HOSPITALITY TO THE STRANGER: THOMAS MERTON AND ST. BENEDICT'S EXHORTATION TO WELCOME THE STRANGER AS CHRIST

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> *"Seven hundred leagues – it wasn't easy."*
> *"But why didn't you join a monastery near you?"*
> *"Because I had heard that this was a REAL monastery."*
> *"Oh, no my friend, this is not a REAL monastery. This is just a MAGIC monastery."*
> *"Oh – seven hundred leagues! Well, could you direct me to a REAL monastery?"*
> *"Why don't you just stand by this door and let people in. If you can even once REALLY let someone in, he will direct you to the REAL monastery."*[1]

It appears on the surface as if there is a contradiction between the image of the hermit, in particular the "hermit" Thomas Merton, and the Benedictine charism of welcoming the stranger as Christ. Yet, this seems to be one more of those paradoxes, central to the monastic life, that Merton could hold in a balance. More than once I have heard people comment after seeing a photograph of Thomas Merton's hermitage at the Abbey of Gethsemani that, if he was really serious about being a hermit, why did he have so many chairs on his porch—surely only one was necessary? Perhaps the psychiatrist Gregory Zilboorg was not too far from the truth when he met Merton in July, 1956, at St. John's Abbey in Collegeville and suggested that Merton wanted a hermitage on Times Square with a big flashing neon sign above the doorway saying "HERMIT,"[2] a fitting hermitage for "the one original cloistered genius, the tonsured wonder of the Western World"[3] as Thomas Merton once humorously called himself.

I would like to suggest that this ability to welcome the stranger is not only integral to the monastic way of life as expressed in the Rule

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[1] Theophane the Monk, *Tales of a Magic Monastery* (New York: Crossroad 1987) 94-95.

[2] Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 1984) 297.

[3] Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer*, ed. by Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco 1996) 64.

of St. Benedict, but to the hermit life as well. First though, I want to trace the change and development in Thomas Merton's life and thought as he moved from *fuga mundi,* fleeing the world, to embracing the world.

The Thomas Merton we are familiar with from the sixties is light years away from the image of himself he held upon his entry to the Abbey of Gethsemani in December, 1941. With Merton's entry to Gethsemani the physical journeying, wandering, and rootlessness that had so dominated his early life were over and, as the brother gate-keeper closed the door behind him, Merton imagined himself "enclosed in the four walls of my new freedom."[4]

In the absence of personal journals from this period we can see this theme being echoed in a number of Merton's early poems. In "A Letter to My Friends," for example, written just days after he arrived at Gethsemani, he wrote:

> . . . we love the holy desert,
> Where separate strangers, hid in their disguises,
> Have come to meet, by night, the quiet Christ.[5]

Having been, as he would write in his poem "Three Postcards from the Monastery,"

> . . . begotten in the tunnels of December rain,
> Born from the wombs of news and tribulation,
> By night, by wakeful rosary:
> Such was my birth, my resurrection from the freezing east,
> The night we cleared you, Cincinnati, in a maze of lights.[6]

At this time, for Merton, the Abbey of Gethsemani was the paradise he had reached after traversing the seven storied mountain of Dante's purgatory, a "paradisus claustralis" as he would described it on his first visit to Gethsemani in April, 1941.[7]

Those early years within the very narrow, strict enclosure practiced at Gethsemani at this time—and the novitiate was an enclosure within the enclosure—were an opportunity for the inner journey to God to begin. Also Merton could begin shedding the false self he had

[4] Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (London: Sheldon 1975) 372.
[5] *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions 1977) 91.
[6] *Collected Poems,* 155.
[7] Thomas Merton, *The Secular Journal* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy 1959) 185.

constructed so as to survive in what must have seemed, with the early deaths of his parents, an immensely cruel world—a cruelty reinforced, no doubt, by the death of his only brother, John Paul, just over a year after Merton's entry to the monastery. Merton had tried to fill the void he felt within himself by grasping at those things and experiences the world offered, none of which, he soon discovered, could fill that void and give real meaning to his life. At Gethsemani the monastic vow of stability forced Merton to stop running and to begin an inner journey.

Whether in a family or a monastic community the capacity to be hospitable to strangers is profoundly related to the quality of the relationships that we experience within those environs. It has been suggested that "the place where we begin to learn the work and spirit of hospitality is with our place of first life commitment":[8] families, faith community, or religious community. With the loss of his close family members it was in his monastic community at the Abbey of Gethsemani that Merton came to experience this. It is from this experience of love that we can then begin to be open to others, to reach out to others, to love others, and to practice hospitality.

At Gethsemani Thomas Merton found a home, a family and, in his abbot, a father figure. In this atmosphere the healing could begin and the void could gradually start to be filled. As we learn to accept ourselves, so we are more and more able to accept others; and when we truly know our own darkness, the stranger is no longer so threatening. Speaking many years later, Merton tells his own novices that "the first step in the love of God is being human: my first obligation to God is to be me."[9] Through Merton's journals and letters it is possible to trace the development of his capacity for hospitality, for openness to the stranger, as he himself underwent this process, learning he was in the monastery for the world rather than as an escape from the world.

JOURNEYING TO NINEVEH

After having turned his back on the world in search of a heavenly city in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, seeking the paradise of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Merton's movement into solitude and out into the woods in *The Sign of Jonas* could possibly be taken as a further

[8] Laura Swan, *Engaging Benedict: What the Rule Can Teach Us Today* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press 2005) 128.

[9] Thomas Merton, Lecture #164.1, recorded 5/1/1966. Unpublished recording of a conference to the novices at the Abbey of Gethsemani. Archives of the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky.

movement away from the world but, instead, he begins to turn towards the world with a compassion that had been lacking previously. In *Jonas,* Merton's opening to the world is expressed specifically in a number of ways: in his reflections on his first return visits to Louisville since his entry to the monastery in December, 1941; in his description of his feelings concerning his naturalization as a United States citizen; and in his reflections on his appointment as Master of Scholastics and his early days in that post.

In *The Sign of Jonas* Merton goes outside the Gethsemani enclosure for the first time since his entry to the monastery. In August, 1948, seven years after his entry to Gethsemani, Merton had to accompany Dom Gabriel Sortais, the Abbot General from France, as his interpreter on a visit to the Good Shepherd convent in Louisville. Merton recalls he felt "completely alienated from everything in the world and all its activity," but "did not necessarily feel out of sympathy with the people who were walking around." He continues in his journal entry: "On the whole they seemed to me more real than they ever had before, and more worth sympathizing with."[10] Later in the year, reflecting on that visit in a letter to a friend from his Columbia days, Robert Lax, Merton says the trip "was a nuisance," but "not as bad as I thought it might be." He then goes on, once again, to express his sympathy for the people he saw, writing "I got the feeling that everybody was of terrific value, immensely precious and bought with a great price and all their souls were like jewels."[11]

These changes taking place in Merton's view of the world continue, so that by the time he came to write the introduction to the chapter of *Jonas* containing the details of this visit to Louisville, he wondered in his introduction "how I would react at meeting once again, face to face, the wicked world." He goes on to add, "I met the world and I found it no longer so wicked after all," and he notes in his journal a new feeling of "a deep and mute sense of compassion."[12] This new sense of compassion was also being stirred by his work with the young scholastics whose master he was appointed to be in June, 1951, and also by the fan mail he began to receive in response to his autobiography. These letters, Merton writes, manifested "such a thirst for God and for prayer" that he began to feel "good about the world outside" the monastery (*SJ* 148).

[10] Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace 1953) 115.

[11] *The Road to Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1989) 171.

[12] Merton, *Sign of Jonas (SJ)* 87.

Within the new solitude that Merton was discovering by being allowed to spend time working in the rare book vault of the monastery, and through growing opportunities for solitude in the Gethsemani woods, Merton wrote that he was also finding "the gentleness with which I can truly love my brothers." He adds "the more solitary I am, the more affection I have for them" (*SJ* 268). Taken out of context this may seem an unrealistic remark, but when seen against Merton's experience of his visit to Louisville and his work of teaching, it becomes clear that Merton is here speaking of a genuine experience of his own. In the final chapter of *The Sign of Jonas*, Merton's movement towards the world and towards compassion continues. In hospital in Louisville in November, 1950, Merton reflects once again on the city, saying it is not a "glamorous city," but that he feels "very dutifully, that Louisville is my city" and there "is no reason why a monk should not have a definite attitude towards the place which, in relation to his monastery, is 'town.' I do not think that being a monk means living on the moon" (*SJ* 310-11).

Two major developments occur in Merton's relationship with the world and his desire for solitude in this final chapter of *Jonas*. In June, 1951, Merton became an American citizen. Rejecting the world with a curse, Merton had discovered, was a false solution, and he goes on to say "I have come to the monastery to find my place in the world, and if I fail to find this place in the world I will be wasting my time in the monastery" (*SJ* 322). He acknowledges that coming to Gethsemani had been a form of withdrawal, but the "right kind of withdrawal" as it "has given me perspective. It has taught me how to live." Having learned this Merton can now acknowledge that "I owe everyone else in the world a share in that life. My first duty is to start, for the first time, to live as a member of a human race which is no more (and no less) ridiculous than I am myself" (*SJ* 322-23).

The other major development that takes place in the final chapter of *Jonas* was that Merton was made Master of Scholastics, in charge of the formation of the young monks studying for priestly ordination. In working with the scholastics Merton found that caring for their souls led him further into the desert and this new desert he names "compassion." He writes, "There is no wilderness so terrible, so beautiful, so arid and so fruitful as the wilderness of compassion" (*SJ* 334). He can then write in his journal "I do not need a hermitage, because I have found one where I least expected it" (*SJ* 337), a striking contrast to the solitude Merton was finding in the rare book vault.

As Merton was drawn further and further into solitude, so his compassion for the world and all who inhabit it grew. Merton can now say "your heart is my hermitage" (*SJ* 333), although for the moment he is only really talking about the scholastics in his care. In his work with the scholastics, Merton began to see that they were not alien to him but shared his searching and his spiritual quest. As his feelings of compassion deepened and widened, the sense of homelessness that he had felt in his own life allowed him to more readily empathize and identify with other men and women throughout the world who also felt oppressed, neglected, uprooted or marginalized. It may seem like a strange paradox, but as Merton journeyed further into the realms of solitude so his sense of compassion grew. This paradox is central to the metaphor of the prophet Jonas which Merton chooses to describe his experience at this time, his realization that "the only way I can enter into the desert is by bearing your burden and leaving you my own."[13] From this compassion Merton's concern with social issues would also re-emerge after having been laid aside upon his entry to Gethsemani.

EMBRACING THE WORLD

Over the course of *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Merton's journal that covers roughly the years 1958-63, he continues to struggle with his response to the world. From the very beginning of the book his approach is more open than previously. Early on in *Conjectures* he suggests the Rule of St. Benedict contains "nothing whatever of the Ghetto spirit" in its attitude to the world, adding:

> St. Benedict never said the monk must *never* go out, *never* receive a letter, *never* have a visitor, *never* talk to anyone, *never* hear any news. He meant that the monk should distinguish what is useless or harmful from what is useful and salutary, and *in all things* glorify God. Rejection of the world? The monk must *see Christ* in the pilgrim and the stranger who come from the world, especially if they are poor. Such is the spirit and letter of the Rule.[14]

In *Conjectures* Merton adopts what he sees as Benedict's attitude to the world and not that of his own Cistercian Order, which was still very closed at this time, turned "in on itself, interpreting interpretations

[13] *Sign of Jonas, 333.*

[14] Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday 1966) 6.

of interpretations . . . a Ghetto."[15] Merton's attitude to the world had changed dramatically from the *fuga mundi* of his early years in the monastery. Throughout *Conjectures* the list of topics Merton writes about, and the various people with whom he is in contact, reflects a growing universal vision of the world from within the confines of the monastery. In an introduction to an Argentine collection of his work, *Obras Completas I*,[16] published in 1960, Merton clearly stated this new, vastly expanded, vision: "In the silence of the countryside and the forest, in the cloistered solitude of my monastery, I have discovered the whole Western Hemisphere. Here I have been able, through the grace of God, to explore the New World."[17]

Merton approaches the question of his attitude to the world directly a number of times in *Conjectures*, an attitude now based on his belief that "God became human, because every one is potentially Christ."[18] This stress on the importance of the Incarnation continues throughout *Conjectures,* though no longer confined to the monastic community at Gethsemani. This is attested to by an "epiphany"[19] Merton experienced on a visit to Louisville in March, 1958. Although the account was elaborated by Merton in his preparation of this material for publication, the essence was there in the original.[20] On the corner of a busy street in Louisville, Merton was "overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers,"[21] a view of the world far removed from the *fuga mundi* of Merton's early monastic writings.

In the entry in Merton's personal journal from which the *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* passage is developed, Merton expresses a similar sentiment in relation to the photographs contained in a copy of *The Family of Man*, the book accompanying Edward Steichen's exhibition of photographs at the Museum of Modern Art,

[15] *Conjectúres*, 6.

[16] Thomas Merton, *Obras Completas I* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana 1960). A planned series never materialized and no *Obras Completas II* was ever published.

[17] Thomas Merton, *Honorable Reader: Reflections on My Work*, ed. by Robert E. Daggy (New York: Crossroad 1989) 40.

[18] Merton, *Conjecture*, 69.

[19] I use this term to describe what are called in writings on the literary genre of autobiography, as that "moment of insight that transforms the soul or, less dramatically, alters the mental perspective," a phenomenon recurring "throughout serious autobiography," confirming purpose and redirecting the author's energy. Jerome Hamilton Buckley, *The Turning Key: Autobiography and the Subjective Impulse Since 1800* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U 1984) 70.

[20] Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco 1996) 181.

[21] Merton, *Conjecture*,140.

which he had purchased in Louisville on that same day as his experience at the corner of Fourth and Walnut. Merton goes on to describe it as "fabulous" writing "no refinements and no explanations are necessary! How scandalized some would be if I said that this whole book is to me a picture of Christ, and yet that is the Truth."[22] Merton's experience of oneness with other people on a street corner in Louisville is mirrored in his experience of the photographs in Steichen's book, where Merton sees all the images as "a picture of Christ."

As Merton's horizons broadened rapidly through the latter years of the fifties and the early sixties, so the mercy he felt so strongly in *Jonas* led gradually to an overflowing of that mercy and compassion from himself towards others. This began with those with whom he was in contact in the monastery, the scholastics and then the novices. Over time it gradually spread outwards through his expanding correspondence, the stream of visitors who came to Gethsemani to see him and ultimately, through the books he was writing, to the wider world far beyond the monastery walls.

A collection of Merton's poetry published in 1963 is a good example of this change. This volume, aptly titled *Emblems of a Season of Fury*, poetically mirrors *Conjectures*, covering topics as wide and as varied as that journal.[23] This broadness of vision reflects Merton's realization of his unity and need for other people, a unity and need he expressed in a letter of 1963 to the American novelist and essayist James Baldwin, writing "I am therefore not completely human until I have found myself in my African and Asian and Indonesian brother because he has the part of humanity which I lack."[24] This is a sentiment echoed frequently in the remaining years of Merton's life.[25]

Merton writing in *Emblems of a Season of Fury* is no longer turning his back on the world and its problems, but, as in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* and other writings of this period, is looking at them from his place on the margins and asking the important questions,

[22] Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, 182-83.

[23] Besides poems which continued to reflect his reading of the Desert and the Church Fathers, the range of subjects covered in this volume is as wide and as varied as the subjects covered in *Conjectures*: "Why Some Look Up To Planets And Heroes," "A Picture Of Lee Ying," "And The Children Of Birmingham" and "Chant To Be Used In Processions Around A Site With Furnaces." Thomas Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Direction 1963).

[24] *The Courage for Truth: The Letters of Thomas Merton to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1993) 245.

[25] For example, "The world cannot be a problem to anyone who sees that ultimately Christ, the world, his brother and his own inmost ground are made one and the same in grace and redemptive love." Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (London: George Allen & Unwin 1971) 155-56.

questions that many, certainly within the Roman Catholic Church at this time, were ignoring. Thomas Merton's sense of being an exile, a pilgrim, a stranger, with "no proper place in this world" made him feel "the friend and brother of people everywhere," especially exiles, pilgrims, and strangers.[26]

As the heart expands, as we learn that gentleness, that compassion with which, in Merton's words, "I can truly love my brothers," that love must necessarily be manifested in its overflowing outwards to others. Through his study of Scripture, the Desert Fathers, the Church Fathers and the great mystical writers, Merton had found an openness to the world that paralleled his own experience in the monastery.[27] In an entry from his personal journal written during his time as novice master at Gethsemani there is a passage where Merton clearly relates his love and compassion for the novices to the world outside the monastery. On November 27, 1961, Merton wrote in his journal:

> . . . on the night watch, hurrying by, I pushed open the door of the novices' scriptorium, and flashed the light over all the empty desks. It was as if the empty room were wholly full of their hearts and their love, as if their goodness had made the place wholly good and rich with love. The loveliness of humanity which God has taken to Himself in love, and the wonder of each individual person among them ...
>
> From this kind of love necessarily springs hope, even hope for political action, for here paradoxically hope is most necessary. 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.[28]

This passage was written in the period of Merton's greatest output on such topics as war, peace, the nuclear arms race, and racial issues, not long before he was silenced in the spring of 1962. A few years later,

[26] *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1985) 52.

[27] In Merton's essay introducing his *Selections from the Protreptikos* of Clement of Alexandria (Norfolk, CT: New Directions 1962) he presents a clear example of the openness he is suggesting.

[28] Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco 1996) 183.

as Merton reworked this passage from his private journal for eventual publication in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, he further refined his perception of God's presence in the novitiate and writes "He [Christ] was as truly present here . . . as upstairs in the Chapel."[29] This view of other people as sacramental is a heightened, more Christocentric, expression of his March, 1958, epiphany on the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville.

BREAKING THE HEART

During this period of the early sixties Merton was spending longer and longer periods in solitude at a simple brick building on the monastery grounds that had initially been conceived of as a place for dialogue with groups, frequently ecumenical in nature, from nearby universities and theological colleges. On August 20, 1965, Merton was eventually allowed by his Abbot, James Fox, and with the approval of the Order's General Chapter, to resign as novice master and to become Gethsemani's first hermit. Certainly, after twenty-four years in the monastic community at Gethsemani, for much of that time Master or Scholastics and then Master of Novices, Merton had "come through the test of living in a monastery for a long time" and "passed beyond the first fervor of monastic life"[30] as St. Benedict recommends should be the case for monks wishing to become hermits. However, Merton frequently continued to use the hermitage as a place to meet many of his friends, correspondents and other visitors who traveled from all four corners of the globe to seek his counsel and to dialogue with him.

By 1968, after three years as a hermit and, with the Abbot's permission, Merton was looking for a new site for a hermitage as he felt too many people were finding their way to his hermitage at Gethsemani. Yet, paradoxically, Merton was the one responsible for most of these visitors. Thomas Merton's paradoxical desire for solitude and his desire for unity and dialogue with other people was at the core of Zilboorg's critical, although highly perceptive, almost prophetic, assessment of Merton in 1956 in naming him as the "hermit of Times Square."

Writing to his abbot from the Abbey of the Redwoods in May, 1968, as he was searching for a solitary life appropriate to him, Merton raised the possibility of "alternating periods of complete solitude with

[29] Merton, *Conjectures*, 193.

[30] *RB 1980 The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English with Notes*, ed. Timothy Fry (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press 1981) 169.

periods in which I see people, etc."[31] As Merton had come to see that he was in the monastery for the world, so he was also understanding the hermit life as his vocation for the world. Speaking in his final conference as novice master Merton clearly states: "This life is not just for me, this is for the community, for other people."[32] Elsewhere, in an essay entitled "Is the World a Problem?" first published in 1966 in *Commonweal*, Merton parodied the change that had taken place in himself. He no longer wrote as "the official voice of Trappist silence" but as the "voice of a self-questioning human person" who was struggling like everyone else to cope with a "turbulent, mysterious, demanding, exciting, frustrating, confused existence"[33] in the modern world.

The openness and hospitality we see in Merton's later years has its roots deep in the Judeo-Christian tradition and was certainly not something totally new when St. Benedict enshrined it in his monastic Rule. It is central to the Jewish and Christian Scriptures and to desert spirituality. Openness to the stranger runs throughout the Bible, whether we think of Abraham under the terebinths at Mamre, the expectant Mother who could find no room at the inn, or the disciples on the road to Emmaus. So as St. Paul reminds us in his letter to the Romans "Let love be genuine. . . extend hospitality to strangers."[34] It has been suggested that central to the gospels is God's hospitality towards us and our response, our hospitality, our receptivity to the Word. Or, as too frequently seems to be the case, our inhospitality, so St. John would write in his Gospel: "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him."[35] At the very beginning of the chapter of the Rule of St. Benedict on guests, Benedict reminds us, referring to Matthew 25, that Christ will one day say: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me."[36]

Living in the inhospitable environs of the desert, removed from the society of their day and, through many of the stories we hear, acting more than a little bizarre at times, the Desert Fathers are not always the first place we would look to find hospitality. However, they went into the desert not to become great ascetics but to find God, and the way to God is charity, love. So Merton writes in his introduction

[31] *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) 380.

[32] Thomas Merton, "A Life Free from Care," *Cistercian Studies* 5 (1970) 219.

[33] Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 144.

[34] Romans 12:9, 13.

[35] John 1:11.

[36] *RB 1980*, 255-57.

to *The Wisdom of the Desert,* that for the Desert Fathers "charity and hospitality were matters of top priority, and took precedence over fasting and personal ascetic routines":[37]

> A brother came and stayed with a certain solitary and when he was leaving he said: Forgive me, Father, for I have broken in upon your Rule. But the hermit replied, saying My Rule is to receive you with hospitality and to let you go in peace.[38]

The priority they gave to charity and hospitality is illustrated by this and other similar sayings of the Desert Fathers.

In the desert environment, hospitality was vital, to refuse hospitality could lead to the death of the stranger. In accordance with the ancient ethos of the desert, and to this day, hospitality to the stranger is a sacred duty. As the hermits in the desert were purified through prayer and solitude, so their hospitality also flourished. The sayings of the Desert Fathers frequently contain stories about hospitality. So, for example, in *The Wisdom of the Desert* Merton tells the following story:

> Once two brethren came to a certain elder whose custom it was not to eat every day. But when he saw the brethren he invited them with joy to dine with him, saying: Fasting has its reward, but he who eats out of charity fulfils two commandments, for he sets aside his own will and he refreshes his hungry brethren.[39]

The Desert Fathers practiced hospitality either to each other or towards those who came seeking them. In fact hospitality is central to the actual development of monasticism as disciples gathered around these holy men and women seeking for a word to live by. From this hospitality the first monastic communities grew as those Desert Fathers welcomed those who sought them out, and so Western monasticism as we know it began to emerge.

CONCLUSION

Having reflected on the development of hospitality in Merton's life and thought, its centrality not only to the Rule of St. Benedict

[37] Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert* (New York: New Directions 1960) 16.
[38] *Wisdom of the Desert*, 51.
[39] *Wisdom of the Desert*, 77.

but to the Bible and the Desert Fathers as well, I want to conclude by reflecting briefly on two elements of the practice of hospitality that seem to play a central part in Merton's thinking: mercy and the heart.

Benedict makes it clear in his Rule that when the monk receives a guest he receives mercy from that guest. After the hands and feet of the guest have been washed by the "Abbot with the entire community," Benedict instructs the monks to recite a verse from Psalm 47: "God, we have received your mercy in the midst of your temple."[40] Commentators on the Rule have suggested that Benedict regards the guest as "'the mercy of God' and in receiving the stranger, we receive mercy from God,"[41] passing on in turn the mercy we ourselves have received. Merton refers to his own experience of God's mercy numerous times in his journals. In particular this is recorded in the final lines of *The Sign of Jonas* as he hears God saying to him:

> I have always overshadowed Jonas with My mercy, and cruelty I 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.[42]

During the period covered by *The Sign of Jonas*, Merton had discovered, like the prophet Jonah, that God's mercy was not meant for him alone.

Welcoming the stranger can be a source of blessing to us as it was to Thomas Merton. The childhood warning "not to talk to strangers" seems to follow many of us through life. We learn to do many of the things we were warned about as a child, using knives properly, driving a car, drinking a gin and tonic, but we find it much harder to overcome our fear of strangers and to be open to the gifts they bring us including, as St. Benedict tells us, the mercy of God.

As the monk experiences this mercy and as he learns to be at home with himself so he can begin to open his heart to others. Through solitude and contemplation Merton was learning, as he would say in one of his conferences, that:

[40] *RB 1980*, 257-59.

[41] Terrence Kardong, *Together Unto Life Everlasting: An Introduction to the Rule of St. Benedict* (Richardton, ND: Assumption Abbey 1984) 122.

[42] Merton, *Sign of Jonas*, 354. Thomas Merton's frequent references to his experience of God's mercy would lead his monastic community to choose words from this quotation for the memorial card that was produced after his death.

> If I love God, I've got to love him with my heart. If I love him with my heart I've got to have a heart, and I've got to have it in my possession to give. One of the most difficult things in life today is to gain possession of one's heart in order to be able to give it. We don't have a heart to give. We have been deprived of these things, and the first step in the spiritual life is to get back what we have to give and to be ourselves.[43]

Joan Chittister, in her book on the Rule of St. Benedict, subtitles her chapter on hospitality: "The Unboundaried Heart," and she suggests that true hospitality of the heart could transform our world into "a world of potential friends rather than a world of possible enemies,"[44] as we learn to appreciate the blessings, the mercy, that the stranger can bring us.

For this change to happen, a breaking of the heart seems to be necessary. This idea Merton had also found in his work on Judaism and Sufism, and addressed the subject in a number of talks given to interested members of the community at Gethsemani in December, 1967, and January, 1968. In one talk he tells the Hasidic story of "the strong thief" to illustrate the total surrender to God that Merton thought was central to both the monastic life and the hermit life:

> Every lock has its key which fits into and opens it. But there are strong thieves who know how to open locks without keys. They break the lock. So every mystery in the world can be unriddled by the particular kind of meditation fitted to it. But God loves the thief who breaks the lock open: I mean, the man who breaks his heart for God.[45]

A very similar story has been told by Parker J. Palmer:

> A disciple asked the Rabbi: "Why does the Torah tell us to 'place these words *upon* your hearts'? Why does it not tell us to place these holy words *in* our hearts?" The Rabbi answered: "It is because as we are, our hearts are closed, and we cannot place the

[43] Merton, Lecture #164.1.

[44] Joan Chittister, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today* (San Francisco: Harper and Row 1990) 128.

[45] Thomas Merton, Lecture #174.1, recorded 1/28/1968. Recording of a conference at the Abbey of Gethsemani. Archives of the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky. Merton is quoting from Martin Buber's *The Way of Man* (New York: Citadel 1964) 47.

holy words in our hearts. So we place them on top of our hearts. And there they stay until, one day, the heart breaks and the words fall in."[46]

This breaking of the heart is essentially the message of the tale from the magic monastery with which I began this paper. It was an experience Merton himself had undergone, learning through his own experience of the mercy of God to truly open his heart and to let others in.

In a *Farewell to Arms,* Ernest Hemingway had written that "the world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places."[47] This certainly seems to have been the case with Thomas Merton. After his early years of loneliness, loss, wandering, and rootlessness he discovered through the hospitality of his own monastic community at the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani the healing necessary for him to become strong in those broken places. But the strength he discovered was not a strength that excludes and rejects others, but a strength built on the mercy of God, a strength full of love and compassion for the world, the very world that broke him—"the world breaks everyone, then some become strong at the broken places."

[46] Parker J, Palmer, "The Broken-Open Heart: Living with Faith and Hope in the Tragic Gap," *Weavings* XXIV:2 (March/April 2009) 6. Palmer attributes this story to Jacob Needleman.

[47] Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (New York: Scribner 1957) 249.