

# TO MERTON THROUGH AUGUSTINE: IMAGES, THEMES, AND ANALOGIES OF KINSHIP

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"Confitebor tibi Domine in toto corde meo:  
narrabo omnia mirabilia tua."

*Psalmus David IX:ii*

Late in the 1940s, the New York publishing firm, Harcourt, Brace and Company, asked Fulton J. Sheen to critique a manuscript entitled *The Seven Storey Mountain*, the autobiography of a young Trappist monk living at Our Lady of Gethsemani Abbey near Louisville, Kentucky. Monsignor Sheen promoted the manuscript as "a Twentieth Century form of the *Confessions* of St. Augustine."<sup>1</sup> No one could have imagined that the young monk's autobiography, published in 1948, would receive universal recognition in his own lifetime and have such an enduring influence. Certainly not the author: Thomas Merton.<sup>2</sup>

## THE INTENTION OF THIS STUDY

An analogical pattern of perceiving reality informed the thought of Augustinus Aurelius (354-423) and Thomas Merton (1915-1968) and it is the first meeting point in their comparison.

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1. Robert Giroux, "Merton the Writer," In *Merton By Those Who Knew Him Best*; ed. by Paul Wilkes (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), p. 22.

2. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1948). Hereafter referred to in the text as *SSM*.

Long before he realized it, Merton was seeing life from an Augustinian perspective. Later, with greater awareness, Merton would look to Augustine as a guide in attempting to articulate his own conversion experience, his monastic life, and his place in the Universal Church.

Part I of this study focuses on some images, themes, and analogies in the life and thought of Saint Augustine within his historical context, Late Antiquity. Part II examines Merton's writings on Augustine during the period of his conversion to Roman Catholicism and early years at Gethsemani Abbey. This will include a discussion of Merton's personal copy of Saint Augustine's *Confessions* and the role of *The Seven Storey Mountain* in the Merton/Augustine comparison. Part III presents a selection of writings from 1950 which indicate Merton's growing awareness of himself as an acknowledged representative of the Roman Catholic Church, with particular stress being placed on Merton's introduction to Saint Augustine's *The City of God*.

## I. AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO AND LATE ANTIQUITY

Saint Augustine saw primary religious experience as a many-faceted mystery. Initially, Augustine thought of religion as the act of choosing God again after repenting from sin (*re-eligere*). Like Caelius Lactantius Firmianus (+325), he developed a doctrine of religion as the bond of duty we share with God (*re-ligare*). From this doctrine the Church would subsequently view religion as a virtue, a teaching fully delineated by Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). Deeply immersed as he was in Greek and Roman culture, Augustine also shared with Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BC) the appreciation of religion as the careful exercise of public responsibilities (*relegere*). In this usage, religious persons (*religiosi*) were regarded as those who were productive citizens and proficient liturgists.<sup>3</sup>

### A. THE QUEST

From Thagaste and Carthage in North Africa to Rome, Milan and Ostia in Italy and back again to Hippo Regius, Augustine traveled a

3. Paul J. Glenn, *Apologetics: A Class Manual in the Philosophy of the Catholic Religion* (Rockford, IL: Tan Books, Inc., 1980), pp. 108-109, 126; *Harper's Latin Dictionary*; Revised, enlarged and rewritten by Charles T. Lewis and Charles Short (New York: American Book Company, 1879), pp. 1556-1557.

geographical odyssey symbolic of the inner pilgrimage of his restless heart. The sinfulness of youth gave way to mature reasoning. Human intellect surrendered to grace. Baptism, ordination and consecration as bishop replaced the secret, cosmic rites of the non-Christian sects.

### 1. THE CLASSICAL HERITAGE

Augustine was never a "pagan." He did not convert to Roman Catholicism from a life without God but after a futile pursuit of God in other places. He saw the Church as the home to which he could return with full forgiveness from his Father (*Confessions* V.xiv.24; VI.xi.18).<sup>4</sup> Augustine was conscious of standing at the confluence of vast ancient and contemporary intellectual and mystical currents and came to see himself as their embodiment, steward and transmitter in his mission as priest and bishop within the Roman Catholic tradition.<sup>5</sup>

The teaching of Plato would be filtered to Augustine through translations by Plotinus and Porphyry. Augustine was eighteen years old, an adolescent in identity crisis, when he came upon Cicero's *Horentius*, a treatise in praise of philosophy now lost. Under its influence, he experienced an intellectual conversion which initiated in him a moral and spiritual ascent to God: lasting Happiness (*Beatitudo*) could be found only in the pursuit of Ultimate Truth (*Confessions* III. iv.7-8). At age twenty, Augustine read Aristotle's *Categories* without commentary and with full understanding (*Confessions* IV. xvi. 29). The book gave him clarification of things human but failed to address his need for an explication of divine realities. In the *Confessions*

4. For the critical text in Latin see: *Sancti Augustini Confessionum—Libri XIII*. Edited by Lucas Verheijen (Turnhout: Brepols, 1981). The following English text has been used in this study: *Saint Augustine: Confessions*. Translation, introduction and commentary by Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). Hereafter referred to in the text as *Confessions*.

5. The following are recommended introductions to the life and writings of Saint Augustine: Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969); Henry Chadwick, *Augustine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*. Translated by L.E.M. Lynch (New York: Random House, 1960); Henri Marrou, *St. Augustine and His Influence Through the Ages*. Translated by Patrick Hepburne-Scott. Texts of St. Augustine translated by Edmund Hill (NY: Harper & Brothers, 1962); Agostino Trapè, "Saint Augustine," in *Patrology* Volume IV: The Golden Age of Latin Patristic Literature. Edited by Angelo DiBernardino. Introduction by Johannes Quasten. Translated by Placid Solari, OSB (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, Inc. 1986), pp. 342-503; F. Van Der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop*. Translated by Brian Battershaw and G.R. Lamb (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1961).

Augustine chronicled his unhappy career as a Manichaeen, telling how he fell under the influence of this missionary sect in 373 AD because he was a youth puffed up with intellectual and spiritual pride. After ten years he was able to admit the folly of the Manichaeen enterprise as "empty of truth." The acuity of his mind and his study of astrology helped Augustine discover the speciousness of Manichaeen scientism and the greatly esteemed Faustus proved an immense disappointment when Augustine met him in person (*Confessions* III.v.9; vi.10; x.18; IV.i.1 ff; V.vi.10-II; vii.12).

In his *Confessions*, Augustine details the effects of the Sceptics, or "Academics," upon him at this stage in his conversion and he describes how he soon came to the realization that their rejection of the possibility of human reason to apprehend the ultimate meaning of life was unacceptable to him (V.x.19; xiv.24). Yet, Augustine's return to the Catholic heritage of his youth, personified by Bishop Ambrose in Milan, left him in an unresolved state. At this juncture in his conversion to Roman Catholicism, Augustine found the teachings of the Neo-Platonists more stimulating than the preaching of Ambrose, (*Confessions* V.xiv.24). His searching mind needed philosophical grounding and the neo-plotinian mystics captured Augustine's allegiance, Neo-Platonism freed Augustine from the dualistic conflict of good vs. evil in matter and in the human will, elevated his mind to the highest conceptual apprehension of Mystery and rekindled his desire to study Saint Paul and the Catholic Scriptures as well as the Old Testament texts which he began to allegorize (*Confessions* VII.ix.13 ff).

Augustine seems to have attained the highest neo-platonic spiritual *Exstasis*, passing beyond the stoic state of pervasive calm (*Apatheia*) and the imperturbability (*Atarasis*) of the sceptics. Augustine's account of the vision shared with Monica parallels Plato's description of the movement from the apprehension of the gross particular to the sublime universal as a quasi-divine rite of passage requiring the full exercise of all moral and intellectual powers (*Confessions* IX.x.24). Nevertheless, Neo-Platonism left him unsatisfied and in its failure demonstrated the reasonableness of Christianity to Augustine.

## 2. THE MYSTICISM OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

From the high Temple cult of Rabbinic and priestly Jerusalem to the radical sectarian dualism to Qumran and the gnostic and philosophical strains of Philo and his disciples, ancient Judaism

exhorted against evil and evildoers while seeking some reconciliation with creation in whatever measured degree. There are suggestions that elements of Hinduism and Buddhism infiltrated the Roman Empire through Judaism as well as the missionary expansion of Christianity and the political and economic currents which flowed in every direction. Scholars today are more willing to find Jewish sources for Christian themes and a radical hellenization seems less tenable when presented as exclusive of native Jewish biblical and philosophical trends. However, Augustine understood the Old Testament with the mentality of a New Testament Christian. His ancient biblical sources were Christianized sources: e.g. the Suffering Servant of *Isaiah* 53 was a prefigurement of Christ and each Christian in imitation of Him; *Psalms* 118 was read as a pattern of Christian conversion. Augustine read the Old Testament in Latin translation.

Wisdom (*Hakmah*) cautions against falling into the traps of the sinful, for to do so is to harm oneself; base experiences of themselves do not make a person wise nor is wisdom to be found in the counsel of sinners (*Sirach* 19:18). Perverse advice foolishly followed results in separation from God (*Wisdom* 1:3). Yet many wonderful expressions in the Hebrew and Greek scriptures tell of the unity which exists between the divine and the human within created matter. Humankind has been made little less than the angels or gods themselves (*Elohim*) and is crowned with "Glory and Honor" (*Psalms* 8:6). Material creation is drawn as a panoramic declaration of the "Glory of God" and as the proclamation of His "Handiwork" (*Psalms* 19:1). The entire Universe itself is a veritable celebration of the wonder of all reality in YAHWEH (*Psalms* 150).

In the Wisdom (*Sophia*) literature of the Greek Scriptures (*Septuaginta*=LXX), all of the mysticism and mythology and philosophy we have examined to this point finds articulation. The personified Lady Wisdom of *Proverbs* 8 manifests herself in *Sirach* 21:9 and *Wisdom* 6:22 and, infused with Greek substance or content, Wisdom becomes the reflection of the Everlasting Light of God which has come to dwell with humankind (*Wisdom* 6:26 and 9:10; *Sirach* 24:8; *Baruch* 3:37).

## 3. THE MYSTICISM OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

In the New Testament Canon, we see that Saint Paul is persistent in warning the recipients of his letters that evil associations have evil consequences. Paul exhorts the Romans to be alert to

preachers who, in their good words and fair speech, deceive the hearts of the simple, teaching doctrines contrary to Christ (Rm 1.6:17-18). He admonishes the Corinthians that the unrighteous will not inherit the Kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:9). Paul was so concerned for the fidelity of the Galatians that he cried out that they had foolishly allowed themselves to be "bewitched" by alien forces (Gal 3:1). In addressing the Philippians, Paul called deviance from true doctrine a "mutilation" of the Spirit (Ph 3:2). Yet Paul himself refused to bifurcate human life into material (*sarx* as evil; *soma* as corporeal body) and spiritual realms (*pneuma*) according to the manner of the radical dualists. For Paul, God is not the alien opponent of creation but the "king of ages, incorruptible, invisible, the only God" to whom glory and honor are due (1 Tm 1:17). Paul expressed the reciprocity of dignity between God and creation. Christ, having put all things beneath his feet and having given himself as head of the church which is his body, is the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way. Through Christ, God and humankind and all of material creation are reconciled (Eph 1. 15-23).

The Parable of the Prodigal Son personifies evil as the sinners and the swine whose degradation the youth shared (Luke 15:11-32). Jesus declares that it were better for a sinner that a millstone be put around the neck and that person thrown into the sea than that person cause one of the "little ones" in faith to sin (Lk 17:1-2). Acts 15:1 tells of those who come teaching a salvation based only on circumcision after the manner of Moses. But in His Johannine completeness, Jesus is the embodiment of the Torah of the Old Testament and the LOGOS of Greek philosophy. He is the Son of Man descended from heaven to earth (Jn 1:14; 3:31; 6:38; 16:28). He has the Father's "Glory" which He makes manifest to all who will receive it (Jn 8:50; 9:4; 17:7; 22:24). Jesus is the Word (*Logos*; *Verbum*) who was in the beginning with the Father before the world existed and in whom all things were created (1:1-4). And He returns to the Father to prepare the Way for us (14:3; 17:5).

It is this Wisdom Incarnate, this Word, this Christ who called to himself Saint Augustine and Thomas Merton.

#### 4. THE MYSTICISM OF THE EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITERS

In the post-testamental orthodox Christian writings, we find a similar balance. Two texts from the Apostolic Fathers can be juxtaposed by way of demonstration. Saint Ignatius of Antioch, in his *Letter to the Ephesians*, cautioned the recipients to be on guard against

those "who make a practice of carrying about the Name with wicked guile, and certain things unworthy of God." In the words of Ignatius, these wicked deceivers must be shunned "as wild beasts, for they are ravening dogs, who bite secretly" and "are scarcely to be cured."<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, from the perspective of a second century apologist, the author of the *Epistle to Diognetus* wrote that it was not nationality, nor language, nor customs, which marked off Christians from the rest of society. Those Christians of whom the author wrote did not live apart in separate colonies or speak any special dialect or practice any eccentric way of life. Visibly, they passed their lives like everyone else about them. What made them different was the conviction that, while residents of earthly countries, they were transients, for their citizenship was in heaven.<sup>7</sup>

With its allusion to the *Letter to the Hebrews*, we can clearly see the theological parallels to Augustine's ecclesiology in the words addressed to Diognetus. As Christianity became wedded with Roman culture, celibacy for the sake of the kingdom would take an ascendent role. As physical martyrdom declined, monasticism as the new self-imposed daily martyrdom rose in importance. It is precisely this consecrated life of sexual renunciation and asceticism which appealed to Augustine in his time and to Merton in our own.

#### B. THE AUGUSTINIAN SYNTHESIS

Building upon the Old and New Testament and elements of Catholic culture and doctrine in which he was formed as a youth, Augustine began to see God, the Universe, human persons, creatures, and matter all within a unified system which was both philosophical and theological and had moral ramifications. Under the influence of Plotinus, Augustine reinterpreted the notion of sin as quantitative negative actions into a doctrine of Evil as the privation of Good with its implication that sin was no-thing and nothing other than a separation from God. The purpose of life, newly discovered and reformulated by him, was, for Augustine, the return to God. This *Exitus* through sin and this *Reditus* through repentance is central to Augustine's thought

6. Saint Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Ephesians*, VII.1, in *The Apostolic Fathers*. Volume One. Translated by Kirsopp Lake. The Loeb Classical Library 24 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 181.

7. Anonymous, *The Letter to Diognetus*, V, in *The Apostolic Fathers*. Volume Two. Translated by Kirsopp Lake. The Loeb Classical 25 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 359-360.

and gives doctrinal content to the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32). Following as it does from the theological proposition of our human participation in the mystery of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit, since Augustine would maintain the insufficiency of the human powers to effect this conversion and therefore the necessity of grace, this doctrine is not only a theological statement but also an ascetical program. It is the re-ordering of creation. It is the quest for peace. (Cf. *Confessions* VII.x.16).

### 1. AUGUSTINE: THE NEW CATHOLIC

Augustine saw sin as a falling away from participation in God's life, not in the loss of essential human nature created by God after his own image, but in our likeness to God in the exercise of our human powers which become blurred and confused (Cf. *Genesis* 1:26-27). For Augustine, the conceptual distance between him and God, and no longer was faith an intellectual ascent only. Though not non-rational, irrational or unreasonable, conversion touched Augustine's affective faculties in a re-creation of his entire being through grace. He tells us of his highly charged, emotional response throughout Book Nine of his *Confessions*.

In Milan, at Easter in 387 AD, through the ministry of Saint Ambrose, Augustine "put on Christ" in the waters of Baptism. Of the actual ceremony during which he and his son Adeodatus entered into full union with the Roman Catholic Church, Augustine tells us only this: "We were baptized, and disquiet about our past life vanished from us" (IX.vi.14). Then, whether describing the rite of Baptism, itself or the general tenor of the cathedral liturgy in Milan, Augustine directs his attention to God and comments: "During those days I found an insatiable and amazing delight in considering the profundity of your purpose for the salvation of the human race. How I wept during your hymns and songs! I was deeply moved by the music of the sweet chants of your Church. The sounds flowed into my ears and the truth was distilled into my heart. This caused the feelings of devotion to overflow. Tears ran, and it was good for me to have that experience" (IX.vi.14). And in the joy of his newfound faith, Augustine expressed a lament for the Manichees: "What vehement and bitter anger I felt against the Manichees! But then my pity for them returned because they were ignorant of your remedies, the sacraments. They were madly hostile to the antidote which could have cured them" (*Confessions* IX.iv.8).

### 2. THE ANALOGY OF BEING

Augustine had extended intellectual inquiry to its extreme in the full exercise of his human faculties, and conversion was truly the right-ordering of his mind and the highest achievement of his genius. Building upon Plotinus's teaching which illuminated his own darkened understanding, Augustine developed a doctrine of Light which became a primary principle of his entire theological enterprise and his own spiritual development (*Confessions* XIII: xx.28; xxi.29ff; xxiii.33-34,48; xxxiv.49). The term "analogy," *analogia* in Latin, comes from the Greek *ana-logon* which means the proportion or likeness that exists between two or more things. In literary usage, we think of simile and metaphor. From Pythagorean physics we derive the analogy of harmonics in music and proportion in art and architecture. In philosophy we consider attribution, proportion and proportionality as components of analogical argumentation in logic and metaphysics. Theologians treat of God and creatures as analogates of being and existence with degrees of finitude and infinitude, causality and finality."<sup>8</sup>

Following the metaphysical principle that the only force capable of preserving a thing is the force which created it, Augustine proposed a doctrine of contingency which in its theological application was an ascent to the notion of humankind's need for Divine Mercy. Augustine saw conversion as a gift from God which could be received or rejected: each human person can refuse immersion in the "Light of God" because of the "Darkness of Sin." For Augustine, philosophical, theological, moral and religious conversion were one, all-consuming endeavor (*Conatio*). The Divine illumination of Sanctifying Grace was the way of true knowledge for all Christians and each person was seen as capable of intense inner scrutiny. Human intellectual development, for Augustine, was connatural with human moral development when ordered to the supreme good of contemplation and love of God. The sciences of the perceptible in creation were based in the higher

8. The following are recommended as introductions to the meaning and usage of analogy in philosophy and theology: Louis Bouyer, *Dictionary of Theology*. Translated by Charles Underhill Quinn (New York: Desclée Co., Inc., 1965), pp. 21-22; Walter Bruggen (Editor), *Philosophical Dictionary*. Translated by Kenneth Baker (Spokane, WA: Gonzaga University Press, 1972), pp. 11-12; Karl Rahner, SJ and Herbert Vorgrimler, *Dictionary of Theology*. Second Edition. Translated by Richard Strachan, David Smith, Robert Nowell and Sarah O'Brien Twohig (New York: Crossroad, 1988), pp. 8-9.

science of Wisdom, the Greek *Sophia* and the Hebrew *Hakmah* of the ancient texts. And all Wisdom was seen as not only a glimpse but an actual participation in the Divine Truth Itself, that is, the Unchangeable Truth which is also Ultimate Beauty and Goodness, or, in other terms, the simply desired, lucidly perceived, freely chosen God.

For Augustine, time and space were created in the one and the same operation of God: when the world was not, there was no time. And into this creation God sent traces of himself in matter (*rationes seminales*) and in the human person (*Imago Dei*).<sup>9</sup> Following *Romans* 8, Augustine posited a soteriological doctrine of the coming of God's son to redeem fallen humankind. In this relationship with God through Christ the human person participates in an *analogia laboris*, that is, the cooperation of the human person with the Divine Persons in the redemption and restoration of all things in God in Beatific Reunion (*Confessions* XIII.xxxii.47).

### 3. THE COMPLETION OF ALL THINGS IN GOD

Ordained priest in 391 and consecrated Bishop of Hippo Regius in 395 AD, Augustine began the *Confessions* at age 43 in 397 and finished it in 400. The more autobiographical Books I-IX were written as a retrospective with the propriety of a man bound to the pastoral care of his flock. Every facet of his experience is described in personal detail yet these Books represent more than an autobiography in the modern sense. Full of specific examples and even intimate self-disclosures, they are not simply a middle-aged man's diary notes made public. They are a proclamation of God's activity in his life. Those seeking scurrilous specifics are left disappointed. Great sin is in the will, not in human deeds. Book X, concerning memory, hinges this review of his life with Augustine's mystical speculations on time, eternity, and the universe in Books XI-XIII. Widely circulated as hand-copied manuscripts in his own time, Augustine's *Confessions*

9. Augustine wrestled with an articulation of the doctrine of the Trinity (*Una substantia, tres personae*) and from this doctrine drew various analogies in human nature: 1. *mens, notitia, amor* (*On the Trinity*, I, 2-5, 8); 2. *memoris sui, intelligentia, voluntas* (X, 11, 17-18, 19); 3. *memoria Dei, intelligentia, amor* (XIV, 8, 11-12, 16). See the discussion on Augustine and the Trinity in: G.L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (London: SPCK, 1936), pp. 235-237. On traces of God in nature, and the doctrine of image as outlined here see: Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, Chapters III and IV, especially pp. 219, 354.

became the most formative non-testamental document for Christian spirituality.

In Late Antiquity, the term "*confessio*" connoted: 1. confession of sinfulness; 2. profession of faith; 3. thankful wonder; 4. loving regard; 5. adoring praise. In ecclesiastical usage, not only did *confessio* suggest a creed, or avowal of faith, but also an acknowledgement of Christ under torture. Thus, a martyr became a "*confessor*," the application here implying suffering for one's religion.<sup>10</sup> The *incipit* (I.i.1) of Augustine's *Confessions*—"Magnus es, Domine..."—addressing God as Almighty Other and non-self-referential, has been described by Robert J. O'Connell, SJ, as the "opening notes of the symphonic power of Augustine's most celebrated work."<sup>11</sup>

In the *Confessions* Augustine sings of God's attributes in a concatenation of Latin superlatives: "...Summe; optime, potentissime, omnipotentissime, misericordissime et iustissime, secretissime et praesentissime, pulcherrime et fortissime..." (I.iv.4)

The vocative case only accentuates the sublimity. The sequence continues in a descriptive mode: "...stabilis et incomprehensibilis, immutabilis, mutans omnia, numquam novus, numquam uetus, innouans omnia et in uetustatem perducens superbos et nesciunt." Chadwick translates: "Most high, utterly good, utterly powerful, most omnipotent, most merciful and most just, deeply hidden yet most intimately present, perfection of both beauty and strength, stable and incomprehensible, immutable and yet changing all things, never new, never old, making everything new and 'leading' the proud 'to be old without their knowledge'" (cf. *Job* 9:5, Old Latin Version).

Rome fell to Aleric and the Goths on August 24, 410. The Roman government blamed Christianity for this tragedy and a North African Christian official, Marcellinus, wrote to Augustine and others alerting them to the charge against the believers. In 413 Augustine began *The City of God* as his response, and by 415 the first five Books were completed. In *The City of God* Books I through IX address the Charge against the Christians. Book X presents a Christian

10. *Harper's Latin Dictionary*, p. 412. Concerning the *Confessions* as literature, see: Richard D. DiLorenzo, "Rational Research in the Rhetoric of Augustine's *CONFESSIO*," in *From Cloister to Classroom: Monastic and Scholastic Approaches to Truth*. Edited by Rozanne Elder (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1986), pp. 1-26; Wilhelm Dilthey, *Pattern & Meaning in History*. Translated, edited and introduced by H.P. Rickman (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961), p. 87.

11. Robert O'Connell, SJ, *Art and the Christian Intelligence in St. Augustine* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 91.

world-view which sets the fall of Rome in a cosmic context and sees it as a small event when measured against Eternity. Books XI-XXII present a positive Christian interpretation of human society.

In *The City of God*, Augustine describes the peace of the body as an orderly, proportioned arrangement of its parts. The peace of the irrational soul is the harmonious repose of the appetites. The peace of the rational soul is the ordered agreement of knowledge and action. The peace of the body and soul is the ordered life and health of a living creature.

For Augustine, peace between moral humankind and God is ordered obedience in faith to eternal law. Peace among human beings is an ordered concord. Domestic peace is ordered concord among those ruling and those obeying. Civil peace is a similar concord among citizens. Religious peace is the enjoyment of God and one another in God. To sum up, Augustine says: "*Pax omnium rerum tranquillitas ordinis. Order est parium dispariumque rerum sua cuique loca tribuens dispositio*" (XIII.13). That is: "The peace of all things is the tranquility of order. Order is the distribution of things equal and unequal, each in its own place."<sup>12</sup>

## II. THOMAS MERTON AND TWENTIETH-CENTURY ROMAN CATHOLICISM

Like Saint Augustine of Hippo before him, Thomas Merton saw primary religious experience as a many-faceted mystery. On November 16, 1938, Merton was baptized and took his First Communion as a Roman Catholic at Corpus Christi Church on 121st Street in New York City. Ed Rice was his godfather and Jewish friends Robert Lax and Sy Freedgood, along with Robert Gerdy, were present.<sup>13</sup> The name of the edifice would take on increasing significance as Merton matured. He was twenty-three years of age at the time. The ceremony symbolized the resolution of years of moral and intellectual struggle and a return to God after his hedonistic youth: Merton was never a "pagan."

12. For the critical text of *The City of God* in Latin see: *Sancti Aurelii Augustini: De Civitate Dei*. In Two Volumes. Volume One: Books I-X. Volume Two: Books XI-XXII. Edited by Bernardus Dombart and Alphonsus Kalb (Turnhout: Brepols, 1965). The citation is from Volume 2, p. 679. The citation in English is from *Augustine of Hippo: Selected Writings*. Translation and introduction by Mary T. Clark (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), p. 456.

13. Monica Furlong, *Merton: A Biography*. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), pp. 76-77.

As a newly-converted Catholic, Merton deepened his relationship with God in a slow process of conformity to the Roman Catholic system of moral and doctrinal truths, laws, private and public religious practices. Attending Mass, reading the Breviary in Latin and the lives of Saints such as Thérèse of Lisieux and other favorites, works of charity at Friendship House in Harlem, pilgrimages to shrines and holy places such as Our Lady of Cobre in Havana, all informed Merton's growing identification of himself as a Catholic. But all of this was not enough to make reparation for begetting a child out of wedlock and for his sins of pride and dissipation.

On December 10, 1941, just a few days after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Thomas Merton committed his life to God by joining the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance, popularly known as the "Trappists" due to its association with the Abbey of La Trappe in France. Merton chose the Trappist life of Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky after making a Holy Week retreat there in 1941 and judging the environment to be the most penitential possible for him in America.

By the intentionality of his entrance and in actuality by his Solemn Profession of Monastic Vows on the Feast of Saint Joseph, March 14, 1947, Merton committed himself to religion as a state in life with all its incumbent duties and obligations. On May 26, 1949, by the Rite of Ordination to Sacred Priesthood, Merton began the mission and function of an official representative of the Roman Catholic Church and Merton's Priesthood became one of the most profound mysteries in his spiritual odyssey.

In the concluding lines of *The Seven Storey Mountain* Merton charted the course of his life from Prades to Bermuda to St. Antonin to Oakham to London to Cambridge to Rome to New York to Columbia to Corpus Christi to St. Bonaventure to the Cistercian Abbey at Gethsemani (*SSM*, pp. 422-423). The course of his life would include a short trip to Ohio, the seminary at St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, a return to New York to see Daisetz T. Suzuki, visits to the Monastery of Christ in the Desert in New Mexico, tours of Alaska, Redwoods Abbey and San Francisco in California, Honolulu, religious sites throughout Far East Asia, and finally, Bangkok, Thailand where the cycle of birth and death would be completed on December 10, 1968.

### A. THE NEW CATHOLIC

Merton carefully chronicled his pre-monastic years as a Catholic in *The Seven Storey Mountain* and in the private journals he

kept while living on Perry Street in New York City and at St. Bonaventure's College, portions of which were published in 1959 as *The Secular Journal*, a revealing title in itself.<sup>14</sup> From what Merton wrote by way of reminiscence and from his journal notes, we learn that it was at the urgings of Bramachari, a Hindu student friend at Columbia, that Merton began reading Saint Augustine's *Confessions* and other Catholic classics. But Augustine's *Confessions* actually had little effect on Merton in the early phase of his life as a convert because the usual distractions of student life and his unconquered habits prevailed. Gradually this situation would change and Merton grew in his appreciation of Augustine.

Merton tells us he was surprised and complimented to learn from Dan Walsh, his philosophy professor at Columbia, that his bent of mind was "Augustinian." The professor recognized something of profound consequence and in this regard knew his student better than Merton knew himself. Merton regarded this as a compliment because of Walsh's philosophical inclusiveness: "Of course, to be called 'Augustinian' by a Thomist might not in every case be a compliment. But coming from Dan Walsh, who was a true Catholic philosopher, it was a compliment indeed." Merton valued Walsh's opinion since he, like Professor Gilson whom he was reading, had "the most rare and admirable virtue of being able to rise above the petty differences of schools and systems, of being able to see Catholic philosophy in its wholeness, in its variegated unity, and in its true Catholicity" (*SSM*, p. 220).

Merton came to see that Walsh was not only speaking of an openness to Truth wherever it might be found but to Merton's mind in its operations: "And from the tenor of his course, I realized that he meant that my bent was not so much towards the intellectual, dialectical, speculative character of Thomism, as towards the spiritual, mystical, voluntaristic and practical way of St. Augustine and his followers" (*SSM*, p. 221).

### 1. DIVINE LIFE AND HUMAN HISTORY

In the analogical theology of Saint Augustine which he made his own, Merton perceived a direct relationship between God and each human person, between persons themselves, and shared by all persons in God. A continuous mediation takes place between God and humankind

14. Thomas Merton, *The Secular Journal*. (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1959). Hereafter referred to in the text as *Sec.J.*

in the Person of Christ. God acts in history. Through the mystery of Christ sin causes God to suffer. The human person, while subject to God, mediates God's divine life to others. To the contrary, sinfulness has its negative impact in the lives of others. Profane time and Sacred time are conjoined in each human act and this moment is lived in sin or grace. In one of the most eloquent passages of his autobiography, eloquent because it is simple and sincere, Merton tells of the meaning of the Mass he attended on New Year's morning in 1939. Writing ten years after the experience, he put it this way: "What a strange thing that I did not see how much that meant, and come at last to the realization that it was God alone I was supposed to live for, God that was supposed to be the center of my life and all that I did." (*SSM*, p. 233).

Merton lamented that it took him nearly ten years "to untangle that truth" from all his "disorganized and futile desires" (*SSM*, p. 233). Looking backwards, Merton found a correspondence between his own behavior and the larger history of the world. The Augustinian character of Merton's reflection is evident: "For that was to be 1939, the year when the war that everybody had been fearing finally began to teach us with its inexorable logic that the dread of war is not enough. If you don't want the effect, do something to remove the causes. There is no use loving the cause and fearing the effect and being surprised when the effect inevitably follows the cause" (*SSM*, p. 233). Following Augustine, Merton saw each human person as a symbol of all humanity (*Humanum Genus*) and each person's spiritual odyssey was an analogue of the odyssey of humankind: the sacred story of Adam and Eve is recapitulated in each newly born infant. Christ has already redeemed us while we are in the very moment of sinfulness which caused the intensity of his suffering and dying in history. The analogy of being defines human character: theologically speaking, we participate, as finite creatures, to a finite degree, in the infinite attributes of God.

Merton came to see that the Church mediates the relationship of the individual with God and with all other believers through the sacraments, sacramentals, the ordained ministers who themselves participate in a hierarchy of being with their own proper duties and powers. As the Body of Christ, the Church is perfect in fulfilling its end of leading the faithful to salvation. As guardian of truth, the Church guarantees intellectual certitude, not in finite propositions but as an incomprehensible certainty of the validity of Divine Revelation as held by faith. In the human quest for God, faith and human reason work together, not in opposition.

Rejecting the secularized world-view of his student days, Merton entered into the new, exoteric realm of religious rites of passage: baptism, reconciliation, confirmation, communion. This outer mode found expression in the esoteric ascetical practices he began: penances, prayers, fasting. The inner workings of his soul were mirrored in the visible, external behavior, although Merton's initial conversion experience was not effected without confusion and dismay at his repeated failings. Merton's spiritual maturation at this point was purgatorial, mostly hidden, largely painful and frequently bewildering. From what he tells us in *The Seven Storey Mountain* and *The Secular Journal*, the exoteric and esoteric dimensions, his inner disposition and external behavior as a newly baptized Catholic, were fields of combat until relative peace was achieved and some sacred order restored through his decision to enter Gethsemani Abbey. As he wrote in *The Seven Storey Mountain*: "The saints are full of Christ in the plenitude of His Kingly and Divine power: and they are conscious of it, and they give themselves to Him, that He may exercise His power through their smaller and seemingly most insignificant acts, for the salvation of the world. But the world did not get very much of that out of me." (SSM, pp. 233-234).

## 2. FAITH AND THE MATERIAL ORDER

After the manner of Augustine, Merton held that faith and knowledge, the invisible and the visible, the internal and the external, the particular and the symbolic were all complementary, analogous aspects of one reality, all realms of existence, were correlated and interdependent, and correspondences and resemblances could be perceived everywhere. Knowledge of one element in this Universe of Being was knowledge of all by analogy, since in this one microcosm the Macrocosm was revealed. Theologically, it can be stated that grace allows the beholder to pierce through the symbol to the Divine Reality.

In the analogical mode, an inward excellence corresponds to a superlative outward manifestation. Almost imperceptible, but right below the surface, lie the Infinity and Eternal Reality of the Divine. Art, painted and plastic, has about it the same inner/outer veil of mystery and manifestation as any random aspect of creation: form reveals. Art does not simply mirror the artist. It is a window into supreme art, the Divine Creativity. Earthly things reflect their heavenly counterpart, and refer the beholder back to their spiritual

archetypes. All is perception, dimmed by sin or intensified through grace.

The canons of sacred art, as well as of morality and sacraments, are established, not by the individual artist, but by the spiritual authority of the Church. The Holy Spirit shines through the human. The Church is arbiter of the experience. True sacred art has a timeless value and a transcultural validity. Sacred art is symbol of the center of the world (*Axis Mundi*). When Merton looked into the eyes of the painted crosses and the mosaics of Rome, he saw the eyes of Christ looking back at him (SSM, p. 108). Augustine's *Confessions* and *The City of God* and Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain*, for example, have mediated divine grace in artistic form.

In a journal entry dated November 2, 1939, All Souls Day, Merton describes Augustine's "symbolic theology" and connects the work of the poet with that of the philosopher and theologian, using Augustine as exemplar. First Merton defines his terms: "The logic of the poet—that is the logic of language or the experience itself—develops the way a living organism grows: it spreads out towards what it loves, and is heliotropic, like a plant. A tree grows out into a free form, an organic form. It is never ideal, only free: never typical, always individual." Then the application to Augustine is made: "St. Augustine's philosophy follows the logic of experience and literary expression. His dialectic moves and grows of its own life, and grows toward the truth to embrace it the way a tree grows up reaching into the light and air and embracing it in an 'airy cage' where light and air move freely. For Augustine the truth is firmly established, accepted in advance, and he merely contemplates and explains it in a development of luminous symbols, and, in fact, there is no logic in any philosophical or systematic sense about him. He is a preacher, and that is the best thing to be" (*Sec.J*, pp. 24-25).

Growing increasingly disillusioned with himself and with all the false promises of life without God, Merton followed the promptings of Professor Walsh and made a Holy Week retreat at Gethsemani Abbey in 1941. In a journal entry dated April 7, 1941, Merton conjoins his personal spiritual development with world events as effected by the spiritual energy generated at the monastery. In one of his most celebrated passages, Merton speaks of monasticism in hyperbolic terms, calling Gethsemani "the only real city in America" and so on. Merton, however, balances this exaggeration by allowing for other such monasteries. Augustine is not mentioned but the influence is evident: "Gethsemani holds the country together the way the underlying substrata of natural faith that goes with our whole being and can

hardly be separated from it, keeps living in a man who has 'lost his faith'—who no longer believes in Being and yet himself is, in spite of his crazy denial that He Who Is mercifully allows him to be..." (Sec. J, pp. 183-184). Then Merton declared: "I feel like a thief and a murderer who has been put in jail and condemned for stealing and murdering all my life, murdering God's grace in myself and in others, murdering Him in His image. I have broken out of the jail in which I lay justly condemned and have rushed even into the place of the King Whose Son I murdered, and I implore the mercy of the Queen who sits here enthroned" (Sec. J, p. 184).

## B. AMERICA'S AUGUSTINE

Gethsemani's Abbey Church became for the young convert the *Axis Mundi* in a mode of analogical meaning after the manner of Saint Augustine's *Basilica Pacis* in Hippo Regius. A minor basilica by papal privilege, the Abbey Church became, for Merton, the paradoxical belly of Jonah's whale, his *Refugium Peccatorum* and his *Communio Sanctorum*. Or, in other words, the "City of God" within a secularized and corrupt modern America.

### 1. MERTON AND SAINT AUGUSTINE'S CONFESSIONS

Thomas Merton bought his personal copy of Saint Augustine's *Confessions* about six months after his baptism, inscribing the inside end sheet of the cover casing: "Tom Merton/N.Y./April 1939."<sup>15</sup> Apparently alluding to Augustine, Merton, on September 13, 1939, wrote in his Perry Street Journal: "Confessions are only valid (in literature) if they confess God" (Perry Street Journal cited by Mott, p. 78).

Merton was deeply attracted to Augustine's doctrine of free will and grace, and the situation in which he found himself at Gethsemani was the starting point for a spiritual odyssey within a religious institution in radical social change as the result of the triumphs of World War II. As a new Catholic Merton refused to be confounded by the maddening uncertainty of a world about to explode in war. He was no passive victim to Fate and he believed himself to be an

15. *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*. In the translation of Sir Tobie Matthew, KT [1620]. Revised and emended by Dom Roger Hudleston, Monk of Downside Abbey. With an introduction by the same. (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne Ltd. Publishers to the Holy See. Fourth Impression. 1935.)

active agent in the shaping of his own future. Merton knew that moral freedom meant moral responsibility and it meant returning to God and cooperating in the movements of grace in his life (cf. *Confessions* VII.iii.5; VIII.viii. 20).

In his developing religious and monastic consciousness, Merton came to see that his personal history mirrored the history of an age in drastic need of God's redemptive mercy. In becoming a Trappist, he, like the monastic Augustine before him, exercised extreme care in choosing how to live out his new life as a Christian in full awareness of his proclivities to sin. In becoming a priest, Merton, like Augustine, bound himself not only to God but to the Church as her minister, teacher and guide of the faithful. All of this informs our understanding of why Merton felt impelled to write *The Seven Storey Mountain* and how Merton came to terms with his popularity. Merton sent his copy of the *Confessions* to Father Paul Bourne, OCSO, of Holy Spirit Abbey during the period they exchanged correspondence as *Censor Librorum* appointed by the Order and author submitting his work approval. Both monks shared a great esteem for the *Confessions* as doctrinal and literary masterpiece. During their meeting together at Gethsemani Abbey in 1965 (Merton had arranged for the Novice Masters of the Region to discuss their work), Merton and Bourne exchanged ideas concerning Augustine and the *Confessions*.

In the judgement of Father Paul, Merton's *Confessions* were used by him during the early years of his monastic life as a format for *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Under the directive of his Abbot, Dom Frederick Dunne, OCSO (who died in 1948 on his way to visit the foundation in Georgia), Merton's composition of the manuscript took place from 1946 on. The clarity of the underlinings, the themes chosen (e.g. p. 170: the Appollinarian Heresy; p. 323: the psalms), the backward reflection, the verbal parallels with his autobiography (childhood, mentors, time and memory, the story completed in the certitude of faith), all suggest a "monastic" reading. The studied and quiet retrospective seems more evident than the first pencil markings of his apparently first reading during 1939-1941.<sup>16</sup>

Some cautions must be sounded at this point. Generally, there is nothing extraordinary about underlining and marginal notes in a book. This has been a common practice since the beginning of written texts. Medieval glosses became masterpieces in themselves. Secondly, the marks indicate more about the marker than Augustine. They

16. In conversation with Father Paul Bourne, OCSO, Holy Spirit Abbey, March 22, 1991.

suggest the mind of Merton and the state of his soul. But there are also markings in pen and words in the script of Father Paul Bourne, who himself seems to have used the book for his own reading in his interaction with Merton.

The script of the marginal and interlinear markings matches that of Merton's letters to Father Paul from this period. However, there are variants in the script and words and lines written in ink, matching Father Paul's script. Therefore, we have an important source for a study of the Merton and Saint Augustine comparison, but one not as unique and reliable as we might wish. Merton may have underlined and jotted in his copy of the *Confessions* during the period after his conversion to Roman Catholicism before beginning work on *The Seven Storey Mountain* as a young monk at Gethsemani Abbey. Could we prove this, his marked copy of the *Confessions* would provide us with a more enthralling perspective of his inner journey from 1939 onward.

## 2. THE SEVEN STOREY MOUNTAIN: A TWENTIETH CENTURY FORM OF THE CONFESIONS OF SAINT AUGUSTINE

Thomas Merton's personal copy of Saint Augustine's *Confessions* and the various extant manuscripts and printed editions of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, along with Merton's private journals and letters from this period in his life remain as a vast field of still undiscovered riches in the Merton and Augustine comparison. For the present, some Augustinian images, themes, and analogies which have been carried through by Merton into his autobiography can be examined.

The analogical mode of reflecting personally and theologically pervades *The Seven Storey Mountain*, as the earlier cited passages have already demonstrated. Each rereading of Merton's life story reveals greater depths and new insights as the reader enters more profoundly into Merton's all-encompassing quest and his panoramic vision of spiritual realities. Like Augustine's *Confessions*, Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain* is a confessional document in the personal and in the theological sense.

Like Augustine, Merton tells us of his temperament and his character. He exposes the workings of his mind that we might learn from him. He describes his suffering as the suffering of all who live without faith and, in the process of censorship and final publication of his manuscript, defended his autobiography as an *apologia* which hopefully would help others in their search for God. *The Seven Storey*

*Mountain* is a public confession of personal sin and a declaration of the joy of Christian conversion (*metanoia; reformatio vitae*), the "putting on Christ" as a "new man" in the waters of Baptism, the entrance into monastic life which traditionally has been described as a "daily martyrdom" (*via purgativa; vita actualis*).

Then, as Augustine in the *Confessions*, Merton transcends his own history by presenting his struggle as the struggle of all humankind. He provides his readers with spiritual principles to consider and practical instructions for a life of faith, hope, and charity (cf. 1 *Corinthians* 12-13 on the analogy of the Body of Christ and the excellence of the theological virtues). In this, like Augustine, Merton is linked with Saint Paul as steward and transmitter of Christian tradition (*Romans* 4:25; 1 *Corinthians* 11:23). In this *traditio tradere*, after the manner of the Bishop of Hippo, Merton did not hesitate to praise friends and mentors who had influenced his moral, intellectual and religious conversion and he had the magnanimity of character to sustain these relationships throughout the post-conversion years at Gethsemani Abbey.

Saint Augustine of Hippo rejected the teachings of the Manichaeans, the Sceptics, and the Neo-Platonists but the very literary fabric of his *Confessions* and *The City of God*, of all his post-conversion writings, is a wonderfully textured cross-weave of non-Christian ideas, images, themes and analogies, with those of the Old Testament, New Testament and the early Church writings. So too with Thomas Merton who, over the long period of his conversion to Roman Catholicism had rejected the Anglicanism of his family, materialism, secular humanism, psychoanalysis, marxism, oriental mysticism, and the academic skepticism of Cambridge and Columbia University. All of these trends and influences are recorded in *The Seven Storey Mountain*; here we find the seeds of fascination and inquiry which would later blossom into Merton's greatest achievements, in writing, and in dialogue with the thinkers of the late Twentieth Century.

As with Augustine, faith for Merton came from hearing the Word of God through the Sacred Scriptures (*fides ex auditu, Romans* 10:17). Most significantly, Merton never stopped listening. The moral, intellectual and religious ascent never ended and Merton in due time would return to the influences of youth: he would enter dialogue with the secular humanists, the psychoanalysts, the marxists, the Hindus and Sufis and Buddhists, with any other person in serious pursuit of ultimate Truth. He did this with understanding and

compassion without insisting that others agree with his positions and convictions.

Thomas Merton gave this title to the Epilogue of his autobiography: "*Meditatio Pauperis in Solitudine*." With allusion to Psalm 19 and the reference to the passing of time and all things, these haunting and nostalgic pages parallel the closing section of Book XIII in the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine.

Monastic conversion (*conversatio morum*) has worked its effect in the heart of the young monk. This epilogue proves Merton's growth as a man and as a Cistercian coming to terms with the human realities which he finds within the enclosure. The world he left behind in 1941 and the world he came to love within the Trappist enclosure, proved, after all, to be the same: human struggle is human struggle, whatever the social arena. This epilogue is a judgement on the previous pages. Yes, physical, moral, intellectual, spiritual and religious change have taken place within the monastic environment and what we read in the closing lines of *The Seven Storey Mountain* is nothing less than a proclamation to the world of Merton's faith, and a prophecy written by Merton in ignorance of his future destiny:

But you shall taste the true solitude of my anguish and my poverty and I shall lead you into the high places of my joy and you shall die in Me and find all things in My mercy which has created you for this end and brought you from Prades to Bermuda to St. Antonin to Oakham to London to Cambridge to Rome to New York to Columbia to Corpus Christi to St. Bonaventure to the Cistercian Abbey of the poor men who labor in Gethsemani: That you may become the brother of God and learn to know the Christ of the burnt men. SIT FINIS LIBRI, NON FINIS QUAERENDI. (SSM, pp. 422-423).

### III. MERTON AND AUGUSTINE: IN UNION WITH THE WHOLE CHURCH

There is a discernible shift during Merton's early monastic years from his identification with the Augustine of the *Confessions* to the Augustine of *The City of God*. The austere, young ascetic became a compassionate, balanced and mature Cistercian through intentional efforts at self-education, in response to the challenges and disappointments in his environment and as a result of responses to him as monastic writer. Like Augustine's, Merton's monastic conversion was a living response to God and to reality in all aspects of his inner-life and outer-experience, and Merton recorded the shifts in his state-

ments on church, sacrament, all forms of Christian conduct in a secularized and pluralized society.

True conversion bears the implication of a right attitude of spirit (soul) more than any posture proper to external worship. And Merton, like Augustine before him, always held that, without a grounding in spiritual growth, piety is an affectation, an affectation which is totally despicable when found in those constituted by the Church as her "professional religious."

#### A. "THE WHITE PEBBLE"

In "The White Pebble," published in 1950 Merton provides us with a confessional document which serves as a link between his pre-monastic awareness of himself as a Catholic and his growing monastic consciousness of his place in the Universal Church. In this explanation of his conversion to Roman Catholicism, Merton demonstrates once again a remarkable consistency. His central themes are eschatology, conversion, and vocation.<sup>17</sup>

In this autobiographical meditation, Merton contends that everyone should see personal baptism "in the light of eschatology" and he describes supernatural life as "a talent which is given us to be developed." Using the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity as his examples, he professes the conviction that one of the "most fundamental laws of life is the need to multiply itself" and that this law applies to the supernatural life as well.

Linking sacraments with inner experience, Merton continues: "Here, then, are our principles: We are baptized into the whole Christ. Baptism implies a responsibility to *develop* one's supernatural life, to nourish it by love of God, to reproduce and spread it by love for other men. All this is ordered to the final perfection of a plan that extends far beyond our own individual salvation: a plan for God's glory which lies at the very heart of the universe. This mystery we must believe and seek to understand if we should make anything of conversion and vocation." (pp. 239-240).

17. Thomas Merton, "The White Pebble," in *Where I Found Christ*. Edited by John A. O'Brien (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc. 1950), pp. 233-250. The title is a reference to *Apocalypse* 2:17.

## B. CORRESPONDENCE

Some significant comments to monastic scholars with whom he was corresponding during this period add to our understanding of Merton's appreciation of Saint Augustine's importance as a Father of the Church for him and his students at Gethsemani Abbey.<sup>18</sup>

A great mind and a great monk, Dom Jean Leclercq's influence on Merton was pervasive. They would eventually meet in Kentucky and it was as the result of Dom Jean's mediation that Merton went to Asia. On April 22, 1950, Merton wrote to his friend in Luxembourg: "Our studies and writing should by their very nature contribute to our contemplation at least remotely and contemplation in turn should be able to find expression in channels laid open for it and deepened by familiarity with the Fathers of the Church. This is an age that calls for St. Augustines and Leos, Gregorys and Cyrils!" (p. 20).

During Holy Week of the same year, Merton wrote to Dom Damasus Winzen, another monk of the Order of Saint Benedict (OSB) originally from Marialaach in Germany who had founded the simplified community of Mount Savior in New York State. Here Merton's comments on Augustine refer to a specific text: "I wish someone would do a good readable translation of St. Augustine's *Enarrationes*—or some of the best of them. It would be invaluable." Merton is demonstrating the importance of Augustine's commentaries on the Palms for modern monks (p. 18).

## C. THOMAS MERTON AND SAINT AUGUSTINE'S THE CITY OF GOD

Thomas Merton's introduction to the Dods translation of Saint Augustine's *The City of God* is dated: "Abbey of Gethsemani January 4, 1950."<sup>19</sup> In this lengthy and profoundly insightful source on Merton's thought concerning Saint Augustine, Merton assessed *The City of God* as a theological enterprise of immense proportions and judged that if the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine might be seen as a personal document then *The City of God* could surely be regarded as a document of the Magisterium.

18. Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: Letters on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*. Selected and edited by Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1990).

19. Saint Augustine, *The City of God*. Translated by Marcus Dods, George Wilson and J.J. Smith. Introduction by Thomas Merton (New York: The Modern Library, 1950). Merton's Introduction: pp. ix-xv.

For Merton, the Augustine of *The City of God* is "catholic" in the etymological sense of Saint Ignatius of Antioch, but also in the doctrinal sense of Saint Paul and the *Apocalypse*. This Augustine is less a polemicist and more an apologist with an ecumenical spirit. The human person in full complexity is addressed by Augustine. Merton makes these points clear: *The City of God* is a "monumental theology of history" growing out of Augustine's "meditations on the fall of the Roman Empire," and it is "timeless and universal in its analysis." Merton calls the religious background in which it was written "a maze of curious ancient fancies" (p. ix).

Merton details how Augustine abandoned his original intention of defending Christianity against charges of superstition. After finishing the first ten Books, Augustine relinquished this project to the care of his disciple Orosius and plunged into the greater delineation of a biblical and theological panorama in order to show how the "two cities" have entered into sacred history. Merton calls *The City of God* "a summary of Christian dogma," an "exposition that can only be fully appreciated if it is read in the spirit in which it was written." For Merton, *The City of God* was not only written but "lived" by Augustine. He explains: "Christianity is more than a moral code, more than a philosophy, more than a system of rites. Although it is sufficient, in the abstract to divide the Catholic religion into three aspects and call them creed, code, and cult, yet in practice the integral Christian life is something far more than all this. It is more than a belief; it is *life*" (p. x).

Pursuing this point, Merton states that this belief is life because it is belief lived and experienced and expressed in action. Entering into the heart of Catholic teaching, Merton calls this action: "mystery." Giving content to the term mystery, he writes: "This mystery is the sacred drama which keeps ever present in history the Sacrifice that was once consummated by Christ on Calvary. In plain words—if you can accept them as plain—Christianity is the life and death and resurrection of Christ going on day after day in the souls of individual men and in the heart of society" (pp. x-xi).

Here, of course, Merton is demonstrating his own gift as monastic theologian. Continuing, he says:

It is this Christ-life, this incorporation into the Body of Christ, this union with His death and resurrection as matter of conscious experience, that St. Augustine wrote of in his *Confessions*. But Augustine not only experienced the reality of Christ living in his own soul. He was just as keenly aware of

the presence and action, the Birth, Sacrifice, Death and Resurrection of the Mystical Christ in the midst of human society. And this experience, this vision, if you would call it that, qualified him to write a book that was to be, in fact, the autobiography of the Catholic Church. That is what *The City of God* is. Just as truly as the *Confessions* are the autobiography of St. Augustine, *The City of God* is the autobiography of the Church written by the most Catholic of her great saints. (p. xi).

A spirit of exhilaration and self-transcendence inform Merton's comments on Augustine. Merton has been a monk for nine years and he senses that he himself has become, as monk-priest, an official representative of the Church. Merton suggests getting to know Augustine first through the *Confessions*. Next, for the reader coming to *The City of God* for the first time he recommends starting with Book Nineteen, which he calls its "living heart." For modern readers it would perhaps have the greatest appeal because it is concerned with peace (p. xi).

Then Merton advises the reader to go back to Book Fourteen in which the "two cities" are sketched. Finally, Book Twenty-two is suggested as the finest chapter of all and "a fitting climax to the whole work" which will give the reader "a broad view of St. Augustine's whole scheme because it describes the end of the *City of God*, the communal vision of the elect in Paradise, the contemplation which is the life of the 'City of Vision' in heaven and the whole purpose of man's creation" (p. xi).

While clearly reflecting on Augustine's thought, Merton's own voice is heard. The monk tells not only of what he has read but experienced for himself. Going yet further, he says this is not "for" himself but for all, in the Body of Christ. Merton's words clearly indicate his own joy at being a contemplative monk:

It may come as a surprise to some to learn that St. Augustine quite spontaneously regarded contemplation as a communal endeavor. Solitude may be necessary for certain degrees of contemplative prayer on earth, but in heaven contemplation is the beatitude not merely of separate individuals but of an entire city. That city is a living organism whose mind is the Truth of God and whose will is His Love and His Liberty (pp. xi-xii).

Tracing Augustine's line of thought, Merton describes Adam as "pure contemplative" in whom all were to be "one contemplative perfectly united to one another in their one vision and love of the One Truth." This end was thwarted by original sin, "an act of spiritual apostasy from the contemplative vision and love of God." Original sin "severed the union with God that depended on the subjection of Adam's will to the will of God" (p. xii).

In what is not only a repetition of his own story but the story of all humankind, Merton writes:

Since God is Truth, Adam's apostasy from him was a fall into falsehood, unreality. Since God is unity, Adam's fall was a collapse into division and disharmony. All mankind fell from God in Adam. And just as Adam's soul was divided against itself by sin, so all men were divided against one another by selfishness. The envy of Cain which would have been impossible in Eden, bred murder in a world where each self-centered individual had become his own little god, his own judge and standard of good and evil, falsity and truth (p. xii).

For the remainder of his introduction, Merton outlines the Christian mysteries. Christ, the "New Adam," raises us again to friendship and vision with God. This is not the contemplation enjoyed by Adam before the Fall, still less the clear vision of beatitude. But, writes Merton, "... heaven was to begin on earth in faith and charity. God would be 'seen' but only in darkness and man would be united in 'one Body' but only at the cost of struggle and self-sacrifice." Merton presents the whole of history since the ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven as "concerned with one work only, the building and perfecting of this 'City of God.'" Wars, persecutions, evil have only this one purpose: "they have been the flails with which God has separated the wheat from the chaff, the elect from the damned. They have been the tools that have fashioned the living stones which God would set in the walls of His city of wisdom" (pp. xii).

Merton explains that the difference between the two cities is the difference between two loves. Those who are united in the City of God are united "by the love of God and of one another in God." Those who belong to the other city "are indeed not united in any real sense: but it can be said that they have one thing in common besides their opposition to God: each one of them is intent on the love of himself

above all else." Merton cites book Fourteen, Chapter 28. In Augustine's words: "These two cities were made by two loves: the earthly city by the love of self unto the contempt of God, and the heavenly city by the love of God unto the contempt of self." Merton says that the earthly city "glories in its own power, the heavenly in the power of God" (p. xiii).

Once again, Merton takes his reader into a deeper penetration of the Christian mysteries by shifting from a theological analysis to a psychological analysis of the Two Cities. Merton presents a deeper psychological explanation of the two loves and of the way they contribute to the formation of two distinct societies. He describes the love which unites the citizens of the heavenly city as "disinterested love, or charity." The other city is built on "selfish love, or cupidity." Merton goes on to present two reasons why only one of these loves, charity, can serve as the foundation for a happy and peaceful commonwealth. He calls the first metaphysical: "charity is a love that leads the will to the possession of true values because it sees all things in their right order." Charity "sees creatures for what they are, means to the possession of God." It uses them only as means, and "thus arrives successfully at the end, which is God." Cupidity is doomed from the start to frustration "because it is based on a false system of values." It takes created things for ends in themselves, which they are not. The will that seeks "rest in creatures for their own sakes stops on the way to its true end, terminates in a value which does not exist, and thus frustrates all its deepest capacities for happiness and peace" (p. xiii). Merton calls the second reason psychological and moral: "Those who love God love a supreme and infinite good that cannot be diminished by being shared." For Merton, basing his comments on Augustine's teachings, those who place their hopes on the possession of created and limited goods "are doomed to conflict with one another and to everlasting fear of losing whatever they may have gained." The logical conclusion Merton draws is this:

Hence the city that is united in charity will be the only one to possess true peace, because it is the only one that conforms to the true order of things, the order established by God. The city that is united merely by an alliance of temporal interests cannot promise itself more than a temporary cessation from hostilities and its order will never be anything but a makeshift (p. xiii).

To provide clearer meaning, Merton momentarily steps away from the *City of God* and cites Augustine's own illustration of the Roman theater in *De Doctrina Christiana* [*On Christian Doctrine*]. Augustine describes two responses of the audience to an actor. Some of the spectators admire and applaud him, forming a bond among themselves in this shared love of another person outside themselves. Merton here gives personal testimony of how he experienced this outpouring of affection for a performer at the opera in a large Italian city. A "society" is "spontaneously generated by this common bond of love for a common object of contemplation" (pp. xiii-xiv). At the same time, Merton explains, those who do not share this admiration and love are by the very fact "excluded and divided off into another, contrary society." The two loves of the two cities "divide them beyond reconciliation. They are traveling in opposite directions." Thus, Merton concludes, "it is impossible that their roads should ever reach the same term" (p. xiv).

The fact that the two cities are opposed does not mean that they cannot coexist here on earth. In Merton's words: "It is not impossible that they should agree upon a *modus vivendi*. They can come to terms, and it is well that they should do so. The temporal advantage of worldly society is well served when the citizens of heaven still living in the world are protected by the temporal power." Developing his thoughts after Augustine's, Merton goes on to say that, although the Church as a whole can only profit by persecution, temporal peace is a greater blessing, "one to be prayed and worked for, since it provides the normal condition under which most men can safely expect to work out their eternal destiny" (p. xiv).

In Merton's opinion, Augustine was not planning a "temporal theocracy" within the Holy Roman Empire. In *The City of God* Augustine is, according to Merton, describing "the Kingdom of Christ which, as Jesus told Pilate, is not of this world." However, says Merton, that does not mean that Augustine would necessarily be opposed to an earthly Kingdom of Christ, though he would probably not have "placed very high hopes in one." The real value of *The City of God* is its eschatological view of history which "contemplates with joy the running out of the sands of time and looks forward with gladness to the Last Day that will make manifest the full and final glory of the 'Whole Christ.'" For Merton, *The City of God*, when properly understood, "contains the secret of death and life, war and peace, hell and heaven" (pp. xiv-xv).

## CONCLUSION

We all stand under the long shadow of Saint Augustine of Hippo. Whatever our questions concerning human generativity, the meaning of church, the justice of war, the nature of the universe, the intentionality of God, Augustine is there with an opinion to proffer.

Like Augustine, Thomas Merton made a conscious, mature, painful choice for the Roman Catholic Church in a process of conversion which was all encompassing—physical, cultural, moral, intellectual and religious. Subsequent shifts in his ecclesiology, sacramental, moral and ascetical theology reflected Merton's inner growth within the monastic context.

This study has focused on some Augustinian images, themes, and analogies in the writings of Thomas Merton. While in no way claiming to have exhausted the subject, the essay has attempted to establish some perspectives for further comparisons of Merton and Augustine. The witness of their relentless quest and their enlightened discoveries along the way deserve attention in the years to come.