

Thomas Merton and Gregorian Chant

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The Origins Of Chant

WHEN THOMAS MERTON arrived at Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky in 1941, he was stepping into a continuous tradition of daily Gregorian chant that extended back through the founding of Gethsemani in the 1850s, through de Rance, the 17th century founder of the Trappists, through Bernard of Clairvaux and the Cistercian reform of the 12th century, to the 6th-century Rule of St Benedict. The core of the chant practice had remained essentially unchanged for 1400 years. But the origins of Gregorian chant go back further than that. Of course there is much singing, and instruments and dancing as well, in the Hebrew Scriptures. We find reference to Christians singing together as early as accounts of the last supper, where before Jesus and his disciples leave they "sing a hymn."

Devotional music was as popular in Greco-Roman pagan religion as it was in ancient Israel but because the church's primary concern in its early years was to distinguish itself from its pagan neighbors, music of all kinds was initially discouraged. There were inevitable exceptions to this, particularly the development of hymns. However the non-melodic recitation of prayers was an acceptable activity, and no group became more fiercely devoted to this practice than the early Christian monks. A few spiritual athletes (such as St

Jerome) began to separate themselves from the distractions of civilization late in the 3rd century, and a trickle became a flood after Constantine made Christianity the official imperial religion in the early 4th century. The inevitable accommodation and compromise that resulted from this monumental shift of direction led many devout Christians to flee the cities and go into the deserts of Egypt and Syria.

At first they were hermits: go to an empty place, build a simple hut, and recite Psalms day after day. The Psalms were a natural choice: many of them are penitential in nature, suiting the austere temperament of these pioneers; they had been re-interpreted by early Christian commentators as a set of prophecies about Christ; and they were free of any taint of pagan association. It was common to recite the entire Psalter - 150 Psalms - each day, or even several times a day. So intent were they on this practice that even the Christian feast days of Easter and Christmas felt like distractions to them.

Gradually these individual practitioners developed a reputation for holiness that drew disciples out into the desert to join them. What was once a solitary practice became a community practice. Individual devotion gave way to group organization, and eventually, the development of "rules" to regulate community life.

Regulated monastic life in the West

reached its classic expression in the rule of St. Benedict. His rule, a healthy balance of austere discipline and consideration for the limitations and necessities of ordinary human life, became a standard, and is still in use by many monastic communities today. Though separated by a couple of layers of reforms, the rule is foundational to the Trappists as well. One core practice Benedict preserved from his ascetic forbears was the recitation of Psalms. He says:

The prophet says, "Seven times a day have I praised you" (Ps 119:164). We will fulfill this sacred number of seven if we satisfy our obligations of service at Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, and Compline.... Concerning Vigils, the same prophet says: "At midnight I arose to give you praise." (Ps 119:62) (RSB, Chapter 15)

We read...that our holy ancestors, energetic as they were, did all [150 psalms] in a single day. Let us hope that we, lukewarm as we are, can achieve it in a whole week. (RSB, Chapter 18)

Thus the pattern was established—eight prayer periods each day, 150 Psalms each week—that has been carried forward with solid commitment by Christian monastics ever since.

When it comes to the musical dimensions of chant we know that Christians began writing and singing hymns in the 4th century (in large part, it seems, because of the popularity of music amongst their Gnostic rivals). We know that by the 9th century, when we have the first decipherable musical notation, there is a full-fledged body of thousands of chants that were in widespread use. How things got from point

A to point B is very difficult to determine. The musical forms of chant may be Jewish in origin—but that seems unlikely. It may come from Greco-Roman musical traditions—but we really have no way of knowing. It is one of the challenging but, to my mind, deeply attractive things about chant that its musical pedigree is wrapped in such deep historical mystery.

We do know a great deal more about the liturgical structures of which chant is a part. There are two major forms to consider. Pride of place is given to the Mass. It has its origins in the Last Supper, and the "love feast," a communal meal celebrated by early Christians. Through a marvellous process of mythification and heightened significance the elements of bread and wine steadily grew in ritual significance, until the process of imbibing and consuming this sacred food became, in the later middle ages, a quite literal experience of absorbing the divine into one's own being. In this regard the Mass is remarkably similar to the practices of "divinization" that we find in Tantric Buddhism and Hinduism. It is a transformative encounter in which the individual is mysteriously rearranged to conform with the shape of the divine. The celebration of Mass was developed and refined within the structure of the hierarchical church, in the cathedrals of Rome and elsewhere.

The chants of the Mass carefully frame the powerful spiritual energies mediated by the officiating priest. These chants provide a magnificent framework for the steady movement of the participants toward the holy of holies, the consecration of the sacred elements, the infusion of the divine in a

quite literal sense into the bread and wine. The chants are solemn, complex, and transcendently beautiful.

The other major chant repertory is the Divine Office. This is the musical setting of the eight periods of prayer, or "hours" stipulated by Benedict in his rule. The Office has its home in the monastery; though because of monastic prestige in the early Middle Ages it was taken up by clergy in cathedrals and churches as well. The Office is participatory: it is a collective expression of the community's spiritual practice that centers on the recitation of Psalms. For the most part, the Office consists of simple, repetitive chant formulas for the Psalms, and a set of relatively unadorned additional chants that provide a framework for those Psalms.

The relationship between the Mass and Office can be illustrated by a teaching from the Hindu saint Ramakrishna. This description comes from Stephen Levine:

Ramakrishna used an image of the freshly picked nut. When its husk is green, we could hit it with a stone and hardly dent it. But when that nut has ripened, just a tap and the shell will fall open. This is the gradual awakening that we are all participating in: ripening so that the shell can fall away and leave us free of our ignorance, free of our imagined self and its incessant posturing, open to the direct experience of the wisdom mind.

The Mass is direct encounter: the tap that opens our shell and awakens us to the presence of the divine, Buddha-nature, Christ within us. The Office is the ripening process that prepares us to receive that gift. The Office is a process of formation: as the Sufis say, "polishing the heart with practice." The

Mass is the container for a transformative moment of liberation and healing. So chant supports both dimensions of spiritual work: formation and transformation.

Both the Mass and the Office are intimately linked with the cycles of the year. There are in fact complete sets of chants for two overlapping cycles of annual time. The first is the cosmic drama of the Christ: from the Big Bang of the Nativity through the cycle of death and rebirth that is the Passion and on to the creative flowering of Pentecost, concluding finally with the end-time vision of Christ the King. Complementing this is the cycle of saints' days, a steady progression of greater and lesser acts of heroism and virtue, including the feasts of Mary and the apostles and the martyrs and teachers and leaders, culminating with the Feast of All Saints.

The Office sacralizes daily time providing an immediate, perceptible awareness of the shifts in our experience occasioned by the movement of the sun, the smells of morning dew, noonday dust, and evening cool, and the activity and stillness of our own bodies' cycles. Merton regularly notated his journal with the appropriate feast or saint's day, and often commented with poignancy on the connection between one's experience of time with a particular melody or the poetic aroma of a specific sacred text.

Merton's Experience of Chant

Monasticism was experiencing a resurgence in the 1940s and 50s. Gethsemani in particular was flourishing (we hear a lot about the flood of novices from Novice Master Thomas Merton). And the practice of Gregorian

chant was strong throughout the Catholic Church. The revival of chant which had begun in the mid-19th century at the Abbey of St Peter in Solesmes, France, had been fully approved by the Vatican and was now widely practiced and taught.

For most of his 27 years at the monastery, Merton participated fully in this traditional practice of chant, in daily prayer and at daily Mass. He continued through his ordination as a priest, through the publication of his many books and the growth of his renown, through his struggles with authority and his longings to leave Gethsemani, through his fascinations with Sufism and Buddhism, civil rights and peacemaking, through his development as a poet and artist. Chant was woven through all these experiences, and he refers it frequently.

Merton talks most explicitly about chant in his earlier writings, while his experience of life in the monastery was still fresh and vivid. In Merton's history of the Trappist order written in the late 1940s, *The Waters of Siloe*, he expresses a romantic notion of chant, painting the following picture of medieval monks praying together in the fields at mid-day:

The monks could tell by the sun when it was near the time for Sext [the noon prayer]. When the bell was heard ringing in the distant abbey church, the heads of the various work groups would give the signal, and their helpers would gather together and begin chanting, after the usual silent prayers, standing in two choirs among the wheat sheaves or in the rows of vines, with their grape baskets resting in the shadow of the leaves; or if working in the olive groves, they would pray beneath the silver

foliage, bowing in their gray robes, their hard, brown hands on their knees. (The Waters of Siloe, pp. 285-86)

We can feel in this passage some of the flavor of hard physical work that was part of Merton's own monastic life.

In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton touches with gratitude and appreciation on the role of chant in the round of his monastic life:

[But] the cold stones of the Abbey church ring with a chant that glows with living flame, with clean, profound desire. It is an austere warmth, the warmth of Gregorian chant. It is deep beyond ordinary emotion, and that is one reason why you never get tired of it.

Gregorian chant that should, by rights, be monotonous, because it has absolutely none of the tricks and resources of modern music, is full of a variety infinitely rich because it is subtle and spiritual and deep, and lies rooted far beyond the shallow level of virtuosity and 'technique,' even in the abysses of the spirit, and of the human soul. (The Seven Storey Mountain)

Merton regularly referred to his chant experience in his journals illustrated here by an entry from 1961, as he was beginning to take a much more active role in the realm of civil rights and peacemaking:

One unquestionable improvement in the liturgy of Holy Week is the recovery of a more ancient tone for the singing of the Passion. I do not know if this is a primitive Cistercian one, or Gallican, or what, but it is splendidly austere and noble. Tremendously moving, like great tolling Flemish bells stirring whole populations in medieval cities, or like the stone sides of Cistercian churches of the 12th century which echoed to those tones. The chant was a

mighty and living presence, binding us together in mystery. Great eloquence and sobriety that has almost been lost from the world and has been recovered. (from Turning Toward the World)

Two themes worthy of note here: again, we see his imagination captured by images of the simplicity and grandeur of medieval life; and a sense of the need to restore, as he puts it, "eloquence and sobriety" to a despairing and empty modern world.

Merton was at first a member of the choir; then a cantor, leading the choir; then a deacon, responsible for chanting the Gospel at Mass; and finally a priest. He struggled regularly with the quality of the chant at Gethsemani, particularly when he was leading it. Here is a description of his experience as cantor—and a general comment on the monastic aesthetics of his day—from his first published journal, *The Sign of Jonas*:

[Dom Gabriel] advised me not to worry about suffering in choir—told me how the cantors suffer at Solesmes! He said I should think of Jesus going up to Jerusalem with all the pilgrims roaring psalms out of their dusty throats. He is an artist but he says he has at last progressed to the point where he can live in a room like the one they have given him in the guest house without putting all the statues and pictures in a closet. (p.116)

When Dom Robert was here he advised me to pray that I would not be made cantor. I did and now I am not even assistant sub-cantor. I have reached my ambition of being nothing whatever in choir, and it gives me a certain amount of peace. I don't mind the singing now that I am not responsible for it. I can spend the office

praying instead of fretting. (p.146)

Leading singing was not the only distraction – sometimes the singing itself was difficult:

All the things that have been bothering me vanished until Vespers. As soon as I started to sing, everything came back. I was once again irritated with the choir and with the work I am doing and with everything in general and went back to the old refrain about being a hermit. Distractions overwhelm me as soon as the bell for office rings and we open the books and stand there ready to sing. However, if it gives God glory for me to stand there in confusion, I have no objection. (p.56)

Through the 1950s and into the early 60s Merton had a growing sense that he needed more space, more solitude, fewer intrusions of the community's life and need.

In a journal entry from 1958, he speaks of "the infinitely complicated nonsense about our chant – the ever more intricate arrangement for placing the schola now one way and now another – there are five or ten new rules promulgated every week on solemn occasions," and goes on to say that he would "gladly furnish" an empty choir stall "without the slightest hesitation."

The liturgical changes initiated by Vatican II were only just beginning to take full effect at Merton's death in 1968. He didn't feel that Catholicism was very successful in its response to the challenges of modernity, and it seems likely that the abandonment of chant for a less profound and spiritually rich music was disturbing to him:

Last evening at Vespers, singing the Magnificat antiphon of the Invention of

the Holy Cross, I was happy with the splendor of the Gregorian setting, its rhythm, its verve, its strength and entrain. Only when we were singing the last alleluia did I realize that this was probably the last time we would ever have this antiphon. The feast has been done away with. In memory of many sunny May afternoons in which I have sung this, and the hymn, I thought I would make of the antiphon a short English poem...(Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, 1966, p.175)

Sailing and Swimming

Through all the change and the difficulties there were moments of profound satisfaction for Merton in the experience of singing chant with the community. Here are a few of them. It is interesting to notice the recurrent metaphors of sailing and swimming that appear.

In choir the less I worried about the singing the more I was possessed by love. There is a lesson in that about being poor. You have got to be all the time cooperating with love in this house, and love sets a fast pace even at the beginning and if you don't keep up you'll get dropped. And yet any speed is too slow for love—and no speed is too fast for you if you will only let love drag you off your feet—after that you will have to sail the whole way. But our instinct is to get off and start walking...(Sign of Jonas, p.121)

And this prayer to the Virgin:

Lady...in the middle of the Gospel this morning...you were doing the singing and I was just resting and sailing along. (p.171)

It does no good to use big words to talk about Christ. That is why I am more and more thankful for the Office and for the Psalms. Their praise of

Him is perfect as well as neutral and God gives it to me to utter as more my own than any other language I could think up for myself. When I have the whole Church crying out with me, there is some chance of finding peace, in the feeling that God is somehow, after all, receiving praise from my lips. (p.226)

The vault is nice and quiet and when I went from there to second vespers of the Epiphany with the folios of a 15th century manuscript...fresh in my mind, the office was better than it had been for months, and love, love, love, burned in my heart. Still does. Waves of it come and go. I swim on the waves. It is beautiful. (p.147)

Merton and the Psalms

One of the things that makes Thomas Merton so popular is his ability to touch people in so many different ways. For some it is the frank self-revelation of his journals; for others his powerful social conscience, or his expansive, groundbreaking multifaith vision. What he loved most about his own writing was his poetry.

What I find most personally compelling about Merton's work is his commitment to the contemplative path, the paradoxical journey toward the place of emptiness where our true nature is revealed to us. In particular he speaks to me about the relationship between the mystery of contemplation—something that is given to us—and spiritual practice—the formal activity we engage in to cultivate a receptivity to contemplation.

Of course, chant is a part of this practice, one of the most obvious and visible forms of practice that Merton and his community engaged in. The question that I would pose to Merton is:

what is the relationship between the practice of chant and the contemplative journey?

To begin to explore this question it is necessary to define this complex word, "contemplation." Merton has much to say on the subject, but here are a few of his thoughts from *New Seeds of Contemplation*:

[C]ontemplation is a sudden gift of awareness, an awakening to the Real within all that is real. A vivid awareness of infinite Being at the roots of our own limited being. An awareness of our contingent reality as received, as a present from God, as a free gift of love. (p.3)

It is as if in creating us God asked a question, and in awakening us to contemplation He answered the question, so that the contemplative is at the same time, question and answer. (p.3)

Contemplation is always beyond our own knowledge, beyond our own light, beyond systems, beyond explanations, beyond discourse, beyond dialogue, beyond our own self. (p.2)

Bread in the Wilderness

So what part does a very specific, detailed, and demanding practice like Gregorian chant have in this mysterious, elusive awakening?

We are most fortunate to have a rich source of Merton's thinking that is directly relevant: the book *Bread in the Wilderness*, published in 1953. It is Merton's clearest and most complete statement about the texts that lie at the heart of the Divine Office: the Psalms. It is characteristic of his earlier work: at times falling into somewhat pious formulas and very closely allied with orthodox Catholic dogma. Nevertheless it sparkles with brilliance and

insight, and points toward the depths he would explore later in his life.

In his first chapter, "The Problem: Contemplation in the Liturgy," he starts out with St Benedict: monastic life, and the rule, are essentially simple, focused entirely on the search for God.

In saying that the Divine Office, the 'work of God,' held a central and dominant position in the monk's daily life, St Benedict was only reaffirming the truth that the monk came to the monastery to seek God. (p.12)

So chanting Psalms is, purely and solely, a way to seek God. But he wants to make clear that, though monks are obligated to chant Psalms, it does not follow that chanting Psalms is the purpose of a monk's life.

The monk does not exist for the sake of the obligation; the obligation exists for the sake of the monk. (p.13)

Typically Merton is looking for the interior significance of the experience, and wants to help us avoid getting stuck on the surface. The Office is the right thing to do because it "penetrates more deeply into the deepest recesses of the monk's soul than any other thing he does" (p.13).

He then goes on to spell out very clearly what the Psalms are not:

- Not a purely psychological "technique" of contemplation. ["The Psalms are not to be regarded as spiritual instruments, which, when they are properly manipulated, will lead us into some special psychological state." (p. 13)]
- Not merely a form of penance [as though "monastic choirs were invented only as a test of humility,

abnegation and dogged endurance. (p. 14)]

- Not merely a poetic or aesthetic experience. ["The desire for contemplation has nothing essential to do with art or with the aesthetic sense." (p. 14)]

So, then, what are the Psalms?

The psalms are theology. That means that they place us in direct contact with God, through the assent of faith to [God's] Revelation. It is because of this theological and dynamic effect that the Psalms are steps to contemplation....It is useless, then, to seek some secret esoteric 'method' of reciting the Psalter in order to 'get contemplation.' If we chant the psalms with faith, God will manifest Himself to us; and that is contemplation. (pp. 14-15)

Merton is not talking about a blind, unconscious faith. As Merton acknowledges, there are many things in the Psalms that seem positively disruptive to contemplative experience: Og the King of Bashan and Sehon King of the Amorites; phrases like "the just man shall wash his hands in the blood of the sinner." Even when the Psalms are ethical, Merton says, they are "rather prosaic and down to earth in their practicality."

Yet contemplatives have been formed, and transformed, for centuries by chanting the Psalms. Merton's conclusion, with the weight of Catholic tradition behind him, is that "[t]he 'real' meaning of the Psalms is held to be a spiritual kernel which must be arrived at by penetration of the 'letter'" (p.28). For Merton, as for Catholic tradition, the pulse that underlies all Scripture, and especially the Psalms, is the presence of Christ.

"The Psalms were seen by the Apostles to be the utterances not only of David but of the future Christ. God Himself, Who spoke in David and Who was to be incarnate as the Son of David, was speaking of His own coming as the Christ." (p.32)

There are three aspects to this relationship between the surface text of the Psalms and the coming of the Christ: the life and experience of Jesus, the life and experience of the church, the visible Body of Christ in the world, and the experience of the individual soul infused with Christ's presence. It is not hard to see all these layers explicitly present in the Psalms: we can see the incarnate Christ in Psalms of royal investiture ("you are my son: this day I have begotten you"); the crucified Christ in the Psalms of despair and lament ("my God, my God, why have you forsaken me"), the resurrected Christ in the Psalms of victory ("sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool"); we also see the wandering, erroneous, confused, but ultimately grace-filled life of the church in the Psalms of Exodus and wandering, exile and homecoming—the story of Israel; the movements of the Christ within the soul, in response to the promptings of the divine in the intimate moments of personal prayer. ("Hide me under the shadow of your wing," "As the deer longs for water-brooks, so longs my soul for you, O God").

Elsewhere the relationship is more subtle but everywhere, Merton says, the Psalms are "the voice of the Mystical Body of Christ. They are the songs of Christ. They are the songs of God in this world. Singing them, we become more fully incorporated into the mystery of God's action in human

history." (pp. 43-44)

So reciting, saying, chanting the Psalms, is not just a formative practice—not just something that gradually, through our own work, polishes our hearts. Saying the words of the Psalms and taking them into our bodies has a transformative effect:

This transformation is operated in us by the power of the Holy Spirit Who lives and acts in the word He has inspired. He, if you like, is the poet. But He is also the poetry. Or rather Christ, Whose Spirit He is, is the poetry of the Psalms ... The peculiar mystical impact with which certain verses of the Psalms suddenly produce this silent depth-charge in the heart of the contemplative is only to be accounted for by the fact that we, in the Spirit, recognize the Spirit singing in ourselves. (p.75)

This is the true sacramental mystery of chanting the Psalms, in Merton's view: it is a way for us to participate in the life of God, to be part of the self-expression of the Word of God in us and through us.

The Psalms and Contemplation

But as sweet as this experience may seem, as final as it may seem, the story doesn't end there. Merton's awareness that contemplation is ultimately "beyond explanations, beyond discourse, beyond dialogue, beyond our own self" requires one additional step. We are on the threshold here, early in his writing career, of the sensitivity, nuance, and spiritual courage that would ultimately take him far beyond pietistic conventions. The last section of *Bread in the Wilderness* is called "The Shadow of Thy Wings."

Here, Merton calls us to a deeper place, beyond the ecstasy of fulfilment

in the divine—an emotion of which he was often wryly sceptical.

The protection of darkness and silence is extremely necessary for the soul that begins to burn with these touches of the Spirit of God ... For when the soul has thus known God divinely, the memory of the encounter is sometimes stirred up by the lines of Psalms, to a blaze that unnerves it beyond its capacity to bear. In this degree of prayer there may arise high seas of inspiration that destroy the mind with the weight of a superhuman demand. But we have no help from God to tackle this demand. It is not the wave of His present power, but an undertow that follows after His passing

So Merton is identifying a sort of glamour or excess emotion that can rise up in us—something we can easily mistake for God. I love the image of the "undertow"—another watery metaphor like those we saw earlier. Something that feels very real but is in fact on the wrong track. He goes on:

This undertow, too, flows through the Psalms. It tends to attack us most where there are appeals made to our mind and will by the word of God, by ceremony and liturgy and chant.... This is the time when every line of the Psalms bursts forth with lights that we no longer need, spurious and tremendous inspirations that exhaust the soul and contribute nothing to its peace. And the soul seems to find no refuge where it may flee them. The only safety is in darkness

Merton is always awake, always aware of the other side of the story. If my soul flies too high, it can be dazzled by its own beauty, or the beauty of chant, or the beauty of the liturgy—and that is no longer God. The only way to

stay surely with God is in a continual return to darkness, a return to emptiness. Even as he embraces the theology of his church, even as he affirms the sacramental power of sacred words and their traditional meanings, he is already looking beyond the surface, and sees that there are mysterious depths he can scarcely begin to understand.

Merton has found the way to this emptiness here, in this early text, only at the conclusion of an extensive affirmation of Catholic doctrine. In another few years he put out another little book of monastic instruction, which we now know as *Contemplative Prayer*. This book is soaked in emptiness. By now he knows without a doubt that chanting Psalms, like other spiritual practices, like every aspect of the contemplative life, like every moment of life, must be done with the pure intention of seeking

God in the desert of darkness. In this Merton calls us back to that original home of monastic experience, the desert where the first monks developed the practices that made genuine contemplation possible.

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