himself — and how most ultimately see him. Merton's life, presented in an autobiography which later caused him embarrassment, has spoken to millions because it is such a powerful sign and sacrament of God's love and action in this world, of the fact that the image of God, our true dignity, remains no matter how much it is covered over by duplicity, no matter how much our true freedom is chained by a false self. Bernard, by being who he was even more than by the teaching which he taught, enabled Merton to come to see who he was. Bernard stands at the beginning of Cistercian history as a sacrament of what all Cistercians should be for the Church and for the world whether solely through the hidden apostolate of prayer or through exceptional dynamic action. Father Louis of Gethsemani was, in this pattern of Bernard of Clairvaux, a Cistercian to the full.

We have all heard Dan Walsh's exclamation as he first read *The New Man*: "The New Man — the new Merton!" Not really new — rather the fullest and profoundest revelation of the Merton that twenty years of Cistercian living had been slowly and steadily forming by contact with the wisdom of the Cistercian Fathers and Mothers and by living the life they had lived. *The New Man* is the crowning expression of nearly a two decades of profound integration. He says nothing new in *The New Man* but he says it with a new power and grace for it now comes forth from a lived experience and not just hearsay from his Father Bernard. He can now say: I know what I have believed.

In the opening chapters of this book Merton dares, like his mentor Bernard, to reach into classic mythology to bring forth a fundamental human aspiration, one which, he clearly sees, can only be fulfilled and is fulfilled beyond all expectation in Christ Jesus. As he continued his exploration he brought forth key texts of Bernard's commentary on the Song of Songs showing that the fundamental malaise of the human spirit lies in its divine likeness in simplicity being cloaked over with duplicity — the false self.

As he comes to the heart of his teaching, Merton acknowledges that other Fathers interpret these key Scriptural texts of the image and likeness in different ways but he is following the thought of Saint Bernard. He sums up Bernard's thought in this brief paragraph:

The human soul is still the image of God, and no matter how far it travels from Him into the regions of unreality, it never becomes so

completely unreal that its original destiny can cease to torment it with a need to return to itself in God, and become, once again, real.

He goes on:

The inner recesses of our consciences where the image of God is branded in the very depths of our being ceaselessly remind us that we are born for a far higher freedom and for a far more spiritual fulfilment.

Or, as he puts it in *The Last of the Fathers*: "Liberty constitutes man in God's image...we fully realize our own identity by becoming perfectly free and therefore by loving God without limit."

The modern existential thinker who wants *lectio* that is fully in the spirit of Saint Bernard yet benefits from the subsequent development in human thought and Christian doctrine can find no better place to do it than in Thomas Merton and, most especially, in *The New Man*.

Through the years Merton constantly returned to this basic insight: the essential dignity of every human person, made in the very image of God, called to true freedom, enjoying a oneness with every other human person in sharing a common humanity. He expressed it again in an article he published just a few weeks before he died:

This kind of maturity is exactly what the monastic life should produce. The monastic life is precisely this sort of freedom in the spirit, this liberation from the limits of all that is merely partial or fragmentary in a given culture. Monasticism calls for a breadth and universality of vision that sees everything in the light of One Truth, as St. Benedict beheld all creation embraced "in one ray of the sun." This too is suggested at the end of chapter seven of the Rule where St. Benedict speaks of the new identity, the new mode of being of the monk who no longer practices the various degrees of humility with concentrated and studied effort, but with dynamic spontaneity "in the Spirit." It is suggested also in the "degrees of truth" and the "degrees of love" in St. Bernard's tracts on humility and on the love of God.

A friend of mine once said that it seemed to him a good writer got one good insight and spent the rest of his life developing and illustrating it in diverse and varied ways. This is an interesting thesis that might be worth exploring. What is true is that the basic theme of the Cistercian Fathers, the restoration of the likeness and the return to God from the land of unlikeness, is basic in the writings of Father Louis. It is deeply explored, richly developed and set forth in so many varied ways that almost any pilgrim on the homeward

journey can identify with him and receive from him helpful guidance and companionship along the way. Consoling for us is the fact that it took Merton years to significantly integrate this insight which he got in the first days of his monastic conversion. When it finally did become truly his insight, he became fully in touch with the perduring wonder of every human person. From this flowed his reverence for all, his openness to all, his universal compassion, his deep social concern. Still looking to Bernard, Merton would write:

The interior life is the life of the whole Church, of the Mystical Body of Christ, shared by all who are members of that Body. But the invisible and interior peace of the members among themselves and with their God is not separable, in the mind of Bernard, from an exterior and visible order which guarantees the effect of his salvific action upon souls... Bernard is a builder, a man at once of liberty and of order, a man who builds individual liberties into a universal order, that all may be more perfectly free.

We may well wonder: would there have been *The Seven Storey Mountain* if the Franciscans had accepted Thomas Merton. Certainly there would not have been a "Firewatch" or *The Sign of Jonas*. But Merton may well have led the renewal of the eremitic among the sons and daughters of Francis.

As all of us, Tom was shaped by many influences, by various schools of thought and most significantly by his own life experience. By God's design he was a Cistercian, spent the more significant half of his life as a Cistercian, however much he kicked against the goad at times. He received the Cistercian charism and was formed by the Cistercian school, above all by the master of that school, Bernard of Clairvaux. We have seen how his own description of the Cistercian Fathers fits him to a 'T.' He entered upon a way of spirituality, of life, that forsakes as much as possible what this world treasures with one glaring exception: a love for authentic beauty, especially in architecture, music and literature. The Cistercians created magnificent buildings — Tom illustrated *The Spirit of Simplicity* with fourteen pages of pictures of Cistercian monasteries and was very active in the committee that recreated the church and cloisters at Gethsemani.

The Cistercians filled these magnificent buildings with soul-embracing chant — Merton served the community at Gethsemani as a cantor through many years. And they set forth their mystical

experience in an unsurpassed poetic prose that explored what is deepest in the human, in the divine and in the marriage of the two. While Father Louis hardly stepped out of his monastic enclosure, like his Father, Saint Bernard, all the deep concerns of the Church and of the human family became his. He did not go out to lead mobs back to the gates of Gethsemani but every Christian monastery in the world has had candidates drawn to them by this monk's writings and example. And countless others, through his influence, while still following their own proper vocations, have been drawn to the essential values of the monastic way and have had their lives enriched by them. Both were exceptionally good letter writers. If this monk of Gethsemani does not wear the halo of the wonder-worker, there can be little doubt that he is a Cistercian, through and through, a true son of Saint Bernard and the other Fathers and Mothers of the ever-alive and fruitful Cistercian tradition.

It is remarkable how much movement has come from the nudge this monk gave to the Church and society some thirty and more years ago. If that momentum is not to lose its force we who eagerly celebrate the fact that we are in varying degrees moved by that nudge need to open ourselves to the sources that so empowered Father Louis. We need to give priority to our daily contemplative practice. We need to let the Spirit enlighten us through regular contact with the Sacred Scriptures and the spiritual masters of the ages, especially the Cistercian Fathers and Mothers. We need to be wide open to the wisdom of all other traditions through a truly dialogical spirit and practice.

To celebrate Father Louis without seeking to inculcate into our lives, into our ideas and into the world in which we live and labour, the values he so luminously and effectively professed and incarnated would be a charade.

I am sure Tom is here with us and he is thoroughly enjoying the whole scene, rollicking with laughter at times seeing how deadly serious we become over the details of his journey. As his Cistercian brother and friend, I would dare to say his one message to us would be: You guys can do so much more in all this than I — do it!