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THOMAS MERTON READS BERNARD^{*}

If we ask a question about a few essential traits of the figure of Thomas Merton, the answer could be as follows.

First of all, he was a man strongly convinced of the bond between truth and life. He believed that a man who is looking for the truth, at the same time strives for the fullness and beauty of his humanity. He is thirsting for his identity, which being incomplete, causes a certain drama on different levels of his experience, and he is searching for the way that would enable him to form that identity.

Secondly, Merton possessed a unique ability to reflect on his own experience. He was a skilful critic in evaluating what he managed to discover. Among many inner and outer lights, he was able to distinguish the most important ones, which were not always the ones that seemed to shine brightest at first. In this respect he was characterised not only with courage to form his opinions, but also he didn't feel attached to them if they turned out to be insufficient or false.

Thirdly, if Merton's reader follows his works chronologically, as they were written, they will be stricken with the fact that Merton's reflection

^{*} Transl. by A. Pogodzińska.

constantly deepens. The effort accompanying the struggle for the right light, often dramatic, is visibly heading inward, extending, at the same time, to new realities of the Church and of man.

And finally, Thomas Merton is a writer, who managed to establish very original dialogue with his reader, being convinced that it is necessary, if he wants to remain truthful in his search. His works, to a large extent, have a character of personal confession, sharing his experiences, but also, one that is intently listening to its reception, in order to verify and move forward.

Features of his character, his way of thinking together with the ethos of his life, create a picture of a unique person who cannot be perceived through some rigid rules of conduct or superficial piety. On the other hand we cannot think of him as an individualist who breaks the traditional canons just to be original.

Thomas Merton is a trappist and represents a very interesting school of spirituality, that has its roots in the Cistercian tradition reaching to XII century. And if you look closely, this particular tradition helped him to become the person with the traits of character that were mentioned above.

Looking through his works in which he comments on the source texts of Cistercian monasticism, especially the ones of St. Bernard, we can see that all he achieved and who he was, was, among other circumstances, a result of looking deeply into the ideals of the Order, he joined.

We cannot really exhaust this subject in such a short presentation, but let me draw your attention to a few of the main issues. I will base my observations on a few articles about St. Bernard, which were published by Merton between 1948-54, and that were later published in the volume of the "Cistercian Studies Series".¹

The identity of man in the thought of St. Bernard.

Merton looks closely into the source texts of Cistercian monasticism, represented by St. Bernard's works and states that in the centre of Cistercian thought lies a particular interest in the identity of man and a desire to shape the fullness of humanity within him. The path on which this identity is shaped is in a way a journey to the source-creative love of God.

The whole aim of the cistercian life – writes Merton – and the Fathers of the Order are unanimous on this point

¹ Thomas Merton on Saint Bernard, CSS 9, Kalamazoo, Michigan 1980.

– is to set men apart from the world, that their souls may be purified and led step by step to perfect union with God by the recovery of our lost likeness to him. (107)

But what is this similarity? Well, when it comes to a man's identity, Cistercian theology is based on a very important distinction between the image of God in a man, and the likeness to God in him. We can see this difference clearly in the text from the Genesis: Let us make man in our image, after our likeness (Gen 1, 26). The Cistercian fathers, by making this statement one of the main pillars of their theology of the inner life, state that there is a difference between the image of God in a man and likeness to Him. The image of God is something that cannot be destroyed in a man, even after the sin; the likeness, on the other hand, is what man lost because of sin.

There are three elements that are essential for the image of God that a man continues to reflect:

- 1) natural simplicity of man
- 2) natural immortality
- 3) inborn freedom of will

Natural simplicity means that for a human soul being and living, *esse* and *vivere* is one and the same thing. An existing soul is always living in the same time, but this "living" does not have to mean that it is happy. And that is because the happiness of a man depends on his likeness to God. What is this likeness? It is a love of man for his Creator. It is a "free" answer to a gift of being an image of God. Cistercian spirituality states that the greatness of man lies in his dignity, but neither dignity, nor greatness make a man happy. Only life in dignity can make it happen, and life in dignity means love. And so being the image of God means being immortal and free, while being like Him, means to be loving/to love. Only the latter truly mean living and being happy, to be of his likeness, in which not only existing/being and living is one, but also living and being happy mean the same thing.

After the sin, a man did not lose the image of God within him – his greatness and dignity – but lost the likeness – the love for his Creator and for his "fellow man". But at present, when a man will realise his dignity, he may discover that he is still able to regain this likeness and happiness. It cannot be done in any other way though, than through the power of God's grace, because he cannot love by himself, but only through participation in the inner life of the Holy Trinity.

Merton says:

We always remain, what God has made us in our essence, but the tragedy is that God's good work is overlaid by the evil work of our own wills. (109)

The awareness that we still remain an image of God, creates a living hope within us, that we will become like Him:

Now the greatness of man consists not only in his own essential simplicity, but in his ability to rise to a participation in the infinitely perfect simplicity of the Word. We too can share by grace, the unity of esse and beatum esse, which is his by nature. (108)

Than Merton states, that St. Bernard proved the goodness of human nature to greater extent than any other philosopher or theologian did before him. But within a man, there appeared a certain tragic duality: he was still an image of God but without that likeness to him. He has the greatness, but he is not happy. He has the dignity, but cannot love (as strong) to its extent.

We are at once great and nothingness. The greatness in ourselves is God's work; the evil, the vileness, is the work we have done with our own will, in direct contradiction to our own nature as it was created by God. (113)

But if the nature of man is good, then an awareness of it gives him strong support and strengthens him in his desire to regain the fullness of his identity.

And if the first step in the Cistercian ascent to God is for the monk to know himself, we may reasonably say, that, in some sense, the whole life of such a one will consist in being himself, or rather trying to return to the original simplicity, immortality and freedom, which constitute his real self, in the image of God. (118)

In this simplicity, says Merton, lies the whole Cistercian ideal:

Meanwhile on earth our chief, in fact our only task, is to get rid of the "double" garment, the overlying layer of duplicity, that is not ourselves. Hence the fact, that the whole of Cistercian asceticism may be summed up in that one word. (119)

Looking at Merton as a man who is a pilgrim on the way to his own identity, we understand his being ingrained deeply in the Cistercian tradition. One of its main features is a deep, theological vision of the identity of man. What makes this particular view attractive is its simplicity. And it is because the Cistercian fathers, while talking about the identity, are pretty clear on what it is exactly: a man is himself only when he is a loving man.

Characterising this love as an inner measure of identity, the Cistercian spirituality is clearly stating that a man cannot reach the ideal on his own. The love comes from God – as St. John says, because God is love. A man can only regain his identity, by opening up to a disinterested gift from God by himself, and there is only one way to do so. This way is a way of humility (and being humble), which is – as Cistercian fathers say it – meeting with truth and accepting it.

The fact that humility is the way, first of all results from the essence of sin itself, which is pride. Yielding to the devil's temptation to "be like God", the man rids himself of God's love, acknowledging himself as an independent being:

Satan, however, tempted Eve to desire what man was not made to desire: divinity not by participation, but independently of God's free gift, by our own right, by our own nature. (109)

This pride in a man became in a way a constant tendency...

...to make himself like unto God, to put himself in the place of God, that is, to make his own ego the center of the universe. (113)

From this essence of sin results a conclusion that the return to the fullness of humanity must be characterised by humility. Merton – still following St. Bernard's thought – analyses also the second important pillar of Cistercian spirituality.

Humility as a way to the truth.

Cistercian spirituality looks more deeply into the virtue of humility in comparison to different scholastic moral treatises, which rate it among so-called "passive virtues". Following St. Benedict's Rule and the theology of the Fathers of Church, especially of St. Augustine, Bernard and other Ci-

stercian Fathers see humility as the fundamental way that unites man with God. Because man's sin consists mainly in pride, his return to God should be based on humility. And humility is not exclusively a painful recognition of one's wretchedness, but most of all it is the path Christ walked himself, who in this respect gave himself as an example to be followed, saying: "Learn from me, for I am silent and humble at heart". For the Cistercian Fathers this humility is seen as a path of embodied love of God. If God is love, and humility is God's path, that can mean only one thing, that when a man is humble, at the same time he becomes loving!

Humility, in this respect, is seen as a true unity of the way and it's destination, the aim that man tries to achieve. When the heart of man becomes humble, it starts to imitate the One who is love, and thus starts to love. In this way, man rebuilds his likeness to God. When love seems to a man to be a mountain too high to climb, seeing his wretchedness, he descends to the valley of humility, and there he finds the truth – only by descending he acquires love, the highest peak. Humility is a path of love and so St. Bernard and the Cistercian Fathers speak the words of Christ, who spoke of himself: "I am the way, the truth and the life." They bring to our attention the fact that this statement unites humility and love, truth and life in one entity. Therefore, through becoming humble a man "learns the truth", and it makes him happy as well. Knowing the truth, he not only "understands", but also loves, and it fills him with the Spirit of Truth, who is a great fact of life, and to be precise – the divine life itself, which is the fullness and beauty of our humanity.

But what does it really mean to be humble? Following the thought of St. Bernard, Merton describes humility as simplicity, distinguishing two kinds of it: intellectual simplicity and simplicity of will.

Intellectual simplicity.

Intellectual simplicity consists in realising that a man cannot reach the fullness of his humanity by himself, for he is only clay, dust, which was raised to the highest dignity by God. Acknowledging this fact is the first degree of humility. The second one, of equal importance, is agreeing to recognise one's dignity and greatness. When a man accepts his wretchedness, he cannot deny his dignity, which he never lost. What he should do is to admit that he doesn't live up to it and that he cannot do it alone. In that

respect humility means self-cognition, which generates fear of God and is a "beginning of wisdom", but it also means getting to know God, which is a supplement to wisdom and its perfection.

Another important element on this way/path is a characteristic emphasis that the Cistercian fathers put on choosing only the knowledge that serves the inner growth. Merton analyses the word *curiositas*, used by Bernard, which means false knowledge:

Curiositas is that vain and illusory knowledge, which is really ignorance, because it is the exercise of our intellect not in search of truth, but merely to flatter our own self-satisfaction and pride. (133)

And that is why man cannot learn the truth, says Merton. This *curiositas* is a first step to pride and a main cause of man's downfall in paradise.

But God had already given Adam and Eve all the knowledge, that was worth having, all that really perfected their souls, all that was really true. Hence, the only addition the devil could contribute was the knowledge of evil, of falsity. (133)

Cistercian spirituality in a particular way encourages us to look for the truth, seeing life and happiness in it, and to reject falsity, which proves to be a great deal of effort.

What is the wisdom, that is fitting for us to have? The knowledge and love of truth. What is the wisdom, that we should not seek? The knowledge and love of falsity. (134)

Merton notices that St. Bernard doesn't say anything that we could call anti-intellectualism. His main stress lies in his statement that a man should ably possess his knowledge, so that it could serve his spiritual development. Cognition should bear the fruit of growth and a deepening of the inner life. A man's mind is not storage where different objects can be kept. It is a cognitive power. And the aim of cognition is the life and identity of man in love. If a man learns to govern his cognition so that he can grow in the spiritual life, then his cognitive skills will multiply. Thus we see that those who accused St. Bernard of anti-intellectualism were wrong. This misunderstanding results from the fact that for St. Bernard, cognition is not merely a simple result of the thinking process itself. It is also a gift, a domain of

contemplation, towards which the mind ascends thanks to grace. In this contemplation, what is important, is not reserved only to mystics. It is a gift that every man can be granted. We can even say it is a gift every man should be open to.

This intellectual simplicity, as Merton calls it after Bernard, leads to contemplation.

It consists in not limiting one's knowledge, but in being alert not to make a mistake of a so-called "own judgement" (*proprium concilium*) of reality. It is a mistake, which caused the downfall of man: a desire of gaining knowledge without loving its Source. The knowledge is not the only aim of cognition. The other one is participation in the life of The Holy Trinity. Merton emphasises Bernard's belief that man can never be satisfied with God by means of rational knowledge, by imagination, or even mystical vision:

...but that soul will only be content, when he receives God with secret love, as He descends into the soul from heaven. For then he will possess the One he desires, not in a figure, but actually infused, not under any appearance, but in the direct contact of love. (136)

And this gift can be granted to a man...

...if only the soul will not cling to its own lights, to its own opinion, to its own way of doing things... (137)

On the basis of this analysis we can see that Bernard as a thinker and writer is faithful/true to his Cistercian school, and we can even say, to the monastic tradition in broad sense, both before, and after Bernard. It isn't hard to find a connection with, for example, the latter Carmelite tradition, which Merton does in an extensive article where he compares Bernard and John of the Cross.

The simplicity of the will.

This love is a unity of man's and God's will. Just as "own judgement", "own will" is a cause of man's unhappiness. The mortifying of one's will is stressed in the discipline/obedience of all orders. This obedience, which Merton explains, is mortifying of one's will in three dimensions: *nihil plus*, *nihil minus*, *nihil aliud*. That means not doing anything more, less, nor different than what has been agreed.

The chief characteristic of voluntas propria is (...) a spirit of separation, of self-exaltation in a private heaven, which belongs to us alone, by our own right... (139)

Merton emphasises that own will is a corruption of our natural freedom, natural simplicity. It is always accompanied with the urge to be pleased with oneself, which is directed to satisfy our own desires. But it does not mean that all will is bad, but only the one that opposes God.

The mortifying of one's soul also has another dimension: it opens one for the mystery of Christ's obedience, who gave up his own will to look for his father's will in all, even though his own will was great and sacred.

There still remains a question about God's will. Cistercian spirituality gives a great answer to that question. As the fathers of the order state it, is a common will of a particular community. It is this Cistercian *voluntas communis*, which was described in a document named *Charta caritatis*, as a kind of Cistercian constitution:

The will of others, the will of community, the Order etc. Is God's will, and to submit to our superiors and our brethren is to submit to God and become united to him. (139)

And it is not only about doing what we are told by others, but about thinking of the whole of community we belong to in our obedience.

The chief means for destroying self-will is not merely obedience. It is obedience regarded as subordinate to charity, and as integrated in the common life. (137)

This common will is something very specific, it is a spirit that revives a particular community, which allows one to see precisely what should be followed and what rejected. The Cistercian fathers write openly that it is the Holy Ghost who creates and leads a particular community!

The common will is a participation in the life of God for it is charity. It is God's will, God's love, the vinculum pacis, the bond of peace uniting man to one another and to God himself. (143)

Thus first of all a man is stimulated with longing, so that he can mortify his will adequately, and as a result he is given this particular sense of common will, that guides him through different inner and outer complexities and

in the end dignifies him. And as this is a particularly beautiful Cistercian ideal, let us hear what Merton himself has to say about it:

Frag. ze s.148 *No matter from what angle we approach cistercian simplicity – Merton summarizes – the core and essence of it always turns out to be one thing: love. The will, for St Bernard as for all the Augustinians, is man's highest faculty. Therefore the highest and most perfect simplicity attainable by intelligent beings is union of wills. The all-embracing union of charity, which is effected by the Holy Ghost himself, unites men to God and men to men in God in the most perfect and simple union of one loving will, which is God's own will, the voluntas communis. This union is what Christ died to purchase for us. It is the work of his Spirit in us, and to realize it perfectly is to be in heaven: indeed the whole work of achieving this final magnificent and universal simplicity of all men made one in Christ will be his eventual triumph at the last day.*

Hence we see, that the very essence of Cistercian simplicity is the practice of charity and loving obedience and mutual patience and forbearance in the community life which should be, on earth, an image of the simplicity of heaven. We now begin to see something of the depth of this beautiful Cistercian ideal!

On the other hand, the devil is always working to break up this simplicity, to break the Order down into separate groups, the groups into conflicting houses, the houses into cliques and the cliques into warring individuals. St. Stephen's Charter of Charity was explicitly directed against this work of hell.

The chief weapon used by the devil in this conflict is our own corrupt self-will, our self-judgment, and the two together are commonly called pride, which makes us idolaters, self-worshippers and consequently unitatis diviso-res, disrupters of union, destroyers of simplicity.

(...)

The culmination of Cistercian simplicity is the mystical marriage of the soul with God, which is nothing else but the perfect union of our will with God's will, made possible by the complete purification of all the duplicity of error and sin. This purification is the work of love and parti-

cularly of the love of God in our neighbor. Hence it is inseparable from that social simplicity, which consists in living out the voluntas communis in actual practice. This is the reason for the Cistercian insistence on the common life: the Cistercian is almost never physically alone. He has opportunities to give up his will to others twenty-four hours a day. It is precisely this which, according to the mind of St. Bernard, St. Alured and our other Fathers, should prepare him most rapidly for the mystical marriage.

What is the highest of Cistercian's simplicity is a mystical nuptial of the soul with God, which is nothing else than a perfect unity of our and God's will, which is only possible through a complete purification from the duality of fallacy and sin. This purification is the work of love, especially of God's love in our fellow man. Thus it is insupportable from this simplicity in community, which is about putting voluntas communis into effect through precise kind of practice. That is the reason of Cistercian's stress on "living together", Cistercian is almost never physically alone. He has opportunity to give his will to others twenty for hours a day. According to opinion of St. Bernard, St. Elred and of our other Fathers, it is (exactly) the quickest way to prepare him for the mystical nuptial.

From here, Merton, consequently, moves on to a subject of the mystical marriage, which is about the unity of God's will and ours, and therefore love. But we cannot achieve it other than with the help of the Holy Spirit, who constantly enlightens and unifies the Church:

...the operation of the voluntas communis (common will) and the operation of the Holy Ghost are one and the same thing, and the man, who wishes to become united to the Holy Ghost only has to enter into participation in this unity of charity by humbly giving up whatever is disordered in his own will to that of the Church, the Order; his superiors, his individual brethren and through all these to God. Sanctified by this participation in the common will, which is God himself working in men and in the Church, the individual monk is prepared for the graces of infused contemplation.

Summarizing, we can conclude that Cistercian theology, and especially that of St. Bernard, exerted an essential influence on Thomas Merton. Firstly, he found his own interest in the identity of man in it, and then, a harsh but

clearly directed school of asceticism of cognition and will, which led to this identity. This school formed in him the ability of critical self-reflection, as well as the ability to find a way in the various intricate realities of the contemporary world. Being one of the biggest virtues it also formed this particular sense of great human community, whose distinctions guard the unity which can really only be achieved on the level of the Holy Spirit, who gives life. Merton himself was an original man through and through, but what we will not find in his originality is the "Cistercian" defiance, which those revolutionizing the Church propagated: "don't search for new ways, it is enough that you take the one others took before you".