The Seven Storey Mountain and My Crisis of Vocation

Gregory Hillis

My vocational crisis

I was eleven years old when I decided I wanted to be a teacher. There was something about the way my Social Studies teacher taught the material that I found mesmerizing, and I remember thinking to myself that I wanted to do what he was doing. When I was sixteen, I read Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and was so taken with the novel that I concluded that I wanted to become a scholar of Russian literature. Under the influence of a wonderful professor of church history during my undergraduate studies, I became captivated by historical theology and realized that I wanted to devote myself to this field of academic study. While my appreciation for Russian literature never abated, historical theology captivated me completely. After completing an undergraduate degree in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, I decided to pursue further studies across the country in Ontario at the University of Waterloo.

Before moving to Waterloo, I got married. Kim and I met when we were both eighteen, and even though Kim knew I had many years of school remaining to become an academic, she was up for the adventure. We married in July and moved across the country in August. The move was difficult; we had very little money and we were lonely. More seriously, I didn't enjoy my studies as much as I had hoped, and I started seriously to question whether I wanted to be an academic.

For the first time since I was in elementary school, I found myself in a vocational crisis, unsure of what direction my life was going to take. What made this crisis that much more painful was the fact that I had asked Kim to move away from family and across the country so I could pursue something I wasn't sure I felt called to do anymore.

We travelled back to Calgary over the Christmas break after my first semester at the University of Waterloo. Looking for something to read over the break, I noticed that I had a copy of Thomas Merton's 1948

autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. I don't remember how or why I had a copy, but something about the book intrigued me. I took it off the shelf and read it over the holidays.

I was not prepared for the impact *The Seven Storey Mountain* would have on me, particularly given what I was experiencing at that time of my life.

The book captivated me from its opening paragraph. Merton exposed me to a life and a world about which I knew little. Here was the story of a man who was born in France, who lost both parents at a young age, who travelled extensively and partied riotously as a young man, and who found himself drawn to Catholicism and ultimately to monastic life. His life experiences were very different from my own. At the time I read this book, I was a young, newly married, Evangelical Christian who had never experienced the kind of profound lack of stability that Merton experienced in his youth. I was not, at the time, attracted to Roman Catholicism (this would change, in no small part due to Merton), and I had only a passing familiarity with monasticism and monastic life. And yet, the book resonated with me on a level that no book had ever done previously. Why?

Merton's call to the priesthood

The Seven Storey Mountain is the story of a man discovering faith and finding meaning in a life devoted to prayer and contemplation. I didn't think I was going to become a Roman Catholic and, as a newly married man, I knew I wasn't going to enter a monastery. But what captivated me about his autobiography were the vocational struggles he experienced after becoming a Catholic. As the world teetered on the brink of war in 1940, Merton had a burgeoning sense that he was called to the priesthood. This calling became more definitive in a dramatic way during Eucharistic adoration at St. Francis Xavier parish on Sixteenth Street in New York. As he gazed at the consecrated host in the monstrance, Merton believed he had been called into that church to answer one question—'Do you really want to be a priest?' And when the priest lifted the monstrance to bless the people, Merton answered the call—'Yes, I want to be a priest, with all my heart I want it. If it is Your will, make me a priest—make me a priest.'[1] From that moment forward, Merton threw himself headlong into this vocation. In conversation with a Catholic professor, Daniel Walsh, he decided on pursuing the priesthood with the Franciscans. He soon met with the Franciscans and arrangements were made for him to enter the novitiate at the end of the summer.

In the spring of that year, he traveled to Cuba. He returned home filled with peace and excited at the prospect of joining the Franciscans. However, as he wrote, 'the blow fell suddenly.' For months, he experienced the contentment of knowing what he was to do with his life. He felt he had a clear direction and purpose, a vocation, a sense of meaning in a world that seemed increasingly meaningless. And then, Merton wrote, 'one day I woke up to find that the peace I had known for six months or more had suddenly gone.'[2]

Merton's crumbling vocation

In contrast to the certainty he felt earlier, Merton started to question whether he really had a vocation to the priesthood. And the questioning was rooted in his recollection of the kind of person he had been prior to his conversion to Catholicism. Prior to making his way to Columbia University to study English, Merton spent what he later referred to as a 'year of riotous living' at Cambridge University where he attended on a scholarship.[3] Merton is light on details in *The Seven Storey Mountain* about precisely what happened during his time at Cambridge. He was, in his words, 'stamping the last remains of spiritual vitality out of my own soul, and trying with all my might to crush and obliterate the image of the divine liberty that had been implanted in me by God,' but apart from writing that 'my own sins were enough to have destroyed the whole of England and Germany,' he doesn't elaborate on what he was getting up to in Cambridge.[4] Whatever the case may be, he was not welcome back at Cambridge after this one year, prompting him to look for alternatives, and it was this that led him to Columbia.

On the morning when the doubts about his vocation emerged with a vengeance, Merton started thinking about who he was and what he had done: I suddenly realized that none of the men to whom I had talked about my vocation,' he wrote, 'knew who I really was. They knew nothing about my past.' He began to believe that he was not fit for the priesthood, that he was not really called to what he thought he had been called, and he decided to test his vocation by going back to the Franciscans to tell them about his past. The Franciscans promptly rejected him. Merton left the monastery despondent, believing that he 'was now excluded from the priesthood forever.' Merton's despondency was made worse after he went into the confessional at a Capuchin parish where he encountered a priest who was in no mood for nonsense. When Merton started sobbing, the priest let him know that he most certainly did not have a monastic or priestly vocation and that he was wasting the priest's time and violating

the confessional. 'When I came out of that ordeal,' Merton wrote, 'I was completely broken in pieces.'[5]

When I first read Merton's account of his vocation seemingly crumbling to the ground, I couldn't but recognize myself in this young man who thought he knew what God was calling him to do. I did not have the same traumatic experience of being told by another that I did not have my vocation, but I was in the throes of the turmoil of going from certainty to the uncertainty of not knowing what I was going to do with my life. It was disorienting, to say the least. It was, more accurately, crisis inducing. And while I was not going to a confessional weeping at the prospect of losing the vocation I thought I had, I was lost and scared.

I suppose misery loves company. It is certainly the case that, in moments when we feel alone in our suffering, it can be comforting to have another accompany us who has been through a similar experience. And this is precisely what Merton did for me in those days—he accompanied me. In articulating his own feelings at the prospect of losing his sense of meaning and purpose, Merton seemed to be expressing my own emotions. His story became intertwined with mine, and as such, he immediately became a companion, even a friend. Yes, I was intrigued by the story of his conversion to Catholicism, but to me *The Seven Storey Mountain* wasn't so much a book about conversion as it was about vocation, and as such, it was a book I needed at that time of my life. Of course, I knew how the story was going to end. I knew enough about Merton to know that he would end up becoming both a monk and a priest, that he would in fact have his vocational crisis resolved. And as someone who was in the midst of a vocational crisis, desperately wanting resolution, I could barely put the book down.

Retreat at Gethsemani

Soon after his rejection by the Franciscans, Merton took a position as an instructor at St. Bonaventure College in upstate New York where he taught English. Though he thought he no longer had a vocation to the monastery or the priesthood, Merton decided he would devote himself as much as possible as a layperson to living out a monastic vocation. During Holy Week in 1941, he went on retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, and the retreat simultaneously exhilarated and devasted him. He found himself deeply attracted to the solitude and silence of the monastery, but this attraction only served to torture him since he believed he did not possess a vocation to the monastic life. 'Far from wondering whether I had a vocation,' he wrote, 'I was not even allowed

the luxury of speculation on such a subject. It was all out of the question.' Looking back on the situation, Merton wrote that he should have sought the advice of another priest at Gethsemani. However, after his experience in the confessional with the Capuchin priest, he was paralyzed with fear. It was fear that he would encounter another priest who would treat him the way the Capuchin had treated him, but fear as well that perhaps another priest would confirm that what Merton longed for was definitively out of reach. He thus spent the whole of Holy Week at Gethsemani in a 'mute, hopeless, interior struggle.'[6]

Things came to a head in the autumn 1941. Baroness Catherine de Hueck invited Merton to join her in Harlem to work at Friendship House, an organization that ministered to the physical and spiritual needs of African Americans. While Merton saw the value of this work, he had difficulty overcoming his latent sense that he was truly called to monastic life even though he had been told he had no such vocation. One day near the end of November, Merton was suddenly filled with the conviction that he needed to find out once and for all whether he had a vocation to become a monk and a priest. The pages in which he recounts this moment are among the most dramatic in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Should he or should he not talk to one of the Franciscans at St. Bonaventure College, Fr. Philotheus, about his vocation? Did he want to open himself up to the possibility that Fr. Philotheus would perhaps treat him like the Capuchin did? Worse, would Fr. Philotheus put the final nail in the coffin by concluding that Merton had no vocation? From outside the building where Fr. Philotheus lived, Merton saw a light on in the priest's room, but instead of going up to talk to him, he went out to a grove where there was a shrine to St. Thérèse of Lisieux. 'For Heaven's sake, help me!' he cried to the Little Flower.[7] He went back to the building where Fr. Philotheus' room was located. Seeing a light still on in his room, he walked into the hall, but stopped short of the door, almost as if something were holding him back. He left and ran back to the grove.

He was in torment. 'I don't think,' he wrote, 'that there was ever a moment in my life when my soul felt so urgent and so special an anguish.' He prayed again to St. Thérèse, telling her that he would be her monk if only she would tell him what to do. And at that moment, as if calling him home, Merton heard the bells of Gethsemani ringing. He immediately went back to the buildings, but Fr. Philotheus' light was out. Disappointed, he knocked on the door of the friars' common room and, finding Fr. Philotheus, he asked to speak with him. They went back to his room and Merton poured out his concerns. The friar told Merton that he

could see no reason as to why he could not enter a monastery and become a priest, and Merton wrote that 'it was as if scales fell off my own eyes.'[8]

Resolutions

I was breathless as I first read Merton's dramatic account of finally having his vocational crisis resolved. While my anguish was admittedly not as acute as Merton's, his suffering resonated with my own. I shared his desire for peace and certainty, I longed for it, and my heart pounded along with Merton's in the grove at St. Bonaventure's College. So when I read that Fr. Philotheus told Merton that he saw no impediments to him entering a monastery to become a priest, and Merton tells us that he had never before 'experienced the calm, untroubled peace and certainty that now filled my heart,' I felt some measure of peace myself.[9] My own vocational crisis remained unresolved as I read his story, yet Merton's account gave me hope. If his much more complicated vocational journey could find resolution, then mine could and would as well.

The Seven Storey Mountain is, in many ways, an imperfect book. Merton's depiction of Catholicism is marked by triumphalism, and his portrayal of non-Catholic Christian traditions as well as of non-Christian religions demonstrates a judgmentalism that the later Merton would reject. Already in 1950, just two years after its publication, Merton wrote in his journal that '*The Seven Storey Mountain* is the work of a man I never even heard of.'[10] Later in a 1967 humorous curriculum vitae he compiled to accompany a book to which he contributed an essay, Merton referred to his autobiography as having created 'a general hallucination.'[11] Merton came to see *The Seven Storey Mountain* as the reflection of a young monk who too often manifested the zeal of a convert. It's worth noting as well that the book desperately needed a more thorough editing. Evelyn Waugh, the great English Catholic novelist who early recognized the potential of *The Seven Storey Mountain* to become a spiritual classic and wrote a blurb praising the book as such that went on the front cover of its first print edition, was also highly critical of Merton's writing style and verbosity. When he was given the rights to publish *The Seven Storey Mountain* in the United Kingdom, Waugh abridged it significantly and changed the title to *Elected Silence*. And when Waugh visited Merton at Gethsemani in 1949, he gave the monk a book intended to improve Merton's writing, which Merton received with grace.

Nevertheless, despite its shortcomings, *The Seven Storey Mountain* spoke to me on a deep level and it continues to speak to many. After

finishing the book, I started reading everything I could by Merton, immersing myself particularly in his private journals, published twenty-five years after his death. He came to mean so much to me that I made the decision to get a drawing by Merton tattooed on my shoulder; it's a drawing of a tonsured monk at prayer, arms folded under his choir robe. While the tattoo can perhaps be blamed on youthful exuberance, I can't say that I regret it.

My vocational crisis did reach resolution. I decided ultimately to pursue the academic life. I completed my Ph.D. in 2008 and landed a position in Kentucky at Bellarmine University, the home of the Thomas Merton Center, the official repository of Merton's literary and artistic estate. My crisis of vocation ultimately resolved in a city only an hour's drive from the Abbey of Gethsemani and at a university known for its connection to Thomas Merton, the monk who accompanied me at a pivotal moment in my life and whose writings continue to resonate with me.

Notes

1. *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1948), (hereafter *SSM*), p. 255.
2. *SSM*, pp. 294, 295.
3. *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, Christine M. Bochen, ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), 1993), letter to Jonathan Williams, May 1967, p. 286.
4. *SSM*, pp. 121, 128.
5. *SSM*, pp. 296, 298, 298.
6. *SSM*, pp. 328, 328.
7. *SSM*, p. 364
8. *SSM*, pp. 364, 365.
9. *SSM*, p. 366.
10. *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer*, Volume 2 of *The Journals of Thomas Merton*, Jonathan Montaldo, ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), entry for 13 June 1951, p. 458.
11. *The Courage for Truth*, letter to Jonathan Williams, p. 286.

Gregory K. Hillis, Ph.D. is Executive Director of the Aquinas Center of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. Prior to joining the Aquinas Center in 2023, he was Professor of Theology and Religious Studies at Bellarmine University in Louisville, Kentucky. He is the author of *Man of Dialogue: Thomas Merton's Catholic Vision* (Liturgical Press: 2021), which won the 'Louie' award from the International Thomas Merton Society for best new book on Thomas Merton.