A Second Round of Merton's Beer, or Mysticism Incarnate

The true source and ground of unity is remaining in love with God, the fact that love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us (Rm 5, 5). Accepting this gift maintains religious conversion and leads to moral, or even intellectual one.

Bernard J.F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*

There is no doubt that Thomas Merton was addicted to keeping diaries. He ordered his thoughts when writing, particularly recording his reflections on the pages of the journal.

Patrick Hart

It may well be that true fervour does not separate, but unites. And leads neither to fanaticism nor fundamentalism. Perhaps one day fervour will come back to our bookshops, to our minds.

Adam Zagajewski, *Defence of Fervour*

I have written about Merton's beer before—in 1995 in a quarterly *Zycie Duchowe* [*Spiritual Life*]. At that time, while referring to Henri Nouwen, I wanted to say a few words about Merton as a man immersed in life, interested in all its manifestations, fascinated by its prose, finding pleasure also in drinking beer or whiskey. This time beer figures only in the title, since actually it was nothing but a pretext for socializing. There were times when he reproached himself for having drunk or eaten too much, yet in fact he was a man of one passion—God.

One may even say that he was drunk with God, for he longed to see him at all costs, and this wish was granted in his close encounter with a stone image of Buddha.

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I came across his books late, when I was already a student. I recall that he interested me, although I cannot say that he shocked or shaped me. At that time we read other books and succumbed to other fascinations. Besides, his Journals were then still unavailable. As I found later, Merton himself treated his ascetic books with great reserve, distancing himself from nearly all of them, reproaching himself for his spiritual vanity and even a distinctive sense of superiority, in itself not far from vanity...

And so, unaware of this change in value judgement I read *The Seven Storey Mountain*, *No Man Is an Island* and *The Sign of Jonas*. These books were "readable." Their author did not escape into idle and irritating "newspeak" of pious commentary. He wrote about happiness caused by the sense of God's presence, he related to the Bible, monastic tradition and the classics of Christian mysticism. Far from moralising, he shared what he considered important in this tradition.

This first contact with Merton has not passed without leaving a trace; however I would lie if I claimed that it influenced me deeply. At the time I was occupied with books that were less pious, yet deeper, it seemed to me, immersed in home tradition and closer history. Only too painful and too conspicuous consequences of decisions made in Potsdam and Yalta caused me to look for voices depicting what we were absorbed in. And so I greedily devoured forbidden Witold Gombrowicz, listened for subtly present Zbigniew Herbert, brushed by Czesław Miłosz, found it hard to believe Gustaw Herling-Grudzinski, was amused to tears by Sławomir Mrozek, and worried by Franz Kafka, fascinated by Bruno Schulz. Thomas Merton definitely did not fit in with this party. Briefly put, his problems were not mine.

It was only recently that I went back to Thomas Merton, thanks to his *Journals*, poetry and literary essays, and above all his fascination with the East, particularly Buddhism. I must not omit his correspondence with Czesław Miłosz. I am not sure if this is the same Merton, but whatever the case may be, this one is closer to me. This is a searching Merton, quite lost, in conflict with his superior, with the hierarchic Church, not understanding apparently necessary compromises, and yet still persevering in his monastery and in the Church.

Merton's *Journals* are too rich and consist of too many themes, which is why I was forced to choose a selection. Trusting that they will present threads complementary to other presentations, I have chosen two: his thirst for God and tension in his relations with the institution of the Church. This dramatic process of searching for truth about himself and God inside the Church was abruptly stopped by his premature death. By following the struggles of Thomas Merton, especially in his last years, we are witnesses not only of his search—we too are beginning to ask ourselves questions about who we are, who is God for us and what role the Church plays in our lives.

1. TO TOUCH REALITY

Patrick Hart is undoubtedly right to think that search for solitude 'is a leitmotif of all Merton's writings, and particularly his journals,'[1] although what Merton was actually after was not solitude, but God. It can be clearly seen especially in the last years of his tragically interrupted life. Let me start from the end, from the illumination Merton experienced only six days before his death. While visiting Polonnaruwa, contemplating the statues of Buddha he is surprised by an experience, which changed his view of surrounding reality. He writes:

> Looking at these figures I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious. [...] I don't know when in my life I have ever had such a sense of beauty and spiritual validity running together in one aesthetic illumination. Surely, with Mahabalipuram and Polonnaruwa my Asian pilgrimage has come clear and purified itself. I mean, I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for. I don't know what else remains but I have now seen and have pierced through the surface and have got beyond the shadow and the disguise. This is Asia in its purity, not covered over with garbage, Asian or European or American, and it is clear, pure, complete. It says everything, it needs nothing.[2]

Let's say that once more: 'I don't know what else remains but I have now seen and have pierced through the surface and have got beyond the shadow and the disguise.' Will it be too much to say that at that moment Merton achieved the goal of his life? It seems to me that he actually did. It reminds me of another mystical experience, described by Ignatius Loyola in his autobiography:

> Going along thus in his devotions, he sat down for a little with his face towards the river, which was running deep below. And as he was seated there, the eyes of his understanding began to be opened: not that he saw some vision, but understanding and knowing many things, spiritual things just as much as matters of faith and learning, and this with an enlightenment so strong that all things seemed new to him. One cannot set out the particular things he understood then, though they were many.

Here St Ignatius adds a very characteristic comment on his vision, which was not, (as in Merton's case) in actual fact a vision at all:

> he received a great clarity in his understanding, such that in the whole course of his life, right up to the sixty-two years he has completed, he does not think, gathering together all the helps he has had from God and all the things he has come to know (even if he joins them all in to one), that he has ever attained so much as on that single occasion.[3]

In both cases we are dealing with a new outlook on the life they have lived so far. We know what were its effects on Ignatius Loyola, the future founder of the Jesuit order. As far as Merton's lot is concerned, we are reduced to conjecture. Whatever the case may be, both of them covered a long way leading to that experience.

In his *Zamyslenia* sketched in the Plus Minus column in *Rzeczpospolita* (5-6 October 2002 issue) His Grace Archbishop Józef Zycinski has written, not without satisfaction:

> At the end of October the Lublin Catholic University will hold an international session devoted to the spiritual heritage of Thomas Merton. When I was looking for available data on the Internet, I conducted a web search on alltheweb.com, my query was to collect all available texts including the phrase "Thomas Merton." After some time I obtained information that the total exceeds 154 000 items.

Then he asks a question which is not in the least rhetorical:

> What makes our generation so vividly interested in the message of an artist who, having converted to Catholicism, embraced austere rules of living in a Trappist abbey in Kentucky?

I think that it is not only curiosity about the exotic life of a hermit, so different from modern ideas of successful life, but more about authentic peace of heart emanating from all his writings, including the fascinating *Journals*. It is not only the number of internet entries, but also the multitude of pages written by Merton himself that is astonishing.

> Jozio questioned all his guests about what they had heard, read, seen. He was voraciously curious about everything. He was an embodiment of curiosity, a perfect incarnation of curiosity

this is how Adam Zagajewski wrote about Józef Czapski. Those words may be also applied to Thomas Merton. This is how I picture him—in his monastic cell, devouring magazines, raining letters full of questions on writers he is attracted to; he wants to know, to understand as much as he possibly can; he cannot rest easy; he is writing, commenting, getting irritated and impatient, taking photos, drawing, painting. One glance at the index in his *Journals* says it all. Who is not there! And then he reproaches himself for being a bad monk, no hermit:

> All of which brings up the problem of real solitude: I don't have it here. I am not really living as a hermit. I see too many people, have too much active work to do, the place is too noisy, too accessible. People are always coming up here, and I have been too slack about granting visits, interviews, etc., going to town too often, socializing, drinking, and all that...

as he wrote on 18 April 1968.

Before setting out on his journey to the East, which he considered so promising, he noted on 9th September:

> I go with a completely open mind, I hope without special illusions. My hope is simply to enjoy the long journey, profit by it, learn, change, and perhaps find something or someone who will help me advance in my own spiritual quest.

I am convinced that it was this sense of insufficiency and want that made Merton such an enjoyable and looked-for partner in conversation. Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki considered him one of the few people best comprehending eastern spirituality. This is how Merton describes his long talks with Suzuki:

> Two good long talks with Suzuki. He is now ninety-four, bent, slow, deaf, but lively and very responsive.... These talks were very pleasant, and profoundly important to me—to see and experience the fact that there really is a deep understanding between myself and this extraordinary and simple man whom I have been

reading for about ten years with great attention. (20 June 1964)

Similarly profound were Merton's relations with Czesław Miłosz, whose *Captive Mind* he greatly admired. He writes to him: 'First of all I would like to say that I found your book to be one of the most intelligent and stimulating it has been my good fortune to read for a long time.' And adds: 'It is an important book, which makes most other books on the present state of man look abjectly foolish'[4] —this is what Merton wrote in his first letter to Miłosz on 6th December 1968. In one of his last letters written on 15th March 1968 Merton wrote to Miłosz:

> You can say absolutely nothing about the Church that can shock me. If I stay with the Church it is out of a disillusioned love, and with a realization that I myself could not be happy outside though I have no guarantee of being happy outside, though I have no guarantee of being happy inside either. In effect my "happiness" does not depend on any institution or any establishment. As for you, you are part of my "Church" of friends who are in many ways more important to me than the institution.

Further development of this friendship might have been interesting for both friends. Unfortunately it was also tragically terminated. Nevertheless, it is characteristic that one of his last postcards (21st November 1968) Merton ever sent was addressed to Miłosz. ('Wrote the card to Miłosz this morning.')

Patrick Hart is undoubtedly right to claim that Merton never thought of leaving the monastery, nevertheless his loose relations with Buddhist monks are unquestionable. He felt that spiritual experience goes beyond the boundaries set down by religious divisions. Perhaps this is precisely the last will that Thomas Merton left for us, readers of his writings. This is how he sums up the time spent in India:

> The days here [in Dharamsala] have been good ones. Plenty of time for reading and meditation, and some extraordinary encounters.[5] So far my talks with Buddhists have been open and frank and there has been full communication on a really deep level. We seem to recognize in one another a certain depth of spiritual experience, and it is unquestionable. On this level I find in the Buddhists a deeper attainment and certitude than in Catholic contemplatives. (6th Nov 1968)

One can perhaps speak of touching Reality, of starting a chapter, which he did not have a chance to finish. One thing is certain. Somehow impulses emerging from surrounding reality became more important to him than those emanating from books and the tradition of the Church. His approach to the Vietnam War and the pacifist movement, to the theology of liberation and to Third World poetry, to writers working creatively behind the iron curtain, and his authentic admiration for them, and at long last for other religious traditions, became significant stimuli establishing his view of his monastic vocation and the Church itself. When he let "the world" enter his monastic cell Merton already saw it as a world mysteriously transformed and saved.

Amazingly, in a way worthy of further penetrating, by doing this he was ahead of the most recent theological institutions which are successful in their attempts to reconcile universality and uniqueness of the saving deed completed in Jesus Christ with the multitude of religions, and hence also multitude of legitimate ways to God. It is sufficient to mention such names as Jacques Dupuis or Wacław Hryniewicz. As the latter writes:

> Those who profess other religions save themselves by means of religious traditions they profess. Saving power of their own ways does not constitute competition for the saving power of Christ. Various religions lead to the same God. Although their ways are different, final goal is common for everyone. It is union with God as He manifested Himself in Jesus Christ.[6]

And to conclude: an important, it seems to me, excerpt from Dupuis's book *Christianity and Religions*, which deals with the benefits of dialogue:

> Christians may benefit from dialogue. They will benefit in two ways. On one hand they will enrich their own faith. Thanks to the experience and witness of others they will be able to discover deeper aspects and certain dimensions of God's mystery, which they previously realized only dimly in the Christian tradition. At the same time they will purify their own faith. The clash caused by the meeting will often raise questions, will make Christians review their stance and overcome deeply seated prejudices, or change concepts and visions which are too narrow, exclusive, and negative in relation to other traditions. Benefits of the dialogue constitute at the same time a challenge for the partners of Christians.[7]

In my opinion these words are the most thorough summary of the life and work of Thomas Merton.

2. 'Monachi plangentis non docentis est officium.'

Merton mockingly quotes the above adage in a difficult period for him, when he was afflicted with a ban on publication during the Vietnam War. It is interesting that it was precisely the pacifist activities of the author of *The Seven Storey Mountain* that became one of the sources of his popularity in the United States. In communist Europe they aroused mixed feelings. His pacifistic zeal wasn't completely shared by Czesław Miłosz, who was only too familiar with the peace policy of the Soviet empire.

For me, it's an example of a considerably greater tension accompanying Merton's relations with the institution, his monastic superiors, and the hierarchical Church. Far from usurping the right to full presentation of this extremely complex problem, I would like to at least point out several factors of this tension, which, it seems to me, the author of *The Seven Storey Mountain* has creatively overcome.

It is perhaps worthwhile to recall a somewhat longer passage from his *Journal* for 3rd March 1964, which constitutes a case in point of the difficulties and his response to them:

> I had been hoping to republish the few articles on nuclear war which had been permitted by Dom Gabriel—thinking that it was enough that he had permitted them once. Not so. The new General, Dom Ignace, dug into the files, held a meeting of definitors, and declared that there was to be no republication of these articles. Thus I am still not permitted to say what Pope John said in *Pacem in Terris*. Reason: 'That is not the job of a monk, it is for the Bishops.' Certainly, it has a basis in monastic tradition. 'Monachi plangentis non docentis est officium.' ['The job of the monk is to weep, not to teach.'] But—with things here: our cheese business and all the other "plangent" functions we have undertaken, it seems strange that a monk should be forbidden to stand up for the truth, particularly when the truth (in this case) is disastrously neglected.
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> A grim insight into the stupor of the Church, in spite of all that has been attempted, all efforts to wake her up! It all falls into place. Pope Pius XII and the Jews, the Church in South America, the treatment of Negroes in the US, the Catholics on the French right in the Algerian affair, the German Catholics under Hitler. All this fits into one big picture and our contemplative recollection is not very impressive when it is seen only as another little piece fitted into the puzzle. The whole thing is too sad and too serious for bitterness. I have the impression that my education is beginning—only just beginning and that I have a lot more terrible things to learn before I can know the real meaning of hope.
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> There is no consolation, only futility, in the idea that one is a kind of martyr for the cause. I am not a martyr for anything, I am afraid. I wanted to act like a reasonable, civilized, responsible Christian of my time. I am not allowed to do this, and I am told I have renounced this—fine. In favor of what?

> In favor of silence, which is deeply and completely in complicity with all the forces that carry out oppression, injustice, aggression, exploitation, war. In other words silent complicity is presented as a "greater good" than honest, conscientious protest—it is supposed to be part of my vowed life, is for the "glory of God." Certainly I refuse complicity. My silence itself is a protest and those who know me are aware of this fact. I have at least been able to write enough to make that clear. Also I cannot leave here in order to protest since the meaning of any protest depends on my staying here. Anyway I am definitely silenced on the subject of nuclear war.

The situation is, of course, unusual, not to say on the verge. It might have led to abandoning the monastic walls. It did not turn out that way, although it is worth remembering that the period of the Second Vatican Council and after was the time of the greatest crisis in the monastic life since the Reformation. Merton persevered, being fully aware that he was making the right choice. He knew that by remaining a monk he became a trustworthy witness to the values he was fighting for, which he wished to realize more than anything else in his own life.

It is clearly visible in ruminations recorded on the day of his fiftieth birthday on 25th January 1965:

> My intention is, in fact, simply to "die" to the past somehow. To take my fiftieth birthday as a turning point, and to live more abandoned to God's will, less concerned with projects and initiatives (which have, however, perhaps also been His will). More detached from work and events, more solitary. To be one of those who entirely practice contemplation simply in order to follow Christ. And who am I anyway?

Now, this is the only thing Merton really cared about—the truth about himself, which is the most important thing in life. He could not find an answer outside the monastery and community. Although there were things he did not like in the monastic life, he would record all weaknesses and vices of his superiors with great perspicacity, he could not imagine life outside it. He was deeply convinced that Gethsemani was his place. Patrick Hart, his secretary, confirms it:

> To be honest, he was extremely sensitive about his status as a Gethsemani monk, because there was a lot of irresponsible rumours around about his apparent intention to break the vows. In one of the earlier letters I received after his departure [for Asia] he mentioned rumours he'd heard: 'Give my love to the whole gang—I hope you haven't heard any crazy rumours. Please tell all of them that I am a monk from Gethsemani and intend to stay that way to the end of my days.'

Later, in a letter from New Delhi of 9th November 1968, only a month before his death, Thomas Merton wrote among others: 'I hope to bring with me to my monastery some of that Asiatic wisdom, which I am so happy to experience.'[8]

It wasn't a mere attachment to the monastery or monastic community as such. For Thomas Merton both the monastery and the community were a place and a way to union with God. He writes about it in a moving way in his entry of 7th December 1965:

> What is primary? God's revelation of Himself to me in Christ and my response of faith. In the concrete, this means, for me, my present life in solitude, acceptance of its true perspectives and demands, and the work of slow reorientation that goes on. Each day, a little, I realize that my old life is breaking loose and will eventually fall off, in pieces, gradually. What then? My solitude is not like Rilke's, ordered to a poetic explosion. Nor is it a mere deepening of religious consciousness. What is it then? What has been so far only a theological conception, or an image, has to be sought and loved. "Union with God!" So mysterious that in the end man would perhaps do anything to evade it, once he realizes it means the end of his own Ego-self-realization, once and for all. Am I ready? Of course not. Yet the course of my life is set in this direction.

It seems to me that we have here instances of mysticism in its pure form. Merton is a child of his times. He has read Nietzsche, Freud, Sartre; he is not only an assiduous reader of 20th century literature, in a way he participates in its creation. His longing for union with God is accompanied by numerous question and quotation marks. Yet perhaps this is why it appeals to us, why we look to it for confirmation also for our timid intuitions.

One more entry, made four years later, on 26th March 1968:

> I obey Church authority because I trust God to bring good out of their errors as well as out of their good will. Because we are all sinners anyway, all subject to error, and because if we deal charitably and humbly with one another, the Spirit will take care of the rest. But there is such a thing as an idolatry of office, and I don't yet believe the Pope is another incarnation!

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It is difficult to comment on those exceedingly expressive texts. They came out, according to their author's wish, 25 years after his death. Had he been alive today, we might not have known them. Perhaps Merton, like St Ignatius Loyola, would have found a way to incorporate the truth about the Church into the creative tissue of its post-council reality. God wished differently. It seems to me that they constitute an integral part of the spiritual legacy of the author of *The Seven Storey Mountain* and must not be omitted, even if we have to force our way through hundreds of thousands of internet entries.

Notes and References

1. Cf. his Preface to *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, 13.
2. *The Other Side of the Mountain: The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 7 1967-1968, ed. P. Hart, San Francisco, 323-4.
3. 'Reminiscences or Autobiography of Ignatius Loyola,' in: *Saint Ignatius of Loyola. Personal Writings*, translated with introductions and notes by J. A. Munitiz and Ph. Endean, Penguin Books 1996.
4. *Striving Towards Being: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz*, ed. R. Faggen, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 3.
5. Including the Dalai Lama.
6. *Chrze cija stwo Nadziei*, Wydawnictwo Znak, Kraków 2002, 327.
7. Dupuis, *Il Cristianesiom e le Religioni*, op. Cit., p. 431.
8. *The Asian Journal*, 12.