

## Thomas Merton and St. John of the Cross: Lives on Fire

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*Nass Cannon*

The streets were empty that cold day as we shivered in our spring clothes. In January, no one is in Ubeda, not even American tourists! We were there almost by happenstance as a convenient place to spend the night on the long drive back to Madrid from Grenada. My family chose a trip to southern Spain, foolishly thinking it would be warmer than other European destinations. (My unsolicited advice would be that if you plan to take a trip to southern Spain in January, take your ski clothes!). Our trip included a rail excursion to Toledo and a self-drive trip through Andalusia including Seville and Grenada.

As we set out to explore the town, my middle son, an insatiable explorer, stumbled across a museum with the name of Juan de la Croix and asked whether I had heard of him? The museum was the monastery where St. John died. After touring the restored cell in which he lived, we viewed his relics and the table on which they treated his gangrenous leg. Unaware, I had traced his movements in Southern Spain (where he tirelessly journeyed to establish and serve in monasteries) and awakened to the reality of our own "pilgrimage" one day before departing Spain. It is this reawakened interest in the writings of St. John of the Cross coupled with the long term assistance provided by that spiritual guide, Thomas Merton, which prompts this essay.

In this paper, I wish to share some observations about Thomas Merton and St. John of the Cross as persons on fire with the love of God. I will do this using St. John of the Cross's concept of contemplation as an encounter with the fiery presence of God. I intend also to reflect on the end effects of such a contemplation expressed by Merton as "the unity of a person" or "final integration" and St. John as "The Living Flame of Love."

Both Thomas Merton and St. John of the Cross encountered the God Moses described in Deuteronomy as a consuming fire (Dt 4:24). The analogy of God as fire permeates most of St. John's writings, especially in *The Dark Night of the Soul* and *The Living Flame of Love*.

St. John views the contemplative process as the transformation of the soul by this consuming fire. The source of this fire-- the Spirit-- afflicts, transforms, and causes the soul to blaze in loving union with

the Father and the Son. Merton also experienced this fire, as illustrated through his description of himself as a burnt man, his reference to "the living experience of divine love and Holy Spirit in the flame of which St. John of the Cross speaks" and believing that this spark resides in our heart.<sup>1</sup> Like St. John, Merton viewed contemplation as the action of the Spirit within the heart of every person. God's embrace of contemplatives such as Thomas Merton and St. John of the Cross cause them to be burnt, purged, and erupt into flames. Although both roared into flames, their writings reflect an individual, personal, and unique expression of their union with God.

In his writings, Merton quotes extensively from the texts of St. John and acknowledges his debt to him as a spiritual forbear and guide. Early in his monastic life, Merton comments on his relationship to St. John: "I say that St. John of the Cross seems to me to be the most accessible of the saints that is only another way of saying that he is my favorite saint."<sup>2</sup> Merton saw St. John as accessible because he revealed his inner depths and the intimacy of his relationship with God for all to see.

Nevertheless it is true, if you consider that few saints, if any, have ever opened up to other men such remote depths in their own soul. St. John of the Cross admits you, in the *Living Flame*, to his soul's "deepest center", to the "deep caverns" in which the lamps of fire, the attributes of God, flash mysteriously in metaphysical shadows; who else has done as much?<sup>3</sup>

I think many of us would answer: Thomas Merton, who undressed himself, his thinking, his reflections and contemplative journey, in full public view.

These men, who were possessed by God and dispossessed in so many other ways, had many similarities during their earthly pilgrimage but also some striking differences. Both had splintered families at an early age. Juan de Yepes y Alvarez was born in Fontiveros, Spain, in 1542, the son of an affluent father who was disowned for marrying beneath his station. He died shortly after John's birth, forcing John's mother to support the family by silk weaving. Like John, Merton lost a parent at a young age. He was six when his mother died of stomach cancer.

St. John had a reputation of piety from youth and at age 17 attended a Jesuit College while working at the Plague Hospital de la Concepcion. After being ordained in 1567 in the Carmelite order, he later joined St. Teresa as her confessor and spiritual director at the Convent of the

Incarnation. St. Theresa introduced John to members of her convent as a saint. By contrast, devoted readers are quite familiar with the more Augustinian youthful life of Thomas Merton, particularly while at Cambridge, which may have been influenced by the bohemian lifestyle of his artistic father. At age seven, Merton was traveling in the company of his father and his father's love interest, including her husband, to Bermuda. (In Wikipedia, a biographer asserts that Merton referred to this as the "Bermuda Triangle").

Both St. John's and Merton's spiritual lives thrived in the desert. In 1576, the Calced Friars arrested John and confined him to a small cell in their monastery in Toledo because of his reform efforts. During this time of physical confinement and abuse, he composed the *Spiritual Canticle*, reflecting a spirit on fire. In the confinement of a Trappist monastery, Merton became a two-fisted monk. He took to being a monk the way he formerly took to the bars: He went at it. He left nothing behind, taking with him all of his gifts-- writing, scholarship, and a mind that would follow the truth wherever it took him. Within the monastery, Merton became an explorer of himself, society, other cultures, and the no-face of God.

Both experienced rejection. Although St. John held many offices in the Discalced Province and tirelessly journeyed on foot in their service, he was rejected by his own order which threatened to send him to Mexico near the end of his life. Shortly afterwards, when St. John's leg became infected, he chose to go to the monastery at Ubeda where his humility moved a hostile prior to become a champion of St. John's cause for beatification. Likewise, Merton was rejected by many as he spoke out for social justice, the peace movement, and immersed himself in Eastern thought; however, to my knowledge there is not a movement promoting Merton's cause for beatification.

While their lives were similar in some respects and very different in others, it is in the writings of their experience of the Spirit that their kinship is most striking. Both were great spiritual writers, guides and passionate men who sought God with great desire. Thomas Merton experienced the purgation reflected in St. John of the Cross's metaphor of the soul being like a log of wood heated by an external flame before slowly igniting and roaring into flames. St. John described this process in the *Dark Night of the Soul*:

For the greater clearness of what has been said, and of what has still to be said, it is well to observe at this point that this purgative and loving knowledge or Divine light whereof we here speak acts

upon the soul which it is purging and preparing for perfect union with it in the same way as fire acts upon a log of wood in order to transform it into itself; for material fire, acting upon wood, first of all begins to dry it, by driving out its moisture and causing it to shed the water which it contains within itself. Then it begins to make it black, dark and unsightly, and even to give forth a bad odour, and, as it dries it little by little, it brings out and drives away all the dark and unsightly accidents which are contrary to the nature of fire. And, finally, it begins to kindle it externally and give it heat, and at last transforms it into itself and makes it as beautiful as fire.<sup>4</sup>

In his *The Ascent to Truth*, Merton uses a similar fiery analogy:

It is into this abyss of blazing light, so infinitely bright as to be pure darkness to our intelligence that the mystic enters not only with his eyes, his imagination, and his mind but with his whole soul and substance, in order to be transformed like a bar of iron in the white heat of a furnace. The iron turns into fire. The mystic is "transformed" in God.<sup>5</sup>

Merton also alludes to this purification at the end of *The Seven Storey Mountain* when he uses the literary device of quoting the Spirit who is speaking to him:

Everything that touches you shall burn you, and you will draw your hand away in pain, until you have withdrawn yourself from all things. Then you will be all alone. Everything that can be desired will sear you, and brand you with a cautery, and you will fly from it in pain to be alone. Every created joy will come to you as pain, and you will die to all joy and be left alone. You will be praised, and it will be like burning at the stake.<sup>6</sup>

Merton concludes the revelation on why he was brought to Gethsemani: "That you may become the brother of God and learn to know the Christ of the burnt men."<sup>7</sup>

Becoming the brother of God led him into some strange places and activities as he became the brother of every person. After his epiphany on the streets of Louisville in 1958, he reached out to his brothers everywhere including celebrities, social activists, Buddhist and Zen monks. He also experienced the Christ of the burnt men, in himself, his neighbors, those who immolated themselves during the Vietnam peace protest, and in his Zen-like death by electrocution. But most of all, he knew the Christ of the burnt men purged by the fire of

contemplation. Purged by that fire, Merton's soul roared into flames. In one of his last written and mature testimonies, *Contemplative Prayer*, he wrote:

The living experience of divine love and Holy Spirit in the flame of which St. John of the Cross is speaking is a true awareness that one has died and risen in Christ. It is an experience of mystical renewal, an inner transformation brought about entirely by the power of God's merciful love, implying the "death" of the self-centered and self-sufficient ego and the appearance of a new and liberated self who lives and acts "in the Spirit".<sup>8</sup>

St. John described what that liberated self who lives and acts in the Spirit experiences.

This flame of love is the Spirit of its Bridegroom, which is the Holy Spirit. The soul feels Him within itself not only as a fire that has consumed and transformed it but as a fire that burns and flares within it, as I mentioned. And that flame, every time it flares up, bathes the soul in glory and refreshes it with the quality of divine life.<sup>9</sup>

Experiencing this flame, Merton wrote, "Love sails me around the house.... I have only time for eternity which is to say for love, love, love...it is love and it gives me soft punches all the time in the center of my heart."<sup>10</sup> Merton attained a liberated self who lives and acts in the Spirit or "a living flame of love" in St. John's verbiage.

Although both were burnt by the same Spirit, their fruition differed towards their spiritual journey's end. While Merton chose to emphasize the Spirit's effect on leading a person to integration and wholeness, St. John focused on the intensity of the Spirit's flame. From Merton's perspective, the contemplative as a living flame of love recovers the true self, obtains final integration and has a realization of oneness with God and all that is. Merton states such a person embraces all of humanity, transcending the accidents of culture and recognizes the one truth shining out in all of its manifestations:

The one who has attained final integration is no longer limited by the culture in which he has grown up. "He has embraced all of life." ... He passes beyond all these limiting forms, while retaining all that is best and most universal in them, "finally giving birth to a fully comprehensive self". He accepts not only his own community, his own society, his own friends, his own culture, but all

mankind. He does not remain bound to one limited set of values in such a way that he opposes them aggressively or defensively to others. He is fully "Catholic" in the best sense of the word. He has a unified vision and experience of the one truth shining out in all its various manifestations, some clearer than others, some more definite and more certain than others. He does not set these partial views up in opposition to each other, but unifies them in a dialectic or an insight of complementarity. With this view of life he is able to bring perspective, liberty and spontaneity into the lives of others. The finally integrated person is a peacemaker, and that is why there is such a desperate need for our leaders to become such persons of insight.<sup>11</sup>

However, Merton is no stranger to the divine love operating within the soul. He writes that the fruit of contemplation results in a new man in union with the Spirit of Christ and therefore one with the Father and Spirit. He states that our oneness with Christ consists of being united to His Spirit.

We cannot get too deep into the mystery of our oneness in Christ. It is so deep as to be unthinkable and yet a little thought about it doesn't hurt. But it doesn't help too much either. The thing is, that we are not united in a thought of Christ or a desire of Christ, but in His Spirit.<sup>12</sup>

He perceives contemplation, like St. John of the Cross, as the very act of this living flame, the Spirit, bringing us to union with the Father through purifying our hearts. The fruit of this purification is love.

That is to say he loves with purity and freedom that spring spontaneously from the fact that he has fully recovered the divine likeness and is now his fully true self because he is lost in God and hence knows of no ego in himself. All he knows is love.<sup>13</sup>

Near the end of his life, the yearning of that Spirit flared from the depths of his heart as he spontaneously uttered the closing prayer at a conference in Calcutta.

We are creatures of love. Let us join hands, as we did before, and I will try to say something that comes out of the depths of our hearts. I ask you to concentrate on the love that is in you, that is in us all. I have no idea what I am going to say. I am going to be silent a minute, and then I will say something... O God, we are one with you. You have made us one with you. You dwell in us. Help us to

preserve this openness and to fight for it with all of our hearts. Help us to realize that there can be no understanding where there is mutual rejection. Oh, God, in accepting one another wholeheartedly, fully, completely, we accept You, and we thank You, and we adore You, and we love You with our whole being because our being is in Your being, our spirit is rooted in your Spirit. Fill us then with love, and let us be bound together with love as we go our diverse ways, united in this one spirit which makes You present in the world, and which makes You witness to the ultimate reality that is love. Love has overcome. Love is victorious. Amen.<sup>14</sup>

Although both men's writings testify to similar qualities in their experience of union with God's Spirit, it does not appear to me that Merton communicates (or chooses to communicate the intensity of the Spirit's wounding love that St. John calls a cautery. St. John notes that a soul in union with God can experience an even hotter flame.

This cautery, as we mentioned, is the Holy Spirit. For as Moses declares in Deuteronomy, Our Lord God is a consuming fire [Dt. 4:24], that is, a fire of love which, being of infinite power, can inestimably consume and transform into itself the soul it touches. Yet He burns each soul according to its preparation. He will burn one more, another less, and this He does insofar as He desires, and how and when He desires. When He wills to touch somewhat vehemently, the soul's burning reaches such a high degree of love that it seems to surpass that of all the fires of the world, for He is an infinite fire of love. As a result, in this union, the soul calls the Holy Spirit a cautery. Since in a cautery the fire is more intense and fierce and produces a more singular effect than it does in other combustibles, the soul calls the act of this union a cautery in comparison with other acts, for it is the outcome of a fire so much more aflame than all others. Because the soul in this case is entirely transformed by the divine flame, it not only feels a cautery, but has become a cautery of blazing fire.<sup>15</sup>

It is true that Thomas Merton is no St. John of the Cross. But then again, St. John of the Cross is no Merton. Each man was shaped by his embrace of God to become uniquely himself. Merton's personality flared toward openness, tolerance, inclusiveness, and wholeness. His intellect questioned and integrated. He stretched boundaries and saw "the one truth shining forth in all of its manifestations." He saw beyond irreconcilable differences and viewed the disparate as complimentary.

Buddhism, Zen, Sufism, existential literature, art, photography and all objects of his contemplative gaze as well as his lived experiences complemented his journey as a Christian contemplative. To my thinking, one of his major accomplishments was to achieve final integration in himself as a prophetic sign pointing the way to a potential deeper union of humankind, which may be attainable despite all our disparate cultures and belief systems.

St. John's temperament and mission differed. A reformer, confessor, and spiritual guide during his lifetime, St. John's mission was to poetically communicate the soul's embrace by God. He was uniquely gifted to view, experience and communicate the Spirit's effect on his own soul to the furthest extent possible and still remain on earth. A spiritual guide to St. Teresa of Avila and Merton, he beckons to those who leave all paths as they are consumed by the fire of the Living God.

Separated by time, culture, and mission, both contemplatives, in the Spirit, share with us their journey to God. For a fractured world bent on destruction, Merton radiates hope with his message of "the unity of a person" and "final integration" whereas St. John explains the timeless process of transforming union in which God and man become one "Living Flame of Love".

In conclusion, I propose that Thomas Merton like St. John of the Cross became a living flame of love. Purged by the Spirit of God, both penetrated into the center of their being to become a roaring conflagration as only occurs in those brought to union with the Living God. Burnt by this fire, both wrote of its effect. Merton's concept of the person, "a unity which is love" and his concept of the person's "final integration" arose from this encounter as did St. John of the Cross's perception of the perfected person as a "living flame of love."

Finally, for both men, contemplation is the means to this encounter. Merton states, "Contemplation is a supernatural love and knowledge of God, simple and obscure, infused by Him into the summit of the soul, giving it a direct and experimental contact with him."<sup>16</sup> St. John indicates that contemplation perfects the soul so that it may experience the indwelling of the Holy Trinity. An effect of this indwelling for Merton is the final integration of the person: "He has a unified vision and experience of the one truth shining out in all its various manifestations."<sup>17</sup> Similarly, St. John relates that a perfected soul "knows creatures through God and not God through creatures."<sup>18</sup> St. John would agree with Merton that "the one love that is the source of all, the form of all,



and the end of all is one in him and in all."<sup>19</sup> Both encountered that love and became living flames spewing embers catching others on fire.

### Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*. (New York: Image Books, 1996) p. 88
2. Clare Booth Luce, Ed., *Saints for Now*. (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1952) p. 274
3. Luce, Ed, *Saints for Now*. p. 274
4. St. John of the Cross, *The Complete Works of St. John of the Cross*. E. Allison Peers, Ed. (Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press 1964) pp. 402-03.
5. Thomas Merton, *The Ascent to Truth*. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1981) p. 261
6. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1948) p. 462
7. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. p. 462.
8. Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*. p. 88.
9. St. John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, Eds. (Washington, D.C: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1971) p. 580.
10. Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton Reader*. Thomas P. McDonnell, Ed. (NY: Image, 1974) p. 190.
11. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*. (New York: Doubleday, 1965) p. 207.
12. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*. (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) p. 360.
13. Merton, *Thomas Merton Reader*. p. 487.
14. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*. Naomi Burton Stone, Patrick Hart & James Laughlin, Eds. (New York: New Directions, 1968) pp. 318-319.
15. St. John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*. p. 596.
16. Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience*. William H. Shannon, Ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 2004) p. 73.
17. Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*. p. 207.
18. St. John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*. p. 645.
19. Thomas Merton, *Love & Living*. Naomi Burton Stone & Brother Patrick Hart, Eds. (New York: Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux, 1971), p. 17.