

Thomas Merton as a Living Bridge Linking Christians East and West

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Trappist monks travel very little. Going on pilgrimage, in the sense of travel to Jerusalem, Santiago de Compostela or other great shrines, was not a part of Merton's life once he began monastic life at the Abbey of Gethsemani on December 10th, 1941. But in the more basic Pauline sense of the term, Merton was certainly a pilgrim - a stranger in a strange land *en route* to the Kingdom of God. In that sense, Merton was among the great pilgrims of the 20th century, someone who traveled vast distances in his spiritual life. Not many Christians contained so much within the borders of their souls. Not many of his generation knew so much about so many traditions of religious life nor regarded the spiritual life not only of non-Catholic Christians but of non-Christians with such profound respect.

One of the main threads of Merton's inner pilgrimage in his 27 years of monastic life was his particular interest in what is sometimes called the Eastern or Orthodox Church – that form of Christianity on the other side of the chasm formed by the Great Schism in the eleventh century. Merton became a western pilgrim to the Christian east.

His was far more than an academic interest. His inner life drew deeply from the wells of Orthodox Christianity. He spent many years exploring primary sources that were shared by Christians both east and west before the Great Schism. As Merton put it in his conferences on monastic spirituality and the early Church Fathers written for his novices:

If for some reason it were necessary for you to drink a pint of water taken out of the Mississippi River and you could choose where it was to be drawn out of the river – would you take a pint from the source of the river in Minnesota or from the estuary at New Orleans? This example is perhaps not perfect. Christian tradition and spirituality certainly do not become polluted with development. That is not the idea at all. Nevertheless, tradition and spirituality are all the more pure and genuine in proportion as they are in contact with the original sources and retain the same content.¹

Along similar lines, there is this passage in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*:

If I can unite *in myself* the thought and the devotion of Eastern and Western Christendom, the Greek and the Latin Fathers, the Russians with the Spanish mystics, I can prepare in myself the reunion of divided Christians. From that secret and unspoken unity in myself can eventually come a visible and manifest unity of all Christians. If we want to bring together what is divided, we can not do so by imposing one division upon the other... But if we do this, the union is not Christian. It is political, and doomed to further conflict. We must contain all divided worlds in ourselves and transcend them in Christ.²

This paragraph is based on a journal entry Merton made in April 1957 when he was in his sixteenth year of monastic life. But his encounter with what we think of as Orthodox Christianity had begun even before he entered university.

It began with icons.

The first icon I ever received was a gift from Merton. In 1962 he sent me a postcard with a photograph on one side of a medieval Russian icon: Mary with the child Jesus in her arms. Jesus, though infant-sized, looked more like a miniature man. It seemed to me formal, lifeless and absolutely flat. At the time I was not impressed and assumed Merton had no more interest in this kind of primitive

¹ Thomas Merton, *Cassian and the Fathers. Initiation into the Monastic Tradition I*, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2005), 5.

² Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 12. For the original journal entry, see Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 87; also see Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), 306.

Christian art than I did. I imagined some donor had given his monastery a box of icon postcards which Merton was using in the spirit of voluntary poverty. It was only in writing a biography of Merton, *Living With Wisdom*,³ that it at last dawned on me how crucial a role icons had played in Merton's life and I realized that no one could have been happier in sending out an icon photo to friends than Merton.

I had forgotten the role that icons played in his early life as recorded in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton's autobiography. Merton described one of the catastrophes of his unsettled childhood, his father's illness and death when his son was in his mid-teens. Owen Merton was suffering from a brain tumor that produced a large lump on his head and made him unable to speak. His teenage son would occasionally go down to London from his residential high school in Oakham and sit in mute silence next to his father's bed in the Middlesex Hospital.

The young Merton could see no meaning in what was happening to his father, whose misshapen head seemed like "a raw wound for which there was no adequate relief." Having already lost his mother to cancer ten years earlier and now on the verge of becoming an orphan, Merton responded with fury to the religious platitudes he heard from the chaplain of his Anglican school. It was all too obvious to Merton that there was no "loving God." Clearly life had no meaning. His parents' appalling fate was proof of that. "You just had to take it, like a dumb animal," he wrote in his autobiography. The only lesson he could draw from his parents' early deaths was to avoid as much pain as possible and take what pleasure he could out of life. At chapel services at his school in Oakham, Merton could no longer join in reciting the Creed. "I believe in nothing" summed up his creed at this point in his life.

Yet Owen Merton apparently had another view of his own suffering which he finally managed to wordlessly communicate to his son through drawings, the only "last word" he could manage. Merton came to see his father in his hospital room and, to his

³ James Forest, *Living With Wisdom: A Life of Thomas Merton* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991).

amazement, found the bed littered with drawings of “little, irate Byzantine-looking saints with beards and great halos.”⁴ In a word, drawings of icons. The younger Merton didn’t know what to make of them. He had no eye for icons at the time. He regarded Byzantine art, he confessed in an unpublished autobiographical novel, *The Labyrinth*, as “clumsy and ugly and brutally stupid.”

Owen Merton died early in 1931. Two years passed. On Tom’s 18th birthday, January 31, 1933, having finished his studies at Oakham and with more than half a year off before entering Clare College in Cambridge, and with money in his pocket provided by his guardian, Merton set off for an extended European holiday. It was a one-man Grand Tour with an extended visit to Italy the main event. The last and longest stop was in Rome.

Once there, for several days he followed the main tourist track, a Baedeker guidebook in hand, but the big attractions, from the Roman Forum to St. Peter’s Basilica, left him either yawning or annoyed. The architecture, statuary and painting of the Roman Empire, the Renaissance and the Counter-Reformation struck him as vapid and melodramatic. “It was so evident, merely from the masses of stone and brick that still represented the palaces and temples and baths, that imperial Rome must have been one of the most revolting and ugly and depressing cities the world has ever seen,” Merton wrote in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, words that still sound like the reflections of a bright, hyper-critical teenager.⁵ It seemed to him that the best one could say of ancient Rome was that it would have been an ideal set for a Cecil B. DeMille film epic.

Perhaps we would never have heard of Thomas Merton had it not been for what happened when he made his way from the guidebook’s four-star attractions to those with three or two stars, or even one, and thus came to know Rome’s most ancient churches – among them San Clemente, Santa Maria Maggiore, Cosmas and Damian, the Lateran, Santa Costanza, Santa Maria in Trastevere, and San Prassede. These moved him in an unexpected and

⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948), 82-83, 98.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 107.

extraordinary way. On the walls of many of these churches he found the early Christian art that had inspired his father's drawings.

These were all churches of sober design whose main decorations were mosaic icons, images of deep stillness, bold lines, vibrant colors and quiet intensity that have little in common with the more theatrical art that was eventually to take over in Rome. They house some of the best surviving examples of the art of Christianity's first millennium. In Santa Maria Maggiore, two lengthy tiers of mosaic icons date from the fourth century.

Merton's first such encounter with ancient Christian art was with a fresco in a ruined chapel. Later he discovered a large mosaic over the altar at Cosmas and Damian of Christ coming in judgment with a fiery glow in the clouds beneath his feet against a vivid blue background. This was not at all the effeminate Jesus he had so often encountered in English art of the Victorian period.

"I was fascinated by these Byzantine mosaics," he wrote in his autobiography. "I began to haunt the churches where they were to be found, and, as an indirect consequence, all the other churches that were more or less of the same period. And thus without knowing anything about it I became a pilgrim."

The excited memory of those days of eager discovery was still fresh when he was writing *The Seven Storey Mountain* fifteen years later:

What a thing it was to come upon the genius of an art full of spiritual vitality and earnestness and power – an art that was tremendously serious and alive and eloquent and urgent in all that it had to say... [an art] without pretentiousness, without fakery, [that] had nothing theatrical about it. Its solemnity was made all the more astounding by its simplicity... and by its subservience to higher ends, architectural, liturgical and spiritual ends which I could not even begin to understand, but which I could not avoid guessing, since the nature of the mosaics themselves and their position and everything about them proclaimed it aloud.

Through these icons, he began to understand, not simply who Christ was but who Christ is. In this crucial section of his autobiography, the crescendo comes in two intense paragraphs that read more like a litany than ordinary prose:

And now for the first time in my life I began to find out something of Who this Person was that men call Christ. It was obscure, but it was a true knowledge of Him, in some sense, truer than I knew and truer than I would admit. But it was in Rome that my conception of Christ was formed. It was there I first saw Him, Whom I now serve as my God and my King, and Who owns and rules my life.

It is the Christ of the Apocalypse, the Christ of the Martyrs, the Christ of the Fathers. It is the Christ of St. John, and of St. Paul, and of St. Augustine and St. Jerome and all the Fathers - and of the Desert Fathers. It is Christ God, Christ King.⁶

Eager to decipher the iconographic images that so arrested his eyes, Merton bought a Bible. "I read more and more of the Gospels," he later recalled, "and my love for the old churches and their mosaics grew from day to day."

The attraction of icons wasn't simply due to Merton's newly-gained appreciation of the aesthetics of iconography but to a profound sense of peace he experienced within the walls of churches graced with such imagery. He had, he said, a "deep and strong conviction that I belonged there."⁷

Merton desperately wanted to pray, to light a candle, to kneel down, to pray with his body as well as his mind, but found the prospect of publicly kneeling in a church alarming.

Finally one morning he climbed to the top of the Aventine Hill and entered the fifth-century church of Santa Sabina, one of the oldest churches in Rome. Once inside, he found he could no longer play the guidebook-studying tourist: "Although the church was almost entirely empty, I walked across the stone floor mortally afraid that a poor devout old Italian woman was following me with suspicious eyes."⁸

He knelt down at the altar rail and, with tears, again and again recited the Our Father.

At age 18, Merton had undergone, without realizing exactly what it was, a mystical experience: an encounter with the living Christ. From that moment he had something against which to

⁶ Ibid., 108-109.

⁷ Ibid., 110.

⁸ Ibid., 113.

measure everything, whether himself or religious art or the Church in history. He knew what was phoney, not because of some theory but because of an actual experience of Christ. Significantly, it was an experience mediated through iconography.

The pilgrimage that followed was nothing like an arrow's direct flight to faith, baptism and the Church. The coming winter at Clare College, Cambridge, was to prove a disastrous time in his life, the "nadir of winter darkness," as he would later write, leaving wounds from which I doubt he ever fully healed. He did more drinking than studying and fathered an illegitimate child. His well-to-do guardian in London wanted no further responsibility for Owen Merton's wayward son and sent him packing to his grandparents in America.

Yet, despite various detours, the journey that began in Rome continued. Four years after arriving in New York, Merton was received into the Catholic Church. Three years later, in December 1941, he was a new member of the Trappist monastic community of the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky.

For twenty years, beginning in the late 1940s, books poured from Merton's pen and typewriter at the average of two a year. Many were best-sellers. Many are still in print. It is striking to discover that only one book of Merton's got as far as being set in type and yet wasn't published: "Art and Worship." It was to have gone to press in 1959. The galley sheets survive at the Thomas Merton Center in Louisville. But his publisher had second thoughts, fearing this icon-reverencing book would damage Merton's reputation. The art historian Eloise Spaeth was enlisted by his publisher as a kind of professor-by-post to update Merton's tastes in religious art, but in the end she threw up her hands. She was appalled with Merton's "'sacred artist' who keeps creeping in with his frightful icons."⁹

Merton's aesthetic heresy was his view that Christian religious art had been more dead than alive for centuries. What he had

⁹ For details both about Merton's book and criticisms that impeded its publication, see Donna Kristoff's essay, "'Light That Is Not Light': A Consideration of Thomas Merton and the Icon," *The Merton Annual* 2 (1989): 85-117; Spaeth's comment is quoted on p. 94.

hoped to do with his small book was to sensitize his readers to an understanding of iconography, a tradition which in the West at least, had been abandoned since the Renaissance and all but forgotten. As he said in "Art and Worship":

It is the duty of the iconographer *to open our eyes to the actual presence of the Kingdom in the world*, and to remind us that though we see nothing of its splendid liturgy, we are if we believe in Christ the Redeemer, in fact living and worshiping as "fellow citizens of the angels and saints, built upon the chief cornerstone which is Christ."¹⁰

It seemed to his publisher that such an opinion was embarrassingly dated. The iconoclastic sixties were about to unfold, but even in the fifties nothing could be more out-of-fashion than icons.

Faced with such incomprehension, Merton finally abandoned his efforts to publish "Art and Worship," but he was never weaned of his love of icons. Occasionally he returned to the topic in letters. Only months before his death, he was in correspondence about icons with a Quaker correspondent, June Yungblut, in Atlanta. He confessed to her that books which presented Jesus simply as one of history's many prophetic figures left him cold. He was, he told her, "hung up in a very traditional Christology." He had no interest in a Christ who was merely a great teacher who possessed "a little flash of the light." His Christ, he told her, was "the Christ of the Byzantine icons."¹¹

June Yungblut would not be the only person, even today, who would regard as scandalous the phrase "the Christ of the Byzantine icons." Icons belonged to the kindergarten of Christian art. As for the word "Byzantine," didn't Merton feel a shiver to use that word? Didn't "Byzantine" signify the very worst in both Christianity and culture? A word synonymous with intrigue, scheming and the devious as well as anything that is hopelessly complex? And as for icons, weren't they of about as much artistic significance as pictures on cereal boxes?

¹⁰ Thomas Merton, "Art and Worship," 40-41. Unpublished manuscript. Archives of the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky.

¹¹ *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985), 637.

In a letter sent in March 1968, Merton explained what he meant by "the Christ of the Byzantine icons." The whole tradition of iconography, he said,

represents a traditional *experience* formulated in a theology of light, the icon being a kind of sacramental medium for the illumination and awareness of the glory of Christ within us... What one "sees" in prayer before an icon is not an external representation of a historical person, but an interior presence in light, which is the glory of the transfigured Christ, the experience of which is transmitted in faith from generation to generation of those who have "seen," from the Apostles on down... So when I say that my Christ is the Christ of the icons, I mean that he is reached not through any scientific study but through direct faith and the mediation of the liturgy, art, worship, prayer, theology of light, etc., that is all bound up with the Russian and Greek tradition.¹²

Even among Orthodox writers, one does not often find so insightful and yet succinct a presentation of the theology of icons.

What Merton had learned about icons had been hugely enriched by the gift from his friend, Marco Pallis, of a hand-painted icon, originally from Mount Athos. It had arrived in the late summer of 1965, just as he was beginning his hard apprenticeship as a hermit living in a small cinderblock house in the woods near the monastery. It was one of the most commonly painted of all icons, the image of the Mother of God and the Christ Child. For Merton it was like a kiss from God. He wrote Pallis in response:

Where shall I begin? I have never received such a precious and magnificent gift from anyone in my life. I have no words to express how deeply moved I was to come face to face with this sacred and beautiful presence granted to me... At first I could hardly believe it... It is a perfect act of timeless worship... I never tire of gazing at it. There is a spiritual presence and reality about it, a true spiritual "Thaboric" light, which seems unaccountably to proceed from the Heart of the Virgin and Child as if they had One heart, and which goes out to the whole universe. It is unutterably splendid. And silent. It imposes a silence on the whole hermitage.

¹² Letters to June Yungblut, June 22, 1967 and March 29, 1968; in Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 642-43; and John Eudes Bamberger, OCSO, "Thomas Merton and the Christian East," *One Yet Two: Monastic Tradition East and West*, ed. M. Basil Pennington (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1976), 440-51. Also see note 9.

He noted:

[This] icon of the Holy Mother came as a messenger at a precise moment when a message was needed, and her presence before me has been an incalculable aid in resolving a difficult problem.¹³

Marco Pallis' gift was the first of seven icons that made their way to Merton in his last three years of life and found a place in his small chapel, where some of them remain to the present day.

We come upon a final clue to the place icons had in Merton's inner life when we consider the short list of personal effects that were returned with his body when it was flown back to the monastery from Thailand in December 1968:

1 Timex Watch

1 Pair Dark Glasses in Tortoise Frames

1 Cistercian Leather Bound Breviary

1 Rosary

1 Small Icon on Wood of Virgin and Child¹⁴

For Merton, the icon is the primary visual art of the Church – if not a door of the Church, as it had been for him, then a window revealing the Kingdom of God. Yet he was also aware that icons were not simply aesthetic objects but had both theological and ecclesiastical aspects. They were not meaningful apart from the totality of the Church and its sacramental life. The icon becomes a dead plant when it becomes simply a “work of art” or a collector's item.

Like the Bible, the icon is made by the Church and guarded by the Church. The iconographer is not simply an independent creative agent but a faithful bearer of a multi-generational artistic tradition whose icons bear witness to the truths the Church lives by. Each icon has dogmatic content. For example any icon of Christ in the arms of his mother (like the one that Merton had sent me with that first letter) reminds us that he took flesh in the flesh of her body. Christ's bare feet seen in the Virgin of Vladimir icon are a

¹³ Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 473-74.

¹⁴ Forest, *Living with Wisdom*, 216.

reminder that he was fully man, walking on the same earth that we do. Though an infant, he is shown dressed as an emperor, because in reality he continually rules the cosmos.

Merton's debt to Eastern Orthodox Christianity goes much further than his appreciation of icons. Not least important there is his devotion to the Desert Fathers and his pioneering efforts to make them better known in western Christianity. After all, these Egyptian and Palestinian monks were the founders of the monastic life. Merton had briefly referred to them in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Later he was to translate a selection of sayings and stories from the ancient communities of the desert. In introducing his selections in *The Wisdom of the Desert*, he wrote that the Christians who fled to the deserts of the Near East in the Fourth Century were like people jumping off a sinking ship.

[They] believed that to let oneself drift along, passively accepting the tenets and values of what they knew as society, was purely and simply a disaster. The fact that the Emperor was now Christian and that the "world" was coming to know the Cross as a sign of temporal power only strengthened them in their resolve.¹⁵

For Merton, desert monasticism was a personal challenge. In an entry in his personal journal, he wrote: "The Desert Fathers talked not about monastic spirituality but about purity of heart and obedience and solitude, and about God. And the wiser of them talked very little about anything."¹⁶

We discover another aspect of Merton's debt to Orthodox sources if we note the books he refers to in his letters, journal entries and lectures given to his fellow monks. He was a close reader of Orthodox teachers of prayer and carefully read such modern Orthodox theologians as Olivier Clément, Paul Evdokimov, Sergei Bulgakov, Alexander Schmemmann, Thomas Hopko and John Meyendorff. In *A Retreat with Thomas Merton*,¹⁷ Fr. Basil Pennington notes seeing in Merton's hermitage library

¹⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert* (New York: New Directions, 1960), 3.

¹⁶ Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 468.

¹⁷ M. Basil Pennington, *A Retreat with Thomas Merton* (Warwick, NY: Amity House, 1988), 34.

such titles as *Early Fathers from the Philokalia*, *Writings from the Philokalia on the Prayer of the Heart*, *Treasury of Russian Spirituality*, and *Manual of Eastern Orthodox Prayers*. In the last book, Fr. Basil found a slip of paper with a copy of the Jesus Prayer in Slavonic with phonetic interlinear transliteration.

Perhaps the most important Orthodox reference work Merton studied was the *Philokalia*, a massive anthology of writings, mainly from patristic sources, whose main topic is the Prayer of the Heart. Merton would often borrow a sentence from one of the authors included in the *Philokalia*, St. Theofan the Recluse:

Prayer is descending with the mind into your heart, and there standing before the face of the Lord, ever present, all seeing, within you.

The Prayer of the Heart is another term for the Jesus Prayer, a short prayer which centers on the name of Jesus and which is widely used both by monastics and lay people in the Orthodox Church, and which is gradually becoming well known in the West.

Merton's use of the Jesus Prayer seems to have begun about 1950. It was well established in his life by 1959, when he wrote the following to a correspondent in England, John Harris:

I heartily recommend, as a form of prayer, the Russian and Greek business where you get off somewhere quiet... breathe quietly and rhythmically with the diaphragm, holding your breath for a bit each time and letting it out easily: and while holding it, saying "in your heart" (aware of the place of your heart, as if the words were spoken in the very center of your being with all the sincerity you can muster): "Lord Jesus Christ Son of God have mercy on me a sinner." Just keep saying this for a while, of course with faith, and the awareness of the indwelling, etc. It is a simple form of prayer, and fundamental, and the breathing part makes it easier to keep your mind on what you are doing. That's about as far as I go with methods. After that, pray as the Spirit moves you, but of course I would say follow the Mass in a missal unless there is a good reason for doing something else, like floating suspended ten feet above the congregation.¹⁸

The icon Merton carried with him while traveling in Asia provides its own last words, silent on the image side, and in the form of a text from the *Philokalia* that Merton had copied on the back:

¹⁸ Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 392.

If we wish to please the true God and to be friends with the most blessed of friendships, let us present our spirit naked to God. Let us not draw into it anything of this present world – no art, no thought, no reasoning, no self-justification – even though we should possess all the wisdom of this world.