

## Thomas Merton and the Christ of the Byzantine Icons Jim Forest

The name of Thomas Merton means many things to many people: convert, monk, poet, photographer, partner in inter-religious dialogue, pacifist, defender of human rights, social critic, a person who was a thorn in the side not only of secular but religious establishments. Most of all we know him as a prolific writer. There are nearly eighty books by Merton on the library shelves in our home. Few writers have touched so many lives. The Seven Storey Mountain is one of the great autobiographies. Though he died in 1968, his books remain in print in many languages while new books about Merton appear each year. There are Thomas Merton societies in several countries.

Yet we have this warning from him: "He who follows words is destroyed." Thomas Merton approvingly quoted this Chinese proverb to the novices in his care at his monastery in Kentucky, the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani. "He who gets involved in statements will be completely lost," he explained.

Merton's name is linked with what is sometimes called "the contemplative life," a condition of existence which sounds most attractive. Which of us wouldn't prefer the occasional exodus, if not the permanent move, to a world free of rush hours, bus fumes and ulcer-creating employment? But as Merton pointed out in an essay on monastic spirituality, "The word 'contemplation' does not occur in the Gospel." In the same essay Merton goes on to remark:

The idea of abstracting oneself from all things, purifying one's mind of all images, and ascending by self-denial to an ecstatic intellectual contact with God the Supreme Truth - ending up by being "alone with the alone" - all this is characteristic of the neo-platonic approach. It has been taken over by a whole tradition of Christian writers and has been Christianised. But still we must remember in dealing with such writers that we are handling a characteristically Greek type of thought and must take care not to lose sight of Christ Himself and His teachings in order to follow a more or less pagan line of thought from which Christ is all but excluded.<sup>1</sup>

Merton, the writer, was painfully aware of the limitations of words just as Merton the contemplative gradually came to see the danger that those pursuing contemplative life might lose contact with the actual Christ who, far from residing on Cloud Nine only to be glimpsed with a mystical telescope, participates moment by moment in our world of grime, sweat, fear and suffering.

It may be helpful for us to become more aware that the spiritual life of this noted writer was not very verbal even though he followed the traditional

regimen of reciting the psalms and other prayers in the course of each day.

One aspect of his inner life had to do with icons, those sacred images produced by an ancient tradition of Christian art that many would be inclined to dismiss as primitive.

Merton's interest in icons had a strange beginning. It was at his father's death bed.

In 1931, Merton's artist father Owen was suffering from a brain tumour that made him unable to speak. And yet he did manage "a last word." Merton - age 16 at the time - came to see his father in his London hospital room and, to his amazement, found the bed littered with drawings of "little, irate Byzantine-looking saints with beards and great halos." The younger Merton had no eye for icons at the time. He then regarded Byzantine art, he confessed in an unpublished autobiography novel, The Labyrinth, as "clumsy and ugly and brutally stupid."

With his father's death, Thomas Merton had become an orphan. His mother, Ruth, had died of cancer when he was six.

It was on his 18th birthday, 31 January 1933, two years after his father's death, having finished his studies at Oakham School and having most of a year off before entering Clare College in Cambridge in September, that Merton set off for an extended European holiday - a one man Grand Tour - with a visit to Italy the main event. He hiked along the Mediterranean coast of France, then took the train from Saint Tropez into Italy: first Genoa, then Florence, finally Rome.

Once in Rome, for days he followed the main tourist track, Baedeker guidebook in hand, but the star attractions, even St. Peter's Basilica, left him either yawning or irritated. The architecture, statuary and painting of the Empire, the Renaissance and the Counter-Reformation struck him as vapid and melodramatic. "It was so evident, merely from the masses of stone and brick that still represented the palaces and temples and baths, that imperial Rome must have been one of the most revolting and ugly and depressing cities the world has ever seen," Merton wrote in The Seven Storey Mountain.<sup>2</sup> It was the Rome of Cecil B. DeMille's film epics of the 1950s.

Perhaps we would never have heard of Thomas Merton had it not been for what happened when he found his way to the city's most ancient churches: San Clemente, Santa Sabina, Santa Maria Maggiore, Saints Cosmas and Damian, the Lateran, Santa Costanza, Santa Maria in Trastevere, the Basilica of San Prassede. These moved him in an unexpected and extraordinary way. These were all churches of sober design whose main decoration were mosaic icons,

images of simplicity and quiet intensity that have little in common with the more theatrical art that was eventually to take over in Rome. Many of the icons in Santa Maria Maggiore date from the fourth century.

"I was fascinated by these Byzantine mosaics," he wrote in his autobiography. "I began to haunt the churches where they were to be found."

Through these icons, he began to understand, and in a remarkable way, who Christ is: "For the first time in my whole life I began to find out something of whom 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 Saint John, and of Saint Paul, and of St. Augustine and St. Jerome and all the Fathers - and of the Desert Fathers. It is Christ God, Christ King."<sup>3</sup>

The intensity of the experiences that are reflected in this powerful litany may be due in part to the fact that Merton was alone in Rome. There is something about immediated face-to-face contact that magnifies encounter. There is no schedule to keep, no one to explain and play sheep dog.

Eager to understand the iconographic images that so arrested his eyes, Merton put aside the D.H. Lawrence books that had weighted down his rucksack and bought a Bible. "I read more and more of the Gospels, and my love for the old churches and their mosaics grew from day to day."

The attraction of icons wasn't simply due to Merton's newly-gained appreciation of the aesthetics of iconography but a profound sense of peace he experienced within the walls of churches graced with such imagery. He had, he said, "a deep and strong conviction that I belonged there."

Merton desperately wanted to pray, to light a candle, to kneel down, to pray with his body as well as his mind, but found the prospect of publicly kneeling in a church alarming.

Then one night, in his *pensione* room on the Piazza Barberini, he had an intense experience of his father's invisible presence at his side, "as real and startling as if he had touched my arm or spoken to me." The experience was over in a flash, "but in that flash, instantly, I was overwhelmed with a sudden and profound insight into the misery and corruption of my own soul. . . . And now, I think for the first time in my whole life, I really began to pray . . . praying out of the very roots of my life and of my being, and praying to the God I had never known."<sup>4</sup>

The next morning Merton climbed the Aventine Hill, crowned by the fifth century church of Santa Sabina. Once inside, he found he could no longer play the guidebook-studying tourist. "Although the church was almost empty,

I walked across the stone floor mortally afraid that a poor devout old Italian woman was following me with suspicious eyes." He knelt down at the altar rail and, with tears, again and again recited the our Father.

Leaving the church, Merton felt a depth of joy he hadn't known in years if ever before. He was no longer "a heretic tourist," he commented in The Labyrinth. He put it more positively in The Seven Storey Mountain: "Without knowing anything about it, I became a pilgrim."

At age 18, Merton had undergone, without realising exactly what it was, a mystical experience: he was stricken with a sense of Christ's reality and living presence. From that moment he had something against which to measure everything, whether himself or religious art or the Church in history. He knew what was phoney, not because of some theory but because of an experience of Christ mediated through sacred imagery.

The pilgrimage that followed, of course, was nothing like an arrow's direct flight. The coming winter at Clare College was to prove a disastrous time in his life, the "nadir of winter darkness," leaving wounds from which I doubt he ever fully healed. It was so disastrous that his well-to-do guardian in London wanted no further responsibility for Owen Merton's wayward son and sent him packing to his grandparents in America.

Four years after arriving in New York, Merton was received into the Catholic Church. In another three years later, head freshly shaven, he was a new member of the Trappist monastic community of the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky.

We can see that icons had their part to play in bringing Merton to religious belief. That's clear to any attentive reader of The Seven Storey Mountain. But religious art in general, and icons especially, continued to figure in his religious development.

It is striking to discover that only one book of Merton's was actually in the production stage and yet wasn't published: Art and Worship. It was to have gone to press in 1959. The galley sheets survive at the Thomas Merton Study Center in Louisville. Also on file there is the correspondence about the project. It makes for entertaining reading to see various friends struggling to bring Merton up-to-date on religious art. An expert, the art historian Eloise Spaeth, was enlisted as a kind of professor-by-post to ferry Merton's tastes into the modern world. In the end she could see no way to rescue either Merton or his book. She was appalled with Merton's "'sacred artist' who keeps creeping out with his frightful icons."<sup>5</sup>

Merton's aesthetic heresy was his view that Christian religious art had been

more dead than alive for centuries. What he had hoped to do with his small book was to sensitize some of his readers to an understanding of religious art that, in the west at least, had been abandoned in the Renaissance and afterward simply forgotten. It was in brief, a work in praise of icons and their recovery.

"It is the task of the iconographer," he wrote, "*to open our eyes to the actual presence of the Kingdom in the world*, and to remind us that though we see nothing of its splendid liturgy, we are if we believe in Christ the Redeemer, in fact living and worshipping as 'fellow citizens of the angels and saints, built upon the chief cornerstone with Christ.'"

At the time there were few indeed who were eager to read such observations. I can recall my own indifference to the icon cards - photos of 15th and 16th century Russian icons - he sent me in the sixties. I assumed some donor had dumped these pious cards on the monastery and Merton was making use of them as note paper.

In Art and Worship, Merton sought to explain what he regarded as the seven qualities of sacred art:

**It is hieratic.** That is, it is concerned solely with the sacred, seeking to convey the awesomeness of the invisible and divine reality and to lead the beholder to awareness of the divine presence.

**It is traditional.** Far from being merely conventional, tradition constantly renews the everlasting newness of revelation. The icon is not the personal meditation of an individual artist but the fruit of many generations of belief uniting us to the witnesses of the resurrection. The icon is as much an instrument of the transmission of Christian tradition as the written or spoken word. Such art has much in common with bread-baking. No loaf of bread is signed and none is the work of a single generation.

**It is living.** It communicates a life of prayer, a life rooted in worship.

**It is sincere,** simple, direct, unaffected, unmanipulative, and unpretentious.

**It is reverent,** not seeking to draw attention to itself or sell anything. It guards against a too easy or too human familiarity with the divine. For example, a Saviour icon is not a painting merely of "our dear friend Jesus" but at once portrays both his divinity as well as his manhood, his absolute demands on us as well as his infinite mercy.

**It is spiritual.** The icon is not an art object and has nothing to do with the commercial world, but exists only as an evangelical expression and an aid to worship. "The Spirit of God speaks to the faithful *in between the lines* of

divine revelation, telling us things that are not evident to the inspection of scholarship or reason," Merton comments. "So too the Spirit of God speaks behind the lines and colors of a sacred painting, telling the worshipper things the art critic cannot see."

**It is pure.** It is not the work of a person who seeks to draw attention to himself. The iconographer, having been blessed by the church to carry on this form of silent evangelical activity, willingly and with gratitude works under the guidance of tradition.

One could add to Merton's list three other qualities of sacred art:

**It is silent.** Over the past 800 years, most Western religious art has been increasingly full of action, often like a movie poster. In the icon there is a conscious avoidance of movement or theatrical gesture. It is rendered in the simplest manner. The stillness and silence of the icon, in the home setting no less than the church, creates an area of silence. The deep silence characteristic of a good icon is nothing less than the silence of Christ. St. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch in the second century, made the observation: "He who possesses in truth the word of Jesus can hear even its silence."

**It bears witness to the incarnation.** The iconoclastic heresy of the 7th and 8th centuries, which resulted in the destruction of countless icons and persecution of those making or using them, was rooted in the idea that the humanity of Christ had been absorbed into his divinity; therefore to draw an image of Christ, representing as it did aspects of his physical appearance, stressed his humanity while obscuring his divinity. The great theologian affirming the place of icons in Christian life was St. John of Damascus, writing from Mar Saba Monastery in the desert southeast of Jerusalem. In his essay On the Divine Images, he argues:

'If we made an image of the invisible God, we would certainly be in error ... but we do not do anything of the kind; we do not err, in fact, if we make the image of God incarnate who appeared on earth in the flesh, who in his ineffable goodness, lived with men and assumed the nature, the volume, the form, and the color of the flesh .... Since the invisible One became visible by taking on flesh, you can fashion the image of him who you saw. Since He who has neither body nor form nor quantity nor quality, who goes beyond all grandeur by the excellence of his nature, He, being of divine nature, took on the condition of a slave and reduced himself to quantity and quality by clothing himself in human features. Therefore, paint on wood and present for contemplation him who desired to become visible.'

**The icon is a revelation of theosis and transfiguration.** We were made in the image and likeness of God but the image has been damaged and



the likeness lost. The icon shows the recovery of wholeness. Over centuries of development, iconographers gradually developed a way of communicating physical reality illuminated by Christ. The icon suggests the transfiguration that occurs to whomever has acquired the Holy Spirit. The icon is thus a witness to *theosis*, meaning deification. It is an ancient Christian teaching that "God became man so that man could become God." Not that we become our own Creator but that we actually participate in God's life.

From time to time Merton returned to the subject of sacred art in his letters. In the last year of his life, for example, there are two letters of importance to us that were addressed to a Quaker correspondent, June Yungblut. She had sent him the manuscript of a book by her husband on great prophets of history in which one chapter was devoted to Jesus of Nazareth. June hoped Merton might read and comment on the Jesus chapter.

Merton replied with the confession that he was still "hung up in a very traditional Christology." He wasn't drawn, he went on, to a Christ who was merely an historical figure possessing "a little flash of light" but to "the Christ of the Byzantine icons."<sup>6</sup>

In her response June Yungblut expressed dismay with the phrase, "the Christ of the Byzantine icons." Didn't Merton feel a shiver to use the word Byzantine? Didn't "Byzantine" signify the very worst in both Christianity and culture? And weren't icons of about as much artistic significance as pictures on cereal boxes?

In March 1968 Merton replied explaining what he meant in linking himself with the "Christ of the Byzantine icons." The whole tradition of iconography, he said,

represents a traditional experience formulated in a theology of light, the icon being a kind of sacramental medium for the illumination and awareness of the glory of Christ within us. .... What one 'sees' in prayer before an icon is not an external representation of a historical person, but an interior presence in light, which is the glory of the transfigured Christ, the experience of which is transmitted in faith from generation to generation by those who have 'seen,' from the Apostles on down . . . So when I say that my Christ is the Christ of the icons, I mean that he is reached not through any scientific study but through direct faith and the meditation of the liturgy, art, worship, prayer, theology of light, etc., that is all bound up with the Russian and Greek tradition.

It is with such words as these, still bearing the stamp of his experience of many years before in Rome, that we can better understand the significance for Merton of the hand-written icon, originally from Mount Athos, that he was

given in 1965, the year he was beginning his hard apprenticeship as a hermit living in a small cinderblock house in the woods near the monastery.

The icon of the Mother of God and the Christ Child - the unexpected gift of his Greek Orthodox friend, Marco Pallis, a scholar of Tibetan Buddhism - was for Merton like a kiss from God. He wrote Pallis in response:

How shall I begin? I have never received such a precious and magnificent gift from anyone in my life. I have no words to express how deeply moved I was to come face to face with this sacred and beautiful presence granted to me .... At first I could hardly believe it .... It is a perfect act of timeless worship. I never tire of gazing at it. There is a spiritual presence and reality about it, a true spiritual 'Thaboric' light, which seems unaccountably to proceed from the Heart of the Virgin and Child as if they had One heart, and which goes out to the whole universe. It is unutterably splendid. And silent. It imposes a silence on the whole hermitage .... [This] icon of the Holy Mother came as a messenger at a precise moment when a message was needed, and her presence before me has been an incalculable aid in resolving a difficult problem.<sup>7</sup>

One final document draws attention to the place the silent icon had in the life of this tireless writer. It is a list of the few personal possessions that Merton had brought with him on his trip to Asia, the journey that led to sudden death by electrocution at a conference near Bangkok. These small items accompanied his body when it was flown back to his monastery in America in December 1968:

*1 Timex Watch*  
*2 Pair Dark Glasses in Tortoise Frames*  
*1 Cistercian Leather Bound Breviary*  
*1 Rosary*  
*1 Small Icon on Wood of Virgin and Child*

From his father's deathbed in London to the most ancient churches of Rome to his hermitage in Kentucky to his dying day in Thailand, icons figured in Merton's life, not merely as art objects but as witnesses to the Incarnation and aids in the mystical life.

May we too find in icons windows that reveal the kingdom of God. May the tradition they belong to help free us from whatever impedes us in becoming one with Christ.

1. Thomas Merton, from the prologue to an unpublished essay, "Monastic Spirituality and the Early Fathers, from the Apostolic Fathers to Evagrius Ponticus," in Monastic Origins, p 250, volume 18, a manuscript collection of Merton's essays, at the Thomas Merton Study Center at Bellarmine College, Louisville, Kentucky.
2. Thomas Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948), p 107.
3. The Seven Storey Mountain, p 109.
4. The Seven Storey Mountain, p 111.
5. For details, see Donna Kristoff's essay, "Light hat Is Not Light: A Consideration of Thomas Merton and the Icon," The Merton Annual, volume 2 (New York: AMS Press, 1989), pp 84-117.
6. The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns, edited by William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux 1985), 637, 642-3.
7. The Hidden Ground of Love, pp 473-73.

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