

Journey to Redwoods Monastery

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I discovered Thomas Merton first on a meditation retreat hosted by two pastors from the German Protestant church. It was back in October 2001 shortly after 9/11 and the traumata of these events were still in the air and strongly felt within the small group who attended the retreat.

I did not know Merton at all and was drawn to the title of a book in a bookshelf of the retreat house, *Contemplation in a World of Action*. Wow – what an idea! Coming from a world of action – at that time I was a partner in an international accountancy firm – I felt that I was so dominated by action that I was almost on the verge of total burn-out. Actually in fact I was desperately searching for a sign to lead me into rest and contemplation, and I believe that what fascinated me most was a title suggesting that contemplation was not necessarily to be excluded in a world of action. In the book a section on prayer gave me a completely new concept of prayer, emphasising its mystical aspect, 'Prayer is the flowering of our inmost freedom, in response to the Word of God. Prayer is not only dialogue with God: it is the communion of our freedom with his ultimate freedom, his infinite spirit. It is the elevation of our limited freedom into the infinite freedom of the divine spirit, and of the divine love.' This reminded me of my earlier studies on Eastern metaphysics, and I was fascinated to come across these ideas and understand

them as also part of Christian culture.

Books like *New Seeds of Contemplation* and *The Inner Experience* followed and captivated me even more. Then I discovered Merton's journals. I began by reading *The Intimate Merton* with excerpts from the seven volumes of his journals, and I was especially fascinated to read the entries from 1968, his final year, when Merton was allowed by his new abbot to travel first within the United States and eventually to make his long journey to Asia. One reason for Merton's longer journeys within the US from May to October 1968, as well as invitations to speak on monastic retreats and conferences, was to look for a place of genuine silence and solitude.

The journal descriptions of the places he visited in North America had such an impact on me that I took time in August and September 2004 to drive all the way through Indiana, Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona to San Francisco. On the way I stayed in Louisville, at the Abbey of Gethsemani, the Abbey of Christ in the Desert (a very remote Benedictine monastery in New Mexico which Merton also visited in 1968) and finally arrived at Redwoods Monastery in Northern California.

What I would like to share is something about the final destination of my journey – Our Lady of the Redwoods which is a small community of eight women religious. It was founded in 1962

from the Cistercian monastery of Nazareth in Belgium. Merton stayed there twice in 1968, first in May and then for a second time before his departure to Asia from San Francisco airport in October 1968.

I arrived at the monastery early in September on a Saturday, late in the morning. The monastery is located in a very remote area in a sparsely populated part of Northern California. The next small village is about a forty five minute drive through mountain forests. It is 'nestled among the majestic redwoods and Douglas fir of the Lost Coast of Northern California, bordered on one side by the salmon bearing Mattole River'.²

**"The calm ocean...
A very active
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I had already contacted the sisters from Germany and had asked for permission to stay for a short retreat. Although disappointed to find this was not possible I decided anyway to visit the monastery and see if I could attend some services and the Sunday mass. In Germany monasteries are often also a tourist attraction with souvenir shops and bookshops on the premises, but when I arrived at Redwoods it appeared almost deserted. I could not even find an information board indicating that it was a place of interest, and it took me some time to discover the nuns who were assembled in the small

church. The abbess saw me wandering around and came out to greet me. She was clear that this was not the right time for me to stay, but I was relieved by her friendliness and pleased to be invited to join the mass on Sunday – the next day.

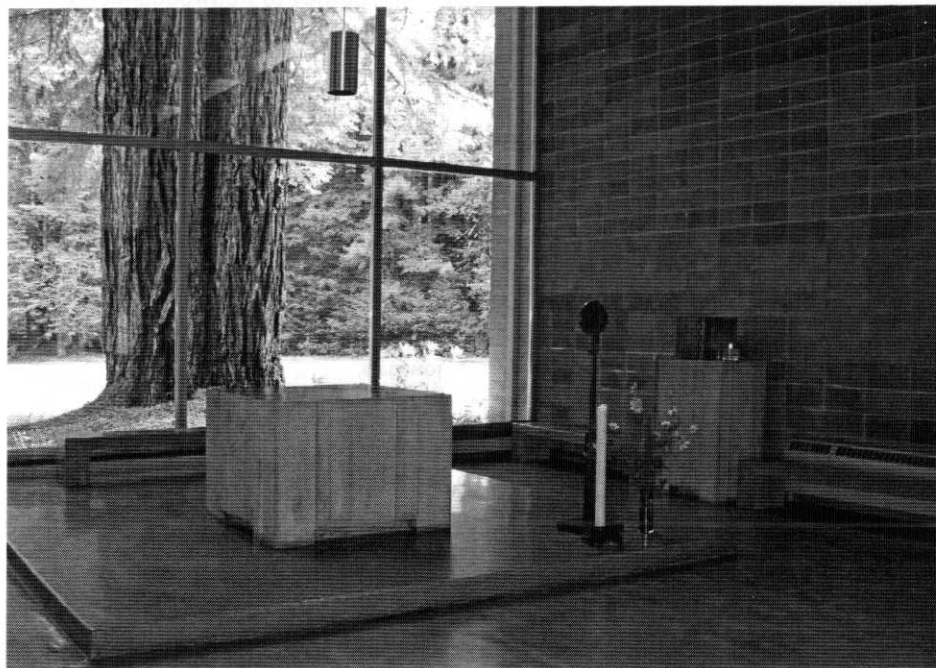
I booked into a small hotel near the Pacific coastline, about three quarters of an hour from the monastery. The scenery was almost as Merton describes it in his journals,

'... I am on the Pacific Shore – perhaps fifty miles south of Cape Mendocino. Wide open, deserted hillside frequently only by sheep and swallows, sun and wind. No people for miles either way. Breakers on the black sand. Crying gulls fly down and land neatly on their own shadows.....

... The calm ocean... very blue through the trees. Calla lilies growing wild. A very active flycatcher. The sun shines through the wings as through a Japanese fan. It is the feast of St. Pachomius. Many ferns. A large unfamiliar hawtype bird flew over a little while ago, perhaps a young eagle....'³

I returned to the monastery on Sunday for Holy Mass. It was actually my 50th birthday.

The chapel of the abbey is about twenty meters in length, ten meters in breadth and five meters high and at one side connected to the cloistered part of the monastery. The whole interior of the building is very simple, almost chaste, but I was overwhelmed by its beauty and warmth. The impression of beauty seems



The chapel at Redwoods Monastery (photo: the author)

partly achieved by the purity of style and even more by the integration of outside nature into the inside of the building. 'The window behind the altar in the Church opens out into nature where the worship is enveloped by the wonders of God's creation. The soul can not stop herself from proclaiming to God in the words of the ancient psalmist: "Heaven and earth are full of your glory".⁴ Behind the altar and a window covering the complete end wall of the building stands a majestic redwood tree. I was reminded of a famous concept applied in Japanese temple gardens, 'borrowed scenery' (the Japanese term is *shakkei*) where the outside nature forms an integral part of the garden architecture. The stony walls of the chapel are left blank except for one icon, which is a canvas showing Christ

painted by Jamini Roy. Merton selected the icon for the Redwoods sisters when he visited the painter in Calcutta together with Amiya Chakravarty. Chakravarty brought it later to the Redwoods monastery.⁵ The chapel does not contain any specific choir stalls for the sisters; instead everyone sits on wooden benches which are horseshoe shaped opposite the altar. The nuns deliberately do not separate themselves from the visitors but mingle with their guests. This gives everyone a feeling of belonging or connectedness and one is reminded of the Gospel, 'For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.'⁶

The mass was celebrated by Fr Maurice Flood, the male chaplain of the monastery, who used to be one of Merton's novice students at Gethsemani. Following

the sermon everyone was invited to share their own prayers of intercessions with the community. This was a surprise for me as people were not only asking God for help but expressing their appreciation and deep gratitude for what had recently happened to them. For the Eucharist service everyone formed a circle around the altar to receive the consecrated bread and wine. After the Mass the nuns and guests stayed in the church for a little while in order to hug each other, to exchange signs of peace and to communicate. I cannot explain what a deep impact this had on me. Although I was a complete stranger to all of them I was warmly received and felt deeply connected.

The greatest surprise however was still to come. As I was about to leave, Sr Kathy, the abbess, invited me to share Sunday lunch with the nuns. At that moment I couldn't have imagined a greater birthday present. Sunday lunch at Redwoods is something special indeed. While according to monastic rules an atmosphere of strict silence is always maintained especially during meals, Sunday lunch is different and intentionally meant as a social event. Everyone was at ease and I enjoyed a lively and cordial talk with the sisters. There are still two sisters remaining, Sr Godelieve and Sr Veronique, who originate from the Cistercian community of Our Lady of Nazareth in Brecht, Belgium and who belonged to the first nuns who founded this monastery back in 1962. Both met Merton when he visited the monastery in 1968. Sr Godelieve remembered Merton's special sense of humour. Later I was invited to stay for a couple of days in the guest house of the monastery and allowed to participate in daily meditation and prayer services.

The sisters of the Redwoods seek God by their commitment to a daily monastic schedule first codified by Saint Benedict in the sixth century, adapted to the present cultural and environmental context. Each day is marked by silence. The divine office, daily Eucharist and spiritual reading 'lectio divina' are complemented by daily periods of common meditation, silent prayer and manual works which brings a necessary balance where mindfulness of God is the common thread uniting the whole day's activities. In Morgan Atkinson's film biography on Thomas Merton (Atkinson actually dedicated the film to the Sisters of Redwoods) Sr Veronique says that for Merton the mundane, if we call the daily life mundane, and the sacred had to go together.

Following that first visit I have returned to Redwoods every year. In 2005 I was able to stay for a whole week and was also allowed to work with Sr Anne-Marie in the monastery garden. Everything that Merton expresses in his journal entries about the Redwoods I have experienced myself in some way,

'Lonely for the Pacific and the Redwoods. A sense that somehow when I was there I was unutterably happy – and maybe I was. Certainly, every minute I was there, especially by the sea, I felt I was at home – as if I had come a very long way to where I really belonged'.⁷

My visits have helped my understanding of Merton and have changed me. It is fascinating to see and good to know that what Merton wrote about is still practised at least somewhere on this planet.

I'd like to end with a section on prayer found on the Redwoods website. It starts with a quote from William of St. Thierry, a Cistercian author of the twelfth century and it reminds me what Merton wrote about prayer:

'Whatever the object of my prayer, I never pray or worship you in vain; the very act of praying brings me rich reward. Teach me then, Holy Spirit, to pray without ceasing, that you may grant me to rejoice unceasingly in you.'⁸

I experienced for myself that the Holy Spirit has found in the Redwoods monastery a good place to do his work.

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Notre Dame, Indiana, University of Notre Dame Press, 1998) p. 217.

2. www.redwoodsabbey.org

3. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, edited by Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O. (HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), pp. 97, 99.

4. www.redwoodsabbey.org

5. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal* (New York, New Directions, 1973), p. 32f.

6. Matthew 18:20

7. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 122.

8. William of St. Thierry, cited from www.redwoodsabbey.org

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