

Thomas Merton and “the Great Feast of Christian Hope”

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*“I know so well the fountain, rushing and flowing
though it be night”*

(St. John of the Cross)

I would like to begin by mentioning a most meaningful coincidence in the context of the topic of my presentation, which may help express my deepest trust and my gratitude for this event and for the many people who have contributed to make it possible.

Twenty years ago, on 27 October 1986 in Assisi, Pope John Paul II called an Interreligious Meeting of Prayer for Peace, an initiative which, in the words of Benedict XVI, “has acquired the features of an accurate prophecy,” for “his invitation to the world’s religious leaders to bear a unanimous witness to peace serves to explain with no possibility of confusion that *religion must be a herald of peace.*” In his message to Bishop Domenico Sorrentino on the 20th anniversary of this meeting, His Holiness Benedict XVI affirmed, “attestations of the close bond that exists between the relationship with God and the ethics of love are recorded in all the great religious traditions.”¹

I would like to briefly show, through a few but very revealing examples, that as a Christian monk, Thomas Merton had gained a deep awareness of that bond, and that his living up to that awareness made him a peace-bearer and a source of hope for our critical times.

Twenty years prior to the Assisi encounter, Thomas Merton had been giving a series of conferences before Sunday Vespers to

¹ H.H. Benedict XVI, *Message on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Interreligious Meeting of Prayer for Peace*, 2 September 2006.

teach his fellow monks at the Abbey of Gethsemani about aspects of the monastic life. Between 1966 and 1968 he lectured on Sufism, for he thought it important for monks to enrich their Christian formation with spiritual lessons from other traditions. Fortunately, these lectures were recorded and later transcribed. In one of them, in which Merton is trying to explain the opening prayer of the Koran, he takes the case of the Sufi understanding of the Mercy of God to affirm something of universal import:

If I am completely united with the will of God in love, it doesn't matter what happens outside, because everything that is going on outside that makes any sense is grounded in the same ground in which I am grounded. The opposition between me and everything else ceases, and what remains in terms of opposition is purely accidental and it doesn't matter. And this is... a basic perspective in all... the highest religions. You ought to get down to this, you get down to it in Christianity, you get down to it in Buddhism, you get down to it in Hinduism, and so forth. It is arriving at a unity in which the superficial differences don't matter. It doesn't mean that they are not real, it doesn't mean that they're not there. They still subsist.²

And in another lecture on "The Mystical Life in Sufism," he adds:

The sense that God is everything, that He is the Beginning and the End ...and that His love is the Source and the Beginning and the End and the All of Everything. Especially in Sufism, there is this idea that we come from God, that's why we desire to return to Him, because God is where we belong.³

From an apparently different religious perspective, in 1966 Merton writes the preface to a collection of essays written in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council's *Declaration on Non-Christian Religions*, which encouraged Catholics to "acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among these men as well as the values in their society and culture."⁴ In the opening essay, which gives the title to the book, *Mystics and Zen*

² Thomas Merton, "The Straight Way," *Merton and Sufism: The Untold Story. A Complete Compendium*, eds., Rob Baker and Gray Henry (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999), 145.

³ Thomas Merton, "The Mystical Life in Sufism," *Ibid.*, 161.

⁴ n. 2.

Masters, Merton finds an affinity between the Chinese Zen Patriarch Hui Neng's experience of "void" and the *todo y nada* of St. John of the Cross.⁵ Moreover, he discovers that "there is in the 'void' of Hui Neng a surprising Trinitarian structure that reminds us of all that is most characteristic of the highest forms of Christian contemplation, whether in the Cappadocian school, the Augustinians and Franciscans, Ruysbroeck and the Rhenish mystics, or St. John of the Cross and the Carmelites."⁶ And most importantly, an "ineluctable consequence of the Trinitarian structure of being which his Zen perceives and reveals" is "a fulfilment in love."⁷ To show that this is not just a scholarly speculation, he tells the readers that for Daisetz Suzuki, the Zen interpreter of the Rinzai tradition, the "most important thing of all is love" and adds, "this he himself told me in a personal conversation in which I feel that he intended, by this remark, to sum up all that he had ever written, experienced, or said."⁸

Thomas Merton intended to visit Fr. Hugo Enomiya-Lassalle, a Jesuit missionary who contributed to the Council's Declaration and a Zen practitioner under Yamada Koun Rôshi who, because of the zeal and seriousness of his Christian disciples, was convinced that Zen would come to play a very important role in the Catholic Church.⁹ The encounter never took place due to Merton's fatal accident in Bangkok. Today, in Spain, in the same spirit of the Council's declaration, their disciple, Sr. Ana M^a Schlüter Rodés, a Catholic member of the Bethany Community, a Zen teacher and the heart of Zendo Betania in Spain, has been leading a series of seminars which seek to discuss the consequences of the encounter of Zen and Christianity, and is encouraging lay and religious Christian practitioners of Zen to deepen our understanding of the Christian notion of "person" and our experience of love from a

⁵ Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967), 39.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁹ Ursula Baatz, *Hugo M. Enomiya-Lassalle: Una Vida entre Mundos. Biografía* (Bilbao: Desclée de Brouwer, 2001), 390.

Trinitarian perspective, which can both illumine and be illumined by the Zen experience. Today, *zazen* is also practiced as a contemplative path in some Cistercian and other monasteries both in the United States and elsewhere and is being integrated within their balanced life of prayer and work.

Now, 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 for saintly people from other religious traditions in their shared search for inner peace and peace on earth. Raimon Panikkar¹⁰ sees in the Trinity a primordial human experience. What is more, he considers Reality itself to be intrinsically Trinitarian.

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 east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 8.11). In his seminal work on a theology of the Trinity, the theologian Gisbert Greshake¹¹ 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 himself 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 de-centred and altruistic. The basic assumption is, therefore, not that “I think” but that “I love,” which, from a relational point of view, has a threefold meaning: 1) God loves me; 2) you are for me as important as I am to myself because I find the Lord in you; and 3) we want to love each other as He loved us. In

¹⁰ Raimon Panikkar, *La Trinidad: Una Experiencia Humana Primordial* (Madrid: Siruela, 1998), 92.

¹¹ Gisbert Greshake, *El Dios Uno y Trino: Una Teología de la Trinidad* (Barcelona: Herder, 2001), 312.

short, we are one, and He is always in our midst. We are not alone. No one is an island. 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.

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, Merton discovered in Louisville, there would be no more wars, no more self-deceptions, no more feelings of abandonment or scarcity. Merton described his experience as follows:

It was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really *are*. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed.¹²

This is reminiscent of a very famous passage from St. Teresa. We may try to apply what she said in reference to the soul to our whole world, seeing it with faith-filled eyes, beholding it as the outer manifestation of the Interior Castle while following the unsophisticated advice of Thomas Merton, who suggested (in a letter to the radical theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether dated March, 19, 1967): “What is needed is for the doors to open and for people to get around more and learn a little.” St. Teresa wrote:

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).

¹²Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 142.

In these and in similar examples, the experience of love acts as a way of overcoming obstacles and breaking down barriers, as the source of strength and inspiration for the construction of a world, and as the embodiment of hope.

In the East, *karuna* (compassion) represents the loving expression of the Buddha-matrix. In the West the loving face of Christianity is known as *charitas*. Today, real efforts are being made towards a cordial meeting of the waters of the Jordan and the Ganges. Merton's visit to the Dalai Lama and other religious representatives in Asia built a bridge for many Christians into the heart of Buddhism. Thich Nhat Hanh's visit to Merton and the Dalai Lama's interfaith encounters with monks of different traditions at the Abbey of Gethsemani as well as their sincere efforts to grasp the Gospel, and the attempts of contemporary Buddhists to reflect on the *Rule of Saint Benedict* have a profound spiritual meaning not only for the life of the Church but also for the future of our world.¹³ "I am convinced," Merton affirmed in the lecture he was to deliver on Monastic Experience and East-West Dialogue, "that communication in depth, across the lines that have hitherto divided religious and monastic traditions, is now not only possible and desirable, but most important for the destinies of Twentieth-Century Man."¹⁴

In case the appeal to love still sounds abstract or vague, let me refer you to a couple of contemporary scenarios on a planetary scale:

The first one has to do with a report called *The Limits to Growth*, which more than 30 years ago was commissioned by the Club of Rome from a team of experts from different countries. On the 20th anniversary of the publication of *The Limits to Growth*, in the 1990s, the team updated their findings in a book called *Beyond the Limits* in which they showed compelling evidence that humanity was moving deeper into unsustainable territory. In their recent study, *Limits to Growth: The 30-Year Update*, the authors

¹³ See Patrick Henry, ed., *Benedict's Dharma: Buddhists Reflect on the Rule of Saint Benedict* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2001).

¹⁴ *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, eds., Naomi Burton, Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973), 313.

produced a comprehensive update in which they concluded that while the past 30 years had shown some progress, including a new awareness of environmental problems, a great deal must change if the world is to avoid the serious consequences of blind and unlimited ambition in the 21st century. What I would like to highlight is that, besides the wealth of technical detail and specific economic, technical and industrial recommendations, one of the writers of the report reached the conclusion that these structural measures will only be effective if they are based on qualitative changes and on values, the most important of which is love itself.¹⁵

The second one comes from the moving documentary, *Knowledge Is the Beginning*, concerning a concert played by the West-Eastern Divan orchestra in Ramallah in 2005. The Divan was created by the Israeli musician Daniel Barenboim and the Palestinian literary critic Edward Said. In the year 2002 both received, in Oviedo (Spain), the Prince of Asturias' Prize for understanding between peoples because of their initiative.

They decided to create a workshop for young musicians from Israel and various countries of the Middle East with the aim of combining musical study and development with the sharing of knowledge and comprehension between people from cultures that traditionally have been rivals... While music will obviously not solve the Arab-Israeli conflict, it does play a role in bringing people together and allowing them to get to know one another.¹⁶

Despite their ideological differences, very often based on prejudices and ignorance of the other, the documentary shows that these most promising young people can actually play together –which is a form of praise– and how they gain a deeper appreciation for each other once they see, to use Merton's phrase,

¹⁵ Donnella Meadows, Jorgen Randers, and Dennis Meadows, *Limits to Growth: The 30-Year Update* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2004).

¹⁶ *Knowledge Is the Beginning: Daniel Barenboim and the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra*. A documentary produced and directed by Paul Smaczny and *The Ramallah Concert* recorded "live" in the Cultural Palace at Ramallah on 21 August, 2005. Concert directed by Michael Beyer. Documentary directed by Ayellet Heller. EuroArts Music International in co-operation with ARTE and Fundación Barenboim-Said in co-production with ZDF. Licensed to Warner Classics, Warner Music UK Ltd. Made in the EU, 2005.

“beyond their shadow and their disguise,” that is, underneath their surface. While differences remain, they enrich their relationship rather than hinder it since ideological barriers are overcome by an unshakable unity of purpose towards creative expression. Knowledge is indeed the beginning of love just as much as love is the beginning of a new way of knowing. To know as we are known is to know as we are loved. In the conclusion of his study on *Culture and Imperialism* Professor Edward Said acknowledged his debt to Hugh of St. Victor, the twelfth-century monk from Saxony.¹⁷ He wrote:

No one today is purely *one* thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting-points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind. Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale. But its worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly, exclusively, white, or Black, or Western, or Oriental. Yet just as human beings make their own history, they also make their cultures and ethnic identities. No one can deny the persisting continuities of long traditions, sustained habitations, national languages, and cultural geographies, but there seems no reason except fear and prejudice to keep insisting on their separation and distinctiveness, as if that was all human life was about. Survival in fact is about the connections between things; in Eliot’s phrase, reality cannot be deprived of the “other echoes [that] inhabit the garden.” It is more rewarding—and more difficult—to think concretely and sympathetically, contrapuntally, about others than only about “us.” But this also means not trying to rule others, not trying to classify them or put them in hierarchies, above all, not constantly reiterating how “our” culture or country is number one (or *not* number one, for that matter).¹⁸

Whilst Edward Said speaks as an intellectual, albeit one who takes inspiration from a mystic, Merton speaks as a contemplative. And when, understandably, Edward Said sets his mind and his heart on the pressing agenda of survival, Merton, in his last letter to Jean Leclercq (1910-1993) of July 23, 1968, suggested, in a different context, that “the vocation of the monk in the modern

¹⁷ See Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: The Preeminent Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 458.

¹⁸ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), 407-8.

world... is not survival but prophecy.”¹⁹ Merton had previously written about 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.”²⁰ 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... to be a prophetic community.”²¹

The striking thing about Christianity is that prophecy and love, the promise and the way, the reason of our existence and our deepest hope are found in One Person to whom we can relate. St. John of the Cross said that in Jesus Christ God had uttered His one and only Word and everything He had to say to us is contained in that Word. In this light, prophecy is a letting go of the false self, allowing Him to be revealed through our listening to His Word. Prophets are therefore not interested in foreseeing the future but in constantly being seen-through. Only when this happens can they be pushed to see and say, to denounce and to announce. The following passage may explain Merton’s passionate use of language, in paradoxical fidelity to his vow of silence:

The Acts of the Apostles is a book full of speech. It begins with tongues of fire. The apostles and disciples come downstairs and tumble into the street like an avalanche, talking in every language and the world thinks they are drunk but before the sun has set they have baptized three thousand souls out of Babel into the One Body of Christ. At Pentecost we sing of how they spoke. The antiphon “*loquebantur*” even now displays its sunlit cadences in my heart. The false Jerusalem, the old one that was a figure and had died, could not prohibit them from speaking (Acts, 4). But the more they loved one another and loved God, the more they declared His Word. And He manifested Himself through them. That

¹⁹ *Survival or Prophecy? The Letters of Thomas Merton & Jean Leclercq*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 175.

²⁰ Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960), 223.

²¹ Thomas Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani*, ed. Jane Marie Richardson (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1992), 134.

is the only possible reason for speaking –but it justifies speaking without end, as long as the speech grows up from silence and brings your soul to silence once again.²²

In view of the present and most pressing events at a planetary level, rather than having to choose between survival and prophecy, we may well collectively realize that survival is indeed 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.”²³

Hope has been regarded as a crucible for change from within different yet somehow akin understandings of the human condition. Paulo Freire revived his initial proposal for a pedagogy of the oppressed peoples, transforming it into a “pedagogy of hope,” one in which educators are “to unveil opportunities for hope, regardless of the obstacles.”²⁴ In Spain, inspired by Freire among others, Daniel Jover is giving shape to the teachings of Jesus through a specific initiative aimed at young people seeking jobs in which he shows the inseparability of ethics, spirituality and social commitment which, framed together, are a telling example of a true “praxis of hope.”²⁵ In 1968, Eric Fromm, with whom Merton had corresponded, published a book called *The Revolution of Hope*.²⁶ Merton had written “A Note on the Psychological Causes of War by Eric Fromm,” the essay where Fromm had tried to explain the death wish underlying the pervasive climate of fear in his contemporary society. Merton concluded his note with the following statement: “It is precisely because I believe, with Abraham Heschel and a cloud of witnesses before him, that ‘man is not alone,’ that I find hope even in this most desperate

²² Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953), 299-300.

²³ Merton, *Springs of Contemplation*, 49.

²⁴ Paulo Freire and Ana Maria Araújo Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 9.

²⁵ Daniel Jover, *Praxis de la Esperanza: Educación, Empleo y Economía Social*. (Barcelona: Icaria-Antrazyt, 2006).

²⁶ Eric Fromm, *Die Revolution der Hoffnung. Fur Eine Humanisierte Technik [The Revolution of Hope. Toward a Humanized Technology* (New York: HarperCollins, 1968), GA IV: 255-377].

situation.”²⁷ In his major book, *The Principle of Hope*, the Marxist writer Ernst Bloch had also found that the essence of humanity is hopefulness.²⁸ Jürgen Moltmann’s *Theology of Hope*²⁹ was inspired by his experience, as a prisoner of war during World War II, of God’s very presence behind the barbed wire, with the broken-hearted.

Merton’s vocation was built upon an experience of forgiveness from which stemmed an unshakable hope. As a Cistercian monk, Merton “emphasizes both that hope has a transcendent dimension, pointing toward the ultimate fulfillment of the world to come (*Thoughts in Solitude*, 38), the eschatological kingdom (*Seasons of Celebration*, 60), and that it has profound effects on the way one’s life is lived here and now.”³⁰

When we are ready to die to ourselves we can begin to appreciate the specific “festive” quality of Christian hope, which may equip us to truly meet the other, and to love their otherness as well as our deep togetherness. For hope –Merton warns us– is not to be equated to “pious optimism.”³¹ Rather, true hope, for Merton, “goes with self-forgetfulness and love of others (not wanting a special fulfillment for oneself and giving to others what one can here and now, without demanding that it be a ‘rewarding experience’).”³² Christian hope, which is based on Christian love, has nothing to do with the rejection of problems or an evasion of our deepest existential difficulties.

The beginning of Merton’s *The New Man* points to the very heart of our human condition. The battle of life and death, he states,

²⁷ Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 117.

²⁸ Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1959). [English edition, *The Principle of Hope* (3 Volumes) trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986)].

²⁹ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (London: SCM Press, 1967).

³⁰ William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O’Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 212.

³¹ *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985), 533.

³² Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 361.

goes on within us as soon as we are born. This is not a struggle for questions and answers but an existential *agonia*. At this point, it is worth quoting Merton at length:

Existence itself becomes an absurd question, like a *Zen koan*: and to find an answer to such a question is to be irrevocably lost. An absurd question can have only an absurd answer.

Religions do not, in fact, simply supply answers to questions . . . Salvation is more than the answer to a question...

The roots of life remain immortal and invulnerable in us if we will continue to keep morally alive by hope. Yet hope in its full supernatural dimension is beyond our power...

Hope then is a gift. Like life, it is a gift from God, total, unexpected, incomprehensible, undeserved. It springs out of nothingness, completely free. But to meet it, we have to descend into nothingness. And there we meet hope most perfectly, when we are stripped of our own confidence, our own strength...

The Christian hope... is a communion in the agony of Christ. It is the identification of our own *agonia* with the *agonia* of the God Who has emptied Himself and become obedient unto death. It is the acceptance of life in the midst of death, not because we have courage, or light, or wisdom to accept, but because by some miracle the God of Life Himself accepts to live, in us, at the very moment when we descend into death.

All truly religious thought claims to arm man for his struggle with death with weapons that will ensure the victory of life over death.

The most paradoxical and at the same time the most unique and characteristic claim made by Christianity is that in the Resurrection of Christ the Lord from the dead, man has completely conquered death, and that 'in Christ' the dead will rise again to enjoy eternal life, in spiritualized and transfigured bodies and in a totally new creation. This new life in the Kingdom of God is to be not merely a passively received inheritance but in some sense the fruit of our agony and labor, love and prayers in union with the Holy Spirit.³³

Again, we have to see this in the light of Merton's life of commitment to peace and concern for the lot of his fellow human beings in the midst of difficulties. In Lent of the year 1967 in a circular letter Merton reflects on technology and complains that while technology could, and should, make a much better world for millions of human beings, and even if it "has given us the means to

³³ Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1961), 3-6.

alleviate human misery... the profit system makes it practically impossible to use the means effectively." With bitter irony he remarks:

In our technological world we have wonderful methods for keeping people alive and wonderful methods for killing them off, and they both go together. We rush in and save lives from tropical diseases, then we come along with napalm and burn up the people we have saved. The net result is more murder, more suffering, more inhumanity. This I know is a caricature, but is it that far from the truth?

At the end of his long letter, in which he thought it worthwhile making clear the myth of technology, he concludes:

And so we turn our eyes to the great feast of Christian hope: the Resurrection. Too often the Passion and Resurrection of the Lord have been used in the past to canonize earthly injustice and despair: the old business of saying "Yes, you are getting a dirty deal, but just offer it up and you will be happy in heaven." The real root of Christian hope is the presence of the Risen Lord among us and in us by His Spirit which is the Spirit and power of love. The power of the Resurrection is the power of love that is stronger than death and evil, and its promise is the promise that the power of this love is ours if we freely accept it. To accept it is not just a matter of making a wish, but of entire and total commitment to the Law of Christ which is the Law of Love. Let us realize this, and believe it, and pray for one another. Let us be one in this love, and seek to make all men one in it, even here on earth. And if technology helps to express the creative power of love, then all the better: it will give glory to God and have its own place in the Kingdom of God on earth. But technology by itself will never establish that Kingdom.³⁴

In plain words he asked: "What can we gain by sailing to the moon if we are not able to cross the abyss that separates us from ourselves? This is the most important of all voyages of discovery."³⁵

Thomas Merton's spiritual journey acknowledged the likeness of the arch of human nature to a rainbow: one circle of light with many colours or, in the words of the Dalai Lama, a single garden containing many flowers. Merton's individual story recapitulated,

³³ Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1961), 3-6.

³⁴ *The Road to Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989), 98-100.

³⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert* (London: Sheldon Press, 1974), 11.

interpreted and added new insights and fertile shades of meaning to our collective history. He immersed himself in the waters of life and found that their bottomless depths pervade all manner of currents and flows of spirituality. As Thomas Merton went deeper into the source of his own and all life, his prophetic vision grew more universal, for the scope of the within and the beyond go hand in hand in the realms of the Spirit. The circle of his life may be likened 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. For many of us, today, Thomas Merton's presence has adopted a new vigorous way, and his life graces our world just like the "festival" of free, abundant rain he spoke of: a "perfectly innocent speech," a kind of "baptism and... renewal" in the forest of our time.³⁶ During his lifetime, he planted seeds of hope and he continues watering them to bring their growth to fruition.

The witness of people like Thomas Merton is making us aware that the three basic religious orientations –contemplation, action and compassion– which have been accorded different emphases in specific religious traditions, are absolutely necessary for the integrity of contemporary men and women, and that they complement each other, resulting in a differentiated yet inseparable unity. Today we find ourselves in a position which may well be demanding that we 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 a communion in love with the suffering other. These attitudes may make it possible to trigger creative, unexpected answers for a century dawning with a mixture of agonizing and birth-giving cries.

I would like to turn again to the disposition of believers "to view other human beings as brothers and sisters" as encouraged by His Holiness Benedict XVI in Assisi on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the interreligious meeting of prayer for peace. In his

³⁶Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), 10-11.

message, His Holiness affirmed that not only Christians but also the representatives of other religions know that “in prayer it is possible to have a special experience of God and to draw from it effective incentives for dedication to the cause of peace.” He added that the “Poverello” embodied the Beatitude addressed to the peacemakers (Mt. 5.9) to the extent that he has now become a “reference point today for people who are fostering the ideal of peace, respect for nature and dialogue between people, religions and cultures.” And he finished by recalling that “*it was Christ’s radical decision that provided him with a key to understanding the brotherhood to which all people are called, and in which inanimate creatures—from ‘brother sun’ to ‘sister moon’—also in a certain way participate.*”³⁷

To conclude these words in conversation with Merton and focused on the issue of peace of heart and peace on earth, I would like to briefly introduce an important statement by Merton from his 1962 essay on peace as a religious responsibility. There, Merton affirms: “We have to look at the problem of nuclear war from the viewpoint of humanity and of God made [human], from the viewpoint of the Mystical Body of Christ, and not merely from the viewpoint of abstract formulas.”³⁸

“What is required of Christians,” Merton declared in another essay called “‘Godless Christianity’?” “is that they develop a completely modern and contemporary *consciousness* in which their experience as [humans] of our century is integrated with their experience as children of God redeemed by Christ.”³⁹

Merton summed up the basis for a hope beyond every reason for despair in his vision of “Christian Humanism”:

Man is in the midst of the greatest revolution his world has ever seen. This revolution is not merely political but scientific, technological, economic, demographic, cultural, spiritual. It affects every aspect of human life. This revolution in its broadest aspects is something that

³⁷ H.H. Benedict XVI, *Message on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Interreligious Meeting of Prayer for Peace*, 2 September 2006.

³⁸ Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace. The Social Essays*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 115.

³⁹ Merton, *Faith and Violence*, 279.

cannot be stopped. The great question is whether it can truly be directed to ends that are fully compatible with the authentic dignity and destiny of man. Science alone, politics alone, economics alone cannot do this. Still less can the aim be achieved by the power of nuclear weapons or by guerrilla bands of social revolutionaries. There must be a full and conscious collaboration of all man's resources of knowledge, technique, and power. But the one hope of their successful coordination remains the deepest and most unifying insight that has been granted to man: the Christian revelation of the unity of all men in the love of God as His One Son, Jesus Christ.⁴⁰

In 1968, the year of his death, Thomas Merton invited a group of contemplative women to make a retreat with him at his abbey in Kentucky. Let the final words of his last talk to them become an extended blessing to us now, and a cause for celebration, for in them Merton points to the very heart of the great feast of Christian hope:

Christ has *really* risen and lives in us now... It's a matter of Christ actually being and living here and now in us.

If we let the risen Christ live in us, then we can go ahead with confidence, very sure that we're walking in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, eds., Naomi Burton Stone and Patrick Hart (London: Sheldon Press, 1986), 150.

⁴¹ Merton, *Springs of Contemplation*, 274.