

# A Homily

by  
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[This homily was given by Jim Forest during the Sunday Liturgy that closed the Southampton Conference of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland; May 17-19, 1996]

[Text: John 17:1-11]

**T**his morning we heard ten verses from a lengthy section of St. John's Gospel, often called Jesus' "Priestly Prayer", which begins in chapter 13, after Jesus washes the feet of the apostles, and continues through chapter 17, that is until his arrest.

In the Priestly Prayer, we hear again and again about love:

"I give to you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another".

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments."

"They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them"

"I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

Providing a metaphor of union in love, Jesus describes himself as a vine to which those who are faithful are united to him as living branches:



"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower .... Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in as the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me .... If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love."

If each time the word love was to glow with the light of a single candle, we would need sunglasses to read these few pages.

I want to say more about love, but in as the context of Thomas Merton's life, because what has brought us together in Southampton these last few days is the fact that Merton has been to each of us a guardian, a mentor, a source of encouragement, for some of us even a spiritual father. We have found in his writing, in his example, something of real importance in our lives. Not simply *something* – but *someone*.

Yet there is always the danger that one becomes so attached to a person or object, which may be quite wonderful and beautiful, that it overwhelms its context. My Serbian friends sometimes joke, "In the Serbian Orthodox Church, we are less much followers of Jesus Christ than of Saint Sava [the national saint of the Serbian Church]." It is the usual problem of tribalism. We who care for Merton can become patriotic citizens of the Merton tribe and make of his writings a Bible that fills a bookcase. I recall the story of a great admirer of Thomas Merton who received communion from his hands and, managing not to swallow the host, afterward saved it in a jar. After all, it was not simply the Body of Jesus Christ; this was something even more important – it had been touched by Thomas Merton!

Let us keep in mind that Thomas Merton, who certainly has been a saint for many of us, was not following himself. Nor was he a religious person in some vague, blurry way, walking daily through the Supermarket of Religion, picking something here, something there, making of himself a Christian on Sunday, a Buddhist on Monday, a Shaman on Tuesday, a Sufi on Wednesday, a Hasid on Thursday, a Hindu on Friday, a Moslem on Saturday; nor was he a *collage* of all these things and more. He was a Christian, a fact that led him as a young man to knock on the door of the Corpus Christi rectory and which remained a constant no matter where he was or what he was doing for the rest of his life. Thus it is no surprise to hear the Dalai Lama remark in Paul Wells's documentary film, "When I think of the word Christian, immediately I think – Thomas Merton!" In his more mature years, the big change was that it was a spacious Christianity, not a holier-than-thou Christianity.

Merton's overwhelming fascination, his great love, was God, and not God as idea, an abstraction, not the mysterious but absolutely hidden architect of the universe, the cleverest of all watchmakers, the inventor of being and shaper of matter, God the elusive, God the absent, God more remote than what lies beyond the most distant galaxy, but God as *Someone*, God as intimately known, God both far and near, God of mercy as well as God of judgment, God the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In the Priestly Prayer, this is what Jesus was teaching his disciples of the freshly washed feet in the upper room.

You know Merton's life well enough to know something of his character — his enthusiasms, his passions, his tendency to go overboard, his playfulness, his discipline, etc. He reveals these qualities throughout his writings and it is such traits that draw us to him. You also have some idea how dogged he was in his pursuit of what mattered to him, digging a hundred holes in search of a buried bone. You know his biography well enough to identify a number of turning points and illuminations along the way.

**Turning Points.** We often don't know at the time we experience a graced moment how important it is. It may only be years later that we begin to see its importance. But they haunt us. We cannot forget them. Increasingly, if we don't get in the way of ourselves, they shape our lives.

Think of the young Merton, age 18, alone in Rome in the spring of 1933. Recall what happened to him as he began to take notice of the mosaic icons, some of them dating from the fourth century, all of them made long before the Great Schism. You find these images in nearly all the ancient churches that survive in Rome — Santa Maria Maggiore, Santa Constanza, Santa Sabina, the Lateran and many others. Thousands of people look at these mosaics every day, no doubt in most cases hardly seeing them. But for some, like the young Merton, these stark, vivid images of Christ and the saints come to life and serve as sacraments, as occasions of grace, of mystical encounter with God. They become windows through which we may receive a "kiss from God," as Merton put it. You recall the familiar words in *The Seven Storey Mountain*: "For the first time in my whole life I began to find out something of who this Person was that men call Christ . . . It is the Christ of the Apocalypse, the Christ of the Martyrs, the Christ of the Fathers. It is the Christ of St. John, and of St. Paul. . . . It is Christ God, Christ King."<sup>1</sup>

These things happen, not necessarily thanks to icons. It can be a person, a tree, a few dandelions, a line in a poem, a succession of notes, a painting, the smell of fresh laundry. One way or another, they happen to most of us, usually when we least expect them to happen. They certainly don't happen by appointment or premeditation. There is nothing we can do to make them happen.

This was, so far as we know from his autobiographical writings, Merton's first mystical experience. Many other encounters were to follow but in this first "showing" (to use Julian of Norwich's fine term) and in it we see the character of all that was to follow. We can see the first step on the way to baptism, the path that brought him to the gates of the Abbey of Gethsemani, and we see too what would become a great longing of his to share with others what God had shared with him.

There was another event of a similar nature seven years later, in the spring of 1940. A rather innocent America was inching its reluctant way into World War II. Merton, 25-years-old, a graduate student at Columbia University, had gone to Cuba during the Easter recess, pilgrimage and vacation intertwined.

The event happened among crowds of school children at Mass in the Church of Saint Francis in Havana. It is vividly described in the first volume of his complete journals, *Run to the Mountain*. Having only moments before been full of



irritation with the intrusive noises of urban life outside the church, not least the repeated cry "**quatro mil quatro ciento quatro**" by a vendor selling lucky numbers, Merton suddenly had an overwhelming experience of the divine presence:

The bell rang again, three times. Before any bread was raised the clear cry of the brother in the brown robe cut through the silence with the words "Yo creo" ["I believe"] which immediately all the children took up after him with such loud and strong and clear voices, and such unanimity and such meaning and such fervor that something went off inside me like a thunderclap and without seeing anything or apprehending anything extraordinary through any of my senses (my eyes were open on only precisely what was there, the church), I knew with the most absolute and unquestionable certainty that before me, between me and the altar, somewhere in the center the church, up in the air (or any other place because in no place), but directly before my eyes, or directly present to some apprehension or other of mine which was above that of the senses, was at the same time God in all His essence, all His power, all His glory, and God in Himself and God surrounded by the radiant faces of the uncountable thousands upon thousands of saints contemplating His glory and praising His Holy Name. And so the unshakable certainty, the clear and immediate knowledge that Heaven was right in front of me, struck me like a thunderbolt and went through me like a flash of lightning and seemed to lift me clean up off the earth.

To say that this was the experience of some kind of certainty is to place it as it were in the order of knowledge, but it was not just the apprehension of a reality, of a truth, but at the same time and equally a strong movement of delight, great delight, like a great shout of joy, and in other words it was as much an experience of loving as of knowing something, and its love and knowledge were completely inseparable. All this was caused directly by the great mercy and kindness of God when I heard the voices of the children cry out "I believe" in front of the altar . . . It was not due to anything I had done for my own part, or due to any particular virtue in me at all but only to the kindness of God manifesting itself in the faith of all those children. Besides, it was in no way an extraordinary kind of experience, but only one that had greater intensity than I had experienced before. The certitude of faith was the same kind of certitude that millions of Catholics and Jews and Hindus and everybody that believes in God must have felt much more surely and more often than I, and the feeling of joy was the same kind of gladness that everybody who has ever loved anybody or anything has felt; there is nothing esoteric about such things, and they happen to everybody, absolutely everybody, to some degree or other. These movements of God's grace are peculiar to nobody, but they stir in everybody, for it is by them that God calls people to Him[self], and He calls everybody . . . [T]hey are common to every creature that ever was born with a soul. But we tend to destroy these effects, and bury them under our own sins and selfishness and pride and lust so that we feel them less and less . . . <sup>2</sup>

In The Seven Storey Mountain, Merton sought once again to describe what he had experienced in Havana:

It was a light that was so bright that it had no relation to any visible light and so profound and so intimate that it seemed like a neutralization of every lesser experience. And yet the thing that struck me most of all was that this light was in a certain sense "ordinary" – it was a light (and this most of all was what took my breath away) that was offered to all, to everybody, and there was nothing fancy or strange about it . . . It disarmed all images, all metaphors . . . it ignored all sense experience in order to strike directly at the heart of truth . . . it . . . belonged to the order of knowledge, yes, but more still to the order of love. <sup>3</sup>

"...but still more to the order of love." This brings us back to St. John's Gospel, and the Priestly Prayer, studded as it is with the word "love."

This word is like a vandalized wall or, better, a damaged icon. You know how it is with old icons. They have often been painted over, usually for the worse. It was a revelation not only to Russians but to many others when, in the early years of this century, the Holy Trinity icon painted by St. Andrei Rublev was restored. All who saw what had long been hidden were absolutely stunned. "Such beauty", it was said again and again, "is a proof of the existence of God."

It is not only sacred images on wood that are damaged in the course of time but also words. They too can be overpainted – by politicians, but salesmen, by promoters of ideologies and movements both left and right, by any who use words for manipulative purposes.

One way of looking at Merton's life is to notice how much of his work as a writer was devoted to the restoration of words, to reveal their real meaning, which is impossible if the mystical context of language is lost. He was, in a way, an icon restorer.

"Love" is the word we use to describe what we feel when we are in communion – communion with another person, yes, but even more significantly when we become aware that, through others and through creation, we are in communion with God. In fact the communion we experience with others, whether or not we are conscious of it, is of its nature an experience of God. The love I have for those most dear to me, for those whom I surely and without thinking about it would lay down my life, isn't something I have cooked up in the kitchen of my brain in a little stew pot of my own making. It is God's love for that other in which I have been allowed to participate. In that experience of love, though it may not occur to me to describe it in religious terms, in fact I am participating in the energies of God and am brought closer not just to the *what*-ness but the *who*-ness of God.

God is love. Nothing we say about God is adequate but we can say nothing truer about God. It is God's love that we see in the words and actions of Jesus. It is a love which seeks to save us, to save each one of us, and it works through ordinary things: bread and wine, for example. Food. The things we make. Acts of caring. Thus the words we will hear at the Last Judgment: "What you did to the least person, you did to me."

God's love, Merton wrote, "is the signature of God upon our being." In that era of religious cold war, it was God's love, which he experienced so often and in so



many ways, that made it ever easier for Merton to cross well-guarded frontiers in forming friendships, in exploring the activity of God — first among other Christians beyond the borders of the Roman Catholic Church, then in other religious traditions, each of which proved to be the guardian of certain treasures which he was not only able to appreciate but often found useful in his spiritual practice as a Roman Catholic Christian.

We can see in Merton's life a simple truth: Love is never vague. It is not a condition of sentimental stupor but of being radically awake. We can imagine that what will be strangest about heaven is how it is at once so familiar and yet so different. It will seem to us that in the first part of our lives, we were more asleep in the day than in the night. Our eyes were open but we saw so *little*. We heard so *little*. We understood so *little*. We loved so *little*. Not only our eyes but our souls were bricked over most of the time.

Opposing love is fear. Recall Merton's insight: "The root of war is fear." Still more important, recall the many times in the Gospel we hear the words, "Be not afraid." We are not speaking here about fear of God; this is in fact that fear which should cure us of all our petty fears. But how often do we allow fear to prevent us from reaching out to others, to divide us from others, to make us into enemies of others, even to decide what we will do with our lives and with whom we will spend our lives?

But in moments of love we see more clearly and are able to live without fear in the freedom of the Resurrection. What freedom that is! As we sing throughout the Easter season in the Orthodox Church, the words falling on us like heavy rain on dry fields: "Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tomb bestowing life."

## Notes and References

1. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p.109
2. Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation*, the first volume of Merton's unabridged journals (San Francisco: Harper, 1995), Pp. 103-4
3. *Seven Storey Mountain*, Pp. 284-85