Dietrich Bonhoeffer & Thomas Merton Co-Patrons of Europe?

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I sinned before the Lord of hosts. My life is forfeit...'

Dietrich Bonhoeffer[1]

Introduction

The 80th anniversary of the end of the Second World War in 2025 was marked by many moving commemorations. Among the most poignant was that of the Lutheran pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was hanged at Flossenbürg concentration camp on 9 April 1945, just weeks before VE Day, for his stance against the Nazi regime.

Bonhoeffer hardly needs a special anniversary to highlight his life and works; his spiritual legacy, like that Fr Louis, Thomas Merton, continues to inspire seekers down to our own times and across the globe. That they are 'kindred spirits' has been suggested before in these pages by William Apel.[2] The current article seeks to complement the illuminating points made there.

The works of both Bonhoeffer and Merton remain much in demand, frequently cited in articles and reviews, while the appetite for new books on them seems insatiable. Why should this be?

At least one strand of an answer might be found in another, less well known, anniversary that has fallen in 2025, that of St Benedict (c.480-546) as Patron of all Europe, whose feast under this title was first kept throughout the universal Church on 11 July 1965. To what extent can these two famous sons of Europe also be seen as sons of St Benedict, another figure who speaks powerfully to our age?[3]

St Benedict of Nursia

Little concrete is known about St Benedict (c. 480-546). St Gregory the

Great tells us that he wrote a Rule 'remarkable for its clarity and discretion' (the *Dialogues,* Bk II, 36). Over the past c.1500 years, countless monks, nuns and lay people have found in that Rule a sure guide for living the Gospel. Christ-centred, the Rule offers a means to combine prayer, worship and work in a balanced way that promotes peace at every level.

Ironically, the monastery of Monte Cassino in Italy where Benedict wrote his Rule was destroyed by Allied bombing in 1944. The re-consecration of the rebuilt monastery there on the same site in 1964 was the occasion for Pope Paul VI's Apostolic Letter, *Pacis Nuncius* ('Herald of Peace') declaring St Benedict to be Principle Patron of All Europe. The Declaration highlighted the role of monasteries following the Benedictine Rule in, among other things, helping to preserve European civilization and its humanistic patrimony through the so-called Dark Ages. And this they were able to do as places which fostered the culture of the book or, more properly, the culture of the Word of God, copied, pondered, and internalized. And it is following in this furrow of the Word that our two protagonists can be seen as figures who continue that work today.

In the beginning ...

> That which has existed from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our own eyes...that we have touched with our own hands – the Word of life – this is our theme. That life was made visible; we saw it and are giving our testimony. (1 John 1:1-2)

As the New Testament shows, the first followers of Jesus came to see him as the incarnate Word of God. This insight affected the early Christians' approach to the whole of Scripture seen, not so much as a text to be read, as a person – Jesus Christ – to be encountered.[4] Such a line of thought, taken up by the Fathers of the Church such as St Augustine who wrote that 'God has spoken only one Word, his Son, who speaks throughout the Scriptures'[5] passed into monasteries and is reflected in the way that St Benedict writes of the Scriptures in his Rule, where, for example, it is often 'the voice of the Lord' who addresses the monks.[6]

While it is difficult to determine with any certainty how often the Eucharist was celebrated in Benedict's monastery, there is no doubt at all that the monks' days and nights were saturated by the Word of God, heard, prayed, chanted and studied – a pattern which reflects that of the Desert monastics of the 3rd and 4th centuries where the Scriptures, especially the Psalms, formed a privileged vehicle of communication with the Divine in both directions. Even today, following the practice of the

Rule, each service, or Office, celebrated in a Benedictine or Cistercian/ Trappist monastery begins with the opening words of Psalm 70/69, 'O God, come to my assistance;/ O LORD, make haste to help me!'[7]

Benedict gives no detailed instructions on how to do the prayerful meditation on the Bible which has come to be known as 'lectio divina', but his prescription that the monks start each day by reciting/hearing Psalm 95/94 encapsulates what might have been his advice: *O that today you would listen to his voice/'harden not your hearts...* (Psalm 95/94 v. 7-8). So, in their 'lectio divina', both from the written page and listening attentively in the liturgy, the monks are to open their hearts to the voice of the Lord.

As a Trappist following the Rule of St Benedict, Merton was steeped in such an approach to the Scriptures and his own writings both reflect and adopt this idiom. I remember at the start of my monastic formation being given Merton's *Bread in the Wilderness* to read and what a transformative experience it was, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to hear the Psalms as a dialogue with Christ the Word, 'the poetry of the Psalms':

> This transformation is operated in us by the power of the Holy Spirit...Or rather [by] Christ, whose Spirit he is, is the poetry of the Psalms....The word of God is full of the Word of God. Christ is conceived in human language through the Holy Ghost, as he was conceived in human flesh, of the Holy Ghost.[8]

Bonhoeffer's immersion in the Scriptures

Bonhoeffer had more than a passing acquaintance with monasticism. During his time in England as pastor to the German communities in London (1933-34) he visited the Anglican monastery of the Community of the Resurrection at Mirfield in Yorkshire and was struck by their praying a portion of Psalm 119/118 together each day, a practice adapted from the Rule of St Benedict and which Bonhoeffer would adopt in the underground seminary he was asked to form and lead back in Germany in 1935.[9]

A further experience of monastic life, three months at the Roman Catholic Benedictine monastery of Ettal in S. Germany 1940-41, working on part of what would later be published as his *Ethics*, cannot have failed to have left a mark. However, Bonhoeffer's immersion in the Scriptures dates from his Lutheran childhood: the copy of the Bible inherited from his brother, Walter, who died in the First World War in 1918, was a life-long companion.

Interestingly, and without, it seems, reading a manual on 'how to do lectio divina', Bonhoeffer's approach to the Bible seems to have developed into what has been described above as that of the Early Church and monasticism, a very personal listening with the heart to the voice of the Lord.

Although familiar with the Bible from boyhood, as a young man he seems to have undergone a subtle yet profound inner change which awoke him to a deeper level of communion with the Word of God. While cloaked in the mystery of any conversion experience, evidence of this change can be dated to the early 1930s at the beginning of his university chaplaincy ministry in Berlin. A reminiscence of a former student from 1932 describes how:

> He [Bonhoeffer] said to us near the Alexanderplatz ... that we should not forget that every word of Holy Scripture was a quite personal message of God's love for us, and he asked us whether we loved Jesus.[10]

This approach was very different from the exegetical and homiletic use of the Bible that was made in the Lutheran academic and church circles of the time and to which Bonhoeffer himself had once aspired. He wrote to his brother, Karl Friedrich, in 1935:

> When I first began [to study theology] I imagined it quite otherwise – perhaps as a more academic matter. Now something very different has come of it...I know that, inwardly, I shall be really clear and honest with myself only when I have begun to take seriously the Sermon on the Mount. That is the only source of power.[11]

And to his brother-in-law, Rüdiger Schleicher, who considered himself a follower of Harnack and Neumann in the modern historical-critical method of interpreting the Bible, Bonhoeffer wrote in 1936:

> Is it ... intelligible to you if I say that I am not at any point willing to sacrifice the Bible as this strange word of God? ... I ask with all my strength what God is trying to say to me through it. ... I want to say to you quite personally that since I have learnt to read the Bible in this way ... it becomes more marvellous to me every day. ... You will not believe how glad one is to find oneself back to these elementary things after wandering on a lot of theological side-tracks.[12]

Bonhoeffer insisted – not without some opposition – on such personal meditation on the Scriptures [what we'd call 'lectio divina'] as a daily exercise for his seminarians at the underground seminary at Finkenwalde. Touching letters from these men while at the Front attest to the power of the practice:

> I have meditated when I found time, and when that failed, I have learned texts by heart. In that way they have opened out into unexpected depth. One has to live with the texts and then they unfold. I am very grateful now for your having kept us to it.
>
> F.E. Schröter, 29.9.1940.[13]

> You know that I am one of your very grateful pupils; the psalms that I first begun to understand at Finkenwalde are with me through the valley of the shadow of these weeks.
>
> E. Klapproth, 5.2. 1942.[14]

Part II Becoming Word Bearers

What effects can one expect in a Christian for whom the Word of God becomes a living reality rather than simply words on a page? Of the myriad effects, I would like to select three which are pronounced in Bonhoeffer and Merton, and which are possible through baptism for all Christians. This is not to make of Bonhoeffer an honorary monk but rather to show how both he and Merton typify that intense closeness to Christ the Word found in the Early Church, where St Paul wrote, echoing Deuteronomy: 'The word is near you: it is upon your lips and in your heart.' (Romans 10:8 & Dt 30:14)

1. 'The power of living is granted to us by Easter'[15]

The Bible is the revelation of God's covenant of faithful love for humanity, centred on the Incarnation of Jesus Christ and including all that prepared for that coming and its outworking through the cosmos through time into eternity. The pivotal point in the biblical story is the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the sending of the Holy Spirit which empowers his followers to emulate that journey from death to new life. Immersion in the Word of God develops not only an Easter focus in life but also an Easter lens as everything that happens on earth is seen in the light of the transforming event of Christ's resurrection.

Hence Bonhoeffer could write to his fiancée's mother, Ruth von Wedemeyer, from his prison cell on 10 April 1944 that 'the power of

living is granted to us by Easter.' The centrality of Easter in the Rule of St Benedict affects everything that is done in the monastery from the times and content of the prayers, including when exactly 'Alleluia' should be sung (*RB* 15) to the timing and content of meals (*RB* 41). Such a focus develops in those who live the Rule a deeply paschal cast of mind and spirit.[16]

Merton concludes the first chapter of *The New Man* (1961), his profound meditation on the new life won for us by Christ's passion, death and resurrection, in words that echo those of Bonhoeffer:

> Contemplation is a foretaste of the definitive victory of life over death in our souls. ... Life, then, is not only known but *lived.* ... It is a communion with Christ, the incarnate Word. Not only a personal union of souls with him but a communion in the one great act by which he conquered death once for all by His death and Resurrection.[17]

2. Becoming doers of the word, not simply hearers. (cf. James 1:22)

A striking feature of allowing the Word of God to enter deeply into one's being is the way it changes one from being simply a hearer to a doer of the Word. This can be seen, for example, in Bonhoeffer's embracing of pacifism under the influence of the Sermon on the Mount. But he was no fundamentalist clinging to a literal reading of the Bible: continual contact with the Word of God speaking to his heart and reflection on that Word led Bonhoeffer to move away from pacifism to take on more pro-active opposition to the Hitler regime, even to the point of becoming involved in the conspiracy to kill the Nazi leader.

The expansion of Merton's horizons to fuel both interfaith dialogue and also dialogue with contemporary culture was also surely powered by his Spirit-enlightened engagement with the Word of God with its universal outreach of the Cosmic Christ. Thus, 'I must look for my identity ... not only in God but in other men,'[18] and 'What is needed is the recapitulation of culture and civilization in Christ.'[19]

3. 'Makes them friends of God and prophets.' (cf. Wisdom 7:27)

Finally, a Word-infused spirituality gives us a share in Christ's prophetic ministry to hand on God's Word to others by preaching, teaching, writing, and by lives willing to speak the Gospel truth which is often difficult and counter-cultural. This prophetic drive is seen clearly in the lives of both Bonhoeffer and Merton. See, for example, Bonhoeffer's involvement in

the international ecumenical movement in the 1930s at a time when such rapprochement amongst Christian denominations was in its infancy, and his speaking out publically against Hitler almost as soon as the latter came to power. Famously, on the same day that Hitler first broadcast to the German people, 1 February 1933, Bonhoeffer also spoke on the radio on the role of the Leader (*Das Führer*) who, unless he understands the limits of his authority, becomes a mis-leader (*Das Irrführer*). The transmission was abruptly ended before Bonhoeffer had finished speaking.

These have their counterparts in Merton's trenchant advocacy of the Peace Movement in the 1960s and his openness to other faiths. He wrote in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*:

> The prophets themselves protested, in God's name, against the perversion of the word of God in the interests of sectarianism, nationalism, power, politics.[20]

And in *The New Man,* Merton urges us to widen our vision: 'We must strive to be more and more universal in our interests.'[21]

And when 'action' is no longer possible, the prophet is called to share the apparent powerlessness but deeply salvific suffering of Christ. In the autumn of 1944, shortly after evidence had come to light which signalled 'the end' for Bonhoeffer and his fellow conspirators, he wrote a poem from prison called 'Jonah' which shows this identity with the sacrifice of Christ who took on the sins of the world:

> *And Jonah said, 'Behold,*
> *I sinned before the Lord of hosts. My life is forfeit.'*[1]

Is it a coincidence that both Bonhoeffer and Merton felt an affinity with the Prophet Jonah who spoke truth to power and, through his preaching, saved the Ninevites from destruction, witnessed to God's mercy and in his 'rebirth' from the belly of the whale foreshadowed the death and resurrection of Christ?

The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing[22]

In so short a space it is difficult to do justice to the extensive writings and works of these two sons of Europe, each of whom turned away from the enlightenment culture into which they were born, and in which they

might have excelled, to espouse a more sapiential education of the heart by the Word of God. A few brief extracts may suffice to encourage readers to follow up this theme.

Merton's *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* has over twenty references to Bonhoeffer whom he considers a fellow witness to the importance for the 'sanity, balance and peace' of the human race, of the tradition of wisdom and spirit which they have received from their Western Christian heritage and which is also found in Orthodoxy, and analogously, in Asia and in Islam.[23]

Merton is frank in confessing his dis-ease with enlightenment thinking: His great paean for most things Parisian in *Conjectures* includes the following:

> Paris means St. Louis whose name I was given in religion. It means Joan of Arc whom I have always loved. ... It means Henri IV, Molière, Racine. ... It means Pascal whom I like and Descartes whom I don't. ... The taste for Zen in the West is in part a healthy reaction of people exasperated by four centuries of Cartesianism: the reification of concepts, ... [the] flight from being into verbalism.[24]

In what seems to be almost the last part of his *Ethics,* probably written in Tegel prison, Berlin, 1943/44, Bonhoeffer sums up succinctly what can be seen as the foundation of the whole work – his guidelines for re-building society after the war:

> The Church's word to the world can be no other than God's word to the world. This word is Jesus Christ and salvation in His name.[25]

Merton would no doubt add 'Amen' to that.

Conclusion

Today, when unbridled scientific 'progress' and AI offer alluring ways out of current ills, political, economic and social, Pope Paul VI's declaration of Benedict to champion this holistic, heart-based way of knowing and acting seems prophetic. Made in the image and likeness of God, and specifically in the image of the image of God the Word who became incarnate for us, human beings have a supernatural affinity with this Word who speaks our language.

In Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Thomas Merton, St Benedict surely has powerful co-adjutants to work for a rebirth – a second renaissance – of a

Europe which is true to the best of its inheritance: firm in its reverence for God and the humanity God created, loves and has redeemed; a pluralist Europe marked by tolerance, openness to the world, and faithful to the spirit of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word and embodiment of God's mercy. As Merton wrote at end of *The Sign of Jonas*:

> I have always overshadowed Jonas with My mercy, and cruelty I know not at all. Have you had sight of Me, Jonas, My child? Mercy within mercy within mercy.[26]

Notes

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (enlarged edition), ed. Eberhard Bethge (London: SCM Press, 1971), p. 398. The quotation is from Bonhoeffer's poem 'Jonah', c. 5 October 1944.
2. 'Engaged Spirituality: Thomas Merton and Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Christian Renewal' by William Apel, *The Merton Journal*, Advent 2010: Vol. 17, number 2, pp. 26-32.
3. The question arises, to what extent did Merton, born in Europe of a New Zealand father and an American mother (both of whom were of Welsh descent), and who lived in the United States for most of his life, think of himself as a 'son of Europe'? This would take a separate paper to answer adequately but several passages in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* suggest that, culturally, he did. For example: 'I for one mean to preserve all the Europe that is in me as long as I live, and above all I will keep laughing until they close my mouth with fallout' - Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander (*New York: An Image Book, Doubleday, 1989), p. 75. (Ecclesiastical approval to publish this book was received in 1966)
4. See *Verbum Domini* (2010), Pope Benedict XVI, para.7.
5. St Augustine, *Enarrations on the Psalms*, 103, 4, 1: *PL* 37, 1378.
6. See, for example, *Rule of Benedict* (*RB*) Prologue 9-19.
7. Psalm excerpts are taken from *The Abbey Psalms and Canticles*, prepared by the monks of Conception Abbey ©2010, 2018 United States Catholic Conference of Bishops, Washington DC. Pub. USCCB, 2020. The Hebrew numbering is given before that of the Septuagint.
8. Thomas Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1954), p. 68.
9. In Benedict's monastery Psalm 119/118 was completed in several offices through Sunday and Monday. See *RB* 18. Many modern monasteries pray a portion of this psalm daily.
10. Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography* (London: Collins, 1970), p. 154.
11. *A Biography*, p. 155.

12. *A Biography*, pp. 155-156.
13. *A Biography*, p. 607.
14. *A Biography*, p. 607.
15. Dietrich Bonhoeffer to Ruth Von Wedemeyer, 10 April 1944. *Letters and Papers from Prison,* p. 247.
16. For more Easter resonances in the Rule, see 'Benedict's Easter' by Andrew Nugent OSB, the *American Benedictine Review* 54: 4 (Dec. 2003).
17. Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (London: Burns and Oates, 1962), p. 14.
18. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1962), p. 51.
19. *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander,* p. 195.
20. Thomas Merton, *Opening the Bible* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1983), p. 8.
21. Letter to Abdul Aziz, June 2, 1963 in Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1986), p. 55.
22. Pascal, *Pensées*, no 277.
23. *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander,* p. 194-95.
24. *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, pp.181, 285.
25. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (London: SCM Press 1955), p. 320.
26. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Doubleday Image, 1956), p. 351.

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