

Thomas Merton's 'One only Kindness'

Fernando Beltrán Llavador

Introduction

In *Beholding Paradise*, the book on the photographs of Thomas Merton, its editor Paul Pearson refers to Merton's journal entry for March 19, 1958 and notes that it records not only the so-called 'Louisville epiphany', when Merton realized that he loved all the people in the shopping district — that they were his and he theirs — but also that he bought, amongst 'other marvellous books', *The Family of Man*, with 'all those fabulous pictures'. Paul Pearson informs us that this was the book that accompanied Edward Steichen's selection of photographs exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1955. The MoMA website provides basic background information on this 'ambitious exhibition', cast in the form of a photo essay, which was meant to be 'a forthright declaration of global solidarity in the decade following World War II' and a celebration of 'the universal aspects of the human experience'.¹ Paul Pearson observes that Merton's epiphany 'is mirrored in his experience of the photographs in Steichen's book'.² Merton, in fact, sees in the whole book 'a picture of Christ' ('There, there is Christ in my own Kind, my own Kind'), and equates the meaning of 'Kind' to 'likeness', 'love', and 'child'. 'The one secret between us,' he adds, is 'that we are all one Kind', 'embraced in one only heart, one only Kindness, which is the Heart and Kindness of Christ.' And if in describing his epiphany he had underlined the fact that 'the Word was made flesh and became, too, a member of the Human Race,' a few paragraphs later, writing on Steichen's book of photographs, Merton placed his only hope of finding wisdom 'in Godmanhood: our own manhood transformed in God!'³

The Family of Man

In his recent autobiography, Jim Forest devotes a short chapter to that exhibition, which he visited when he was fourteen. For him, the vast sequence of black-and-white photos proved that 'we are indeed one

family bound together in love, pain, labor, awe, anger, gratitude, and grief.' And just as Merton had perceived in the catalogue of the exhibition a reflection of Christ, Jim Forest views the catalogue, which he still treasures, as 'a Bible without words' whose 'golden thread' is the 'us-ness of being'. Besides showing the unity beneath our separateness, the exhibition displayed the beauty of the 'unembarrassed nudity of Adam and Eve before the Fall' in the form of a photo of 'an un-self conscious young Indonesian woman with full, bare breasts shopping in a vegetable market'. In contrast it also contained a clear warning, encapsulated in the image of a Japanese boy who had survived Hiroshima and who seemed to be staring at what his eyes had seen, and which 'was burned into his retinas', rather than at what he was seeing when he was being photographed.⁴

The cover of *The Family of Man* describes its content as 'The greatest exhibition of all time — 503 pictures from 68 countries'. Carl Sandburg, who wrote the prologue, summed up the range of this impressive endeavour as follows: 'If the human face is "the masterpiece of God" it is here then in a thousand fateful registrations.'⁵ And in the introduction, Edward Steichen himself explains that the exhibition, with photographs from '273 men and women, amateurs and professionals, famed and unknown', was conceived as 'a mirror of the essential oneness of mankind throughout the world'.⁶

Amongst the recognizable photos, Dorothea Lange's famous photograph of a migrant mother during the Great Depression stands out, but its meaning gains further import within the overall tapestry of the accompanying images. In spite of critical voices against the project's ideological bias including those of Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes and John Berger,⁷ the exhibition offered a global view of the human presence on the same earth that over a decade later humans could see for the first time from outer space. This was no small feat and, as Jim Forest vividly recalls, the 8½ x 11-inch colour photograph of the earth, as seen from Apollo 11, in July 16, 1969, which he received while in prison, celebrates 'our own planet, seen whole, small, and vulnerable, a colourful island of cloud-shrouded life in the vast black night of space.' And he shares with us the impression of Apollo 14 astronaut Edgar Mitchell that, by looking at the Earth from the moon, 'you develop an instant global consciousness, a people orientation, an intense dissatisfaction with the state of the world, and a compulsion to do something about it.'⁸

One year before, in 1968, Merton had addressed the following question: 'What does the contemplative life or the life of prayer, solitude,

silence, meditation, mean to man in the atomic age?'⁹ The question remains: what does it mean to men and women today? His experience of Christ in the solitude of the cloister and in the busyness of urban life, in himself and in others, and the contemplation and growing consciousness of the utter poverty and glory of the human condition, the awareness of his 'kind' and the 'kinship' with his fellow human beings, within and beyond monastic cloisters, religious affiliations, and national boundaries may have prepared the path towards a kind of relatedness, integration, and catholicity 'no longer limited by the culture in which he [had] grown up.'¹⁰

Louisville — 1958 & 1959

In her recent book, *The Seeker and the Monk*, Sophronia Scott has engaged in 'everyday conversations' with Thomas Merton. Reflecting on 'how to revive spirit after an epiphany', she reminds readers of the content of a unique sign to mark a mystical experience in the United States, the plaque in the town of Louisville at the site of Merton's epiphany, which says that 'Merton's sudden insight ... led him to redefine his monastic identity with greater involvement in social justice issues.'¹¹ She next invites us to 'fast forward one year' and points to the fact that Merton now records in his journal that he hated the very same town, and feels that the world oppresses him 'with a sense of infinite clutter and confusion — and this is what is worldly in the monastery also.'¹² Her first reaction is natural and, to some extent, one to be expected; in her own words: 'Part of me wants to say, "What the heck, Thomas?"'¹³ But she next agrees with Lawrence Cunningham in diagnosing *acedia* as a plausible cause for such a seemingly striking chasm and suggests, as much as she identifies it in Merton, the practice of faith as a way of bringing light back to the heart.¹⁴

Thus, whereas in 1958 Louisville had been the locus of a revelation of a world inhabited by grace-filled people, in 1959 the same town had unveiled an opacity and lack of light in his monastery as much as in the rest of the world. And yet, do the two moments show a real spiritual dissonance or are they, rather, the very thread of mercy that binds us to the heights of Mount Tabor and to the depths of Christ's descent into hell as 'one only Kindness'? Are they two, and collide, or are they one, or at least one coherent continuum?

The Wisdom of the Cross

One of Master Shōgen Sūgaku's 'Three Turning Words', phrases which he made up and used to examine his disciples in order to choose a Dharma

successor when he grew old, reads: 'Why is it that the crimson lines (that is, the lines of tears) of a clearly enlightened person never cease to flow?'¹⁵ And reflecting on 'The Wisdom of the Cross', Father Joseph Wong, a Benedictine monk of the Camaldolese Congregation, who has written on the Tao and the Trinity, affirms that Christians 'believe that Christ even today is present in the suffering people and continues to suffer in solidarity with them.'¹⁶

If this is so, what kind of wisdom is this 'wisdom of the Cross'? What kind of 'Kindness' is Christ's Kindness? Ramón Cao has written an extensive essay on Merton as a diarist where he tracks down some of 'the pages that nourished his reflections, inhabited his dreams, and encouraged him in his work,'¹⁷ and concludes that they were 'a way to participate in that lively conversation with both the living and the dead in which, ultimately, culture consists.'¹⁸ If we want to do justice to Merton's craft as a diarist and to the entirety of Merton's entry where he jotted down both his epiphany and the response prompted by *The Family of Man* catalogue, we cannot ignore the brief paragraph between the two, where he adopts an epistolary mode and converses with 'Dear Proverb', the young Jewish girl he had met in a 'charming dream' and about whom he had written nine days earlier in his journal entry for February 28. There, once awake, and rationalizing it 'complacently', he evokes the Book of Wisdom ('I loved wisdom and sought to make her my wife') and names her Sophia.¹⁹ On March 19 Merton writes for the second time not *about* Proverb but *to* her, as his 'dear child sent to me by God!' He confides to her that he had kept his promise and refrained from speaking of her until seeing her again. In the preceding paragraph he had transitioned from thanking God for being 'only another member of the human race' to acknowledging having seen in 'the woman-ness' of 'all the women in the world' the image of God brought into the world, recognizing in each of them 'Wisdom and Sophia and Our Lady.'²⁰

In his study on the life transforming journeys of Dôgen, Merton, and Jung, Robert Gunn underlines that in April of 1958, one month after the Louisville 'revelation', Merton asked his literary agent, Naomi Burton, to get him Pasternak's novel *Dr. Zhivago*, with whose character, Lara, Merton resonated 'as a reflection of what he was experiencing as *Sophia*, the feminine principle of wisdom.'²¹ In his detailed volume devoted to Sophia, significantly subtitled *The hidden Christ of Thomas Merton*, Christopher Pramuk concludes that 'the sophiological perspective is alive to God's presence in the world never as "abstract essence", or "merely" symbolically, but concretely, sacramentally, more than literally.'²²

Our Inner Stranger

At this point, I would like to bring in Bonnie Thurston's suggestion that 'it was after [Merton] met and began to befriend the inner stranger ... that his focus could shift outward to the world and its terrible problems,' and that after he had his Louisville experience, 'he knew something of himself, he'd seen something of his true self and therefore he could recognize his unity with others and see the face of Christ in them;' that, in fact, 'his important later teaching on civil rights and social justice and peace and ecology and disarmament and interreligious dialogue, all of it came largely after he had walked a long way on his own journey of self-discovery.' For Thurston, 'the text of his life suggests that healing the world ... begins when we befriend our own inner stranger.'²³

Indeed, one can read in Pope Francis' 2020 Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti* on Fraternity and Social Friendship, which encourages one to 'dream as a single human family',²⁴ as a contemporary expression of 'One only Kindness'. More recently, in the course of an interreligious meeting in Iraq, Pope Francis brought together Jews, Christians and Muslims, with brothers and sisters of other religions, to 'honour our father Abraham by doing as he did: *we look up to heaven and we journey on earth.*' Using plain words, his message is pristine clear:

Thousands of years later, as we look up to the same sky, those same stars appear. They illumine the darkest nights because they shine *together*. Heaven thus imparts a message of unity: the Almighty above invites us never to separate ourselves from our neighbours. The *otherness* of God points us towards others, towards our brothers and sisters. ... God urges us to love. This is true religiosity: to worship God and to love our neighbour.²⁵

Pope Francis encyclical letter and his address are interspersed with names, faces, stories, testimonies, concrete proposals, examples, shared longings, words that announce and denounce and that, as he said of Merton, challenge the certitudes of our time, open 'new horizons' and promote 'peace between peoples and religions'.²⁶

Witnesses to Love

Julian of Norwich called Jesus 'our true Mother', for he feeds us 'not with milk but with himself, opening his side to us, and calling out all our love.' At the end of her revelations, she unveils 'our Lord's meaning in this thing': 'Love was his meaning.'²⁷ And as he records at the end of his

autobiography, Merton hears God saying to him: "I will give you what you desire. ... I will lead you by the way you cannot possibly understand. ... [A]nd you shall die in Me and find all things in My mercy which has created you for this end."²⁸ Saint John of the Cross wrote that, unlike under the old law, God, 'In giving us his Son, his only Word (for he possesses no other), he spoke everything to us at once in this sole Word -and he has no more to say.'²⁹ Despite their different inflections, in their unique way, these three stand as witnesses to love as the ultimate meaning, to mercy as the source of everything, and to the Word, his Son and All, as God's gift to us.

What Wisdom is this? Who is this Wisdom? Whose 'likeness', 'child', 'love' are we? Whose Oneness? Whose 'Kindness'? Whose folly? Whose dance? Whose language, whose name, whose Word, whose *is-ness*, whose *us-ness*? Whose is our longing and whose our belonging?

In Merton's poignant and poetic words, he asks us:³⁰

Who
Are You? Whose
Silence are you?

Notes

1. See <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2429> (accessed 07/07/21).
2. Paul Pearson, ed., *Beholding Paradise: The Photographs of Thomas Merton* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2020), p. xii.
3. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude, The Journals of Thomas Merton, Vol. 3*, ed. Lawrence Cunningham (New York: HarperSan Francisco, 1996), entry for March 19, 1958, pp. 182-183.
4. Jim Forest, *Writing Straight with Crooked Lines: A Memoir* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2020), pp. 49-50.
5. Carl Sandburg, Prologue, *The Family of Man* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1955), p. 2.
6. Edward Steichen, Introduction, *The Family of Man*, pp. 4-5.
7. Gerd Hurm, Reitz Anke and Zamir Shamoon, *The Family of Man Revisited. Photography in a Global Age* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2018); Jean Back and Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff, eds., "The Family of Man," 1955-2001: *Humanism and Postmodernism; a Reappraisal of the Photo Exhibition by Edward Steichen* (Marburg, Germany: Jonas, 2004).
8. *Writing Straight with Crooked Lines: A Memoir*, pp. 207-208.
9. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), p. 157.
10. Thomas Merton, "Final Integration", *Contemplation in a World of Action*, p. 212.
11. An image of the plaque can be found at: <https://mepkinabbey.org/new-fourth-and-walnut/>
12. *A Search for Solitude*, entry for August 15, 1959, p. 316.

13. Sophronia Scott, *The Seeker and the Monk: Everyday conversations with Thomas Merton* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2021), pp. 65-67.
14. *A Search for Solitude*, Introduction by Lawrence Cunningham, pp. xvii-xviii.
15. Koûn Yamada, *Gateless Gate* (translation and commentary of the *Mumonkan*) (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1979), p. 99.
16. Donald W. Mitchell and James Wiseman, OSB, eds., *Transforming Suffering: Reflections on Finding Peace in Troubled Times* (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Auckland: Doubleday, 2003), p. 49.
17. Ramón Cao Martínez, 'The Readings of A Diarist: Thomas Merton as a Reader of Journals and Related Works' (Part 1), *Cistercian Studies Quarterly*, 50.2 (2015), p. 196.
18. Ramón Cao Martínez, 'The Readings of A Diarist: Thomas Merton as a Reader of Journals and Related Works' (Part 2), *Cistercian Studies Quarterly*, 50.3 (2015), p. 367.
19. *A Search for Solitude*, p. 176.
20. *A Search for Solitude*, p. 182.
21. Robert Jingen Gunn, *Journeys into Emptiness: Dôgen, Merton, Jung and the Quest for Transformation* (New York / Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2000), p. 161.
22. Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Collegeville, Minnesota, 2009), p. 297.
23. Bonnie Thurston, "'Inward Stranger?'" Challenge, Coordinates, and Consequences' (Plenary Conference. 'Thou Inward Stranger'. ITMS Meeting 2021 (June 23-26, 2021). (minutes 45:40 to 47:24 of the online and video-recorded presentation at US Eastern -New York- 8 pm of June 23).
24. Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter Fratelli Tutti on Fraternity and Social Friendship* (3 October 2020). See https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html
25. Pope Francis, *Address of His Holiness. Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Pope Francis to Iraq (5-8 March 2021)*. (Interreligious Meeting. Plain of Ur. Saturday, 6 March 2021). See <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/events/event.dir.html/content/vaticanevents/en/2021/3/6/iraq-incontro-interreligioso.html>
26. Pope Francis, *Address of the Holy Father. Visit to the Joint Session of the United States Congress* (United States Capitol, Washington, D.C. Thursday, 24 September 2015). See https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150924_usa-us-congress.html
27. Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love* (Harmonsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1966), pp. 169, 211.
28. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1948), p. 422.
29. Saint John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel* (Book 2, Chapter XXII, 3), in Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D., and Otilio Rodríguez, O.C.D., transl., *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross* (Washington: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1991), p. 230.

30. Thomas Merton, 'In Silence', *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), p. 280.

Fernando Beltrán Llavador completed his doctoral thesis on Thomas Merton at the University of Valencia (Spain). Since then he keeps learning from and disseminating Merton's message through publications, retreats, conferences, and translations into Spanish of books by and about him.

Mare of Easttown

Mare of Easttown is an seven-part American crime drama series with a script by Brad Ingelsby released in April 2021 and available on Amazon Prime Video. It stars Kate Winslet as detective Mare Sheehan investigating the murder of a teenage mother in a small town in Pennsylvania while trying to keep her own life from falling apart. In his review of the series in *The Tablet* in June 2021, Mark Lawson claimed that it was 'a masterpiece of Catholic writing in the tradition of Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh', with Mare as a 'standout heroine'.

From a scene from the first episode when Mare, Father Dan Hastings - a Catholic priest and Mare's cousin - and Mare's mother, Helen, are all together in Mare's kitchen:

Mare: Are you here to guilt me into returning to the church again, Danny?

Dan: No, no, no. I gave up on that a while ago.

Mare: Freddie broke into Bethy's again. Did he come by the shelter this afternoon?

Dan: Deacon Mark made sure he had a bed for the weekend.

Helen: Poor Bethy. I don't know how she handles it.

Dan: How's she holding up?

Mare: Well, her mom's got Parkinson's, and her brother's smashing her kids' piggy banks to buy Dilaudid. I think she's wondering where the hell God is in her life.

Dan: Depends on what her view of God is. Merton says that our idea of God tells us more about ourselves than about Him.

Mare: When you're up at the altar preaching to the congregation, you ever get the feeling no one's listening?

Dan: Every single day.

The Merton quote is from *New Seeds of Contemplation*, chapter 3, 'Seeds of Contemplation'.

Editor