

Thomas Merton, Ignatius and the Descent into Hell

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Thomas Merton's lifelong project was the liberation of the human person from the false self, the ego-constructed identity rooted in fear, illusion, and self-protection, and the awakening of the true self, hidden with Christ in God. In *New Seeds of Contemplation*, he presents us with an understanding of holiness as God's work, not as ego-driven achievement, just as in *Meditations on Liturgy* he presents the liturgy as a school of self-forgetfulness. Merton claims that 'the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of [...] discovering my true self' although this is far from implying the exaltation of the ego. On the contrary, he also states that 'the only true joy on earth is to escape from the prison of our own selfhood [...] and enter by love into union with the Life Who dwells and sings within the essence of every creature.' The false self 'wants to exist outside the reach of God's will and God's love', preferring to rely on the self-oriented illusions that we cherish about ourselves by which the false self 'is the fundamental reality of life to which everything else in the universe is ordered.' This false understanding of the self is both a conceptual and a moral prison, a hollow structure made up of illusory pleasures and ambitions. When these eventually collapse, as collapse they must, 'there will be nothing left of me but my own nakedness and emptiness and hollowness, to tell me that I am my own mistake.'¹

All of this sounds starkly challenging but articulates the theology behind the icon of the *Anastasis*, the descent into Hell, one of the most beloved themes in the art of the Eastern Church. Its iconography evolved from the seventh to around the eleventh century and we find one of its finest manifestations in the fresco in the Kariye Museum, formerly the Chora Church in Istanbul.² The icon shows Christ's descent into the underworld after his death, where he destroys the bonds of death and Hades forever and draws Adam and Eve and their descendants into the light of truth and glory. We hear this in the writings of Melito of Sardis in the second century, 'I am the one that destroyed death and triumphed over the enemy and trod down Hades and bound the strong one', echoed

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also in Epiphanius of Salamis' verse for Vespers for Holy Saturday:

Yesterday he was stricken
Today he strikes the abode of Hades
With the lightning of his divinity
Yesterday he was bound up
Today he ties down the tyrant in indissoluble bonds
Yesterday he was condemned
Today he presents freedom to the condemned.³

Adam and Eve, representing the whole human race, have been in the darkness and captivity of the false notions of self and the enslaving passions of an ego that seeks to be its own God. Their descendant, the risen Jesus, has kicked down the gates of hell under which Hades personified is crushed and bound forever. In the dark vault below are an array of chains, locks and bolts, all the traps by which our desire for autonomy ironically enslaves us. Christ stands, knees bent, hauling his ancestors upwards out of the tomb. He is not simply putting an end to death but is lifting them into the life of the Trinity itself.

In the liturgical practice of the Western Church, Holy Saturday often gets paid far less attention than it deserves. In many parishes no sooner is the sombre drama of Good Friday decently ended than it is replaced by a flurry of cleaning, polishing, pulling down of Passiontide drapes and preparing of flowers for the Easter vigil the following night. The actual day and what it represents goes scarcely noticed. St. Ignatius of Loyola lays particular stress on the importance of the Holy Saturday experience. We are unlikely to make much of what it means to us, both as individuals and as the human race, that Jesus is risen from the dead, if we do not take fully on board the enormity of what it means that he has died. Some Ignatian retreat houses at this point in the Exercises, take the blessed sacrament out of the tabernacle, leaving it shockingly empty and extinguishing the sanctuary lamp to give visual emphasis to the darkness and emptiness felt by his disciples after they had laid him in the tomb. When the *Exsultet* is sung at the Easter Vigil, its triumphant claims ring out more insistently when we have fully experienced what the darkness and captivity of sin and death represent:

This is the night when Christ broke the prison-bars of death and rose victorious from the underworld. Our birth would have been no gain, had we not been redeemed. O wonder of your humble care for us! O love, O charity beyond all telling, to ransom a slave you gave away your Son! O truly necessary sin of Adam, destroyed

completely by the Death of Christ! [...] The sanctifying power of this night dispels wickedness, washes faults away, restores innocence to the fallen, and joy to mourners, drives out hatred, fosters concord, and brings down the mighty.⁴

Merton sees salvation as an act of liberation, a stripping back of the disguises which we assume to avoid the reach of God's transforming power. The free children of God must be 'saved from the conformist slavery of fantasy, passion and convention' by allowing God to discover us and learning to know and contemplate God as the one who knows and contemplates Godself in us.⁵ This echoes Ignatius' meditation on the Incarnation in which the Trinity looks down at the earth where human beings are being born and dying, trading and creating, but none of them fulfilling their full and true purpose. The Second Person of the Trinity decides fully to assume the human condition so as to save it from the consequences of its own false notions of freedom. We follow Jesus through his life and death into the resurrection, and in the final week of the Exercises come to the Contemplation for Obtaining Love which brings us back to the earliest exercise, the Principal and Foundation, where we considered the purpose for which humankind was made, namely to know, love and serve God in the fullest expression of our freedom.

Many people would not think of finding freedom or fulfilment in the silence of a Trappist monastery, but Merton found there the goal of all the frustrated seeking of his troubled youth. He was no great admirer of the Ignatian Exercises, as we read in his dryly hilarious account of his solo attempt at them in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, but his writing on the finding of the true self and the letting go of the self-enslaving ego carries a similar encouragement towards salvation through discovery of one's authentic vocation and destiny, 'For me to be a saint means to be myself. Therefore the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self.' He sees the human vocation as a fully free co-operation with God in the creating of our own identity and destiny and goes on to claim that 'not to accept and love and do God's will is to refuse the fullness of my own existence.' This is, in fact, Ignatius in a nutshell, and both echo Augustine's *Confessions*, although in true Cistercian fashion Merton also stresses that if we are left to ourselves, the discovery of ourselves in discovering God is impossible, since 'the only One who can teach me to find God is God, Himself, Alone.'⁶

Merton's autobiography, described by some as a twentieth-century version of the *Confessions*, was the beginning of the global fame of the man who had chosen solitude. Merton was aware of the dissonances

within his own life even as a relatively new monk, writing that his dramatic request of a local farmer in the confession queue to pray for him as he entered the enclosure 'still smacked of the old Thomas Merton who had gone around showing off all over two different continents'. It took years for the solitude truly to take hold and involved several notable detours along the way. His autobiography's final paragraph prophetically speaks of his finding all things in God's mercy only when he has tasted the true solitude of God's anguish and poverty and learned 'to know the Christ of the burnt men.'⁷ St. Ignatius' quest to help others through his Exercises to embrace true poverty and thus find God in all things does not seem so distant after all.

Notes

1. Thomas Merton - quotes from chapter 4, 'Everything that is, is Holy', & chapter 5, 'Things in their Identity', in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, (London, Burns & Oates, 1961), pp. 25, 20, 27, 27, 28.
2. <https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=54562>
3. Kallistos Ware and Mother Mary eds., *The Lenten Triodion*, (Faber and Faber, London, 1978). For this and all other discussions of the *Anastasis* icon I am indebted to Lawrence Cross et al., 'Anastasis Icon, Text and Theological Vision' in *Australian Ejournal of Theology*, Issue 7, Pentecost 2006
4. *Exsultet* for Mass of the Easter Vigil
5. Merton, 'Pray for Your Own Discovery' in *New Seeds*, p. 30.
6. Merton, 'Things in their Identity' in *New Seeds*, pp. 25, 26, 28.
7. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, (Harcourt, Brace & Co., Orlando, 1948), pp. 377, 422-423.

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