

Thomas Merton and the Christian Search for Wholeness and Holiness.

by Paul M Pearson.

There is a story about a Russian Staretz, a spiritual guide, who was once criticised for spending too much time advising an elderly peasant woman about the care of her turkeys. The Staretz reply was "not at all, her whole life is in those turkeys."

That is a story that I think is very relevant to Thomas Merton's understanding of spiritual direction and its purpose in the life of a Christian. A great deal of Merton's monastic life at Gethsemani was taken up with spiritual direction – with his first major job as Master of Scholastics, and then, for ten years as Master of Novices. As well as this he was also his Abbot's director and confessor for fifteen years, and through his letters and books has touched and changed the lives of many people.

Before moving on to look at Merton's understanding of the importance of direction for the development of the fully human person, the development of both wholeness and holiness, I think it is worth looking briefly at Merton's own experience of spiritual direction as, for me, Merton speaks most clearly and most persuasively when he speaks from his own personal experience.

In *The Seven Storey Mountain* Merton makes it very clear that until he returned to America to study at Columbia University there had been no formal spiritual direction in his life. God's grace at this time seemed to influence him in an informal way, through books and through people. In his autobiography one thinks of books such as Gilson's *Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, Huxley's *Ends and Means*, and the poetry of Blake and Hopkins as well as such people as Dan Walsh, Mark Van Doren and Bob Lax. When he was received into the Catholic Church in 1938 he received some direction and instruction, but, except in the sacrament of reconciliation, this did not continue after his baptism. As he says in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 'I should

have sought constant and complete spiritual direction. Six weeks of instructions, after all, were not much' and again 'Direction was the thing I most needed.'¹ At this stage of his life God was obviously working powerfully and the main direction that Merton was receiving was coming from his friends - Lax clarifying Merton's desires of wanting to be a saint, Van Doren challenging him on the depth of his desire to be a priest, and Walsh in affirming that decision and helping Merton to sift his way through the vast array of different religious orders.

Upon his entry to Gethsemani in 1941 Merton embarked upon a highly directive monastic formation, a formation that fed him and rooted him, possibly for the first time in his life. The monastic way of life, following the Rule of St. Benedict and the Usages of the Cistercian Order, works to mould and form the monk. Merton would have been subject to that formation especially through the novice master, with his care of the individuals under him, as well as direction from his confessor and from the abbot, and finally the direction that comes through the monk's constant exposure to scripture, in particular the psalms, and other spiritual literature. In Merton's early years at Gethsemani there are two major areas he tells us of in his life where spiritual direction was essential and those areas were in relation to his dual vocation to be both a monk and a writer, and secondly his growing desire for a more solitary life and his questioning of his place at Gethsemani.

In Merton's journals he reveals some of the struggle that was taking place within himself in regard to these issues and the benefits that he received from discussing them in spiritual direction. In one journal entry he recalls a talk with his abbot about his vocation:

I went and talked over the whole business of my vocation again with Father Abbot and he assured me once again, patiently, that everything was quite all right and that this was where I belonged. In my bones I know that he is quite right and that I am a

fool. And yet, on the surface, everything seems to be all wrong.²

Similarly, as regards his dual vocations, he recounts a conversation he had with the Abbot General of the Cistercian Order in which:

he told me emphatically - in fact it was the most emphatic thing he said, and the only thing that seemed like an official pronouncement - that it was good and even necessary for me to go on writing.³

That last quote also points to other areas from which Merton received direction, from visiting superiors and retreat givers, and also from some of his written contacts, with whom he shared his personal struggles and from whom he asked advice.

As well as receiving spiritual direction Merton also spent a great deal of time giving it. Merton's Abbot, Dom James Fox, once described Merton as 'a gifted director of others in the spiritual life'⁴ and his student, and later Abbot, Flavian Burns, spoke of how Merton was regarded by many at Gethsemani as 'the spiritual father of our souls' and that 'he was a skilful reader of the secret of the souls that sought his help' in whom 'we had the best of Spiritual Fathers.'⁵ High praise that is clearly reflected in fact, as Dom James had Merton as his own spiritual director and confessor for fifteen years, and also made him both Master of Scholastics and then, in 1955, Master of Novices. Both of these were highly responsible jobs within the monastic community, a fact that Merton clearly understood as he says of this work in a letter to Erich Fromm, in October 1954, that he is spiritual director for 'some thirty monks...in the crucial period of their formation.'⁶

Merton took this work very seriously and though at first he feared he would lose some of the precious time he had found for solitude, the opposite turned out to be true. He discovered that it was 'the only true path to solitude' and that 'one must be in some sense a hermit before the care of souls can serve to lead one further into the

desert.⁷ He found it 'a rather heavy responsibility'⁸ but one that had a tremendous effect on him. He has an intuition of this in *The Sign of Jonas* when he wonders whether 'The one who is going to be most fully formed by the new scholasticate is the Master of the Scholastics.'⁹ In his work with the scholastics and the novices, the world that he had left when he entered Gethsemani returned to him as he was drawn into their mental and spiritual predicaments in a period of immense and challenging change as he 'looked into their hearts' and took 'their burdens upon' himself.¹⁰ Merton called the new desert that he was discovering 'compassion' and I think it is hard to underestimate the profound impact Merton's work here as spiritual director had upon his changing world view. In a letter that Merton wrote to the novice mistress at the Loretto mother house in 1961, after a visit that he had made there, he remarked that their 'novices and postulants . . . gave me much more than I was able to give them.'¹¹

It is also important to remember that Merton gave some spiritual direction by letter as is seen in a number of the letters in *The School of Charity*, though in a circular letter of 1967 he advises his friends that he 'cannot undertake direction by mail' though he does try to 'answer important questions when possible.'¹² Finally, as Merton received direction himself through his reading especially prior to his conversion, so, through his own writings he gave, and still continues to give spiritual direction to many people.

As Merton's understanding of spiritual direction changed and grew over the years, I think he came to an understanding of it which brought together wholeness and holiness. There has been a long tradition in the Christian churches in which the wholeness of the person has often been denied in the search for holiness. The reforms of the Cistercian Order undertaken by de Rance are a good example of this attitude which can also be seen in the regime at Gethsemani in Merton's early days. I am reminded of the picture of austerity that Merton drew of his first Abbot, Dom Frederick Dunne, in *The Waters of Siloe*, where he described how:

Bit by bit and year by year the meals in the refectory dwindled down to their most naked essentials. The two fried eggs that had transformed each monk's Easter Sunday dinner into a banquet of unusual splendour, were relentlessly banished.¹³

Though in some of Merton's early work he writes approvingly of such regimes, his views change, influenced especially, I believe, by his work as a spiritual director. So, in *Contemplation in a World of Action*, he says that monastic life should

affirm not only the message of salvation but also those most basic human values which the world most desperately needs to regain: personal integrity, inner peace, authenticity, identity, inner depth, spiritual joy, the capacity to love, the capacity to enjoy God's creation and give thanks.¹⁴

Merton expresses this view even more succinctly in a conference he gave in December 1967 when he said:

Our religious institutes exist to help form human beings, people who are complete persons. This is our work and our duty, to the human race as well as to God. Our monasteries should be producing people who are fully developed human beings and even saints.¹⁵

What did Merton understand by that statement, how did he see a 'fully developed human being'? For Merton this was a person who was engaged in the search for both God and for their true self – two inseparable searches. It is impossible to find one without finding the other. When a person truly finds God they also find their true self and vice versa. These two paths are evident in Merton's work of spiritual direction as he asks whether his students 'are able to love God more,

or if I have helped them in any way to find themselves.'¹⁶ He makes it clear that sanctity and life are one, that 'holiness is life lived in its fullness.'¹⁷ But when Merton speaks of wholeness he makes it quite clear that he is not talking about perfection, he points out how some of the saints were 'terrible to get along with'¹⁸ and how they could be very 'exasperating people.'¹⁹ Merton points to the case of Benedict Joseph Labre who 'wanted to be a Trappist and a Carthusian and succeeded in neither. He finally ended up a tramp' and died on the streets of Rome. Yet, as Merton says, he is the 'only canonized saint, venerated by the whole Church, who has lived either as a Cistercian or a Carthusian since the Middle Ages.'²⁰

In speaking about wholeness Merton is referring to a fullness of living that includes the cross. It is a way of brokenness and woundedness in which we have to accept 'our own incompleteness'²¹ and which can bring darkness and crisis. But, as he points out in a letter to Jeanne Burdick in 1962, 'crisis is both necessary and fruitful.'²² Once again, in writing of this, Merton is writing from his own experience. In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Merton spoke of how one becomes 'a more complete, a more developed person, capable of wider understanding, empathy, and love for others' by a 'personal crisis' which can be 'creative and salutary if one can accept the conflict and restore unity on a higher level, incorporating the opposed elements in a higher unity.'²³ It is the pattern of the spiral which seems to occur in Merton's own life, periods of crisis leading to a higher unity and integration. (A movement which would seem to fit into Gregory of Nyssa's teaching on *epektasis* where the perfect spiritual man is the one who 'is ever moving forward, deeper into the mystery of God.'²⁴) A view that is so well reflected in that line from the poet Yeats where he says that 'perhaps nothing can be sole or whole that has not been rent.'

The way of wholeness and holiness that Merton is talking about here leads a person to see sanctity in everything and to see that 'God is all around them.'²⁵ It is the way of the saint who, as Merton says in *Seeds of Contemplation*, 'preaches sermons by the way he walks and the way he stands and the way he sits down, and the way he picks

things up and holds them in his hand.'²⁶ This is a Zen way of seeing and reminds me of the monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, who spoke of two ways of washing dishes - washing the dishes to have clean dishes, or washing the dishes in order to wash the dishes. He is speaking here of a mindfulness that a person should have to the actions that they are performing, a mindfulness that we can see in Merton, especially in journals like *A Vow of Conversation* and *Day of a Stranger* where he describes the daily rhythms of life in the hermitage.

This vision of life is very Benedictine in its outlook. Benedict in his Rule had spoken of the respect that the monk should have for all things, treating even simple monastery utensils 'as if they were the sacred vessels of the altar.'²⁷ A way of life that Merton found and appreciated in the Shakers whom he saw as 'deeply imbued with a spirit like that of St. Benedict' and as seen 'in the work of their hands, which was worship in spirit and in truth.'²⁸ This is a whole view of life, a view of the sanctity of all God's creation and it is central to Merton's thinking. As he said in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*:

To live well myself is my first and essential contribution to the well-being of all mankind and to the fulfilment of man's collective destiny... To live well myself means for me to know and appreciate something of the secret, the mystery in myself .²⁹

The wholeness that Merton is speaking of here he referred to at other times as that of the 'fully integrated person'. The importance that he gave to it can be seen in the vast array of subjects that he covered in his novitiate conferences as he believed that for the novices to make a free and a full commitment to the life at Gethsemani they had to be whole people. Unless they were whole they would never be able to undertake the demands of the monastic life. As Anthony Padovano has pointed out 'Merton was convinced that we suffer reverses in the spiritual life not because our desires are uncontrolled but because our humanity is deficient.'³⁰ For Merton the strict Trappist asceticism which was . . .

devised to control violent passions may do more harm than good when it is applied to a person whose emotions have never properly matured and whose instinctual life is suffering from weakness and disorder.³¹

In one of Merton's novitiate conferences he spoke quite specifically about the importance of wholeness. Beginning historically, with the rise of the Greek Tragedies, the Hebrew Prophets, Buddha and Confucius, he explored with the novices man's gradual acquiring of a sense of identity and purpose. Through a growing freedom and responsibility for life individuals gradually become superior to their destiny by the choices that they have made. From the philosophy of Confucius he drew up for the novices a pattern for the fully developed human person, a pattern he held up for the monk as well. The pattern he drew up was based on four principles – love, righteousness, liturgy or rites, and wisdom.

The love Merton was referring to here is a profoundly compassionate love, a real empathy. By righteousness he was speaking of justice, doing things not for profit but for no other reason than that they are right. Liturgy or rites he explains as an acting out of real relationships with others and with heaven, with all creation. Finally, the wisdom he spoke of was an all embracing wisdom which understands this whole pattern. The wholeness of this pattern from Confucius, Merton told the novices, could be found perfectly fulfilled in Christ. Christ's love is seen in the redemption, his righteousness in our justification. The idea of liturgy or rites can be seen in the sanctification that he brings and, lastly, as scripture tells us, Christ is himself the wisdom of God. For Merton, at the centre of this pattern of wholeness is the cross and the task of the Christian is to become whole by attaining to that central pivot.

This was a journey that Merton himself undertook. It can be seen in many different areas of his life, especially in his work of spiritual direction and formation of the students in his care. In his last years it can be seen in his relationship with Margie and in his

relationships with women like Rosemary Ruether and others with whom he had contact. Similarly it can be seen in the way in which he came to terms with the feminine dimensions of himself. As he said to a group of contemplative nuns in May 1968

What everybody has to be is a person. Wholeness is in the mutuality between men and women as persons who have the same nature.³²

Later in the same conference he went on to speak of the contemplative life as the 'life of a fully developed human being', pointing out that

Both women and men saints proposed to us as models were whole people. Everybody is both masculine and feminine.³³

From within the enclosed walls of Gethsemani, Merton's vision grew from one of turning his back upon the world to an all embracing world vision which, in *The Geography of Lograire*, covers all the world and its people. It was a vision of wholeness and holiness in which, as Anthony Padovano has pointed out, Merton 'made holiness equivalent with a life that seeks to be whole, honest and free.'³⁴ It is a wholeness and holiness that can be found wherever we are in life and whatever we do, whether we are an elderly Russian peasant woman looking after turkeys, a hermit in the Gethsemani woods, or a leading academic or industrialist. Writing to Christopher Mwoleka, later Bishop of Rulenge, Tanzania, Merton spoke of this wholeness and holiness in an African context, and these words, which I would like to conclude with, can be applied to each of us in our own lives with our own national gifts and characteristics. He said:

Perhaps God wants you to experience contemplation in a deeply African way, which I would surmise to be a way of wholeness, a way of unity with all life, a sense of deep rhythm of natural and cosmic life as

the manifestation of God's creative power: and also a great warmth of love and praise. If you realize that God has indeed given you His Spirit as the source of all joy and strength, and trust Him to purify your heart with His presence and love, in great simplicity, He will teach you the joy of being a child of God, an African child of God with your own special unique gifts³⁵

Notes and References

- 1 Merton, Thomas: *The Seven Storey Mountain*. (London, 1975) p.228
- 2 Merton, Thomas: *The Sign of Jonas*. (London, 1953) p.24 (Hereafter abbreviated to *SJ*.)
- 3 Ibid. p.33
- 4 Hart, P. Ed: *Thomas Merton/Monk A Monastic Tribute* (Kalamazoo, 1983) p.144
- 5 Ibid. pp.265/6
- 6 Merton, Thomas: *The Hidden Ground of Love* (New York 1985) p.309 (Hereafter abbreviated to *HGL*)
- 7 *SJ*. p.325
- 8 Merton, Thomas: *The School of Charity* (New York, 1990) p.49 (Hereafter abbreviated to *S.Ch*)
- 9 *SJ*. p.321
- 10 Ibid. p.325
- 11 *S.Ch*. p.141
- 12 Merton, Thomas: *The Road to Joy* (New York, 1989) p.106
- 13 Merton, Thomas: *The Waters of Silence* (London, 1950) p.236
- 14 Merton, Thomas: *Contemplation in a World of Action* (London, 1971) p.81
- 15 Merton, Thomas: *The Springs of Contemplation* (New York, 1992) p.12 (Hereafter abbreviated to *Springs*.)
- 16 *SJ*. p.325
- 17 Merton, Thomas: *The Silent Life* (London, 1957) p.126 (Hereafter abbreviated to *SL*.)
- 18 *SJ*. p.126

- 19 Merton, Thomas: *Seeds of Contemplation* (Wheathampstead, 1972) p.46 (Hereafter abbreviated to *SC*.)
- 20 Ibid. p.79
- 21 *SL*. p.16
- 22 *HGL*. p.110
- 23 Merton, Thomas: *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (London, 1968) p.189 (Hereafter abbreviated to *CGB*.)
- 24 Bamberger, John Eudes. 'The Cistercian.' *Continuum* Vol.7 No.2 (1969) p.238
- 25 *SC* p.47
- 26 Ibid. p.150
- 27 *The Rule of St. Benedict*. Chapter 31
- 28 *S.Ch*. p.211
- 29 *CGB*. p.81
- 30 Padovano, Anthony T. *The Human Journey* (New York, 1984) p.84 (Hereafter abbreviated to *HJ*.)
- 31 Merton, Thomas: *Life and Holiness* (London, 1963) p.22
- 32 *Springs* p.170
- 33 Ibid. p.173
- 34 *HJ*. p.170
- 35 *HGL*. p.462

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