



## Thomas Merton's Legacy: A Personal Reflection

The Newsweek cover of 19 November 2007 proclaimed 1968 as “The Year That Made Us Who We Are.” Prominent among the events recalled were the deaths of Martin Luther King Jr. on 4 April and Robert Kennedy on 6 June. For me the year recalled another death, Thomas Merton's, on 10 December, and Newsweek's title led me to reflect on how Merton had made me and many of my generation who we are as Christians. This surprised me. I had never explicitly assessed Merton's contribution either to 20th-century spirituality or to my own.

Then I received and accepted an invitation from St. Mary's College, South Bend, to speak about Merton's legacy to contemporary spirituality. I began delving back into spiritual developments after the Second Vatican Council.

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To be safe I narrowed my topic to Merton's influence on me, but I soon felt that Merton had influenced my entire generation, affecting major writers such as Henri Nouwen and Thomas Keating.

From 1969 to 1972 I studied in the Department of Religion and Religious Education at Catholic University in Washington, D.C. There I became fascinated by Abraham Maslow's self-actualization psychology, especially his approach to peak “religious” experience. Deciding for my dissertation to compare Maslow, an agnostic, with a Christian spiritual writer, I did not take the suggestion to use Ignatius Loyola. I had read *Seven Storey Mountain* in high school; as a young Jesuit I had not become further acquainted; but I would become familiar with him. I chose Merton.

Looking back now, I am aware that Merton significantly altered my approach to spirituality in at least five areas: models of spirituality, personal prayer, the sacred and the secular, nonviolence, and interreligious understanding.

### Models of Spirituality

Merton transformed my understanding of not only spirituality but also human nature. He moved me from a behavior-centered approach to a contemplative, heart-centered approach. And for the first time I began understanding the role of grace.

In my Jesuit formation from 1955 to 1968, we strove to do God's will as indicated in the daily order. Our day included Mass, meditation, examinations of conscience, the rosary, and other prayers. It included times for work, study, play, eating, and sleeping. Our day was spent doing things for God. Holiness, as I understood it throughout my Jesuit formation, was in fidelity in doing God's will



by observing the daily order and keeping the rules: “Keep the rules and the rules will keep you.” I frequently failed in observance. I was a perfectionist and experienced guilt. I had migraine headaches during my early years.

During my studies at Catholic University, I began rethinking my model of spirituality and of human nature. Though I had never formally articulated it, my understanding of human nature throughout my formation was Freudian: Human nature cannot be trusted because it is dominated by the strong self-centered instinctual impulses of the Id, and so spirituality strives to repress and control this unruly nature.

Abraham Maslow's personality theory challenged this model. Maslow describes human nature in a positive series of needs leading to full self-actualization. This actualization occurs as we recognize and respond to our nature's promptings.

For my dissertation I sought a theological perspective on human nature that would complement Maslow's psychological one. Merton's theory of the True Self provided that perspective. He stresses that the True Self is the self in an existential union with God. This union is capable of transforming the self if we live in tune with it: “The secret of my identity is hidden in Him. He alone can make me who I am, or rather who I will be when at last I fully begin to be. But, unless I desire this identity and work to find it with him and in him, the work will never be done.” Also: “There is only one problem on which all my existence, my peace, and my happiness depend: to discover myself in discovering God. If I find him I will find myself, and if I find my true self I will find him.”<sup>1</sup>

For the first time in my life I was exposed to a Christian approach to the self that stressed not sinful-

ness but grace. For me, Merton was describing grace as it worked transforming the various levels of Maslow's series of needs. Merton's “self-realization in Christ” was the perfect complement to Maslow's agnostic “self-actualization.”

But Merton's approach to the self was not naïve. He realized that discovering our True Self is difficult because we are shadowed by a False Self. This False Self is a product of our secular, materialistic culture; it leads to an understanding of the self that does not include God: “Every one of us is shadowed by an illusory person: a false self. . . . My false and private self is the one who wants to exist outside the reach of God's will and God's love—outside of reality and outside of life. And such a self cannot help but be an illusion. . . . All sin starts from the assumption that my false self, the self that exists only in my own egocentric desires, is the fundamental reality of life to which everything else in the universe is ordered” (*Seeds*, 34-35).

Merton's approach to spirituality focuses not on behavior but on the habitual consciousness underlying actions. Spirituality seeks to recognize and respond to God's presence at the center of our self, our True Self. This includes recognizing and rejecting the patterns of our False Self that separate us from God. It is not unlike Paul's contrast between following Christ by faithful observance of the external law and following Christ

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by responding to the law of the Holy Spirit written upon our hearts. This insight illumined my spirituality. When I began my university teaching, I was asked to teach a graduate course called Approaches to Mysticism. Merton's contemplative spirituality became my guide.

### Personal Prayer

Merton transformed my personal prayer, helping me experience prayer as an authentic and fulfilling expression of myself before God and not only as a prescribed religious obligation. He helped me recognize the Spirit's role and become aware of actual contemplation in my life and prayer. I believe that contemplation is the key to Merton's spirituality.

Daily personal prayer was a regular part of our Jesuit formation. We were given Jesuit-authored meditation books that presented scriptural passages for each day of the year. We were taught the Ignatian methods of meditation and contemplation presented in his *Spiritual Exercises*. We were instructed to reflect on those passages using memory, understanding, will, and imagination. We prayed for fifty minutes each morning beginning at 5:30. I found these prayer hours difficult and did not look forward to them. They seemed irrelevant; I often experienced distraction, boredom, and sleep. I was faithful to this regimen for the first nine years of my Jesuit formation.

As part of my formation I taught at a Jesuit mission in South Dakota. Life at the mission was difficult, both in community life and in ministry. The students showed little enthusiasm for the courses I taught or the activities I ran. Discouraged, I wondered if I had followed the right vocation. I began taking walks alone late at night down the country road. I poured out my

discouragement to the Lord. The walks stabilized me; in the stillness I often found peace. I looked forward to these walks and would not miss them if I could help it. I determined to continue serving the Lord.

But I did not consider these walks personal prayer—they were not the Ignatian prayer I was trained in.

Needing sleep, I soon was sleeping through the morning prayer hour and getting up in time for the 6:30 Mass. I felt guilty, but one day I realized I was not skipping prayer—I was doing it at night. From that moment my personal prayer changed. I felt that prayer does not have to be a strenuous concentration of memory, understanding, will, and imagination. Simply being with the Lord anywhere—in chapel or outside—was prayer. Theologians might not agree with me, and this was not the Ignatian prayer I was taught—so I kept my ideas to myself.

In graduate school Merton gave me a theological foundation for my prayer. He helped me realize I was holding on to a Pelagian understanding of prayer. He showed me that prayer is really more the work of the Holy Spirit than my work: "It can therefore be said that the aim of mental prayer is to awaken the Holy Spirit within us, and to bring our hearts into harmony with his voice, so that we allow the Holy Spirit to speak and pray within us, and lend him our voice and our affections that we may become, as far as possible, conscious of his prayer in our hearts."<sup>2</sup>

Merton showed me that prayer can actually be easy and that we can pray from wherever we are in our lives. It does not have to be a strenuous effort to forget our daily lives and to concentrate on Scripture using memory, understanding, and will. "In prayer we discover what we already have. You start where you are and you



deepen what you already have, and you realize that you are already there. We already have everything; but we don't know it and we don't experience it. Everything has been given to us in Christ. All we need is to experience what we already possess."<sup>3</sup>

Finally, and unbelievably, I learned that my prayer sometimes fulfilled Merton's description of contemplation—being touched by God in a way transcending

words. What I had considered merely natural human experiences—Maslow's peak experiences—were actually encounters with the divine: "Contemplation is a sudden gift of awareness, an awakening to the Real within all that is real. A vivid awareness of infinite

Being at the roots of our own limited being. An awareness of our contingent reality as received, as a present from God, as a free gift of love. This is the existential contact of which we speak when we use the metaphor of being 'touched by God'" (*Seeds*, 3). I realized these experiences happened most frequently for me—and for Merton—in nature, and they happened most frequently outside of formal prayer times. He showed me that contemplation is not merely the preserve of cloistered monks and nuns, but that we are all called to it by our baptism.

In short, Merton gave me the theology and language to explain and justify what had become my regular practice of personal prayer. This had several enduring effects

on my rhythm of personal prayer. I moved toward more and more silence in prayer, allowing the Holy Spirit to pray within me. I began daily prayer with my personal concerns rather than Scripture. I arranged my place of prayer to ensure I could always view God's creation. I altered my annual eight-day retreats: I stopped going to retreat houses and went to places of great natural beauty near a mountain or an ocean—and I began looking forward to these retreats.

### The Sacred and the Secular

Merton's ideas had many ramifications in my life. He helped me transcend an artificial distinction I had made between the sacred and the secular. He helped me recognize that daily life is sacred.

Before the Second Vatican Council and throughout my formation, I had lived with a basic misunderstanding about spirituality and holiness. I believed that spirituality is primarily faithful performance of devotional practices aimed directly at worshiping God, such as Mass and visits to chapel, and that holiness is measured by fidelity to these practices. I did acknowledge other things as important, such as doing God's will and charity toward others, especially toward the most needy. These things, however, seemed not as central to holiness as the explicitly religious activities.

When the council came, I was deeply influenced by the document "The Church in the Modern World" (*Gaudium et spes*). The council clearly taught that being a good Catholic is more than simply performing religious obligations faithfully. A good Catholic must also be actively involved in serving the kingdom of God by living in love in ordinary daily life, and especially by working for justice in the world and working for the poor.

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This call occasioned a crisis in my life. I began to feel there had been too much emphasis on religious activities and not enough on service to others. I questioned my commitment to daily Mass and meditation. For a while I dropped daily personal prayer. I had set up a dichotomy between sacred activities and secular activities. Merton helped me overcome this dichotomy. His understanding of the True Self was key. The True Self exists in an existential union not only with God but also with the entire human family. There is no true union with God without union with one another, and so the Holy Spirit moves our hearts not only to love God in religious activities but also to love one another in our daily activities: “Christ prayed that all men might become One as He was One with his Father, in the Unity of the Holy Spirit. Therefore when you and I become what we are really meant to be, we will discover not only that we love one another perfectly but that we are both living in Christ and Christ in us, and we are all One Christ. We will see that it is he who loves in us” (*Seeds*, 65).

Living a life of service to others is not a distraction from union with God but actually a condition for reaching this union: “One of the paradoxes of the mystical life is this: that a man cannot enter into the deepest center of himself, and pass through that center into God, unless he is able to pass entirely out of himself and empty himself and give himself to other people in the purity of a selfless love” (*Seeds*, 64).

Merton emphasizes that the quality of prayer affects the quality of our action. The more deeply we are united to God in prayer, the more energy we have to serve our neighbor. “Action and contemplation now grow together into one life and one unity. They become two aspects of the same thing. Action is charity looking out-

ward to other men, and contemplation is charity drawn inward to its own divine source. Action is the stream, and contemplation is the spring. The spring remains more important than the stream, for the only thing that really matters is for love to spring up inexhaustibly from the infinite abyss of Christ and of God.”<sup>4</sup>

Merton gave me the theology to dedicate myself to both prayer and service. Since both flow from the Holy Spirit, both are sacred. This theology impelled me to social action. Soon after I began my university teaching, I initiated a campus boycott of iceberg lettuce to support the farm workers’ union. I encouraged nonviolent picketing of the food service lines. The boycott took more than a year but was ultimately successful.

### Nonviolence

Before reflecting on Merton’s spirituality, I had a limited understanding of nonviolence. I thought of it simply as conscientiously objecting to the war in Vietnam and, influenced by Martin Luther King’s civil rights movement, as not retaliating physically when attacked. Though I admired these positions, I saw those who took them as rare, highly idealistic, and a bit naïve. Merton revolutionized my understanding. His description of the True Self showed me that an attitude of nonviolence is an integral part of living the gospel and following Christ. Since God dwells within every human being, this communion has radical consequences for how we think and how we act. When we are in tune with God at our center, in our True Self, we experience our oneness with others, even with our “enemies.” Our behavior changes.

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This False Self has the illusion that our existence is not connected with God or with others, and this illusion leads to violence: “People who know nothing of God, and whose lives are centered on themselves, imagine

that they can only find themselves by asserting their own desires and appetites in a struggle with the rest of the world. They try to become real by imposing themselves on other people, by appropriating for themselves some share of the limited supply

of created goods and thus emphasizing the difference between themselves and other men who have less than they, or nothing at all” (*Seeds*, 47).

Merton concludes simply: “I must look for my identity, somehow, not only in God but in other men. I will never be able to find myself if I isolate myself from the rest of mankind as if I were a different kind of being” (*Seeds*, 51).

The transformation Merton calls for happens most profoundly in contemplation. In a busy Kentucky city, Merton experienced his most well-known contemplative awakening: “In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of

separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness.”<sup>5</sup>

Such consciousness is the foundation for Merton's understanding of nonviolence. It can move us to deal with our neighbors always with compassion and love, not violence. We seek nonviolent ways to show our neighbors the divine within them as it has been shown joyfully to ourselves. This is the way Merton was leading me to radical implications of being a Christian. How inadequate my understanding of nonviolence had been!

Merton lived during the turbulent 1960s and applied nonviolent principles to social movements. He became the prophetic voice for many involved in these movements.

While studying in Washington, I attended many mass demonstrations against the Vietnam War. I remember a group of marchers on Pennsylvania Avenue carrying a banner slandering President Nixon. Merton helped me realize that this was not true nonviolence. Without compassion and love, it was merely a redirection of hatred. Truly nonviolent social movements exclude hatred, because we are all members of one human family with God as our Father. I began applying nonviolent principles to personal conflicts. I realized how often I sought to resolve conflicts by some sort of psychological intimidation. I saw anew the need for prayer. And I began teaching a course titled Faith and Nonviolence. We read the New Testament, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Cesar Chavez, Daniel Berrigan, and Merton. The course applied nonviolent principles to both societal and personal conflicts.

### **Interreligious Understanding**

Although I had taken several courses on world religions during my theology studies, I understood these religions mainly as institutions with distinctive creeds,



codes, and cults. Through his approach to contemplation, Merton led me toward an empathetic understanding of them. Key to this deeper understanding was Merton's insistence that the contemplative experience of the divine is beyond words: "Contemplation is always beyond our own knowledge, beyond our own light, beyond systems, beyond explanations, beyond discourse, beyond dialogue, beyond our own self." "It cannot even be clearly explained. It can only be hinted at, suggested, pointed to, symbolized. The more objectively and scientifically one tries to analyze it, the more one empties it of its real content, for this experience is beyond the reach of verbalization and rationalization" (*Seeds*, 2 & 6). Since all human beings share the same human nature, and since the same God dwells within us all, we may indeed share similar experiences of God.

Reading Merton's *Inner Experience* confirmed this idea for me. Buddhist descriptions of satori are not unlike Merton's descriptions of contemplation. Merton presents a poem.

Devoid of thought, I sat quietly by the desk in my  
official room,  
With my fountain-mind undisturbed, as serene as  
water;  
A sudden crash of thunder, the mind doors burst open,  
And lo, there sits the old man in all his homeliness.

Merton comments: "There sits Chao-pien himself, the same and yet utterly different, for it is the eternal Chao-pien, one with no familiar name, at once humble and mighty . . . utterly beyond description or comparison because he is beyond yes and no, subject and object, self and not-self. It is like the wonderful, devastating, and unutterable awe of humble joy with which a Christian realizes: 'I and the Lord are One.'"<sup>6</sup>

This was a major breakthrough in my understanding. After my own experiences of contemplation, I could now allow Merton's books and essays on Zen Buddhism, Taoism, Sufism, Judaism, and Hinduism to lead me to deeper understanding of these religions. Since I wanted my students to understand the centrality of prayer and contemplation for every world religion, I began adding these readings to my courses.

We all mourned Merton's untimely death in Bangkok on 10 December 1968, during his three-month trip to Asia. This death was especially sad because his firsthand Asian experiences would have given him further data on similarities between Eastern and Western mysticism.

### My Debt to Merton

I realize that many today take for granted the five areas of spirituality that I have described. But Merton's insights were presented before the council and official Catholicism accepted them. Indeed, his own abbot general censored his 1961 antiwar writings. Merton's writing became foundational for a new generation of Christians and spiritual writers. This fortieth anniversary of his death is the first time I have stopped to acknowledge my debt. I do not consider it an exaggeration to say that Merton was a prophet heralding a new age of spirituality.

Merton paved the way for my own understanding of the council's teaching on the Holy Spirit in Christian spirituality. Merton's insistence that the True Self is ontologically united both to God and to all humanity and that the Holy Spirit is the source of this communion transformed my previously unrecognized American individualism. I had never grasped that the indwelling of the Spirit has actual effects in daily life and daily prayer. The



combination of Merton's description of the True Self and the council's message on the Holy Spirit revolutionized my spirituality. I was so energized by these insights that I wrote three books and dozens of articles.

I am indebted to Merton for "bringing me home" to Ignatian prayer. Merton's descriptions of prayer flowing spontaneously from daily life led me to reconsider my understanding of it. I realized that Ignatian prayer is not simply to be identified with intense concentration on scripture texts as found in the meditations and contemplations of the Spiritual Exercises. Prayer more characteristic of Ignatius is found in his *Contemplation for Obtaining Divine Love* and flows from daily life. Observations of Ignatius at prayer, like the following recollection from one of Ignatius's first companions, assure me that I am on the right track:

At night he would go up on the roof of the house, with the sky there up above him. He would sit there quietly, absolutely quietly. He would take his hat off and look up for a long time at the sky. Then he would fall on his knees, bowing profoundly to God. Then he would sit on a little bench because the weakness of his body did not allow him to take any other position. He would stay there bareheaded and without moving. And the tears would begin to flow down his cheeks like a stream, but so quietly and so gently that you heard not a sob nor a sigh nor the least possible movement of his body.<sup>7</sup>

Merton helped me internalize that hallmark of Ignatian spirituality "Finding God in all things." He also paved the way for my understanding of Ignatius's discernment of spirits, but that is another article.

I have asked myself why my journey into Ignatian spirituality took so long. I recognize now that I was blocked by invalid False Self assumptions. I needed

someone to address them directly. In God's providence Thomas Merton was that person—the person who with God's grace most made me who I am today as a Catholic Christian.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), pp. 33 & 36. Hereafter, in the text, *Seeds*.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Merton, *Spiritual Direction and Meditation* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1960), p. 67.

<sup>3</sup> David Steindl-Rast OSB, "Recollections of Thomas Merton's Last Day in the West," *Monastic Studies*, Vol. 7, pp. 1-10.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (New York: Doubleday Image, 1955), p. 65.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday Image, 1989), p. 156.

<sup>6</sup> *Inner Experience*, pp. 300-301, taken from L.S. Cunningham, *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> W.W. Meissner SJ, *Ignatius of Loyola: The Psychology of a Saint* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 280.



#### Personal Reflection / Group Discussion

Has Thomas Merton or another spiritual writer influenced my practices of the spiritual life? Like Hauser, how would I describe the change?