The Letters of St Antony of Egypt and Thomas Merton's *The Silent Life*

by
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Introduction

Thomas Merton, the American Cistercian monk and writer, in his book *The Silent Life*, (1957) wrote.

> The Rule of St Benedict, which so often quotes verbatim from the monastic traditions of the East, and which relies so heavily on Cassian, the popularizer of Oriental monachism, is written for monks who are to live in the direct line of the pure, ancient tradition. The monk who vows obedience under the Rule of St Benedict is therefore the true descendent of St Antony of the Desert as well as of St Pachomius and of St Basil. He enters upon the monastic life as a cenobite, indeed: but there is nothing in the very nature of his vocation itself to exclude a deep admiration for the ancient hermits, or to prevent his desiring to share something of their solitary contemplation of God. On the contrary, if the monk were to sever all the spiritual bonds which tie him to the Desert Fathers, he would be cutting himself off from the purest original source of his monastic spirit. (Merton 1957:147)

This study attempts to compare and contrast St Antony's teaching on the monastic life as contained within the *Letters of St Antony* and Thomas Merton's teaching on the monastic life as contained within his book, *The Silent Life*.

The Life, the Sayings and the Letters of Antony

It is widely recognised that Athanasius' *Vita Antonii* is not to be relied upon as an accurate account of the saint's teachings because they 'too closely reflect the bishop's (Athanasius') own spirituality to be a trustworthy basis

for understanding Antony's own teaching and discipline.' (Brakke 1995:204). Similarly, the *Apophthegmata* were compiled long after the lifetime of the historical Antony and are therefore 'not reliable sources for the reconstruction of any single person within the monastic movement' (Brakke 1995:204).

It is accepted that there is evidence to support the Antonian authorship of the *Letters* and that 'there is no source on Antony with sufficient reliability to dismiss the authenticity of the letters' (Rubenson 1990:42).

The Letters

At the end of the fourth century, the seven *Letters* were attributed to Antony and known in the Coptic-speaking monastic circles. The *Letters* appear to have been written originally in Coptic (although only *Letter IV* survives in Coptic) at the end of the 330's A.D. (Rubenson 1990:45) with a Greek translation some twenty years afterwards. These were followed by a further Greek translation and a Syriac translation in the fifth century and later translations into Georgian, Arabic and Latin. (Rubenson 1990:34).

The *Letters* themselves give no indication as to when they were written and the only historical reference is to Arius' preaching in Alexandria in *Letter IV*. The *Letters* are exhortations to monastic disciples, modelled on the Pauline Epistles. They appear to have been written at roughly the same time and intended for different monasteries; the didactic and authoritative tone of the *Letters* indicates that they were written by someone who was respected as a spiritual teacher.

It would appear from the contents, that *Letter I* was written as an introduction to the monastic life whilst *Letters II* to *VII* are intended for those experienced in the monastic and ascetic traditions and their similarity in content would indicate that they were written within a short space of time. The *Letters* exhort their readers with a sense of urgency to seek insight and discernment; the philosophical and theological language and ideas reflect the Platonic and Origenist tradition with which presumably they would have been familiar. The *Letters* have been based on the Pauline epistles and use Pauline style introductions and endings, Pauline phrases and even one Pauline quotation adapted to the first person.

Letter I, written perhaps for those new to the monastic life or those contemplating it, is a systematic treatise on repentance and purification and the ways in which God calls people to follow him. *Letters II* to *VII* have a great deal in common and many passages are almost identical. The general outline of these *Letters* contains an introduction followed by a summary of the history of salvation (apart from *Letter IV*) and then a series of exhortations. Antony stresses the need to attain self-knowledge, to avoid false religion and prepare for the coming of Jesus. He teaches that every man must prepare himself by repentance and humility and by being aware of the activity of demons so as to be united with the angels and saints in the Church of God.

The Silent Life

Thomas Merton wrote *The Silent Life* in 1957, just two years after being appointed Master of Novices in the Cistercian Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. He was born in France in 1915 and as a child lived in the United States, France and England where he attended Cambridge University. Three years after his conversion to Catholicism he entered the Cistercian Order where he made his life profession and was ordained a priest. During most of his monastic life, he was engaged in writing books, poems and letters. His autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain* sold 400,000 copies, and established him as one of the most popular spiritual writers of the twentieth century.

The Silent Life is in two main parts. The first describes the vocation of monks as people who have chosen to seek God in a particular way – apart from the world in a 'desert place'. He describes the book as a meditation on the monastic life, and some twenty years later when reviewing his books, he considered *The Silent Life* to be among his better works (1981:170). He links the Cistercian life with the desert fathers and views the monastery as a tabernacle in the desert (1957:34). He sees the Benedictine Rule as providing the framework for a monk to grow in holiness and find inner peace through conversion of life, stability and obedience.

The second part of the book is a survey of the various orders – cenobitic and eremitic – and the history, growth and development of Benedictinism seen within the Benedictine, Cistercian, Carthusian and Camaldolese monasteries.

This book appears to reflect two developments in Merton's own life. Firstly, at the time of writing *The Silent Life* he was Master of Novices and had previously been Master of Scholastics. It is likely that this book grew out of the instruction he gave to the younger monks and novices. Secondly, Merton had for some years been wrestling with the desire to be a hermit but his abbot would not permit it. His volunteering to be novice master was one way in which he was able to fulfil in part his ambition to be a hermit, because the novice master and the novices lived apart from the other monks. During this time he considered becoming a Carthusian or a Camaldolese in order to find greater solitude. His detailed description of their life therefore reflects something of his own restlessness and search for another form of Benedictinism.

The Silent Life was written before the Vatican II reforms had had their impact on the Cistercian life and before Merton had his 'Epiphany' experience on the corner of Walnut and Fourth Avenue in which he felt a sense of unity with all the passers-by. He wrote, 'I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realisation that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers.' (1965:140) This experience among others, led Merton to a more life-embracing approach. He became concerned for the oppressed and for peace and justice. He attacked racism and nuclear weapons, opposed the Vietnam war and felt deeply about the plight of the poor. He became interested in Eastern religions. *The Silent Life*, however, reflects an earlier time in his life but nevertheless a time of personal struggle with his own vocation as he guided the novices in theirs.

The call to *ascesis*

Antony's first *Letter* and Merton's book are written for those who are not advanced in the monastic life. They both begin with the theme of God's call – for Antony, it is by one of three ways – by the law of love, by a response to the warning and promises of the written Mosaic Law or in response to

being a chastised and penitent sinner (*I:* 1); for Merton it is simply by the Holy Spirit (vii). More significantly, for both men it is a call which leads to purification. With a tripartite division of body, mind and soul, Antony writes:

> First, the body is purified by much fasting, by many vigils and prayers, and by the service which makes a man to be straightened in body, cutting off from himself all the lusts of the flesh... Then the Spirit that is his guide begins to open the eyes of his soul, to give it also repentance that it may be purified. The mind also starts to discriminate between the body and the soul, as it begins to learn from the Spirit how to purify both by repentance. (*I:* 2)

For Antony this purification is primarily an act of the mind or will in which the Spirit enables him to discern the impurities of body and soul. He warns of the man 'who stuffs his body with food and drink' (*I:* 2) and the need to purify the eyes 'that they may see rightly and purely' (*I:* 3) and the ears that 'they may hear in peace' (*I:* 3). The Spirit 'teaches the tongue its own purity' (p.3) and 'heals the motions of the hands' (*I:* 4) as well as 'the belly in its eating and drinking' (*I:* 4). It also cleanses 'sexual thoughts which are moved from below the belly' (*I:* 4) and lastly the feet 'that they should walk according to its (the Spirit's) will, going and ministering in good works, so that the whole body may be changed and renewed under the authority of the Spirit'. (*I:* 5) Antony also adds, 'And I think that when the whole body is purified and has received the fullness of the spirit, it has received some portion of that spiritual body which it is to assume in the resurrection of the just'. (*I:* 5)

By contrast, whilst Merton accepts the importance of monastic asceticism he feels it necessary to warn of the dangers of some physical ascetic practices.

> Asceticism itself does not produce divine union as its direct result. It only disposes the soul for union. The various practices of monastic asceticism are more or less valuable to the monk in proportion as they help him to accomplish the inner and spiritual work that needs to be done to make his soul poor, and humble, and empty, in the mystery of the presence of God. When ascetic practices are misused, they only serve to fill the monk with himself and to harden his heart in resistance to grace. (Merton: 1957:3)

Both Antony and Merton stress the need for purity and self knowledge. For Antony the spiritual human essence, though created, is immortal. It is hidden in the body but manifest in the mind and so people have to purify their souls and bodies so that the material may give way to the spiritual and the mind may find the truth. Antony sees the spirit as eternal but without gender so that it is the body and soul which make for human individuality. (*VI:* 17)

For Merton, the spiritual is found in the soul (1957:2) and it is the will and the body which must be purified by humility and obedience. He writes, '(Humility) detaches him (a monk) from that fixation upon his own will which makes him ignore and disobey the eternal Will in which alone reality is to be found' (1957:4)

For Antony, the struggle for purity is to be fought alone with the help of the Spirit and its goal is union with God; for Merton it is to be fought in community but not as an end in itself. 'Purity of heart . . . is the beginning of unity within the monk himself. . . . Purity of heart, too, is the beginning of the monk's union with his brothers'. (1957:19)

Knowledge and truth

Antony's Letters *II -VII* are very similar in format and content, suggesting that they were written by the same person but for different audiences. There are various themes which run throughout; one of which is knowledge, *gnosis*. Antony reflects the Platonic belief that true knowledge is not to discover something previously unknown but to come to the realisation of the need to return to what was previously known.

> But in the case of those rational natures in which that covenant grew cold, and their intellectual perception died, so that they were no longer able to know themselves according to their first condition, concerning them I say that they became altogether irrational, and worshipped the creation rather than the Creator. (*II:* 6)

Merton appears to echo Antony in describing a process of learning or knowledge leading to the monastic goal of union with the creator. It could be said to be not so much a learning process but a process of 'unlearning' as the monks let go of their self-centredness to discover what was there in the first place.

> Cistercian asceticism, and indeed all the asceticism of the monastic Fathers is simply the recovery of our true self, man's true 'nature', created for union with God. It is the purification, and liberation of the divine image in man, hidden under layers of 'unlikeness'. Our true self is the person we are meant to be – the man who is free and upright in the image and likeness of God. (1957:22)

> This 'return to paradise', this return to the perfection of charity in which man was created by God, is the true end of the monastic life. (1957:170)

For Antony, truth lies in the spiritual which is unchanging; the material is corruptible and transitory and truth cannot be known empirically or by academic study but only by the spiritual sense or *nous*. He sees the things of this life as unimportant. 'For concerning your bodily names there is no need to write to you at all, since they are transitory. If a man knows his true name, he will also see the name of truth' (*III:* 9). It is rational thought which leads to self knowledge combined with moral purification which in turn leads to the detachment of body and soul. Antony describes the body as 'heavy' (*VI:* 20) and seeks to purify it so that the eternal spiritual state can emerge. 'Moral purification is the purification of the soul from undue bodily influence, the detachment of the soul from the body'. (Rubenson 1990:62).

Merton does not share Antony's belief in the need to separate the body from the soul. He writes

> If we ask what the monastic Fathers consider to be 'alien' to the soul of man, they tell us that material and created things, temporal values seen as ends in themselves, are foreign to us. For our souls are spirits, created for the highest of all spiritual and eternal goods. This is no Manichean or Gnostic philosophy. It is not a crude division between matter and spirit that they envisage. They know well enough that that would be only to divide man against himself since man is, in fact, constituted by body and soul together. It takes the perfect union of matter and spirit to make a true human person, and we do not increase our humanity or our sanctity by simply 'delivering the spirit from the body'. (1957: 23)

Although Antony and Merton both have tripartite anthropologies, for Antony sanctity is achieved though detaching the soul from the body; for Merton it is by integrating the body and soul that sanctity is achieved.

Unity

For Platonists the highest ideal is unity. It is a state of being, of stability and integration. The opposite is disharmony, which leads to discord and war. Reflecting this teaching, Antony writes

> God is One, that is to say, Unity of intellectual substance. You should understand this, beloved, that in all places where there is not harmony, men draw wars upon themselves, and raise up lawsuits among themselves. (*III:* 9)

For Antony the importance of unity lies in the belief that before the Fall there was a unity of souls with God to which the world must return through the practice of *apatheia*, obeying the commandments and by the power of the Holy Spirit.

> Let us now prepare in all holiness to cleanse the senses of our minds, that we may be clean by the baptism of Jesus, so as to offer ourselves a sacrifice to God. And this Paraclete Spirit comforts us and brings us back to our beginning, to recover our inheritance and the dominion of that same comforting Spirit. (*VII:* 28)

Merton sees unity as coming about when there is the unity within the monk himself as he is freed from illusions and selfish projects and stops seeking

his own will. This leads to unity with his brothers expressed in monastic charity when the brethren are united in one will, the will of Christ. Then, 'All the souls called to union with God are fused like iron in the fire and transformed together in the Light of God.' (1957:20). Merton likens this unity to that of the Trinity and the fulfilment of the Eucharistic mystery.

Both Antony and Merton see Christ's mission as gathering all people together in unity through the love of one another and the love of God. For Antony the hermit, this unity looks back to a restoration of the unity that existed in the beginning; for Merton the cenobite, there is an additional emphasis on unity looking forward to the building of the Kingdom of God of which the Eucharist is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet. For Antony, unity is the goal of each hermit led by the Spirit; for Merton it is to be found within a community united under an abbot; only later does Merton see the need to find unity, paradoxically both in solitude and with those outside the monastery walls.

The Law

Antony sees God's saving works expressed through the Law. Firstly, God gave the Law of Love (Chitty) or the Natural Law (Rubenson) which was implanted in mankind at their first creation (*I:* 1). Natural Law should be naturally obeyed

> but by reason of the spread of infirmity, and the heaviness of the body, and evil cares, the implanted law dried up and the senses of the soul grew weak, so that men could not find themselves as they truly are according to their creation.... (*III:9*)

When this in planted law failed, God gave mankind the written law through Moses whom Antony views as a forerunner of Christ (*III:* 9). Antony sees the written law as one of the ways in which God visits us, but in the end, like the natural law, it fails.

> To Antony there is thus a clear distinction between service under the law and perfect righteousness. From being servants of God men are called to be brothers and servants of Jesus,

> that is adopted sons of God. With a strange use of a quotation from St Paul, Antony even refers to the service as an imprisonment, implying that man needs to be liberated from it (Rubenson, 1990:76).

Antony is not saying that the written law should be ignored but that it is only a guide and cannot bring salvation. Like St Paul, Antony sees the law as 'our tutor to bring us to Christ' (Gal 3:24).

Merton links the Law of God with the role of the abbot. His own difficulties in relationship with his own abbot, James Fox, had been partially resolved by this time by Dom James acceding to Merton's request to be the novice master. Merton has a traditional Cistercian understanding of the abbatial office in which the abbot has the responsibility of ensuring that the Rule is observed.

> The abbot is the superior, a man of God who has been especially endowed with graces and gifts for the sake of the community. As the representative of God, he not only exercises a divinely given authority to rule, but as it were a 'sacrament' of the Fatherhood of God . . . . Therefore he must first of all understand what God's Providence is, since he is its instrument. This does not mean a magic ability to guess right and make cunning decisions by means of some kind of divination. It means knowledge of the Law of God, for the abbot is *doctus lege divina.* It means understanding of God's ordinary ways with men, the law of Christ, the law of charity (1957:48).

Merton recognises the abbot's jurisdiction with which he equates 'the law of Christ, the law of charity' (1957:48). He also recognises the written law for monks as being contained within the Rule of St Benedict and quotes St Bernard, the Cistercian founder, who sees grace as an extension of Law.

> He (St Bernard) too would speak of 'Law'. But going beyond Stephen Harding he would gaze into the depths of God himself and discover that God too has a 'Law', which is his own infinite charity. His own freedom, his own generosity. He would see that the Law of God entered into the world not only by

> creating all things and implanting itself in their natures, but above all in the Incarnation of the Word who was to redeem fallen man by the supreme expression of His infinite liberty, in which He, who was without sin took upon Himself the sins of men out of pure and gratuitous love, and for their sakes became 'obedient unto the death of a cross' (1957:104).

For Merton, like Antony, the Law (or the Rule) can only make a person a faithful servant; it is a means to an end and not an end in itself. Indeed the law can be a prison. 'If the rule is too austere, the monk may become a machine for doing penance, but he will cease to be a man of prayer' (1957:54). Antony quotes St Paul (Romans 8:17) to remind the monks that we have not received the spirit of bondage but the spirit of adoption (*IV:* 12). For both Antony and Merton the law is fulfilled and superseded in Christ in whom is perfect freedom. 'The law of divine Liberty, hidden and active in the person of Christ, broke into the world of sin in which man languished as a prisoner of a far different Law,' writes Merton (1957:104).

The discernment of Spirits

Antony sees all spirits – good and evil – as created by God . . . .

> Now therefore understand that, be it the holy heavens or angels or archangels or throne or dominions or cherubim or seraphim . . . . or devil or satan or evil spirits . . . . in the beginning of their creation they are all derived from one – all save only the perfect and blessed Trinity of Father and Son and Holy Spirit (*V:* 16).

He warns the brethren of the evil spirits which deceive.

> Therefore they make us laugh when it is time for weeping, and weep when it is time for laughter, and simply turn us aside at every time from the right way. And there are many other deceits whereby they make us slaves, but there is no time to describe all this (*VI:* 19).

Antony stresses the need to recognise good from evil spirits because although they come from the same source they have been given different names.

> Again, the evil way of others made it necessary to name them devil and satan, because of their evil state; and others were named demons, and evil and impure spirits, and seducing spirits, and princes of this world (*VI:* 20).

Whilst Antony describes the spiritual struggle for perfection, his *Letters* do not reflect the vividness of the demonic battles portrayed in the *Vita* and he encourages the brethren to be aware of their own sinfulness and to practice discernment of spirits. 'Therefore it behoves us all, approaching our Creator, to exercise our minds and senses to understand the distinction between good and evil' (*VII:* 25).

It is unclear from the Letters what theological view was held by Antony regarding a demonology, although Rubenson thinks it likely that he followed Origen and Evagrius in believing that the spiritual battle was fought in the minds and souls. The demons in the *Letters*, unlike the demons in the *Life*, are internalised (Rubenson: 87,88).

Merton only refers to the existence of evil spirits when describing the temptations of St Benedict and places his emphasis on discerning spiritual passions within ourselves. He quotes the monastic founders (St Benedict and St Bernard) as possessing the gift of discernment of spirits and of the need to discern evil spirits in monks. For Merton writing at this time, discernment was the role of the abbot and was related to decision making and seeking God's will for the good of the community or individual brothers in their vocations. Nevertheless, he is writing at a time when he believed that he himself discerned a vocation to solitude, although his abbot did not.

> To me the whole problem is that God has one plan for Fr. Louis (Merton) and good Fr. Louis is trying to follow another one different from what God has planned for him. The result is, of course, terrific conflict. (Fox 1955: a letter)

Both Antony and Merton see the activity of the Holy Spirit as being central to the life of the monk. Antony sees the activity of the Spirit in Moses and the prophets and more importantly in calling humankind back to God. The work of the Spirit is manifested in a Spirit of repentance, or a Spirit of wisdom or a Spirit of consolation. The human heart has to be cleansed so that 'God. .will grant him that invisible fire which will burn up all impurity from him, and our principal spirit will be purified; and then the Holy Spirit will dwell in us, and Jesus will abide with us, and so we shall be able to worship God as we ought.' (*V:* 15). For Antony, the Spirit both calls the monks to a life of virtue and is also the gift to those who live such a life.

Merton uses the word 'spirit' to refer to the disposition of the soul as in the 'spirit of self-renunciation' (1957:147), and the 'monastic spirit' (1957:59) because he sees the Holy Spirit already at work in the monk because it is the Holy Spirit which has called him to the monastic life in the first place. Merton is more systematic than Antony and distinguishes between the gifts of the spirit, as in the gift of compunction which he sees as a special grace, and the mystical marriage of the human spirit with the divine Spirit.

> God is said to be 'found' by the soul that is united to Him in a bond as intimate as marriage. And this bond is a union of spirits, in faith . . . It implies submission to the gentle but inscrutable guidance of His infinitely hidden Spirit. It demands the renunciation of our own lights and our own prudence and our own wisdom and of our whole 'self ' in order to live by His Spirit. 'He that is joined to the Lord', says St Paul, 'is one Spirit' (1 Cor 6:17) (1957:3)

For Merton, the Holy Spirit is already present calling us to closer union with God; for Antony the Holy Spirit is the reward for those who have been purified by the spirit of repentance. Such a distinction may well be a difference in emphasis rather than in doctrine because the Holy Spirit 'blows where it wills' and for both men is the means as well as the end to communion with God.

Both Antony and Merton stress the apophatic spiritual path as the means of finding unity with God which is achieved through a process of sanctification or purification. It is a way that is world-denying, a spiritual battle in which the Law or the Rule provides support to help overcome the temptations that afflict the monk. The monk must be obedient to scripture and his superiors so as to be led by the Spirit in the desert journey whether it be in Egypt or the woods of Kentucky. 'The desert has provided from time immemorial, a testing ground for the souls of men. ... The desert is silent, apart, different' (Meinardus 1989: ix). Merton sees the western monastic tradition as directly descended from Antony and the desert fathers. There are differences in anthropology, philosophy and ecclesiologies but the emphasis is on knowledge, of knowing ourselves and finding God through discipline and obedience.

Neither work is intended to be a work of systematic theology although Antony develops the theme of God's redeeming acts. Merton's book, like the Rule of St Benedict itself is about the practical living out of the monastic life. 'The Rule of St Benedict is not a treatise in systematic theology. Its logic is the logic of daily life lived in Christ and lived well'. (J.Chittister 1992:16)

The teachings of Antony and Merton are strikingly similar but can they assist those living the contemplative monastic life today? It can certainly be claimed that the foundations of monasticism are still the same, that is the monk's consecration expressed in the vows, the living out of the Rule and the need for a 'desert' place. It is primarily a way of finding God through a life of discipline, of renunciation and prayer. Merton acknowledges the missionary, apostolic and charitable works associated with some Benedictines but his emphasis is on the enclosed contemplative life.

Today many contemplative monks, like Merton in his later years, rather than shutting out the world, seek to embrace the needs of the world. This springs from a shift in theological emphasis – from the eschatological, that the monastery is living the life of heaven on earth – to the incarnational that God is in everything and everyone. Peace and justice are seen as signs of the Kingdom and monks, no less than other Christians, are called to pray and work for the establishment of God's kingdom.

In monastic formation today it has been found necessary to place much emphasis on sexuality and preparing the monk for celibacy. Perhaps this reflects the sexual openness of society today but it receives only passing attention from Antony and Merton in the *Letters* and in *The Silent Life.*

Antony and Merton alike see the desert in terms of geographical space where many monks today would understand it more in terms of inner solitude. The recent growth in those living as 'solitaries' or in small fraternities in our cities has seen the development of urban monks. 'There is no protection but God's for the urban hermit who lives and dwells in the real world, as stark and naked a reality as ever there was in the heart of the desert' (Mancuso 1996:136)

Antony died in the desert aged 105. Merton died tragically at the age of 53 but by the time he died he had deepened his understanding of the desert. He had discovered it everywhere, in the West and in the East, in love and in desolation, because ultimately we don't have to find God; he finds us.

Notes and References

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