

Hope as an Unexpected, Incomprehensible and Total Gift: Reflections on Merton's Life and Writings

Erlinda G. Paguio

Introduction

During the Fifth General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society in 1997, one of the presenters led a workshop on Merton's prayer, "My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going." Participants were asked how this prayer helped them in situations that they had to face in a particular moment in their life. They shared their different experiences of finding peace and a resolution to their problems after praying Merton's prayer, which expressed a firm trust in God's abiding love:

I do not see the road ahead of me... Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it.

The prayer ends with much faith and confidence in Christ's own promise that He will remain with us forever. "Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone."¹

I have shared this prayer with many friends and relatives, and I am always happy to know that it has helped them. An accountant, who was laid off from her job, was much distressed and was going

¹ Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1958), 83.

through depression and uncertainty when she sent me an e-mail about her problem. I accompanied my response to her with a copy of Merton's prayer. She wrote back after a few days and told me how grateful she was to receive the prayer, which truly expressed the sentiments she felt in her heart. "It is just what I needed to move on," she said. "It gave me much hope that God will guide me and help me." In 2005, a blogger on the internet wrote that Merton's prayer was similar to a modern-day Psalm. By incorporating elements of faith it gives comfort and assurance to the loneliest and most frightened of persons among us. "I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone" reminds me of Jesus' promise that he will always remain with us.

I am delighted that we are gathered here in Ávila to share our reflections on Merton and hope. How necessary it is to have hope at this time when there is so much violence, poverty, homelessness, injustice, uncertainty, and seemingly hopeless distresses throughout the world. During a press conference in Aspen, Colorado, a person in the audience stood up and told the panel of journalists that we need more hopeful stories in the news. Sometimes a hopeful story in the news emerges from the unity and love that young children express. I remember reading several years ago about a group of young boys, who agreed to have their hair shaved so that they would look like their cancer-stricken classmate whose hair had fallen out because of chemotherapy. Their concern that his appearance would make him the laughing stock in school was so strong that they wanted to become one with him and look like him. They did not want their sick friend to feel bad and embarrassed because of his baldness. On the first day of school, there were five bald boys in class instead of only one. Today it is not unusual anymore to hear of people shaving their heads and donating funds to support cancer patients and cancer research.

Merton's Message to the World

I would like to explore Merton's message of hope for us, a message that was the fruit of his deep prayer life, wide reading

interests and reflections, involvement with peoples of all religions, and engagement with what went on in the world during his lifetime. He urges us that in times of violence and unrest, we need to rediscover meditation, silent unitive prayer, listening, creative silence, and to believe firmly in the presence within us of an invisible God. He wrote that “true hope is tested by silence in which we have to wait on the Lord in the obedience of unquestioning faith.”²

In 1967, Pope Paul VI requested from Dom Francis Decroix, abbot of the Cistercian Monastery of Frattochie near Rome, a “message of contemplatives to the world” and suggested that Thomas Merton might be one of those who would compose the message. Dom Francis wrote Merton, who immediately responded on August 21, 1967. Merton was very honest to admit in his message that as he grew older in the monastic life and advanced more deeply into solitude, he became aware that he had only begun to seek these questions: “Can man make sense out of his existence? Can man honestly give his life meaning merely by adopting a certain set of explanations which pretend to tell him why the world began and where it will end, why there is evil and what is necessary for a good life?” He said that in his solitude he had been summoned to explore a most arid area in the human heart where he learned that explanations were not enough and that only experience counted. He wrote that one could not truly know hope unless he had found out how like despair hope is. He affirmed that in his desert experience, he became aware of Christ’s Cross as mercy and not cruelty, as truth and not deception. He had learned to rejoice in the certainty of Jesus’ presence in the world, even in people who did not know Him, and that Jesus was at work in them when they themselves thought that they were far from Him.³

During Merton’s informal talk at the Temple of Understanding conference at Calcutta in October 1968, he spoke as a monk, as a

² Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, eds., Naomi Burton Stone and Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979), 42.

³ *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985), 156.

marginal person, who struggled in the depths of his being with the fact of death in himself so he could break through the dichotomy of life and death to become a witness to life. He told his audience that God, the only ultimate reality, lives and dwells in us. The monk tries to pierce through the irrelevance of his life to find relevance in God. He said that the kind of life he represented is a life that is open to God's gift and the gift of other persons. He said: "And so I stand among you as one who offers a small message of hope, that first, there are always people who dare to seek on the margin of society, who are not dependent on social acceptance, not dependent on social routine, and prefer a kind of free-floating existence under a state of risk. And among these people, if they are faithful to their own calling, to their own vocation, and to their own message from God, communication on the deepest level is possible." Merton spoke of the deepest level of communication as a communion, which is beyond words, concepts, and speech. He emphasized to his audience the oneness, the original unity that they already share with one another.⁴

In 1966, Merton had experienced divine and human love in its many dimensions and hoped to remain in God's love and mercy. He wrote in his journal on September 19, 1966: "Must I prove that I love? No, I hope in God's love, i.e. in the incomprehensible. And in that love live at peace with myself and others."⁵ He was writing from his own experience of love and living when he wrote that "God... the invisible One... is the Seer, the Seeing and the Seen. God seeks Himself in us." He was attempting to express the relationship of man's experience of aridity and sorrow in his heart to God's own sorrow when He is not known in us because we do not dare to believe and trust that He could live in us. Merton is also teaching us to live in such a way that we become the place God has chosen for His presence. He is encouraging us to believe in God's love and to dare to love God and every person because it is in

⁴ *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, eds., Naomi Burton, Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973), 307-8.

⁵ Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 137.

loving that God manifests Himself to us. He said: "Love is the epiphany of God in our poverty. The contemplative life is then the search for peace... in the openness of love."⁶

Merton's message to the world, which he sent through Dom Francis Decroix in 1967, is full of conviction:

It is my joy to tell you to hope though you think that for you of all men hope is impossible. Hope not because you think you can be good, but because God loves us irrespective of our merits and whatever is good in us comes from His love, not from our own doing. Hope because Jesus is with those who are poor and outcasts and perhaps despised... The message of hope the contemplative offers you... is... that whether you understand or not, God loves you, is present in you, lives in you, dwells in you, calls you, saves you, and offers you an understanding and light which are like nothing you ever found in books or heard in sermons.⁷

The late Pope John Paul II wrote that the guardian of hope in the human heart is the Holy Spirit. The perfect model of hope is Mary who listened deeply to the Holy Spirit and opened the world to the great event of the Incarnation.⁸ Jesus, in His person and in His work of salvation, is "our hope." The virtue of hope by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness, enables us to place our trust in Christ's promises and the grace of the Holy Spirit, instead of relying on our own strength. Pope John Paul II had observed that many people today are floundering in the illusion and myth of an unlimited capacity for self-redemption and self-fulfilment and the temptation to pessimism is strong after experiencing frequent disappointment and defeat. The many crises occurring every day, the constant pain, and death around us, make many persons incapable of dealing with the meaning of life. Pope John Paul II assured us that hope that is nourished by prayer sustains and protects us in the good fight of faith.⁹

⁶ Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 157.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 157-58.

⁸ Pope John Paul II, *Message of the Holy Father for the XXX World Communications Day, January 24, 1996*.

⁹ Pope John Paul II, *General Audience, November 11, 1998*.

Hope in Christ

Merton expounded the meaning of hope in his book, *He Is Risen*. He believed that “true encounter with Christ liberates something in us, a power we did not know we had, a hope, a capacity for life, a resilience, an ability to bounce back when we thought we were completely defeated, a capacity to grow and change, a power of creative transformation.” The presence of Christ in our life is also the presence of His Cross, but if we die with Christ, we also live with Him, and we enter the dynamics of creative transformation, renewal and love.¹⁰

In his book, *The New Man*, Merton wrote that hope, like life, is a gift from God – “total, unexpected, incomprehensible, undeserved. It springs out of nothingness, completely free.”¹¹ We experience hope most perfectly when we lose our own strength and confidence, when we are at the very end of existence. Our hope lies in the communion and identification of our own suffering and anguish with the suffering and anguish of Christ. By accepting life in the midst of death, the God of life Himself accepts to live in us in the depths of our emptiness. St. Teresa of Ávila expressed this clearly: “Jesus on the Cross for me; I on the Cross for Him.”

Merton's Vocation as a Hermit

There were many occasions in Merton's life when he lived by hope, especially during those times when it was difficult for him to work out the contradictions between his life as a writer and a contemplative who was open to exploring the truth in other religions; as a monk who was also a social critic; as an independent and strong-willed person in search of freedom, yet who was bound in obedience to his ecclesiastical superiors; and as a monk living in a monastic community but yearning for a solitary life as a hermit. Dom John Eudes Bamberger, retired abbot of Our Lady of the Genesee in Piffard, New York, wrote that Merton took the initiative and displayed a remarkable degree of persistence,

¹⁰ Thomas Merton, *He Is Risen* (Niles, IL: Argus Communications, 1975), 15.

¹¹ Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960), 4-5.

patience, obedience, and ingenuity in working with Abbot James Fox to resurrect the hermit life in the Cistercian Order.¹² Merton experienced many obstacles to becoming a hermit, but his conviction and determination that it was the life he was called to was very strong.

On May 22, 1958, Merton wrote Dom Jean Leclercq, a Benedictine monk of the Abbey of Clervaux in Luxembourg, that he did not believe that there was any institutional solitude for him:

I can hope, however, that perhaps I might gain permission to live alone, in the shadow of this monastery, if my Superiors will ever permit it. I do not think that there is any other fully satisfactory way for me to face this, but to seek to live my own life with God. I am not pushing this, however, simply praying, hoping, and waiting. I hope you will pray for me also.¹³

On December 28, 1958, Merton wrote in his journal that if he ever had a chance to lead a really solitary life, he must have the sense and boldness to jump at it. He realized that in 1955 when he wanted very much to become a hermit up a fire tower in the Gethsemani woods, he was not ready for it. "I hope when the time comes I may really be ready to go off alone. May Christ grant me this great favor."¹⁴

On November 19, 1959, Merton informed Dom Jean Leclercq that he had written to the Congregation of Religious in Rome and asked for an exclaustation so he could go to Mexico and become a hermit near the Benedictine monastery of Cuernavaca.¹⁵ On November 28, 1959, Dom Leclercq assured Merton that he had evidence "that serious matters are seriously examined in Rome, and that all guarantees are taken so that the decision may be objective." This was for him a sign of the will of God. He prayed that the decision Merton was expecting from Rome would indicate

¹² John Eudes Bamberger, OCSO, *Thomas Merton: Prophet of Renewal* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2005), 36-37.

¹³ *Survival or Prophecy? The Letters of Thomas Merton and Jean Leclercq*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), 82.

¹⁴ Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 242.

¹⁵ Merton, *Survival or Prophecy*, 86-87; the same letter is also found in *The School of Charity: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 123.

God's will for him and that Merton would accept it, whatever it might be, with joy.¹⁶

During a retreat in 1959, Merton asked himself this recurring question: "What shall I be?" He said that there was no point in thinking about it, but he must do what he had to do, read what he had to read and the rest would follow. He must live fully up to the level of what he was as a son of God: "I do not have to be something new, I only have to be what I am. I have known this all along, and I really think I have sought it. If only now I can seek it more completely and more efficaciously."¹⁷

Merton wrote in *The New Man* that "as soon as we are born, we begin at the same time to live and die."¹⁸ "Are we strong enough to continue choosing life when to live means to go on and on with this absurd battle of entity and nonentity in our own inmost self?"¹⁹ He said that to be rooted in life we have to live in hope, even if hope in its supernatural dimension is beyond our power. He looked at the Cross of Christ as a sign of liberation and of hope. He knew there was no hope for freedom in himself alone nor by simply conforming to what is said and done in the community. Freedom meant battle and faith and darkness, and a new creation out of darkness. The new man, he thought, lived in a world that was always being created and renewed. He realized how foolish he was to lose hope that anything new could come out of his situation at Gethsemani, but he was also convinced that newness was there all the time.²⁰

Merton noted in his book, *The New Man*, that when we try to keep ourselves in hope by sheer violent determination to live, we end up in despair and delusion because we are relying mainly on our own will. In his journal on December 5, 1959 he wrote:

I still have hopes and sometimes strong ones. One must have courage to hope – dare to rouse hopes that might be dashed. Yet – not rouse them to such a pitch that they have to become delusions. Hope more in God

¹⁶ Merton, *Survival or Prophecy*, 88.

¹⁷ Merton, *Search for Solitude*, 262.

¹⁸ Merton, *New Man*, 3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁰ Merton, *Search for Solitude*, 268-69.

than in a particular fulfillment if that appears to be willed by Him. Hope in Our Lady... If I have Her, nothing else matters. But it does matter because this desire for solitude is part of my love for her, her will for me.²¹

On December 17, 1959, Merton received a letter from Rome stating that his departure from Gethsemani would upset too many people in the Order and outside it. The Cardinal Prefect, Valerio Valeri, and Cardinal Larraona, former Secretary to the Sacred Congregation of the Religious in Rome, did not think he had an eremitical vocation. They told him he would find interior solitude if he stayed in the monastery where God had put him. Merton was relieved at their decision and accepted the fact that the issue had been settled. "The letter is obviously an indication of God's Will and I accept it fully." He felt joy, emptiness and liberty and that his desire to go to Cuernavaca, Mexico, was lifted off his shoulders. He realized that he would have solitude not by his own contriving, but only by a miracle. He said: "Where? Here or there makes no difference. Somewhere, nowhere, beyond all 'where.' Solitude outside geography or in it. No matter."²²

After Merton received the letter from Rome, he woke up at midnight and spent an hour praying in the darkness. We find this entry in his journal:

Empty, silent, free, opening, into nothing — a little point of nothing that alone is real. What do you ask? Nothing. What do you want? Nothing. Very quiet and dark. The Father. The Father. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing, Nothing.

He ends this entry in a symbolic but very real pain. "The place where the tooth was pulled is only just beginning to hurt this morning."²³ A few weeks later, on January 19, 1960, he remembered the letter after reading an article on the canonical situation of hermits, and thought that he was unjustly treated by his superiors, but could not do anything about it.

In September 1960, Merton realized that he had paid little attention to the great reality that he loved his monastery and that

²¹ Ibid., 352.

²² Ibid., 358-59.

²³ Ibid., 359.

the community loved him. He thought that to admit it might mean that he must stay. "I do not mean that the will of the Superior does not, or cannot, indicate where God's will may be for me – but the will of the Superior simply defines and points out the way in which I am to try to act intelligently and spiritually, and thus clarify the meaning of my own life."²⁴ Merton confronted himself on the issue of obedience to his Superior. He thought that his obedience should bring clarity into his life, not confusion. "How much I need clarity. I live in great darkness and weakness... The center of the problem – my own pride, the pride of others, the pride of my monastery. I enter into dialogue with the pride of others, and it is my own pride that speaks."²⁵

A hopeful event took place in October 1960 when a place was staked out for a conference centre for Protestant retreats. It was going to be a pavilion but, as Merton discussed his ideas with the contractor, the plans were changed to a plain cottage with two rooms in it. Merton and three novices helped the contractor dig the foundations. The Abbot scolded Merton for changing the plans. Merton thought that the cottage was clearly going to be a hermitage rather than a conference centre. He sang in secret to himself: "The house of the Lord is well founded, on a strong rock."²⁶ As the hermitage developed, Merton became anxious because the Abbot made it known to him that it was something that he did not want Merton to have or use except in a very restricted way. Merton could not live in it, sleep in it, or say Mass there.²⁷

Throughout October 1960, Merton wrestled quietly with the circumstances of his life. He wanted to rethink his whole attitude towards contacts with people outside the monastery and struggled with these questions: What am I doing? What am I saying? Who do they think I am, and who am I? Who do I think they are? What do they think they want? What did it really mean to live in complete spiritual independence, silence, detachment and freedom?

²⁴ Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 46.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 50.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 58.

Merton called the hermitage St. Mary of Carmel. He experienced silence and extraordinary peace while sitting on the porch of the hermitage. He wanted to live and die there. The hermitage was completed at the beginning of December 1960. He was filled with gratitude and amazement:

After having thought for ten years of building a hermitage, and thought of the ten places where one might be built, now *having built* one in the best place, I cannot believe it. It is nevertheless real – if anything is real. In it everything becomes unreal. Just silence, sky, trees.

Although anxious that the Abbot General might close the hermitage, he tried to put his concerns in perspective. “It is not thoughts that matter,” he said, but many

hours of silence and the precious dimension of existence which is otherwise completely unknown, certainly unknown when one thinks, or mentally speaks... or even writes. It must simply be seen, and is not seen until one has been sitting still, alone, in its own utter obviousness.²⁸

While he was at the hermitage the day after Christmas of 1960, he felt that he had arrived at his resting place and that the sense of journey and of wandering, waiting and looking had ended. He felt like he had come home. When the Abbot General visited Gethsemani in February 1961, Merton took him to the hermitage. The Abbot General seemed glad of the hermitage and eager for Merton to have it, but he told Merton not to live in it since he was the novice master.²⁹

The hermitage was conceived for Protestant retreats, but novices, students from theological schools, and friends of Merton also went up there with him. He thought the hermitage was God’s way of being right in his life in spite of everything. He appreciated the difference in his prayer life while in the hermitage. “Clarity – direction – to Christ the Lord for the great gift – the passage out of this world to the Father, entry into the kingdom. I know what I am here for. May I be faithful to this awareness.”³⁰

²⁸ Ibid., 73.

²⁹ Ibid., 97.

³⁰ Ibid., 108-9.

Although he felt that everything he prayed in the Psalms was right before him in the hills, the dew, light, birds, etc., Merton was not spared from interior struggles that went back to his bitterness and frustration with the Abbot. He knew that he had to live with this situation. He remembered the anchor at the Old Zion Church in Douglaston, New York, the earliest symbol he became aware of. The anchor is a symbol of hope, and hope was what he and what the world needed most.³¹ In November 1961, he also discerned a “decisive clarity” about his commitment to opposing, and non-cooperation with, nuclear war.³²

Merton reflected on hope again during the night watch when he entered the novices’ scriptorium. He felt the goodness and love of God in his novices, who were given to him as his children. He was much moved that he was appointed to be their father:

From this kind of love necessarily springs hope, hope even for political action, for here paradoxically hope is most necessary. Hope is always most necessary precisely where everything, spiritually, seems hopeless. And this is precisely in the confusion of politics. Hope against hope that man can gradually disarm and cease preparing for destruction and learn at last that he *must* live at peace with his brother. Never have we been less disposed to do this. It must be learned, it must be done and everything else is secondary to this supremely urgent need of man.³³

On March 20, 1962, Merton received permission to stay the whole day in the hermitage.³⁴ On December 11, 1962, he wrote in his journal that his primary responsibility was to seek awareness, coherence and clarity as much as possible from the silence, the emptiness, and grace in his life. He needed to find the right balance between his study, work, meditation, duty to others and solitude.³⁵ On Christmas Day, 1962, he felt certain that the Lord, seeing his poverty, anguish, tears, and helplessness, would come down and be born in him as a point of infinite joy in his point of nothingness and as a seed of peace in his soul. He thought that to be a seed of peace

³¹ Ibid., 175.

³² Ibid., 182.

³³ Ibid., 183.

³⁴ Ibid., 212.

³⁵ Ibid., 274.

had always been his mission.³⁶ In 1968, he would say in a conference to the nuns in Alaska that we have peace when God is all we seek, when God is enough, is sufficient. "That is the root of peace."³⁷

Merton's experience of solitude in the hermitage brought him the pure gift of recovering the real dimension of the mystery of Christ in his life. After a long time of stuffiness and suffocation, he felt that his spirit was breathing again. By August 1963, Merton could write that although he was more involved with people than than at any other time in his life, his solitude was very real.³⁸ What was most important to him was to deepen his grasp of spiritual reality by renouncing himself and completely surrendering to the Spirit.³⁹

As the year 1964 began, Merton was again besieged by thoughts of resentment, of frustration, of his being treated unfairly and to some extent cheated and exploited. Yet he realized that it was useless to blame the Abbot for these. He wrote in his journal that although there was no pattern for him to follow, what mattered most was for him to make the right adjustment in his life, to follow the Holy Spirit in freedom. He realized the need for constant self-revision, growth, renunciation of the past, yet in continuity with all that happened in his life. He did not think that he would be permitted to live permanently in the hermitage, but he felt that since it was there, he had to make the most use of it, "not as an evasion but as a real place of prayer and self-renunciation."⁴⁰

On June 2, 1964, when even the thought of temporary travel for Merton seemed useless and vain, he received a letter from D. T. Suzuki's secretary, Mihoko Okamura, informing him that since Suzuki could not come to Gethsemani, he was inviting Merton to meet him in New York. Although he had a strong sense of the Abbot's predictable objections to let him leave Gethsemani, Merton

³⁶ Ibid., 280.

³⁷ *Thomas Merton in Alaska*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: New Directions, 1989), 73.

³⁸ Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 4.

³⁹ Ibid., 18.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 108.

asked for permission to go to New York. He was convinced that this might be the only opportunity he would have to meet Suzuki, his Zen correspondent, the man who first brought Zen Buddhism from Japan to the West. To his surprise, the Abbot gave him special permission to meet Suzuki in New York. This unexpected decision upset and distracted Merton. "The only way I can stomach the whole idea is that I think, in good faith, it was God's will for me to ask, and for some reason I should go, not only for my benefit. I am not supposed to understand, but have to trust. There is more here than I know."⁴¹ Merton realized how deeply attached he was to Gethsemani and to its silence, but if he had to be shaken up a bit by going to New York, it was also good. His apprehension about the trip vanished once he arrived in New York. He felt a great joy in his heart and had a deep sense that he was going *home*. He was after all a New Yorker. The time he spent in conversation with Suzuki and Mihoko Okamura moved him very much and he felt as if he had spent a moment with his own family. This was truly another unexpected and incomprehensible gift.

On October 13, 1964, the Abbot gave Merton permission to sleep at the hermitage without any special permission, though he could not stay there all the time. It was a great experience for Merton to say Lauds there and feel alive, awake and real with silence all around him.⁴² He realized that he was *happy*. Happiness was not an "it" or object. It simply was and it was he. He felt strongly his nothingness before God and he was immensely grateful.⁴³

In October 1964, Dom James received a letter from the Abbot General saying that he was not opposed on principle to experiments in the hermit life within the Order and that such an experiment at Gethsemani would be reasonable. On December 16, 1964, the Abbot gave Merton permission to spend a full day at the hermitage. Merton believed that the happiness he felt was not of his own making, but sheer mercy and God's gift to him. The hermitage, an undeserved gift, was the place God had given him after so much prayer and longing. He realized the unity of contemplation and eschatology because he

⁴¹ Ibid., 109.

⁴² Ibid., 153-54.

⁴³ Ibid., 177.

had experienced the life-giving Spirit in Whom the Father is present to us through Jesus, the Son. To contemplate being in Christ and the Spirit gives us a loving sense of divine life in this life in the present and in eternity.

One of the fruits of Merton's solitary life was his sense of the absolute importance of obeying God in seeking His will, in choosing freely to accept what came from Him. He believed that our life is without meaning if we are not attentive and listening and if we do not surrender our love to God in union with Christ. He believed that if we desired that the Father's will be done in us on earth as it is in heaven, we can be sure that the love of God would be upon us and our lives will be transformed. "This transformation is a manifestation and advent of God in the world."⁴⁴

On July 19, 1965, the Abbot informed Merton that on August 20, 1965, the feast of St. Bernard, he would make the change in the novitiate and Merton would be free to live in the hermitage, with his only responsibility being to give one conference a week in the novitiate on Sundays. Merton was much moved at this delightful surprise. "Things like this make me ashamed of my fears and worries and my decision, as this, after all, is really remarkable." He thought that it was a most unusual step in the Cistercian Order which had not been possible in 1963. He considered it one of the greatest mercies of God in his life and the answer to many prayers. He thought that even when it appeared hopeless he was glad to have stayed on the path where he was and did not succeed in getting off it. His attempts to go elsewhere, however, led him to have the hermitage.⁴⁵ Merton's following of God's will reminds me of his prayer: "And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it."

After a few days in the hermitage, Merton admitted in his journal that he had begun to feel the lightness, the strangeness, and the desertedness of being alone. When he saw a group of monks gathering potatoes in the fields, he remembered the communal beauty of cutting and husking corn and the joy and sense of

⁴⁴ Ibid., 226.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 273.

brotherhood he experienced before. He felt lonely just to see them out there. During his meditation on August 28, 1965, he realized that he was taking the hermitage too seriously and himself in it. "What is important," he said to himself, "is not the house, not the hermit image, but my own self and my sonship as a child of God... My first obligation is to be myself and follow God's grace... What matters is not spirituality, not religion, not perfection, not success or failure at this or that, but simply God, and freedom in His Spirit."⁴⁶ Merton prayed for the Holy Spirit to bring him true freedom.

Merton's hermitage journals reveal his realization that his coming to the hermitage had been for him a "return to the world," not a return to the cities, but a return to direct and humble contact with God's creation, and the world of poor men who work in it. He realized that his task was to get rid of the last vestiges of a pharisaical division between the sacred and the secular, and "to see that the *whole* world is reconciled to God in Christ."⁴⁷

On April 26, 1965, he wrote Dom André Louf, Abbot of Sainte-Marie-du-Mont, that he felt in his own mind that he was in the place that God destined for him when God called him to the monastic life. If he had been dissatisfied before and was looking for more, it was because the hermitage was needed to complete what God had given him before. "There is a sense that this is a complete, inexplicable gift of God to me, without reference to any merit of mine."⁴⁸ He said that in spite of the profound emptiness and loneliness, and sickening void during times of purification, he never had so true a sense of the nearness of God and God's love for him.

At the end of 1965, Merton asked himself what the next year, 1966, would bring. He expected more sickness, more trouble in Asia, less writing, and more meditation and reading. He wanted to prepare a good book on prayer, but he had no real plans. All he wanted was to live and to free the reality of his life and be ready when it ended and he was called to God, whenever that would be.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 287.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 293-94.

⁴⁸ Merton, *School of Charity*, 276-77.

He wrote in his journal on January 29, 1966 that “What matters is to *love*, to be in one place in silence, if necessary in suffering, sickness, tribulation, and not try to be anybody outwardly.”⁴⁹ Christine Bochen, who edited the sixth volume of Merton’s journals, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom*, noted in her introduction that those lines which Merton wrote before his 51st birthday “seem to auger what lay ahead: an invitation to learn about love, freedom, and solitude, in ways he could not possibly have imagined.”⁵⁰

Most of us have read about Merton’s surgery on March 25, 1966 and his meeting and falling in love with a student nurse who also loved him. Although he was aware that he was a priest and a monk, he felt that their love was not a contradiction of his solitude, but a mysterious part of it.⁵¹ He described this love as a “disconcerting, risky, hard-to-handle reality” that was *real*. He thought that it did not fully interfere with or invalidate his solitude, but it gave his solitude a strange new perspective.⁵² He experienced himself as “a monk in love.” He tried to reconcile this love with his hermit life, but sincerely admitted that M’s love for him was “not just ‘another question’ and ‘another problem.’” It was right at the center of all his problems and right at the center of his hermit life.⁵³ He wrote on August 6, 1966: “I do not regret at all my love for her and am convinced it was a true gift from God and has been an inestimable help to me.”⁵⁴

On September 8, 1966, Merton made a commitment in writing before the Abbot to live in solitude for the rest of his life in so far as his health would permit it. On March 21, 1968, on the feast of St. Benedict and with the blessing of the new abbot, Dom Flavian Burns, Archbishop McDonough gave Merton permission to have the Blessed Sacrament reserved in the hermitage when his chapel was finished.⁵⁵ A new chapter in Merton’s life unfolded with the

⁴⁹ Merton, *Learning to Love*, 15.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, xvi.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 77.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁵⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 70.

election of Dom Flavian Burns, who was open to new possibilities. Merton's prayer, "You will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it" comes to mind again when he was allowed to travel to California, New Mexico, Alaska, and finally to Asia where he died.

I want to conclude my presentation with two Psalms, which I am sure Merton would have prayed since the Psalter was a great source of prayer for him. He called the Psalms "Bread in the Wilderness," which was also the title of one of his many books.⁵⁶

Psalm 33.20-23:

Our soul waits for the Lord;
he is our help and shield...
Let your steadfast love, O Lord, be upon us,
even as we hope in you.

Psalm 71.5:

For you, O Lord, are my hope,
my trust, O Lord, from my youth.

⁵⁶ Thomas Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness* (New York: New Directions, 1953).