Experience as a Source of Revelation

The great masters of contemporary theology such as Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan have put great emphasis on human experience as a source of revelation. Thomas Merton beat them to the draw, not by articulating a theory about how human beings discover God in their lives, but by doing it.

Merton, who thought of himself as a poet more than a theologian, reveled in his experience and sought to express it in his writings, especially in his journals. In doing so, he did habitually what the rest of us do sporadically when on retreat or in Encounter or Renew sessions: Reflect on our experience of God in our life and try to express it.

Merton's wrestling with experience served him well in his continuing spiritual development. In his journals, he tried to describe as honestly as possible his reactions to events and ideas, his responses to people, his accomplishments and his failures.

His sustained effort to put the experiences of everyday life into words cultivated in him habits of self-scrutiny and discernment. It nurtured in him a capacity for recognizing the hand of God at work in the small world of his monastic life and the larger world of global tensions and aspirations.

Regular journal-keeping taught Merton to appreciate where he was being brought and to decide where he was being asked to go. Journal-keeping was not an interesting pastime for Merton; it constituted the human activity in which God was revealed.

Is Merton a model for the rest of us? Yes and no. No, in the sense that few of us have his incisive intelligence, his gift for words, his range of experiences. Yes, in the sense that he made an effort any of us can make: Reflect on our experience and see it as a way in which God is communicating to us.

— Elena Malits

"the cosmic dance" (*New Seeds of Contemplation*) or as discovering "our true selves" (*The New Man*). He did not talk about techniques for prayer nor try to explain various forms of contemplation. Rather, he mined the tradition and conjured up new worlds for the reader. Like all good storytellers and poets, he suggested, teased out meanings, provoked insights through new metaphors.

But Merton's contemplative experience went beyond the Christian tradition. For years in the monastery he studied the great religious traditions of the East: Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism. He died in Bangkok of accidental electrocution by a defective fan while on an extended tour of Asia for the explicit purpose of talking to monks from these traditions about their spiritual experiences.

Merton believed deepening his own contemplative life as a contemporary Catholic demanded that he be open to the wisdom of the East. Having thoroughly appropriated Christian contemplative prayer, Merton could find nourishment from other seekers different from himself. Merton's encounter with other religious traditions, however, involved more than finding nourishment; it was a matter of finding himself, of finding Christ. As he put it in *Mystics and Zen Masters*:

> Our task is now is to learn that if we can voyage to the ends of the earth and there find ourselves in the aborigine who most differs from ourselves, we will have made a fruitful pilgrimage. That is why pilgrimage is necessary, in some shape or other. Mere sitting at home and meditating on the divine presence is not enough for our time. We have to come to the end of a long journey and see that the stranger we meet there is no other than ourselves — which is the same as saying that we find Christ in him.

For those of us who cannot travel to Tibet or Indonesia, at least we have Merton's *Asian Journal*, even though his untimely death prevented him from putting it together and editing his notebooks into a book. In that journal, as in his studies of the contemplative tradition of the East (*The Way of Chuang Tzu, Zen and the Birds of Appetite, Mystics and Zen Masters*), we get the feel of Merton's experience of non-Christian forms of contemplation.

In initiating his readers into global dimensions of contemplative prayer, he related them to a world of action. The man who was born in France, lived in England as a teenager, and graduated from Columbia University in New York, became an American citizen some years after entering the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. He was by temperament and experience a "man of the world" in every sense of that term. As a contemplative monk, Merton was consciously concerned with breaking down barriers that lead to prejudice, hostility and war. He desired to transcend divisions within himself and thereby offer a transformed self to the world. For Merton, to let his soul be purged of self-seeking, the drive for power and prestige, and the roots of evil was, in fact, something to do to make the world a better place.

Merton forcefully reminds us that when we can do nothing in the external world to change an evil situation, we can always be open to being changed ourselves by the Spirit of Christ. To have hatred, despair, self-deception eradicated from our hearts is, indeed, to change the world. That was Merton's priority. He regarded it as his vocation as a contemplative to come to grips with the forces of destruction within himself. He regarded it as his vocation as a writer to write about that process of purgation and transformation.

Such effort, of course, could only take place within the context of prayer. For Merton, the work of transforming the human heart began and ended in authentic contemplative prayer. But that did not excuse him or anyone else from engaging in the kind of action for change in the world that one's vocation required.

Merton, himself, believed that he was called to a contemplative life, which meant he should keep "critical distance" from specific social action so as to assess it from another perspective. Others, like his friends in the Catholic Peace Fellowship, may be called to protest and civil disobedience. A side of Tom Merton wanted to engage in such demonstrations, but he resisted on the grounds of conviction.

Nonetheless, even the monk would need to act in certain ways. He wrote letters to the bishops at the Vatican Council, published astonishingly insightful essays on every conceivable social problem, and gave thoroughgoing spiritual direction to many individuals both in person and in letters. He brought about more social change from his contemplative enclosure than most of us could ever dream of. And the people who listened to Merton on the nuclear build-up, racial inequality as the white man's self-justification, or the need to change structures in the church, did so because he was perceived as a mar of prayer.

To be sure, Merton was a man of prayer. He sweated out the dark periods, endured the suffering of feeling his life "useless," and knew the experience of being stripped down to his naked self before God. And he wrote about it. He expressed the sense of his mission in *The Sign of Jonas:*

> To be as good a monk as I can, and to remain myself, and to write about it: to put myself down on paper, in such a situation, with the most complete simplicity and integrity, masking nothing, confusing no issues.

Merton intrigues us, I think, because most of us recognize something of ourselves in his quest. The circumstances of our lives may be radically different, but in the life of Thomas Merton and in the words of a gifted writer we touch our own humanness in all its frailty and splendor.

'The life of the soul is not knowledge,
IT IS LOVE,
Since love is the act of the Supreme Faculty, the will,
by which man is formally united to the final end of all his strivings-
by which MAN BECOMES ONE WITH GOD."

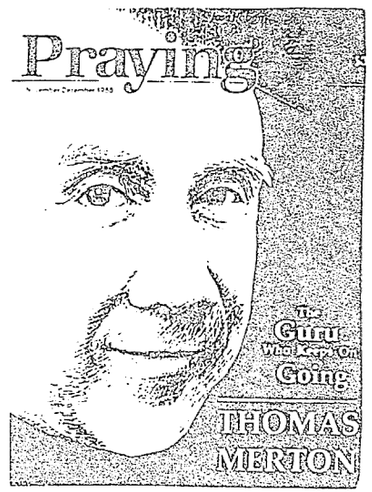
THOMAS MERTON(1948)

Notre Dame Religious Bulletin

Nov 20, 1988

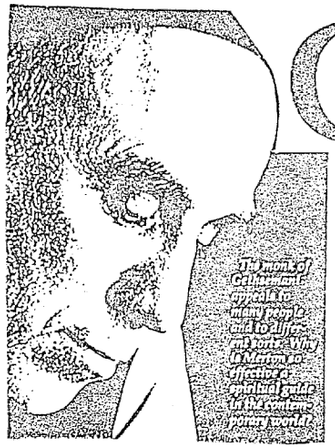
Special Merton Edition

50(conversion)
40(ordination)
20(death)



Thomas Merton

Wasp
"British"
Columbia
English Prof
Writer
Poet
Photographer
Catholic Convert
Monk
Hermit
Zen Master
Lover
Peace and Justice
In Heaven and still with us..



The Guru Who Keeps On Going

By Elena Malits

The extraordinary influence of Thomas Merton shows no sign of waning as the 20th anniversary of his death, on Dec. 10, approaches. His numerous books are constantly reissued — even ones he himself considered inferior. Both popular and scholarly articles and books about the man, his life, and his thought appear in never-ending profusion. " Thomas Merton: A Biography, " the TV documentary produced for the Public Broadcasting System, continues to enjoy immense popularity and is regularly reshown. An International Thomas Merton society is flourishing in its first year of existence.

The monk of Gethsemani appeals to many people and to different sorts of people. Not only Catholics are fascinated by him, though they have a special claim on Merton since his youthful autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, became a bestseller in 1948. Christians of various denominations, representatives of the great Eastern religions, and even nonbelievers read Thomas Merton and write about him. The Merton bug bites contemplatives and social activists, lay people and clerics, young and old, liberals and conservatives. What are the reasons for such widespread appeal? Why is Merton so effective a spiritual guide in the contemporary world?

The answer, I think, lies in Merton's fidelity to the task of expressing his own experience. He took those experiences seriously (though he often wrote about them with humor), and was convinced that sustained reflection on that experience was his primary access to religious understanding, personal growth and social responsibility. But Merton reflected on what was happening to him precisely through the process of writing about experience. He seems to have been one of those people who can only think with pen in hand or meditate at a typewriter. Merton always thought of himself as having a dual vocation: monk and writer. He could not be faithful to either calling without being faithful to both.

His readers, as well as himself, are the beneficiaries of that self-understanding, and we can trace the development and expanding religious horizons of the monk by reading chronologically his published journals: *The Sign of Jonas* (1953), *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1965), and *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (published posthumously in 1973). His voluminous letters, moreover, reveal a man always grappling to communicate to others what has become significant in his own life. (See *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concern.*)

While Merton tells his story most obviously in these straightforward autobiographical writings, he is nonetheless reflecting on his experience in all his books, essays and poetry. The monk's work on the nuclear threat, on Zen Buddhism, or on the novels of William Faulkner, for instance, never expressed abstract issues or ideas. Such writings exhibited the concerns with which Merton personally struggled in the depths of his soul. Whatever he wrote articulated his experience of himself in relation to God and to the world of his time.

While Merton tried to put into words his own experience, he never understood it in an individualistic way. For him, social issues such as racial injustice or political tyranny were his personal problems, not in the sense that he directly contributed to them, but insofar as he deeply felt and lived their implications. Indeed, the war in Vietnam was a thoroughly personal matter to Merton; he experienced it as rooted in the blindness and moral indifference of American foreign policy.

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But Merton was American, too, and while he differed with official policy, he knew that in some way he participated in what his nation perpetrated. Merton thought of himself as a "guilty bystander" insofar as there was any moral lassitude or self-righteousness in his own heart. So the war — as well as every social evil in American society or in the world community — was profoundly personal for Merton. And thus a matter for prayer.

Perhaps Merton's most distinctive gift to contemporary Christians is his recovery of the contemplative tradition. For what he did was to go to the sources of that tradition and make its meaning accessible to people living in a technological, action-oriented world. The title of another posthumously published book (taken from a late essay) *Contemplation in a World of Action*, sums up Merton's grasp of how 20th-century people might approach prayer.

Merton himself had experienced contemplation as described by the Desert Fathers, early Christian monks and theologians in both the West and Eastern Roman empire, and mystical writers such as St. Bernard and St. John of the Cross. He read widely and deeply and tried to put into practice what he read. When Merton tasted forms of contemplative prayer he had studied, he tried to share what he learned in writing.

He possessed a genius for going right to the heart of the matter and the ability to express a point in ordinary language. Merton was a born poet and his language sparkled with rich images and provocative metaphors. He could describe contemplative prayer as participating in

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How to Begin to Read Merton

There are many ways you might begin reading Merton, but I'd suggest following the order of his explicitly autobiographical writings. That will provide a framework for charting Merton's personal development as well as situating his topical interests.

Begin at the beginning with *The Seven Storey Mountain* and move through *The Sign of Jonas, Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, and the *Asian Journal*. Then you could read one book in each area of his major concerns: *New Seeds of Contemplation* on the spiritual life, *Faith and Violence* on social issues, *Mystics and Zen Masters* on mysticism East and West, and *Raids on the Unspeakable* for a literary potpourri.

If you have time for only one Merton book, try *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* to get the flavor of the mature monk commenting on the world around him and the large world of events. *A Thomas Merton Reader*, revised edition, edited by Thomas P. McDonnell (Doubleday Image paperback), is the one inexpensive way to sample Merton in his many moods and multiple modes of writing.

— Elena Malits