

Thomas Merton: A Monk of Compassion, A Man of Paradox

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I entered the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1949, the same year that Thomas Merton was ordained a priest. Hence I had the grace of living and working with him for some nineteen years. I have always said that he was one of the greatest gifts in my life. He taught me not only how to be a monk, but even how to discover who I am and who God calls me to be. One of the great gifts of Merton was precisely his humanness. He was able to be a spiritual person without sacrificing anything of his own humanity. In fact one of the books that he recommended early on was a small book entitled *Holiness is Wholeness*.¹ This was an important factor in the Gethsemani of that time, for French Jansenism had influenced the reform of La Trappe, the Trappist Order as a whole, and Gethsemani in particular to a great extent. At this time monastic life was seen more as a life of penance than one of contemplation.

The fact that Merton had studied at Columbia and taught at St. Bonaventure College meant that he was accustomed to doing research into the sources of subjects that he studied or taught. He carried this over into his pursuit of monastic life. He had an adequate knowledge of Latin and French and so was able to seek out early documents of both monasticism and spirituality. Due to this, the Abbot, Dom Frederic Dunne, appointed him to prepare a series of brief studies on early Cistercian saints and holy men and women. In 1950 the new Abbot, Dom James Fox, asked him to give a series of conferences to the novices. He was not yet Novice Master. The material for these conferences was drawn from the early sources of monasticism that he had been researching. These

¹ Josef Goldbrunner, *Holiness Is Wholeness* (New York: Pantheon, 1955).

conferences were very popular with the novices due both to the material and to his way of presentation. His material was always very well prepared, but he was able to inject his own style of humor and wit to keep them interesting.

After several months, the Novice Master complained that Merton was giving his own doctrine rather than the traditional doctrine. In actual fact it was just the opposite. For what Merton was presenting was authentic monastic history. However over the years such material had been largely overlooked in favor of more popular sources of spirituality, particularly St. Thérèse of Lisieux. Also the spirit of the Order had moved from a primacy of contemplation to a primacy of penance and austerity. Beyond all this, however, there was also involved a certain pettiness on the part of the Novice Master. He was upset to see Merton having such success with the novices and felt that that was intruding on his influence on the novices.

In June of 1951 Merton was appointed to a new position in the community. There were about 30 young monks studying for the priesthood, and so the position of Master of Students was created, and Merton was assigned to this position. Merton took to this new position like a duck to water. He had sought for a sense of family ever since the death of his mother at age six, and the death of his father at age fifteen – perhaps even earlier, for he spoke of the severe spirit of his mother, and after her death his father shuttled him between himself and his grandparents in New York. His father was more preoccupied with his art career and also with his relationship with Evelyn Scott. Merton was left to feel he was “without a family, without a country, without a father... without God, without heaven, without grace.”² And many of his antics while in school, in France or England or New York, can be seen as futile attempts to find family where there was none. Even after his conversion and entrance to the monastery, the strict rules of silence and the ideals of solitude prevented any profound sense of belonging. However in this new position he was both father and

² Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948), 71-72.

brother to a group of young monks who looked to him for their formation.

In his journals, Merton describes his reaction to this new position: "Now that I am a spiritual director I have to live beyond my own borders in the souls of those whom God has placed in my charge."³ So this new position had its own influence on Merton and his development. After some months he noted:

It is now six months since I have been Master of the Scholastics and have looked into their hearts and taken up their burdens upon me... I do not know if they have discovered anything new, or if they are able to love God more, or if I have helped them in any way to find themselves, which is to say: to lose themselves. But I know what I have discovered: the kind of work I once feared because I thought it would interfere with "solitude" is, in fact, the only true path to solitude.

He further said:

What is my new desert? The name of it is *compassion*... There are no bounds to contain the inhabitants of this solitude in which I live alone... belonging to all and belonging to none, for God is with me, and He sits in the ruins of my heart, preaching His Gospel to the poor. Do you suppose I have a spiritual life? I have none, I am indigence, I am silence, I am poverty, I am solitude, for I have renounced spirituality to find God, and He it is Who preaches loud in the depths of my indigence... Compassion: I take you for my Lady, as Francis married poverty, I marry you, the Queen of hermits and the Mother of the poor.⁴

This spirit of compassion would fill the heart of Thomas Merton throughout his remaining years and in all that he wrote and taught over those years. After only another six months, Merton composed the beautiful meditation that some have said is among the best of his writings:

The Voice of God is heard in Paradise:

"What was vile has become precious. What is now precious was never vile...

What was cruel has become merciful. What is now merciful was never cruel. I have always overshadowed Jonas with my mercy, and cruelty I

³ Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 459.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 463-64.

know not at all. Have you had sight of Me, Jonas, my child? Mercy within mercy within mercy. I have forgiven the universe without end, because I have never known sin.

What was poor has become infinite. What is infinite was never poor. I have always known poverty as infinite: riches I love not at all...

What was fragile has become powerful. I loved what was most frail. I looked upon what was nothing. I touched what was without substance, and within what was not, I am."⁵

Merton here touches on what he calls the "paradox" of his life. He wrote:

It is in the paradox itself, the paradox which was and still is a source of insecurity, that I have come to find the greatest security. I have become convinced that the very contradictions in my life are in some ways signs of God's mercy to me... Paradoxically, I have found peace because I have always been dissatisfied. My moments of depression and despair turn out to be renewals, new beginnings... All life tends to grow like this, in mystery inscaped with paradox and contradiction, yet centered, in its very heart, on the divine mercy.⁶

Even at the end of his life, in a talk in Alaska, Merton cited Martin Buber who

talks about the man who has a "complex self-contradictory temperament" – of which I could tell you much because that is a perfect description of me. It is rough to live with that kind of temperament, but a number of people have it and one should not feel too condemned to be complex and self-contradictory forever. He says that in the core of our soul the Divine force in its depth is capable of acting on the soul, changing it, binding the conflicting sources together, amalgamating the diverging elements. It is capable of unifying it. He makes it quite clear that there is in the depths of our souls a power of God which can do this if we let it.⁷

This awareness of his own "paradox" and "self-contradictory temperament" made him an ideal person to work with the young monks in their own paradoxical nature.

⁵ Ibid., 488.

⁶ Thomas Merton, "First and Last Thoughts: An Author's Preface," *A Thomas Merton Reader*, ed. Thomas P. McDonnell, rev. ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Image, 1974), 16-17.

⁷ *Thomas Merton in Alaska*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: New Directions, 1989), 150.

It was shortly after this that I became a student and thus came under him. I remember the first time I went to see him. At that time we always knelt to receive a blessing and then remained kneeling during the time of speaking with the Father Master or Abbot. However after giving his blessing, Merton said: "Sit down." This was a real revolution! Yet it expressed the respect that he had for each person and the way he looked upon them not as "subjects" but as brothers and sons. In due time this became the common practice for all of the superiors. Merton then asked how things were going. The greatest difficulty I found at that time was in relation to prayer. The Novice Master had the practice of giving "points for meditation" each evening to prepare for the morning meditation time. These points were based on the gospels in a traditional Ignatian method: setting of place, placing oneself in that setting and responding to the Lord in the ways the gospels called for. However I had never been able to pray in that way and felt both frustrated and something of a failure. But when I explained that to Merton, his response was simply: "Well, it sounds as though the Holy Spirit is at work." This was totally freeing for me, expressing that perhaps God was calling to me in a different way to a simpler form of prayer. This was typical of Merton. He was able to take each person as they were and encourage us to respond to the promptings of the Spirit within. He did not try to form us in his own way, but encouraged us to discover our personal way to God and to living the monastic life.

As Master of Students he gave a weekly conference to the students. These conferences were always well prepared and based on monastic tradition, yet interspersed with various topics of interest at the time. He gave an overview of the writings of St. Bernard. It was while speaking of St. Bernard's Degrees of Humility that he developed his thinking on compassion. Merton said that the importance of the degrees of Truth in Bernard is that they are degrees of *experience* in which we ascend from the experience of our own misery to the experience of the greatness of God through the narrow gate of compassion. The key to this compassion is Christ. The Mystery of Christ is, in fact central to the whole thing so that it is through that Mystery, lived and applied in

our relations with our brethren in the monastery, that we ascend to contemplation.

St. Bernard uses Hebrews 5.8 to explain how Christ “learned obedience through what he suffered.” Merton said that Jesus *experiencing* our misery by compassion is the key to the mystical life. Jesus, who is Truth and Life in Himself, not only sends us light to know ourselves, but descends to our level to become our way to the Father. His descent is compassion. The way is compassion. We must be united with Him to return to the Father, or we are not on the way. We are united with Him not by compassion for HIM alone, but by union with His Compassion. We are united with Him by compassion for our brethren, loving one another as He has loved us. But Bernard extends the meaning of St. Paul’s text to the Mystical Body. Jesus in His Mystical Body is always “learning mercy” in so far as the members learn what the Head learned by His experience. Hence the three degrees of Experience: (1) Experience of our own misery – “Truth in us” – judging ourselves by the light of Truth; (2) Experience of our neighbor’s misery – “Truth in the Neighbor” – union with Truth by fraternal love; (3) Experience of Truth in Itself – Union with God by pure Love. Bernard says that Truth teaches us first through others and only then in our own nature. The Beatitudes speak first of the Merciful and only then of the Pure of Heart. St. Bernard’s idea of community life is not merely *bearing* the moods of others but in some sense *sharing* them. “To rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep” (Romans 12.15). One who has not arrived at fraternal union by compassion proves it by judging and violently rebuking the faults of others. This is because they do not know the truth; they are blinded by pride, i.e. inordinate love of their own excellence. In these degrees God Himself becomes more intimate with us. In the first, when we are united to Him by judgment of ourselves, He is our Teacher. In the second, when we are united to Truth in brethren and become their friends and brothers, He becomes our brother and friend. And in the third, when united to Truth itself, He becomes our Lover.⁸

⁸ Thomas Merton, “An Introduction to Cistercian Theology.” Unpublished notes of Lectures given to the Scholastics at the Abbey of Gethsemani, 71.

Following St Bernard, Merton said that this is the right order by which we ascend to contemplation: through compassion to contemplation, truth in others and then in God. Conformity of compassion prepares us for the conformity of transforming union. We must be capable of being morally transformed into our brethren before we can be mystically transformed into God. The proof of this can be found in St. John: "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars" (1 John 4.20) and "in such a person the truth does not exist" (1 John 2.4). There is a real cause and effect relationship. This charity really purifies and prepares the soul for mystical union.

Merton also spoke on many varied topics, as they were timely. He also, from time to time, exposed the students to recordings of classical music, poetry and literature, so that their formation would be truly rounded in human as well as spiritual ways. He encouraged exchange with himself during the conferences, and showed obvious enthusiasm when the students became involved in the discussion. However students who tried to be clever were soon in trouble! He was able to inject wit and humor in his talks. These can still be found in the recordings of his conferences where one discovers a different Merton than merely the spiritual author. Whenever a monk would die, Merton would devote a conference on the life of that person. In these he showed a deep understanding and compassion for his brothers, showing even their idiosyncrasies in a light which made them more real and understandable.

Merton taught not only by words and instruction, but also particularly by his example. He was zealous for prayer and for solitude. He had struggled for years with the notion of a call to the Carthusians and to greater solitude. He realized that it was precisely this struggle that enabled him to better understand and assist those young monks in their inevitable struggles. But he also saw this as a call to make use of what opportunities he had at hand. In 1952 the abbot gave him a tool shed which was left after building the new retreat house. It was dragged out to the woods behind the monastery. Merton used that as his first hermitage, and he named it St. Anne's. He loved to go there whenever he could for prayer,

reading and writing. Shortly after that he obtained permission for the first time for the young monks to go out to the same woods after dinner. Any who wished (the number was always small) would scatter to various points in the woods. I asked him once whether it was not an impingement on his own solitude to have us go along. But he immediately said that he thoroughly enjoyed having us go out there. He rejoiced to see others respond with enthusiasm to an experience of solitude, however brief.

Once in a while on feast days, when there was no work, he would obtain a truck and take any who wished to go out to the knobs across the road. The purpose was ostensibly to plant tree saplings in the woods, but it also gave an opportunity to experience the solitude of the larger woods.

But Merton's love for solitude was not an evasion from conflicts in community. He was a very sensitive person and felt deeply any conflicts with his brothers. Yet he was able to write in 1953:

It is important, also, to be in conflict with the people you live with in order that the differences between you may be composed in sacrifice and without anger... To be in opposition to another you have to return to yourself; you have to rediscover all the faults and weaknesses and passions which the "peace" of solitude had only seemed to lay to rest... I find I have really learned that these "conflicts" are one of the *good* things of the monastic life: that they ought not to be feared but *faced*... We must learn to profit by our own mistakes and by the mistakes of others. And the way to do it is to realize that no mistake, no fault, no weakness, can separate us from the charity of Christ when we realize that charity itself wipes out and makes up for everything else.⁹

One of the main areas of conflict that Merton found in community life was his relation with the Abbot, Dom James Fox. Both men were extremely gifted and yet both were extremely complex persons. Michael Mott, in his biography, characterizes Merton's attitude toward authority. "This was ambiguous at the deepest level. He was rebellious by nature, a born critic and changer, and yet he sought to appease... He was a rebel who won

⁹ Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 40-41.

and kept a reputation for obedience.”¹⁰ On the other hand Mott speaks of Dom James’ position:

Dom James was not a natural tyrant. Merton was not a natural victim. But two roles *are* implicit in the monastic situation . . . The conflicts Merton had with Dom James were not open. They could not be, because it was in the very nature of James Fox to avoid open conflict, to turn away wrath with a smile, to dissolve all surface rancor and strife in sweetness. It was the sweetness – the word is carefully chosen – that drove Thomas Merton to distraction at times... Dom James, however sweetly spoken and smiling, could be ruthless.¹¹

Merton’s problems with the abbot, however, were not simply an “authority problem.” Certainly he had some of that, in ways not dissimilar from many of the monks. However Merton seemed to feel Dom James’ authority was an intrusion on his own inner solitude. In his “Notes for a Philosophy of solitude,” Merton wrote:

One of the first essentials of the interior solitude of which I speak is that it is the actualization of a faith in which a man takes responsibility for his own inner life. He faces its full mystery, in the presence of the invisible God. And he takes upon himself the lonely, barely comprehensible, incommunicable task of working his way through the darkness of his own mystery until he discovers that his mystery and the mystery of God merge into one reality, which is the only reality... The words of God... have the power... to illuminate the darkness. But they do so by losing the shape of words and becoming – not thoughts, not things, but the unspeakable beating of a Heart within the heart of one’s own life.¹²

Merton desired to be able to face this inner solitude and to be able to make decisions on the basis of what this “Heart within the heart” revealed to him in his solitude. He knew that it was risky to do this on his own, but he felt called to such a risk.

The essence of the solitary vocation is precisely the anguish of an almost infinite risk... Too many people are ready to draw him back at any price from what they conceive to be the edge of the abyss... but they do not realize that he who is called to solitude is called to walk across the air of

¹⁰ Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), 279.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 279-80.

¹² Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960), 180.

the abyss without danger, because, after all, the abyss is only himself. He should not be forced to feel guilty about it, for in this solitude and emptiness of his heart there is another, more inexplicable solitude. Man's loneliness is, in fact, the loneliness of God.¹³

Merton, as anyone formed by the *Rule of St. Benedict*, certainly knew the value and role of obedience to the Abbot and the monastery. Yet he was also acutely conscious of the dangers of mere social pressure. He fully realized that social pressures, expectations and the image of the group determine many people, particularly today. But the solitary is called to avoid the illusory satisfaction of such social images.

The man who is dominated by what I have called the "social image" is one who allows himself to see and to approve in himself only that which his society prescribes as beneficial and praiseworthy in its members... And yet he congratulates himself on "thinking for himself." In reality, this is only a game that he plays in his own mind – the game of substituting the words, slogans and concepts he has received from society, for genuine experiences of his own.¹⁴

Yet even here Merton showed a definite compassion for the people of today. This was evidenced by the experience that he had in Louisville in 1958 where he was "suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers."¹⁵ In his private journals he expressed this

As if waking from a dream – the dream of my separateness, of the "special" vocation to be different. My vocation does not really make me different from the rest of men... I am still a member of the human race – and what more glorious destiny is there for man, since the Word was made flesh and became, too, a member of the Human Race.¹⁶

This experience of Christ at one with the whole human race led Merton into a new phase of his writing. For in experiencing all peoples as one in Christ, he became aware of the social dimension

¹³ Ibid., 185, 190.

¹⁴ Ibid., 186.

¹⁵ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 140.

¹⁶ Merton, *Search for Solitude*, 182.

of the Christian vocation, as well as the social dimension of his own monastic vocation. Jesus Christ told us that the final judgment will be based only on “whatever you did – or did not do – to the least of my brethren” (Mt. 25). Why do we not fulfill Christ’s command to love as He loves us? Merton says: “The Root of War is Fear.” It is also the root of all violence and injustice toward one another. He discovered Gandhi and marveled at his ability to see the oneness of the sacred and the secular and to join in his own life contemplative and active elements. Gandhi realized that “there can be no peace on earth without the kind of inner change that brings man back to his ‘right mind.’”¹⁷ This “right mind” is the mind of Christ, a mind free of fear and violence and injustice. This awareness led Merton to increase his output of writing on race relations, nonviolence, nuclear proliferation, and the war in Vietnam. It also increased his letter writing to many who were already involved in these issues. In due time it led to conflict with the Abbot General of the Cistercians, who formally ordered him to desist from writing on such topics. Also Cardinal Spellman of the U.S. Military Vicariate objected to the denunciations of U.S. policy. Merton responded with obedience, and yet disseminated his writings in unpublished form. Eventually he was vindicated by the Encyclical of Pope John XXIII *Pacem in Terris*.

Many of these writings of the ‘60s are unfortunately still just as pertinent as they were when he wrote them. The world policies on justice and peace, war, armaments and nonviolence have changed little, if at all. The world is still dominated by fear and by war, now accentuated by terrorism in all parts of the world. Merton would still say today:

The duty of the Christian in this crisis is to strive with all his power and intelligence, with his faith, hope in Christ, and love for God and man, to do the one task which God has imposed upon us in the world today. That task is to work for the total abolition of war... It is a problem of terrifying complexity and magnitude, for which the Church herself is not fully able to see clear and decisive solutions. Yet she must lead the way on the road towards nonviolent settlement of difficulties and towards the gradual

¹⁷ Thomas Merton, *Gandhi on Non-Violence* (New York: New Directions, 1965), 20.

abolition of war as the way of settling international or civil disputes. Christians must become active in every possible way, mobilizing all their resources for the fight against war.¹⁸

In 1965 Merton was finally given permission to live full-time in his hermitage at Gethsemani. Yet even there he continued his writings and his contacts with many people, whether through correspondence or through personal contact. It was a time of high tension and paradox for him. On the one hand he had finally attained his greatest aspiration for solitude. On the other, he felt impelled to continue his efforts, through his writing and his contacts, towards peace. He was literally torn in two directions. By 1966 it took its toll on him spiritually, physically and psychologically. Some felt that he was perhaps on the verge of a breakdown. It was during this time that he experienced the greatest crisis of his monastic life.

In July of 1965 he recalled a young girl he had known in England. He felt that she was "a symbol of the true (quiet) woman with whom I never really came to terms in the world, and because of this, there remains an incompleteness in me that cannot be remedied."¹⁹ This sense of incompleteness bothered him in many ways. It left a certain gnawing doubt as to whether he was really capable of true love, whether he felt that he was truly loved by others, and consequently whether his solitude was really authentic or a partial flight from this underlying despair in himself. He was honest enough with himself that he did not try to claim that divine love would totally compensate for human love. It was this realization, which left him so very open to sharing and loving: his brothers in the monastery, his friends outside, even those he knew only by correspondence. But even with all this, he was conscious of a certain "incompleteness" in himself.

Margie, the nurse at St. Joseph's hospital in Louisville, definitely filled this incompleteness. Merton was conscious of his love for her and her love for him. He failed in his usual honesty

¹⁸ Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 12.

¹⁹ Thomas Merton, *A Vow of Conversation: Journals 1964-1965*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1988), 194.

with himself. He realized that the situation was “absurdly impossible” and yet he continued on – torn between his dedication to his life of solitude and his love for her. “Who knows anything at all about solitude if he has not been in love, and in love *in his solitude*? Love and solitude must test each other in the man who means to live alone: they must become one and the same thing in him, or he will only be a half a person.”²⁰ In the end, things were resolved by being taken out of his hands. One of the Brothers overheard a phone conversation and reported the matter to the Abbot. John Howard Griffin, Merton’s original biographer, wrote: “Though troubled almost to the point of panic, Merton was swept with a sense of relief that the matter was now in the open. From this viewpoint of openness, his own perspective changed. He told himself he had to face the fact that he had been wrong.”²¹ With the help of friends and counselors, Merton was able in time to resolve the issue and they were both able to agree that they could not have contact with one another. It was certainly a real trauma for Merton. We do not know the effect of it on Margie. She has staunchly maintained her silence on the matter for all of these years in a way that can only evoke the greatest admiration of her as a person. For Merton it had served to confirm for him the fact that he possessed an authentic capacity to love fully and that he could be fully loved in return. This provided an inner liberation for him.

However throughout the remaining two years in the hermitage he faced another kind of tension. The number of visits he received from friends, correspondents, business associates, friends of the Monastery as well as others who came uninvited and unannounced, brought this on. In time he began to spend more time in the woods rather than at the hermitage in order to avoid intrusions. The tension finally led to his desire for greater solitude than he felt he could find there in the hermitage.

²⁰ Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 315.

²¹ John Howard Griffin, *Follow the Ecstasy: Thomas Merton the Hermitage Years, 1965-1968* (Fort Worth: JHG Editions/Latitudes Press, 1983), 101.

Merton had been invited to a monastic conference in Bangkok. The new Abbot left Merton free to make the decision for himself, and so he planned the trip to the East. Some might wonder why Merton did not simply remain in his hermitage, limit his contacts more and thus be able to experience the solitude he sought. Perhaps that would have worked for many, but not for Merton. Just as he wanted to *experience* not only solitude but also love, so he wanted to experience for himself how the monks of the East train themselves for the kind of experience he sought. He said that his purpose in going to the East was to learn more not just quantitatively but qualitatively. In the end the tension was resolved for him only by the bolt of electricity that brought him into that full solitude and full love.

Thomas Merton –or Fr. Louis– was a rare individual. Certainly I can say that knowing him and living with him has been one of the great graces of my own life. The fact that he still speaks so eloquently to so many forty years after his death shows that he had truly lived that type of solitude of which he wrote – a solitude which led him not only into his own heart, but into the heart of every person with whom he is one in Christ.

For in this inmost “I” my own solitude meets the solitude of every other [person] and the solitude of God. Hence it is beyond division, beyond limitation, beyond selfish affirmation. It is only this inmost and solitary “I” that truly loves with the love and the spirit of Christ. This “I” is Christ Himself, living in us: and we, in Him, living in the Father.²²

²² Merton, *Disputed Questions*, 207.