

A Stranger No More

Nass Cannon

An auto accident disrupts my planned presentation at the Seventh General Meeting of the Thomas Merton Society Meeting of Great Britain and Ireland. Through pondering the writings of Camus and Merton I gain during my hospitalization and recovery a deeper appreciation for the conference's theme, 'the voice of the stranger'. In the course of this unplanned journey, I reflect on the question, who is the stranger? I realize: the stranger is a person I do not know. The stranger is someone I am when in a foreign place. The stranger is the false self I created whom God does not know. The stranger is Christ, whose Spirit and my true self, become one Spirit making me and the other, strangers no more.

The stranger is a person I do not know

Shuddering in the cold on a mountain top, I await sunrise with my family. The sun rises beneath us with its warmth and beauty as we stand where Moses witnessed the glory of God on Mount Sinai. The trip is ordinary in every way – except for the camel ride to the foot of the steep climb to the summit and the Bedouin stranger who escorts me arm in arm to the peak, extolling, 'We have one Father'. On Mount Sinai and in my encounter with this stranger, I reflect on Merton's proclamation, 'God speaks, and God is to be heard, not only on Sinai, not only in my own heart but in the voice of the stranger... God must be allowed the right to speak unpredictably'.¹ And He does so. Two weeks later I am hospitalized in a trauma intensive care unit from an auto accident. Surrounded by strangers, I am totally dependent on them to tend to my body as I lie helpless, stripped physically, mentally, and emotionally. Through the care of these strangers, God speaks a message of care and love.

The stranger is someone I am when in a foreign place

A foreigner and stranger, I stand at Jethro's well in St Catherine's Monastery in the Sinai Peninsula where several thousand years' earlier Moses met his future wife and perceives himself a stranger: 'So Moses settled with this man who gave him his daughter Ziporah in marriage. She gave him a son and he named him Gershom because he said I am a stranger in a foreign land'.² Here, too, the Israelites trekked with Moses as foreigners. We, like the wandering Israelites, remain estranged from God until we, through our interior journey, awake to the realization of His indwelling Presence. We begin our journey when we confront our false selves.

The stranger is the false self I created whom God does not know

In his literary essays, Thomas Merton reflects on the works of Camus and provides insight into the false self that God does not know, as man alienated from his

true self made in the image and likeness of God. Such a person appears in Albert Camus' *The Stranger*. Camus chronicles the interior life of someone devoid of a meaningful encounter with another human being, much less God. However, through the protagonist, Meursault, we discover that his false self is akin to ours and that we are brothers in our alienation. Children of Adam and Eve, we all inherit the seeds of falsity that make us strangers in exile from our true selves. Camus correctly perceives this situation of man as absurd. Merton encourages us to acknowledge our false selves, seek our true one, and thereby be strangers no more.

Meursault, the protagonist in *The Stranger*, lives an alienated and isolated life with a selfhood that God does not know. The plot of this novel is that Meursault, casually and almost by happenstance, kills another man and is metaphorically convicted, more for not crying at his mother's funeral than for the murder. His detachment and indifference convict him in the eyes of society. The prosecutor sums up his case not with the act of murder but with Meursault's behavior at his mother's funeral, 'Gentlemen of the jury, the day after his mother's death, this man was out swimming, starting up a dubious liaison, and going to the movies, a comedy, for laughs. I have nothing further to say'.³

Camus quickly thrusts us into his character's detachment and poverty from the first sentence of the novel, which details Meursault's emphasis on the details of a telegram announcing his mother's death, rather than an emotional response to his loss. Meursault's ruminations and behavior outline the poverty of his relationships. He does not love his mother or his

girlfriend. Having witnessed an acquaintance beat a girlfriend, he promises to support him with the police. He also agrees to write a letter for him to seduce the girlfriend into returning for the purpose of continuing the abuse. Meursault realizes that he has killed a man only after the police interrogation. He feels like a spectator at his own trial and at times forgets that it is his trial, weighing the pros and cons of the arguments as though he were a member of the audience. Even his girlfriend testifies to Meursault's emotional detachment after his mother's death, describing the activities of their time together.

In his analysis of Camus' *The Stranger*, Thomas Merton points to Meursault's passivity in remaining in his poverty even though society is ultimately responsible for it. 'The poverty of Meursault is the product of a social system which needs people to be as he is and therefore manufactures them in quantity – and condemns them for being what they are... Meursault remained in his poverty, his absurd, solipsistic loneliness. He was not able to find and integrate himself completely by compassion and solidarity with others who, like himself, were poor'.⁴ Merton believes that '...the stranger is an ironic study in extreme poverty, the man who has no interiority, who does nothing, makes no choice, has no real purpose, cannot be justified, has not God; even his crime is not really his – it is so automatic, so mechanical'.⁵ His crime was almost accidental. He happened to be on the beach; the Arab of a previous encounter happened to be there. It was as though nature fired the shot through him:

It seemed to me as if the sky split open from one end to the other to rain down fire. My whole being tensed and I squeezed my hand around the revolver. The trigger gave; I felt the smooth underside of the butt; and there, in that noise, sharp and deafening at the same time, is where it all started... Then I fired four more times at the motionless body where the bullets lodged without leaving a trace. And it was like knocking four quick times on the door of unhappiness.⁶

Commenting on the murder, Merton observes, "The murder is the fruit of this passive, automatic existence—and an awakening from it. The shooting is almost entirely an accident. Completely unmotivated, it occurs under the blazing noonday sun of North Africa in a trance of acedia worthy of a desert father."⁷

Camus perceives Meursault as a man of integrity whose situation is absurd. His integrity arises from his authenticity. "He is a man poor and naked", who 'refuses every mask', who 'refuses to lie... by saying more than he feels... in love with the sun that casts no shadows' and animated 'by profound passion... for the absolute and for truth'.⁸ Meursault's authenticity relates to the congruence of his expressions and feelings within his capacity to perceive them. His passion for the absolute and the truth is limited to that absolute and that truth which he can know. Camus strips his character Meursault of illusions about himself and starkly portrays his selfhood as unconnected to those about him while revealing the depth of Meursault's interior poverty as well as

his poverty in relationships. Through this character, Camus provides a mirror in which we can view our own false selves. Our selfhood is a lens of sorts through which we view ourselves and others. Our capacity to see accurately depends on the clarity of this lens. The more opaque our selfhood becomes through its falsity, the more it obscures our ability to know, relate, and love ourselves and others. In regard to Meursault's passion for the absolute and truth, the falsity of his self-

Our selfhood is a lens of sorts through which we view ourselves and others. Our capacity to see accurately depends on the clarity of this lens. The more opaque our selfhood becomes through its falsity, the more it obscures our ability to know, relate, and love ourselves and others

hood limits and taints his capacity to seek the Absolute and the Truth which exist irrespective of Camus' and Meursault's ability to perceive them. Meursault's selfhood becomes an island isolated both from his true self who could perceive the Absolute and the Truth and the true selves of others. Camus uses the term 'Absurd' to communicate this sense of the

stranger's isolation and alienation. He explains the origin of this feeling of the absurd as follows:

A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and light man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of a memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of the absurd.⁹

Although Meursault recognizes the absurdity of society and refuses to play its game, he fails to recognize his own absurdity and the stranger within. His true poverty results from his lack of love underlying his passivity, indifference and detachment. Merton reflects on Camus's notion of the absurd and applies it to Meursault:

One gives life a meaning by living it in openness and solidarity with others. But Meursault is utterly impoverished because he is utterly alone. He is caught in his own absurdity because having rightly rejected the hypocrisy of systematic answers and explanations proposed by others, he has not entered into solidarity with anyone else. He does not love anyone else. He does not love Marie, or his mother, or his neighbors, or his friends.¹⁰

It is his failure to love that makes Meursault a stranger to himself. Camus demonstrates Meursault's indifference and self-centeredness while maintaining his emotional honesty in this playful exchange between Meursault and Maria:

She was wearing a pair of my pajamas with the sleeves rolled up. When she laughed I wanted her again. A minute later she asked me if I loved her. I told her it didn't mean anything but that I didn't think so. She looked sad. But as we were fixing lunch, and for no apparent reason, she laughed in such a way that I kissed her.¹¹

Meursault permanently excludes the possibility of love by his disbelief in repentance and redemption. He wilfully excludes the option of transcending his alienated selfhood in a moment of rage triggered by the prison chaplain's bothersome questions. Meursault comments, "The chaplain knew the game well too, I could tell right away: his gaze never faltered. And his voice didn't falter, either, when he said, "Have you no hope at all? And do you really live with the thought that when you die, you die, and nothing remains?" "Yes," I said."¹² Rejecting the entreaties of the prison priest, Meursault erupts into rage directed at the chaplain and that rage results in his epiphany. In awakening to the world's indifference, Meursault forgoes the possibility of love and hope and has only the wish to experience the mob's hate at his execution.

As if that blind rage has washed me clean, rid me of hope; for the first time, that night alive with signs and stars, I opened myself to the gentle indifference of the world. Finding it so much like myself – so like a brother, really – I felt that I had been happy and that I was happy again. For everything to be consummated, for me to feel less alone, I had only to wish that there be a large crowd of spectators the day of my execution and that they greet me with cries of hate.¹³

By his fixed and arrested interior development, Meursault chooses alienation over love. This is his true prison making him a stranger to others as well as to himself. It is also ours. To escape this prison we must take a journey which Meursault refused to make. We must abandon our false selves in search of our true selves made in the image and likeness of God. This journey passes through the stranger in us that God does not know and the stranger we make of others because we are estranged from our true selves. In Merton's words:

Everyone of us is shadowed by a false self. This is the [person] I want myself to be but who cannot exist, because God does not know anything about him. And to be unknown to God is altogether too much privacy. My false and private self is the one who wants to exist outside the reach of God's will and God's love – outside of reality and

outside of life. And such a self cannot help but be an illusion.¹⁴

Such is the false selfhood of Meursault and ourselves – an illusion outside of God's love and outside of life. Those on their journey to their true selves must acknowledge this interior stranger. Merton observes:

In returning to God and to ourselves, we have to begin with what we actually are. We have to start from our alienated condition. We are prodigals in a distant country, 'the region of unlikeness,' and we travel far in that region before we seem to reach our own land (and yet secretly we are in our own land all the time!).¹⁵

The stranger, in one of his disguises, is Christ, whose Spirit and my true self, become one Spirit making me and the other, strangers no more.

To recognize Christ in the stranger we must first pass through the stranger within ourselves. I can identify with Meursault by finding aspects of his selfhood within myself. In a more hedonistic phase of my life, I experienced the detachment, indifference and subsequent alienation arising from a self-centeredness that caused a rift between me and my life. I found that at the end of this path was not only a sense of the Absurd but also despair. With the aid of grace, I attempt to trace the roots of this selfhood incapable of love. I discover that it originates in an impulse to make a god of myself which nurtures a fabricated self built upon drives to lust, power, and wealth.

The project of this self is not to love but to control and dominate, to be admired and worshipped. I share with Meursault a false selfhood which is detached, alienated, and unloving. It has its roots in the mysterious consequences of Adam's and Eve's choice to be like God. Camus appears to me to be correct. Our situation is absurd because our self-centeredness imprisons us within a falsity which is divorced from life and disconnected from our setting. However there is another self hidden within us, the one through which we love. There is a true self made in the image and likeness of God which bathes in the light of the indwelling presence of God within us. Paradoxically, the false self strives to make of itself a god, whereas the true self is in mystery co-joined to God.

Merton shows us the way out of our falsity.

A man cannot enter into the deepest center of himself and pass through that center into God unless he is able to pass entirely out of himself and empty himself and give himself to other people in the purity of selfless love.¹⁶

For Merton, spirituality was precisely this journey from the false self to the true self. It is a journey to God which passes through the heart of the stranger and engages the stranger within. It is a gift of grace for the seeker to have a parched thirst to see the face of the living God. This thirst leads him into the warrens and caverns of his own interior with its attachments, delusions, and the ferocity of its desires. Slow progress is made by one's

efforts. Faster growth occurs with the help of the Spirit. St. John of the Cross describes this process in the *Dark Night of the Soul* and in *The Living Flame of Love*. Like a log of wood burnt by fire, the soul is slowly purified by the Spirit until it becomes a living flame itself. For unlike Meursault who forsook hope, love and life after death based on beliefs which excluded repentance and redemption, this person embraces hope, love, and life after death based on an encounter with this Spiritual Fire.

We are destined for an encounter with an incomprehensible Living God whose

That is a goal of the contemplative journey - to realize that tiny spark at the core of our being which is Love itself, where His Being and our being are one

nature is Love. It is a Love without boundaries. This redemptive Love allows a Son to make of Himself a sacrifice and be nailed to a cross. It is, in the end, a Love that is not explainable. Nor are we asked to explain it but rather to live in it. That is a goal of the contemplative journey – to realize that tiny spark at the core of our being which is Love itself, where His Being and our being are one. Merton comments, 'If the deepest ground of my being is love, then in that very love itself and nowhere else will I find myself, and the world, and my brother [and sister] in Christ. It is not a

question of either/or—but of all in one. . . of wholeness, wholeheartedness and unity . . . which finds the same ground of love in everything.”¹⁷ Our true self is in union with Love for which there is no stranger, either within or without. To know that love as the center of one’s being is to know the center of all beings. With that knowledge, the other is a stranger no more.

Merton witnesses to the union of our true selves and God’s Spirit:

The contemplative has nothing to tell you except to reassure you and say that, if you dare to penetrate your own silence and risk the sharing of that solitude with the lonely other who seeks God through you, then you will truly recover the light and the capacity to understand what is beyond words and beyond explanations because it is too close to be explained: it is the intimate union, in the depths of your own heart, of God’s spirit and your own secret inmost self, so that you and [God] are in all truth One Spirit.¹⁸

From these insights and his life journey, Merton grasps the realization that someone may be a stranger to himself and others as a false self divorced from his true self, but concludes that in the reality of our existence in God, there are no strangers. As one of his last testaments he proclaimed that we have to become what we already are – we are already one. When we awaken to this realization, we come to recognize that the other as a stranger is Christ in one of his disguises.

When we journey beyond the stranger whom God does not know within ourselves, we discover that Christ’s spirit dwells within us and makes us and the other, strangers no more.

Epilogue

Juxtaposing my exterior ascent of Mount Sinai and my interior descent during my hospitalization, I experience my own alienation from my true self as I recall a young boy racing after me near the great pyramids of Egypt pleading for me to buy his postcards. Even after I stepped into the van, he ran alongside, his face contorted into an anguished plea. His desperation was more about survival than peddling. I am awake all night accused by the flame of my conscience of my rich American indifference to the cry of the poor. There remains incompleteness in me, in my world, the unmet cry of the poor, the stranger in the boy racing along the van, the cry of Meursault, the cry of those who care for me in the hospital – there are those to whom I am still a stranger and who indict me as a stranger to myself. Yet amidst my brokenness, in the distance of my interior, I hear faintly a plea from the unborn Christ – the ultimate stranger – to me and to you, the innkeepers of the world, ‘Please don’t shut me out!’

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, ‘A Letter to Pablo Antonia Cuadra Concerning Giants’, in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, New York: New Directions Books, 1977, p.384.
2. New Jerusalem Bible, Exodus 2:19, 21-22, Alexander Jones, (gen. ed.). New York: Doubleday, 1966.

3. Peter Schofer, *The Rhetoric of the Text: Causality, Metaphor, and Irony, Camus’s L’Etranger: Fifty Year On*. New York: St. Martin Press, 1992, p.143.
4. Thomas Merton, ‘The Stranger: Poverty of an Antihero’ in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, Patrick Hart (ed.). New York: New Directions Books, 1985, p.301.
5. *Ibid.*, p.292.
6. Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, Matthew Ward (trans.). New York: Vintage International, 1989, p.59.
7. Thomas Merton, ‘The Stranger: Poverty of an Antihero’ in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, op. cit., p.294.
8. *Ibid.*, p.298.
9. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Justin O’Brien (trans.), Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975, p.13.
10. Thomas Merton, ‘The Stranger: Poverty of an Antihero’ in *The Literary*

Essays of Thomas Merton, op. cit., p.299.

11. Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, Matthew Ward (trans). op cit., p.35.

12. *Ibid.*, p.117.

13. *Ibid.*, p.122-23.

14. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, New York: New Directions Books, 1972, p.33.

15. *Ibid.*, p.280-81.

16. *Ibid.*, p.64.

17. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998, p.155-156.

18. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, William H. Shannon (ed.) New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985, p.158.

Nass Cannon is a Clinical Professor of Medicine at the University of Alabama and Chief of Staff at Cooper Green Hospital, Birmingham, Alabama.

A Meeting of the Southern Chapter of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland

Exploring the Intra Faith Dialogue of Thomas Merton with Fiona Gardner

11 am-4pm
Saturday 27th June

The Sisters of Bethany, 7 Nelson Road, Southsea, PO5 2AR

£12 - including refreshments and light lunch

For further information, please contact Derek Reeve on
023 9282 7881 or at djwis@btinternet.com