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# Christmas at Gethsemani

## Thomas Merton

*In this extensive passage Merton reflects on his vocation, harking back to his first Christmas at Gethsemani in 1941. It was excised from the original manuscript of *The Seven Storey Mountain* by his editor Robert Giroux.*

The way had been prepared in the last days of Advent. It was prepared, as His ways are always prepared, in the desert. My conscience, awakened and educated to new realities, new possibilities by the Liturgy, was searching for some way to prepare His ways and make His paths straight, leveling the high places and filling the valleys—reducing to unity and grade all the accidents of human self-assurance and human diffidence, pride and fear, presumption and timidity.

All this was done, as it has to be done, in darkness, in aridity. I was not even half aware of it.

The one thing that struck me was this. When I went to pray, especially in meditation and alone in the Chapel before the Tabernacle, I became more and more conscious of the uselessness, of the superfluity of the interior acts that habit prompted me to make.

Why did my imagination reach up to see something that I did not see? Why did my mind stretch itself out towards inadequate concepts, and form intellectual figures that were mostly vain? Why did my will move itself to acts that had to be dressed in the complications of word or idea?

Suddenly, I began to grasp the fact that I might be wasting my time, and that all these things were unnecessary: that perhaps I already possessed far more than they could give me.

Had I never noticed the fruitfulness, the deep, mysterious vitality of the silence that had been opening out within me? Surely, all my mental

images and concepts and words and acts and sentiments and movements and discourse: all these things were only getting in the way! There was some other voice, that far transcended anything of my own, was far simpler and wiser and more perfect that might speak to me if only I learned to hold my peace, and be still.

If only I would give up all this noise, which was all my own—if only I would be content to silence my own voice and the activity of my own nature, then perhaps I would hear this other voice, and learn something that my nature, by itself, could never grasp.

I was at last beginning to realize the amazing paradox that God, Who is infinitely above me, was also within me. And even though He was closer to me than my own self, yet I could never attain to Him by any act of my own, because He was still infinitely above me. How can we come to Him unless He lifts us up to Himself? And how can He lift us up to Himself if we persist in doing things that get in His way?

We have a natural way of knowing, which grasps things and sees them and touches them and understands them. But no one can see or touch or understand God. Therefore as long as our faculties are absorbed in the vain work of trying to see, to grasp, to understand, they are unnecessarily standing in God's way, and prevent Him from lifting us up to Him by a knowledge that transcends our natural knowing.

But oh, if only we will let Him, He will give us, in His own time, and according to the ways of His grace, new senses, spiritual senses and a spiritual understanding by which we shall truly have our whole desire, and shall see Him Who is invisible and touch Him and possess Him and know Him not merely as an abstract essence but *in concreto* as the real, present, true God, *ut haec essentia*, realized and as it were owned by us.

Had I not read all this before in St. John of the Cross? I had read it, and had more or less understood it, and yet I had never realized it until now. Before it had been a matter of knowledge: now it was getting to be a matter of experience.

And so, by this means, my soul was sinking into a kind of silence and isolation and order, reducing itself to the level of its own true poverty, going down to the last place, where it belonged: the place of the helpless, the beggar, the one who is utterly destitute and poor.

Christ always seeks the straw of the most desolate cribs, to make His Bethlehem. In all the other Christmases of my life, I had got a lot of presents and a big dinner. This Christmas, I was to get no presents, and

not much of a dinner: but I would have, indeed, Christ Himself, God, the Saviour of the world.

You who live in the world: let me tell you that there is no comparing these two kinds of Christmas.

What an atmosphere of expectation and joy there is in a Cistercian monastery when the monks get up, not at two in the morning but at nine in the evening. They have gone to bed at five. Now, at this unaccustomed hour, when the night has not yet begun to get that paralyzing desolate coldness of the small hours, the church is full of unaccustomed lights. There is the crib, all lit up with a soft glow, and in the high darkness of the sanctuary the forest of cedar branches that has grown up around the altar, sparkles with tinsel here and there.

It is then that the night office begins, begins at once with a solemn and stately invitatory that nevertheless rocks the church with cadences of superlative joy: and from then on it is as though the angels themselves were singing their *Gloria in Excelsis* and showering upon the earth from the near stars, the stars that seem to have become close and warm, their messages and promises of peace, peace! Peace on earth to men of good will. As the Midnight Mass begins the whole place glows with happiness, and after that it is indescribable, building up to the climax of unworldly interior peace at Communion.

It is good that somewhere in the world there are men who realize that Christ is born. There were only a few shepherds at the first Bethlehem, and it is the same now. The ox and the ass got more out of the first Christmas than the High Priests in Jerusalem. And it is the same way today.

The emptiness that had opened out within me, that had been prepared during Advent and laid open by my own silence and darkness, now became filled. And suddenly I was in a new world.

I seemed to be the same person, and I was the same person, I was still myself, I was more myself than I had ever been, and yet I was nothing. It was as if the floor had fallen out of my soul and I was free to go in and out of infinity. The deeps that were suddenly there could not be measured, and it was useless even to think of fathoming them. And they were not a place, not an extent, they were a Presence. And in the midst of me they formed a citadel. And I knew all once that there was nothing that could ever penetrate into the heart of that peace, nothing from outside myself could ever get in, and there was a whole sphere of my own activity that

was irrevocably excluded from it: the five senses, the imagination, the discoursing mind. I could enter in, I was free to come and go, and yet as soon as I attempted to make words or thoughts about it, I was excluded--or excluded to the extent that I attended to the words and thoughts.

And yet I could rest in this dark unfathomable peace without trouble and without worry even while the imagination and the mind itself were in some way active outside of it. They could stand and chatter at the door, in their idleness, waiting for the return of the will their queen, upon whose orders they depended. They stood like a couple of chauffeurs at the door of a mansion which it was not their business to enter. And yet the mind was not all excluded: only in certain of its operations. But in so far as it was able to rest serene, in itself, the mind too could enter into the peace and harmony of this infinite simplicity that had come to be born within me.

But what are all these words? Shadows, illusions. The soul has not divisions into parts, into sections, into places. It merely operates this way or that, and the experience of this or that kind of operation can be translated by the imagination into terms of place and space, light and darkness: but as soon as it gets into those terms, the whole thing becomes dead and loses its true meaning.

Within the simplicity of that armed and walled and undivided interior peace was the sweetness of an infinite unction. Yet this sweetness, as soon as it was grasped, or held, lost its savor. You must not try to reach out and possess it altogether. You must not touch it, or try to take it. You must not try to make it sweeter, or to keep it from going away ....

But all this is abstract. There was a far greater reality in all this, the sense of the presence of a Person; not exteriorized in space, not standing opposite one, or inside one, or outside one, not standing here or there or anywhere, but *living* in the midst. You are aware that you are alive: but where do you feel your life? Is it here? Is it there? It is inside you rather than outside you: but where? I suppose you can get to thinking it is in your heart, but it is all over you.

It is easy to realize the life of one's body, and hard to track it down, to place it. It is even easier to realize the life of your soul when it is made known to you: and even harder to track it down and place it.

And the hardest thing about it is that that life is a Person, Christ.

*Vivo, jam non ego, vivit vero in me Christus.\**

You know that Christ is born, within you, infinite liberty: that you are

free! That there are enemies which can never touch you, if this liberty loves you, and lives within you! That there are no more limitations! That you can love! That you are standing on the threshold of infinite possibilities! That the way lies open to escape from all these useless words! That the darkness has been washed out of your spiritual eyes and that you can open them and begin to see: but above all, that you can know by more perfect knowledge than vision, by the embrace of this liberty, and by the touch of infinite freedom in the midst of your spirit, and above all by rest, peace! This is the true contemplative vocation, the kernel of it, the innermost meaning of our life: *frui Deo*, heaven on earth, the love, the connatural knowledge of God: God as experience.

The whole meaning and purpose of Cistercian isolation from the world, of obedience, of humility and humiliations, of penance, fasting, hard manual labor, the discipline, the five vows and the whole complex of observances is this: to bring each monk into this close, intimate union with Christ, to make him possess Christ, to possess this infinitely rich interior silence and peace in which Christ is born and grows in the soul, speaking to us, walking with us every minute of the day, standing by us and within us in all that we do, living Himself in all our acts and making them fruitful for His Father's glory, in the power and fire of this sanctifying Spirit.

And in the deeps of this silence, Christ does speak, sometimes charging the silence with the eloquence of His tremendous presence, sometimes moving the will with the contact of His love: but He speaks by acts not by words, by contacts rather than syllables, momentarily delivering us from our wills in the lightning flashes of His freedom within us, kindling in us the sudden flames of *amor amicitiae*, disinterested charity.

And when He is with us, nothing wearies us, no sacrifice is too much, no difficulty is anything but slight and negligible: we see the whole course ahead of us at one glance, and throw ourselves into the long career on the wings of His peace without a qualm, without a ruffle on the smooth surface of the mind. A moment of His special presence, a word from Him working within us with His special love, and we recover from sicknesses and are re-established from weeks of weariness and trial in no more than an instant.

But *rara hora, parva mora!* Although He is always with us in the vague and general sense our love can always get of His presence whenever we



look His way, how intangible that presence sometimes becomes. He is always there, but sometimes there is a wall of distractions in the way between us and Him, or a crowd of preoccupations that no effort can dispel, no trick can evade or bridge. We may kneel for a hopeless hour at the doors of this inward infinity, and they will not open.

Then another time, as soon as a monk opens his book, a phrase of Scripture, a line of St. Augustine, or a glance at the Tabernacle, or nothing at all, and the depths of this great peace will open within him and let him in to taste its infinite silences--those silences which flood him with strength, not only in his soul, but often in his body as well, in every vein and sinew and limb.

Nevertheless, there is a very important distinction between the delight which the soul gets, out of this experience, and the activity of love which is the reason for the delight.

It is the love which is, or should be, formally the object of all our desires and strivings, not the delight. The delight in our soul follows inevitably from the perfection of a supernatural love, liberated from all the bonds and limitations of the created order, and transcending all natural appetite and all necessary self-love. The peace, the rest which the soul enjoys is not inaction: it is, rather, the product of a most perfectly free and emancipated *action*: that of disinterested love. But the delight in this peace is distinct from the act of love because it belongs to the order of passions rather than operations.

And the sense of delight, of peace, is altogether subordinate to the activity of love of which it is the fruit.

Now on the part of the lover, this love may be just as perfect, just as disinterested, just as free when it operates in darkness and aridity, and in the apparent absence of the Beloved, without delight.

Consequently, God often hides Himself again, leaving the soul to seek Him in darkness and without satisfaction of any kind, in order to teach us the distinction between the purity of our love, and the delight we get out of it: the perfection of our love, and the reward it gives us: the merit of our love in the eyes of God, and the rest which it produces in our own souls. Indeed, God disposes the life of a monk in a series of alternating crosses and consolations in order that our love may grow every moment in perfection. And this way we learn the truth that 'We do not work in order that we may rest, but we rest in order that we may work.' The words are those of Duns Scotus: '*Non est operatio propter delectationem,*

*sed magis e converso: non enim laboramus ut quiescamus, sed quiescimus ut laboremus.'*

The whole purpose of our life is this 'work' of disinterested love. It is for this that we were created: it is this that we are put on earth to learn: and when we have completely learned it, whether on earth or in purgatory, we will go to heaven to do this work forever: and in this work is everlasting rest. But the work is not for the rest, the rest is for the sake of the work.

Day after day, on all the big feasts of the Christmas season, I was able to taste the astounding happiness of this emancipation, and to love God and know to some degree how much I was loved by Him. This was my introduction into the life of a Cistercian monk, my entrance into the 'School of Charity.' But I was given this rest because there was work to be done — work that has scarcely been begun, although nearly six years have gone by since that time. And yet, when I look back, it is true: I can see there has been much work done: not by me, but rather in spite of me, by the merciful grace of God.

\* Galatians 2:20—It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me

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