

MERTON A SAINT? WHY NOT?!

(A Letter in response to a Letter to the Editor
 “Too Serious a Brother Monk” — Spring ’88 Seasonal)

Dorothy Barbehenn appears distressed at Basil Pennington’s inference that Thomas Meerton might have actually fulfilled his Christian — not to mention monastic — vocation by becoming a saint, at least the uncanonized variety. At the start of my Merton seminars, I pointedly tell each group that it is not my intention to canonize Merton, for he has been already canonized by virtue of the countless thousands whose lives he touched and changed, my own included.

If Merton was not brought to a state of perfect love (the definition of “saint” Ms. Barbehenn seems to be looking for) then those of us who are struggling and stumbling in an attempt to follow his spiritual footsteps are in a world of trouble. Meister Eckhart — with whom Merton was most spiritually akin — assures us that as soon as “pieces” of us move out, God simultaneously moves in, or as Eckhart laconically urges us: “Get out of the way and let God be God in you!” However long it took, I believe with many others that Merton eventually got out of God’s way completely and became the no-man of his favorite Chinese philosopher, Chuang Tzu: “No man is true man.” To which we can safely add: “True man is saint.” From his hermitage he one day wrote: “It is time to step out into nothingness.”

There is a vast difference between Merton taking himself seriously and taking his God and vocation seriously. He was a man of sole intent and pursuit. He wrote that becoming a saint was the only thing worth the striving. On one of his tapes he chides that to assume we are going to spend “time” in Purgatory is an affront to the merciful love of God, revealing only our defective trust in Him.

We sometimes forget that saints are not only stained with imperfections but, like the rest of us — as St. Paul reminds us — are sinners as well. Love covers a multitude of sins and, perfect love, the totality. That “Brother Louie” instantly crashed the Heavenly Festivities I, and others, have no doubt. Like Eckhart, let him remain uncanonized. Like Eckhart, let us not be trepid about calling him “saint.”

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 (Once called “Genesius” by my Gethsemani brothers)