

Seeds of Hope in Times of Crisis: Saint John of the Cross and Thomas Merton

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Drawing by Thomas Merton of St. John of the Cross, 1952. Used with permission of the Merton Legacy Trust and the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University.

This paper examines the mystical theology of hope in the life and the writings of St. John of the Cross and Thomas Merton, and explores how their contemplative messages of hope, love, and meaning can inspire us to confront our own personal and collective crises. Both the Carmelite saint and the Trappist monk invite each one of us to become full partakers in building the kingdom of heaven on earth. These two Christian mystics bring us a prophetic message of love and compassion, which is rooted in their personal vision and their encounter with the living God. Their central message for humanity is to seek redemption, reconciliation and renewal within our own society. Their contemplative-prophetic messages are even more urgent for us today because we are in the midst of great social, political, ecological, spiritual and religious turmoil.

This paper is divided into three parts. Firstly, I define genuine mystics as contemplatives in action. I do this so that we can clearly see the intrinsic relationship between contemplation and action, and through the contemplative messages of John and Merton discover how we can better respond actively to the signs of the times. Secondly, I present John's and Merton's contemplative messages through a selection of some major writings and events in their lives. Finally, I reflect on how their messages of hope and love can enlighten and transform us by becoming fully engaged in the social and religious problems of our time.

1. Contemplation in a World of Action: Toward a Holistic Approach to Mysticism

Genuine mystics are those who are able to integrate a contemplative desire for the glory and love of God with an apostolic and social commitment for their neighbor as well as for all creation. As William Johnston says in *The Inner Eye of Love*:

I believe that the great prophets were mystics in action – their inner eye was awakened so that they saw not only the glory of God but also the suffering, the injustice, the inequality, the sin of the world. This drove them into action and often led to their death. And just as the great prophets were mystics, so the great mystics had a prophetic role.¹

According to Wayne Teasdale, the prophetic voice demands witness and response to the most pressing moral and religious issues of our time:

The prophetic voice vigorously acknowledges the unjust events and policies that cause enormous tension, misery, and dislocation in the lives of countless numbers of people. Wars; the plight of refugees (most of whom are women and children); unjust economic, social, and political conditions that enrich a small class of rulers while oppressing the masses; threats to the environment – all are matters that should evoke the moral voice and our willingness to respond. We no longer have the luxury of ignoring the many challenges to justice in all its forms. We have a

¹ William Johnston, *The Inner Eye of Love: Mysticism and Religion* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982), 11.

by states against its people or a neighboring nation, or some other danger as yet unforeseen.²

Following Teasdale, we can say that true contemplatives stand up as prophetic witnesses to justice and peace in their unique ways, asking for forgiveness and reconciliation in times of crisis. Without doubt, true mystics do not turn their backs to the suffering inflicted on millions of people in different parts of the world. They do not withdraw completely from society in a search for solitude. Instead, they protest against the individual and structural evils of their respective societies. Their spirituality is based on the ideal of building a compassionate world where peace, justice and love reign, which includes even the act of loving one's enemy. In the words of Wayne Teasdale:

Socially engaged spirituality is the inner life awakened to responsibility and love. It expresses itself in endless acts of compassion that seek to heal others, contributing to the transformation of the world and the building of a nonviolent, peace-loving culture that includes everyone.³

Both John and Merton were contemplatives in action who took literally the words of the Evangelist when he said: "Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action" (1 John 3.18). As Peter Henriot points out:

"Faith without works is dead." This is the blunt answer given by the Apostle James to the perennial question about the relationship between belief and deeds. Today, we might phrase the question differently. We might ask about the relationship between faith and justice, prayer and action, spirituality and social commitment. But the answer is still the same. Faith without works is dead.⁴

Apostolic service like helping the poor or denouncing social injustices would be fruitless if it is not grounded in faith, hope, and love. The mere task of performing external acts of devotion does not guarantee a positive result if God is not taking the initiative. Without grace all acts are condemned to failure. Works without

² Wayne Teasdale, *The Mystic Heart: Discovering a Universal Spirituality in the World's Religions* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 1999), 157-58.

³ *Ibid.*, 239.

⁴ Katherine Marie Dyckman and Patrick L. Carroll, *Inviting the Mystic, Supporting the Prophet: An Introduction to Spiritual Direction* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), ix.

God's grace are vain, ineffective, or sterile. As St. John of the Cross declared in one of his commentaries:

The flower of these works and virtues is the grace and power they possess from the love of God. Without love these works will not only fail to flower but will all wither and become valueless in God's sight, even though they may be perfect from a human standpoint. Yet because God bestows his grace and love, they are works that have blossomed in his love.⁵

This paper will attempt now to trace the contemplative messages of John and Merton through selected life events and writings.

2. John's and Merton's Contemplative Messages

John's Life

John's life experiences as a child would prepare him to adopt the Carmelite way of life. He was born around 1542 in a humble family. He learned quickly what it means to live under harsh conditions of poverty. This exposure to material poverty prepared him to embrace the monastic vows of poverty and simplicity as a friar around 1563.

John was recruited at the Hospital of Las Bubas around 1555 and worked there until 1563. He raised funds for the hospital, a center dedicated to patients infected with venereal diseases. During his years working at the hospital, John learned how to cultivate the virtue of compassion by being confronted on a daily basis with such harsh realities as the pain, suffering and death of his patients. There are numerous reports of how John quickly put into practice his early years of experience working in the hospital. John took personal care of those who fell ill in the monasteries while he was the prior in Granada. He fed them by preparing delicious food with the best ingredients available. He also told them stories and jokes,

⁵ *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodríguez (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991), 594; see "Spiritual Canticum" 30.8.

or recited poems to uplift the spirits of the ill. In sum, John's treatment was humanitarian; the austere and pious image presented to us by some of his interpreters does not capture the real compassionate person behind the monastic walls.

The Teresian reform was not welcomed by many Carmelite brothers and by some ecclesiastical authorities. There are several reasons for the political battles fought within the Carmelite Order. First, it was uncommon in Teresa's age to see a religious woman founding a new monastic order for nuns as well as for friars. Another reason might have been the fact that Teresa gave more autonomy to the Discalced Carmelites, thus giving women more control over their jurisdiction. Teresa also allowed numerous *conversos* to seek refuge in her new Carmelite Order. As we know today, Teresa was a descendant of Jewish *conversos* herself, and John was most probably a descendant of *conversos* as well. This problem of *conversos* alone could explain why Teresa and John suffered persecution at the hands of their Carmelite brothers and why they were denounced to the Spanish Inquisition.⁶

Clearly John sided with those who suffered persecution. John had the courage to raise his prophetic voice in support of the Teresian reform. He acted on behalf of Fr. Gracián and Ana de Jesús, major collaborators in spreading the Discalced Carmelite Order to Andalusia, Belgium, and France. Fr. Gracián was expelled from the Order by the new vicar general, Fr. Nicolás Doria. Ana de Jesús also suffered at the hands of Doria's new leadership. In my view, John's political involvement in reforming the Carmelite Order is without doubt the major reason why he suffered persecution and imprisonment. In 1577, John was abducted in Ávila and moved to Toledo, where he was incarcerated in a small cell inside the Carmelite monastery. He was accused of "rebellion and contumacy" against the Order. Among other persecutions, he was

⁶ For a more in-depth study of these problems see my doctoral dissertation: *Mystical Vision and Prophetic Voice in St. John of the Cross: Towards a Mystical Theology of Final Integration* (Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 2003), 50-92. In English it is available from ProQuest and the Spanish translation will be published soon: *Visión Mística y Voz Profética en San Juan de la Cruz: La Acción Desde la Contemplación* (Madrid: Pueblos Blancos).

mocked and humiliated, put in prison for nine months, forced to leave his administrative offices, and sent to the Desert of La Peñuela before his death. Ultimately, John even faced the martyrdom of rejection by his own Discalced Carmelite brothers. He paid the price of aligning himself with those who were oppressed. Like Jesus, he suffered persecution, and perhaps his death was caused by his enemies' constant oppression. Peter Slattery correctly understood John's prophetic dimension when he wrote:

St. John, the poet, being a person of discernment, was sensitive to the injustices and exaggerations of his time, and in his innocence he made people aware of them. Poets are uncomfortable people to be with. Certainly, toward the end of his life those with power did not want him close to them. St. John, the poet, called on his fellow religious to examine stagnation in their lives and institutions – he did this by the force of the sanctity of his life and the power of his poetry.⁷

In life, John was a contemplative in action. He was well known for his extraordinary social skills, for his respect shown to everyone, including his enemies. John was an ordinary man who worked hard and never complained, because he did it for the love of God and for the love of his neighbor. While on his death bed, John listened to the verses from the *Song of Songs*, his favorite mystical text. His witnesses saw John's compassionate heart in action when on the eve of his death he forgave the prior of Úbeda for mistreating him. His merciful actions demonstrated to his fellow Carmelites that his spirit was full of generosity and kindness, even when he suffered the physical afflictions and personal attacks initiated by some of his religious brothers and superiors.

The austere and masochistic picture of St. John of the Cross does not correspond to his legacy, for John's ascetic-mysticism is well-grounded in the best spirit of the Catholic tradition. As Paul J. Bernadicou rightly observes: "Though his [John's] age put much emphasis on penitential austerities as preliminary requisites, his

⁷ Peter Slattery, *The Springs of Carmel: An Introduction to Carmelite Spirituality* (New York: Alba House, 1991), 74.

path stayed grounded in the faith, hope, and love that marked one as an authentic follower of Jesus in the gospel tradition.”⁸

Needless to say, Sanjuanist scholars are in need of reinterpreting John’s texts and his mystical thoughts in reference to the historical context in which he lived. Bringing out the multifaceted dimensions of St. John of the Cross illustrates more accurately the Carmelite saint’s enormous contribution to the world. In the words of Thomas Merton:

Saint John of the Cross has never been a very popular saint, outside his native Spain. His doctrine is considered “difficult,” and he demands of others the same uncompromising austerity which he practiced in his own life. Nevertheless, a close study of his doctrine... should prove that Saint John of the Cross had all the balance and prudence and “discretion” which mark the highest sanctity. He is not a fanatic... In actual practice, Saint John of the Cross was relentlessly opposed to the formalism and inhumanity of those whom he compared to “spiritual black-smiths,” violently hammering the souls of their victims to make them fit some conventional model of ascetic perfection.⁹

The contemplative John was also ahead of his time when he rightly saw the urgent necessity of courageously confronting the socio-economic, political and religious problems that were affecting the fragile thread of the Iberian family. John advocated a non-violent way to shed light on the injustices committed in his own time, following the Christian principles of the Gospels. Additionally, John exposed in public the systematic expressions of sin that were part of the social and the religious establishment of his time. He chose writing, preaching, confession, and spiritual direction as the prophetic mediums for speaking out against such injustices as intolerance, hunger, illiteracy, or the mistreatment of women.

In John’s view the true contemplative was not only the blessed soul who achieves union with God in this life but also one who works for peace and unity in the world. As Thomas Merton notes, “The finally integrated man is a peacemaker.”¹⁰ Indeed John was

⁸ Paul J. Bernadico, “Contemporary Guides to John of the Cross,” *Spiritual Life* 44:1 (1998): 4-5.

⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Ascent to Truth* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951), 330-31.

¹⁰ Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 212.

able to create in the midst of a harsh environment of hatred and resentment a non-violent, loving response to those who characterized themselves as his enemies. In his famous twenty-sixth letter addressed to Mother María de la Encarnación, John wrote: "And where there is no love, put love, and you will draw love."¹¹

Without a full understanding of John's life, his thoughts are meaningless because his works contain the language and learned experiences of his lifetime.

B. John's Writings

The goal of the Christian mystic is to become God by participation so that the contemplative can share the fruits of his or her mystical vision with others by becoming a messenger of God on earth. St. John of the Cross clearly granted the possibility that some blessed souls become God by participation, calling this transformative experience of the human soul in God, "*a lo divino*." John wrote: "Eat not in forbidden pastures, (those of this life) because blessed are they who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be satisfied [Mt. 5.6]. What God seeks, he being himself God by nature, is to make us gods through participation, just as fire converts all things into fire."¹² The Sanjuanist panentheistic experience is rooted in the Pauline message where it is said that God was, is, and shall be "all in all" (1 Cor. 15.28).

In the Christian mystical tradition, in which the Carmelite saint is deeply immersed, the contemplative and the prophetic are two aspects of the same reality. Mary often symbolizes the contemplative mystic, while Martha best represents the active mystic. John needs to be placed in the Christian mystical tradition where Martha and Mary are sisters. They complement each other.

¹¹ *Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, 760. See S. Juan de la Cruz. *Obras Completas*, ed. Eulogio Pacho (Burgos: Monte Carmelo, 1993), 1315. The Spanish text reads: "Y adonde no hay amor, ponga amor, y sacará amor."

¹² *Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, 93; *Sayings of Light and Love*, 107 – in other works it is Saying 106.

Together they symbolize the mixed life by combining action and contemplation respectively.

Gustavo Gutiérrez, the founder of liberation theology in Latin America, rightly describes this intrinsic relationship between the active (or prophetic) life and the contemplative (or mystical) life in terms of language: "Mystical language expresses the gratuitousness of God's love, prophetic language expresses the demands this love makes."¹³

In the monastic tradition, every single action is consecrated for the honor and glory of God. John repeatedly said that only those who perform works for the love of God will find the kingdom of heaven at hand. But even the thought of doing something because one wants to enter into heaven is detrimental to the aspirations of the human soul to become God by participation.

The golden rule of Christianity is to love God as well as to love our neighbor. The Bible says: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19.18). In John's words: "Those who do not love their neighbor abhor God."¹⁴ These expressions only make sense when they are read in reference to John's theology of faith, hope, and love. The First Letter of John says: "Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love" (1 John 4.8). Friar Eliseo de los Mártires, a contemporary of John, has reported that John himself would say:

The love of neighbor is born in the spiritual and contemplative life... because the [Carmelite] precept wanted their members to follow the mixed life for it includes and embraces both the active and the contemplative. The Lord chose for himself the mixed life because it was the most perfect.¹⁵

¹³ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *On Job*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 1987), 95.

¹⁴ *Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, 97: *Sayings of Light and Love*, 167 – in other works it is Saying 176.

¹⁵ Crisógono de Jesús, Matías del Niño Jesús, and Ruano Licinio, *Vida y Obras de San Juan de la Cruz* (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1978), 433: *Advice*, 9. [Quotations from this book are translated by Cristóbal Serrán-Pagán y Fuentes] The Spanish text reads: "Decía asimismo que el amor del bien de los prójimos nace de la vida espiritual y contemplativa, y que, como ésta se nos encarga por Regla, es visto encargado y mandarnos este bien y celo del aprovechamiento de nuestros prójimos; porque quiso la Regla hacer observantes de vida mixta y compuesta por incluir en sí abrazar las dos, activa y contemplativa. La cual escogió el Señor para sí por ser más perfecta."

John of the Cross reinterpreted for us the triadic relationship of the love of God with the love of neighbor and of the world at large. He wrote: "the compassion for our neighbor grows all the more as the soul is united with God by love."¹⁶ Friar Eliseo de los Mártires also declared:

To them going to heaven by themselves does not seem like much, endeavoring with eagerness and celestial affection and exquisite diligence to take with them many souls to heaven. And this is born from the great love that these souls had for God, and [this] is [due to] the proper fruit and effect of the perfect prayer and contemplation.¹⁷

John believed that all Christians are called to be contemplatives in action, although only a few reach "this high state of perfect union with God."¹⁸ However, John also thought that "the reason is not that God wishes only a few of these spirits to be so elevated; he would rather want all to be perfect, but he finds few vessels that will endure so lofty and sublime a work."¹⁹ John might have thought that few people are really committed to walk through the narrow path in the ascent to God's summit, for only a few can take the ordinary sufferings and sacrifices along the road.

John, being firmly rooted in the Carmelite tradition, shares the belief that

The prophet is so present to God that God dominates his whole life. He is moved by the needs of the people who are being neglected and being misled... In this way Carmelite spirituality encourages people to live continually in the presence of God, and like the prophet, to be attentive to the signs of the times, so that they may hear the cry of the poor.²⁰

I believe John would admit that God is against all forms of injustice in the world; that unnecessary suffering and moral evil is a question that affects all humans because we have the capacity to

¹⁶ Ibid., 434: *Advice*, 10. The Spanish text reads: "la compasión de los prójimos tanto más crece cuanto más el alma se junta con Dios por amor."

¹⁷ Ibid. The Spanish text reads: "pareciéndoles poco ir solos al cielo, procuran con ansias y celestiales afectos y diligencias exquisitas llevar muchos al cielo consigo. Lo cual nace del grande amor que tienen a su Dios, y es propio fruto y efecto este de la perfecta oración y contemplación."

¹⁸ *Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, 667: *Living Flame of Love*, 2.27.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Slattery, *The Springs of Carmel*, 136-37.

choose evil, and therefore it is our responsibility to avoid evil; and finally, that God is calling humans to participate as co-creators in building the heavenly kingdom on earth by denouncing the deepest troubles of humanity and by announcing the good news of a new reality, a new order that will definitely put a stop to the affliction and unnecessary suffering of the *anawim*. As one of Merton's correspondents points out in her classic book *Liberation Theology*:

The hope for salvation is the hope for the coming of the Kingdom of God; the hope for a new man in a new world, where the oppressive structures of the present "world" have been revolutionized and a new era of peace, brotherhood and obedience to truth has dawned.²¹

C. Merton's Life

Thomas Merton was born in Prades, France, on January 31, 1915. As he wrote in his autobiography, he was born "in a year of a great war."²² It was the First World War, which was fought "to end all wars." Merton learned by experience the devastation that the war brought to Europe.

A major turning point in his life was December 10, 1941, the day that Merton entered the Cistercian Abbey of Gethsemani. By this time, Merton had become a conscientious objector. A few days before Merton entered the Cistercian Order, Pearl Harbor was bombed and the United States had declared war against Japan and, shortly after, Germany. This marked the entry of the United States into the Second World War. Two years later in 1943, Merton's brother, John Paul, who was in the Royal Canadian Air Force, was killed returning from action over Mannheim. Merton wrote a poem to his brother entitled, "For My Brother: Reported Missing in Action, 1943." In this poem, Merton prayed for the soul of his brother whose body is "lost and dead" in a "landscape of disaster."²³

In 1958, Merton reported having a mystical vision at the corner of Fourth and Walnut Street (today renamed as Muhammed Ali

²¹ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Liberation Theology: Human Hope Confronts Christian History and American Power* (New York: Paulist Press, 1972), 134.

²² Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948), 3.

²³ *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), 36.

Boulevard), the business and commercial district in Louisville, Kentucky. This experience, narrated in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*,²⁴ marks Merton's transition from a life solely dedicated to prayer and contemplation to a life more engaged with the world. After this, Merton began addressing social issues more directly, and started to publicly denounce the Cold War in his letters and writings.

Merton saw the divine reflected in all things and developed a sense of cosmic interconnectedness. The epiphany that took place in Louisville has its spiritual root in his personal encounter with the source of life. Out of this contemplative experience he gains a new perspective on life. Merton is able to reach out to the world compassionately and, in doing so, he no longer ignores his moral responsibility towards both the stranger and the neighbor.

In 1962, Merton was told by the Abbot General to cease publishing on war and peace. However, Merton found ways to address these subjects, sometimes anonymously, with the help of friends like "Ping" Ferry who were very supportive of his social justice work. Three years later, Merton became a hermit and was allowed to live in the woods in a search for solitude, living apart from his Trappist community. Yet, in 1965, Merton denounced the war in Vietnam, calling it an "atrocity." This public denunciation demonstrates that Merton the hermit did not withdraw from the world in order to leave it behind. His new contemplative solitude led him to embrace the world as an act of solidarity and compassion towards all sentient and non-sentient beings. As Leonardo Boff reminds us, "all true liberation arises out of a deep encounter with God, which impels us toward committed action."²⁵

Merton thought that the root of war and unnecessary violence is fear of others who are not like us or who do not think like us. The antidote for this fear is to cultivate a spiritual practice of love in action, which is based on mutual trust. Again, Merton's personal conviction has its origins in his own contemplative vision of love's

²⁴ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 140-42.

²⁵ Leonardo Boff, *The Path to Hope: Fragments from a Theologian's Journey* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 59.

transformative power, which led him to keep his high hopes in humanity intact. Merton believed that it is only through compassionate love that we can treat the other as one of us, because God is love. Each one of us is a reflection of God's love, even if we are not fully aware of it. Furthermore, Merton extended his arms not only to the oppressed but also to the oppressor. And yet, Merton did not remain neutral. He took sides with those who suffer. Merton himself wrote:

I am on the side of the people who are being burned, cut to pieces, tortured, held as hostages, gassed, ruined, destroyed. They are the victims of both sides. To take sides with massive power is to take sides against the innocent. The side I take is then the side of the people who are sick of war and want peace in order to rebuild their country.²⁶

Ultimately, there is room in Merton's non-violent thought to defend one's life as the last resort because nonviolence does not mean absolute pacifism.²⁷ As Merton himself said:

The theology of love must seek to deal realistically with the evil and injustice in the world, and not merely to compromise with them... In any case, it is a theology of *resistance*... which is at the same time *Christian* resistance and which therefore emphasizes reason and humane communication rather than force, but which also admits the possibility of force in a limit-situation when everything else fails.²⁸

In his final year, Merton describes his own mystical experiences in his journals. Perhaps the most famous account is when he writes about his visit to Polonnaruwa. He said that he could not write adequately what he felt while he was contemplating the giant statues of the Buddha at Polonnaruwa. Merton experienced peace in its fullness, resting in complete silence before the extraordinary faces of the Buddhas. There was a sense of gratitude and awe. Merton wrote: "All problems are resolved and

²⁶ Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 109-10.

²⁷ At the ITMS General Meeting in San Diego in June 2005 I presented a paper entitled, "Blessed are the Peacemakers: Thomas Merton on Pacifism." In this paper I demonstrated that Merton was both a relative pacifist in relation to conventional warfare and the just war theory, and an absolute pacifist in the context of nuclear warfare.

²⁸ Merton, *Faith and Violence*, 9.

everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear... Everything is emptiness and everything is compassion.”²⁹

On December 10, 1968, Merton received an electric shock from a faulty fan after coming out from the shower. He was in Bangkok, Thailand, attending a monastic conference. Merton the peacemaker lost his life in his beloved Asia after denouncing on numerous occasions the American participation in Vietnam. Ironically, Merton’s body was transported home to North America from an Air Force Base along with the dead bodies of American soldiers who were killed in Vietnam.

D. Merton’s Writings

For Merton, the goal of Christian mysticism is to know and to love God, which is to experience the divine at the deepest center of the soul. The way to prepare for this mystical union is to learn how to die to the old self so that the new self learns how to live in the presence of the divine. By God’s grace, the human soul becomes one with the divine by participation. Merton, following the lines of St. John of the Cross, defined infused contemplation as the secret knowledge of God by a union of love.

For John, faith is the experiential mode of encountering the living God at the apex of the human soul. John construed his notion of faith as a dark night to the senses and to the spirit, which is no other than infused contemplation.³⁰ The Carmelite saint defined dark night as “infused contemplation” or even as “mystical theology.” John probably adopted the mystical symbol of the dark night as an example of his apophatic mysticism in which God is revealed to the mystic as a No-thing. We meet God in total darkness and emptiness because God is not an object.

³⁰ In my opinion, Merton is one of the few Sanjuanist commentators who has grasped the real meaning behind John’s mystical symbol of the dark night. See my paper “Merton’s Understanding of the Mystical Doctrine of St. John of the Cross’s Dark Night of the Soul,” *Thomas Merton: A Mind Awake in the Dark*, eds., Paul M. Pearson, Danny Sullivan, and Ian Thompson (Abergavenny, Wales: Three Peaks Press, 2002): 165-73.

Merton went even further in his definition of “dark” contemplation when he said: “Contemplation is not a deepening of experience only, but a radical change in one’s way of being and living, and the essence of this change is precisely a liberation from *dependence on external means to external ends*.”³¹ The Trappist monk understood that his true identity lies in finding God’s love within and in his personal response to the divine calling, not in relying on external structures. Genuine mystics are called to be free and they must take full responsibility for their actions in the world. Mystics then ought to become prophets by responding to God’s Will out of their love for the Creator of all life and their love of creatures.

Merton defined the prophet not as “one who exactly predicts future events” but rather “in the more traditional sense of one who ‘utters’ and ‘announces’ news about man’s own deepest trouble.”³² In his introduction to *The Prison Meditations of Father Delp* Merton finds a contemporary example of a prophet [Father Delp] whose message is not that:

of a politician, but of a mystic. Yet this mystic recognized his inescapable responsibility to be involved in politics. And because he followed messengers of God into the midst of a fanatical and absurd political crisis, he was put to death for his pains.³³

Merton further wrote:

The place of the mystic and the prophet in the twentieth century is not totally outside of society, not utterly remote from the world. Spirituality, religion, mysticism are not an unequivocal rejection of the human race in order to seek one’s own individual salvation without concern for the rest of men. Nor is true worship a matter of standing aside and praying for the world, without any concept of its problems and its desperations.³⁴

For Merton, the dichotomy presented to us between contemplation and action is no longer valid. As Thomas Merton rightly observed:

³¹ Merton, *Faith and Violence*, 217.

³² *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1985), 3.

³³ Merton, *Faith and Violence*, 67.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

Contemplation and action necessarily have their part in every religious Rule. The two must always go together, because Christian perfection is nothing else but the perfection of charity, and that means perfect love of God and of men... But the active Orders would soon find that their activity was sterile and useless if it were not nourished by an interior spirit of prayer and contemplation, while the contemplative who tries to shut out the needs and sufferings of humanity and isolate himself in a selfish paradise of interior consolations will soon end up in a desert of sterile illusion.³⁵

Merton was well aware of the need for the monk to reach out to those who suffer in this world. Prayer without charity, he said, is a “sterile illusion.” Merton expanded the concept of contemplation by saying that it is “the highest expression of the monastic and Christian lives, but it rests on action and tends to overflow in apostolic activity for souls.”³⁶ Additionally, Merton wrote:

There is no contradiction between action and contemplation when Christian apostolic activity is raised to the level of pure charity. On that level, action and contemplation are fused into one entity by the love of God and of our brother in Christ.³⁷

Like John, the contemplative message of Merton stresses the practice of love in our daily lives. However, Merton did not define this Christian love as being “sentimental.” In fact, Merton suggested that:

A theology of love cannot afford to be sentimental... A theology of love cannot be allowed merely to serve the interests of the rich and powerful, justifying their wars, their violence and their bombs, while exhorting the poor and underprivileged to practice patience, meekness, longsuffering and to solve their problems, if at all, non-violently.³⁸

Merton recognized the danger of escapism, especially within monastic circles. He warned his religious brothers and sisters not to remain indifferent to the social and religious problems of their fellow human beings. Clearly Merton spoke his mind as a mystical prophet by fulfilling his contemplative vision in the world.

³⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Waters of Siloe* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949), xxxiii-xxxiv.

³⁶ *Thomas Merton on Saint Bernard* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1980), 34.

³⁷ Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 143.

³⁸ Merton, *Faith and Violence*, 8-9.

3. Conclusion

Children of the twentieth-first century are witnessing similar fears to those of John's and Merton's age. On the one hand, we are facing the fears of personal insecurities such as conditions of poverty, of unemployment, of misfortune, of domestic violence, of lack of success, or of social acceptance. On the other hand, the global fears of terrorism, of unjust wars, of fundamentalisms, of illegal immigrants, of ecological tragedies, are the signs of our times.

In the final analysis, let me summarize our contemporary world situation by quoting from one of Merton's most valuable social analysts, Erich Fromm. Fromm writes about "the increasing dissatisfaction with our present way of life, its passiveness and silent boredom, its lack of privacy and its depersonalization, and the longing for a joyful, meaningful existence, which answers those specific needs of man." These characterize our age as much as they did in 1968 when Fromm wrote this critique of modern America.³⁹

Clearly we are living in an age of fear and despair when most of our politicians and religious leaders are more worried about holding and expanding their positions of power rather than serving the people that they are supposed to protect and to help. This could explain why people are losing faith in their leaders and in their institutions. As Merton put it:

In the spiritual, social, historic crises of civilizations – and of religious institutions – the same principle applies. Growth, survival and even salvation may depend on the ability to sacrifice what is fictitious and unauthentic in the construction of one's moral, religious or national identity. One must then enter upon a different creative task of reconstruction and renewal. This task can be carried out only in the climate of faith, of hope and of love.⁴⁰

For Merton, the crises that we face in our lifetime are sometimes a necessary part of our own growth because they bring new opportunities for creative response that might yield new solutions to the old problems of social injustices and the presence

³⁹ Erich Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope: Toward a Humanized Technology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 4.

⁴⁰ Merton, *Faith and Violence*, 138.

of evil in the world. Furthermore, the Trappist monk really believed that our socio-economic and religious crises are linked to our own spiritual crises. The solution then is to unmask our fabricated illusions of false selves and false institutions and to return to the center of life, which is God's transformative love.

The people of the world are desperately crying out for signs of hope and they are longing for new leaders who can address their social, economic and spiritual needs in humane ways. Many of us wonder what our leaders are saying and doing in the midst of massive turmoil. I believe the contemplative messages of John and Merton can help us identify the root of our contemporary problems by asking the right questions. This deep questioning in search for solutions will require from us a creative response that can directly and effectively address the most urgent problems of our time.

The Carmelite saint and the Trappist monk are beacons of hope for humanity because they never gave up in their search for truth, peace, justice and love. Both John and Merton devoted their lives to the pursuit of building a more just and humane society where each sentient and non-sentient being is respected and valued. Both understood the unique role each being plays in the unfolding drama of the universe. For them, a true mystic is one who, out of his or her direct encounter with the divine, actively engages and participates in the social and spiritual struggles of his or her time.

John's and Merton's religiosity does not have much to do with the fact that they both chose the monastic life. These two contemplatives were convinced of God's existence as an extension of their direct experience with the divine, even though they also acknowledged the presence of evil in the world. Thanks to their contemplative visions John and Merton were able to see God's presence in every situation and, therefore, refused to cooperate with evildoers. They knew out of their personal convictions that "humans are not alone," that God is the ultimate "Cosmic Companion," and that there is ultimate meaning in fighting the good fight.

Both John and Merton found hope even in the most desperate situations. Their mystical theology of hope is even more religious

because of their personal union and vision of God, not because they are simply monks. Therefore there is no room for silence, especially within contemplative or religious circles, when people and other creatures are suffering unjustly. It is no wonder that they both suffered from persecution, even at the hands of their own Carmelite and Cistercian brothers and sisters.

Both the Trappist and the Carmelite saw all created beings as divine reflections bathed in "a sea of love." And because their contemplative visions of God offered them an alternative vision of reality they were able to love the stranger, even their enemies. Their summoning of a higher truth is a powerful message for our contemporaries because the prophetic mysticism of John and Merton is rooted in an unconditional faith, hope, and love in humanity and in all God's creation.

These two contemplatives in action were prophets in their own time because they saw beneath the surface God's divine light and love, even in the midst of their suffering. As Paul Tillich says:

For if you find hope in the ground of history, you are united with the great prophets who were able to look into the depth of their times, who tried to escape it, because they could not stand the horror of their visions, and who yet had the strength to look to an even deeper level and there to discover hope.⁴¹

John and Merton planted the seeds of love and non-violence in their own times. However, their prophetic messages were not only addressed to monks and nuns in sixteenth-century Castile or to lay people in twentieth-century North America. Although these two messengers of God came from very particular cultures and monastic traditions, their contemplative messages are universal in scope. They both bring a prophetic message of real and everlasting peace, justice, and love. Their impact in today's world resonates even louder since most of their writings are available to us now. The major task ahead of us is to reinterpret their works using a contemporary language that speaks to new generations.

⁴¹ Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), 59.

The lives and teachings of John and Merton prepare us to embark on a spiritual journey in which we are going to be constantly reminded that our love for God has to be matched by our love for all creatures and for all creation. Both of them have planted the seeds of hope and love in their spiritual legacies. It is up to us to nurture those seeds so that other generations can benefit from us as much as we can benefit from them. What we really need to do is to love and to be loved, and the rest will follow. That is the central contemplative message of the Carmelite and the Trappist. Why would such a simple message be so difficult to put into practice in our daily lives?

I leave you with the great responsibility to pass the torch to other generations so that we can all become real agents of love in action.