

## IMAGE OF PERFECTION

One of the things to which Thomas Merton devoted much of his time, energy, meditation and prayer and which influenced profoundly almost all else he was involved with was to the question of 'Humanity's Relationship with God'. He was deeply concerned to clarify just how a person is created in the 'Image of God'; and to determine how this affected his own life and the life of others who were, and are, called to follow the Christian faith.

We read in the book of Genesis that:

**"God created man in the image of himself, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them."  
[Gen. 1: 27]**

Through sin humankind has moved away from that image in which it was created, it has become corrupted and imperfect. Through the death of Christ on the cross that image was restored to perfection only to be sullied once more by the vanities of the human person. It is my intention here to show how Thomas Merton attempted to restore to his life that flawless image of God, which is at one and the same time, potentially ours and yet, which is impossible to attain.

The human person has on many occasions been compared to a mirror which is created to reflect the true glory of God. Of course, it must be said at this point, that there is no way in which a person could ever reflect fully the glory which is God in all its entirety and immense diversity; a person can however, reflect that part of His glory which it is his vocation so to do, indeed this is the very thing the

Saints have done throughout history. Thomas Merton, as indeed should all who profess the Christian faith, strove to be a Saint.

I quote here from 'The Ascent to Truth':

**"The only thing which can save the world from complete moral collapse is a spiritual revolution. Christianity, by its very nature, demands such revolution. If Christians would all live up to what they profess to believe, the revolution would happen. The desire for unworldliness, detachment, and union with God is the most fundamental expression of this revolutionary spirit. The one thing that remains is for Christians to affirm their Christianity by that full and unequivocal rejection of the world which their Baptismal vocation, demands of them."**

This statement is still as true today as it ever was, the Church is becoming a place where the liturgy is little more than a number of ancient texts and formulae recited with virtually no recourse to God and where the spiritual life is no longer considered necessary or valuable. Holy Mother Church reflects a spirit of worldly accommodation, to the point of confounding her own mission. We can see this in so many ways, not least in the way the many evils in the world are allowed to continue with barely a word of censure from the Church. If humanity were truly to reflect the image in which it was created then, surely, people would never be left to starve and people would learn to live in harmony.

Were he able, I feel sure that Merton would be the first to agree, that his life was a journey. Not a journey in the sense that he set off at one physical point in time and space and arrived at another, yet different, physical point in time and space. The journey on which Merton was embarked was a very different journey indeed, one which would take him to the very depths of despair and to the very pinnacle of spiritual union with God Himself. Indeed, this spiritual union with God was something to which he believed all people were being called.

**"Whatever I may have written," he wrote, "I think it can be reduced in the end to this one root truth: that God calls human persons to union with himself and with another in Christ, in the Church which is His Mystical Body."** 2

It was not, for Merton, a case of striving to achieve only spiritual union: This he would have said were pointless, unless that is, this state of spiritual union were reflected in ones physical existence. This is perhaps a complete turn around for the Church!

This call to unity with the Father and with one another is a fundamental tenet of the Christian faith though, it has to be admitted, one of which we fall terribly short: it is reflected in much of Scripture but never is it more succinctly put than by St. John in his gospel:

**"May they all be one. Father, may they be one in us, as you are in me and I am in you, so that the world may believe it was you who sent me. I have given them the glory you**

**gave to me, that they may be one as we are one. With me in them and you in me, may they be so completely one"** [John 17: 21-23]

Not only through our dwelling in the Father and the Son in such a close union as can only be likened to the union enjoyed by the three Persons of the Trinity, but God also dwells in us; for we can read again in St. John's gospel:

**"He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I live in him."** [John 6: 56.]

This in-dwelling of God within a person's being; what Merton would have called 'The Ground of Being', is at the very heart of his journey toward the image of perfection.

There is a great danger, when thinking along lines such as those under consideration at present, to make the assumption that Merton sought to distance himself from the world in a physical sense; to withdraw into the cloistered halls of monastic life and, thereby, to move nearer to God. Merton himself would have argued vehemently against this error and the briefest of glances at the topics covered by his writing should be sufficient to tell us that this was clearly not the case. How then does Merton effect his renunciation of the world?

The first thing to affirm is that even though Merton was in no way physically involved in the struggles which faced the world of his day he was, none the less, actively involved. One of the ways he was involved was through the regular pattern of prayer and devotion: he saw the monastery as a great powerhouse of prayer which worked like a great dynamo, generating power which, through the grace

of God, was discharged into the wider created order and which, in some small way, enabled human beings to live as fully human a life as possible. In a far less general way Merton held the whole of humanity within himself: because every person has their dwelling in God, through Christ and because God dwells in every person, then surely it must follow that each of us dwells in the rest of humanity and the rest of humanity must dwell within each of us. Again we might use St. John's gospel to help illustrate this mystery:

**"I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me, with me in him, bears fruit in plenty. [John 15: 5.]**

We are all nourished by the same food; there is but one root; many branches yet one vine. As one vine we live in complete unity with the Father and with the rest of the vine. In this way Thomas Merton brought with him into the monastery and ultimately into the life of the hermit the whole of humanity and held them, within himself, before God who dwelt within him also. Just as Christ held within Himself the whole of humanity and was the propitiation for their sins so too do we, as the Body of Christ, the Church, hold before God the whole of humanity. Cyprian of Carthage, when writing about the Lord's prayer said,

**"When we pray, it is not for one person, but for the entire people; because, we the whole people, are one. God, who is the teacher of prayer and peace, taught us peace. He wished each one to pray for all, just as he, has borne all together in one."**

Far from withdrawing from life into the monastic disciplines of

the Cistercian Order of Strict Observance, Thomas Merton entered into a fuller life than even he had ever imagined; he entered into a life which had as its sole aim, the reflection of the Divine Image.

This is an image which can only be achieved through the grace of God and by the power of the in-dwelling Holy Spirit. In his attempt to benefit to the full from these two Divine gifts, Merton was prepared to use any means which he considered appropriate including those from other traditions and religions. Merton managed to shake off the prejudices which limit most of us to looking within our own tradition for the pathway to perfection: he was able to be truly religious without needing to be constantly formally religious. This was the catholic spirit which freed him to really search out the best way for him to reflect God in all His glory.

It is a fact of nature that no two things are identical, even so called 'identical twins' have their differences; this being so how does this great diversity reflect the image of God, whom we know to be constant and un-changing? If we turn to 'Seeds of Contemplation', Merton has something interesting to say on this very topic:

**"A tree gives glory to God first of all by being a tree. For in being what God means it to be, it is imitating an idea which is in God and which is distinct from the essence of God, and therefore a tree imitates God - by being a tree."**

The more it is like itself, the more it is like Him. If it tried to be like something else which it was never intended to be, it

would be less like God and therefore would give Him less glory.

But there is something more. No two trees are alike. And their individuality is no imperfection. On the contrary: the perfection of each created thing is not merely in its conformity to an abstract type but in its own individual identity with itself." <sup>4</sup>

Merton goes on to point out to us that each individual created thing is not some vain and imperfect attempt by God at creating His image. If this were true then it would not glorify God but rather show Him up to be incompetent; not a perfect Creator. Each individual thing created by God, glorifies Him by being what He created it to be.

To talk of 'World Renunciation' and to state that Merton was able to take the 'World' with him into the monastery and hermitage without offering some guidance as to understanding the way that Merton perceived that 'World' would be to neglect a fundamental aspect of his thought. So it is we must turn and consider precisely what Merton understood by the expression 'The World'.

Thomas Merton saw the world in paradoxical terms: it was something to be renounced whilst, at one and the same time, it was something from which one must not hide. If one takes the time to look carefully at the apparent paradox an important fact comes to light, it is this. The world which is to be renounced is a different thing from the world with which one must live.

The world where we live is a place of encounter. It is in this

world that we have encounter with our fellow human beings and with God. This is a physical world which God created for His creation. This is not a world to be renounced but to be enjoyed and for which we should give thanks; the world to be renounced is something other than this and ultimately destroys this world.

The world which Thomas Merton renounced was the world of self interest and self assertion, the world where people see themselves as more important than anything else, the world of self love in which the idol worshipped is success, measured in terms of material gain.

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- 1] The Ascent to Truth; Burns and Oates 1951, Prologue - para one.
- 2] From a statement written by Thomas Merton and read by Daniel C. Walsh, on the occasion of the opening of 'The Thomas Merton Collection' at Bellarmine College Library. This Collection was officially opened on the 10<sup>th</sup> November, 1963.
- 3] See 'Message of the Fathers of the Church'. (Prayer: Personal & Liturgical. No. 16.; Michael Glazier, Inc.
- 4] 'Seeds of Contemplation'; The Catholic Book Club, 1950. Chapter 2.

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