

A LETTER TO BROTHER LOUIE

Review of

*THE SCHOOL OF CHARITY: THE LETTERS OF THOMAS MERTON
ON RELIGIOUS RENEWAL AND SPIRITUAL DIRECTION*

Edited with an Introduction by Brother Patrick Hart

Preface by William H. Shannon

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Reviewed by **Mary Milligan**, R.S.H.M.

Dear Brother Louie,

I have just finished reading *The School of Charity*, letters you wrote to religious throughout your life. Perhaps because letters represent a personal investment in a way that books and articles do not, I want to use this same *genre* to let you know my response and also to ask you a few questions. I do realize I cannot expect an answer to my letter, and I regret that.

The School of Charity organizes your letters into three parts, representing specific moments in your life. You yourself recognized various phases in your life and described those phases in terms of your writings (p. 384). And yet your letters reveal that it was your move to the hermitage in a more permanent way that marked a turning point for you. This move was both the fulfillment of a deep spiritual desire and the dawn of a new maturation in your life.

What strikes me in your correspondence with religious is your emphasis on reality. Your God was surely the God of the real and was to be met only in *real* life. "There is bound to be fruitfulness where there is real life," you write to one of your correspondents (p. 263). Throughout your letters, you speak of "reality." One senses your desire to perceive and comprehend your own inner reality as well as to face the reality of external events with honesty. You wrote to Dom Aelred Graham that "wē [Catholics] are out of touch with life and that affects our faith a great deal,

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because subjective sincerity is not enough. We have to be real, not just mean to be. The paradox is of course that we *are*. And we try to make our being real by adding unreality to it, through useless mental gyrations” (p. 167). You saw Zen Buddhism as a “correction of perspective” capable of helping Catholicism to “discard a lot of useless baggage” and thus become more real.

As I read your letters, it seemed evident that “reality” for you was synonymous with “simplicity.” Yes, “the simplest is best . . . and goes deepest and farthest” (p. 170). In writing of the arbitrary division that we tend to set up between “intellectual life” and “life of prayer,” you wrote that “each of us has to find the unity in which everything fits and takes its right place” (p. 177). That search for unity is not just a piece of advice found in your letter to a fellow Trappist. It is especially evident in your own life. Is it the search for oneness which so attracted you to the Eastern tradition?

This thirst for the real is evident in three areas of your life, it seems to me: 1) in the clarity with which you sensed what was essential to renewal within religious congregations; 2) in your critique of American culture and your response to the world of your times; and 3) in the struggle to integrate your own two-fold vocation as a writer and a hermit within the Cistercian tradition.

So many people looked to you for guidance in those heady days of Vatican II and its aftermath! There is a consistency in your response to fellow Trappists, to others in the Benedictine tradition and to religious in “apostolic” congregations. You had a sensitivity to the God of the REAL which enabled you to see, in the conciliar climate of enthusiasm, what was essential and what was peripheral. And you did not hesitate to take “potshots” at all that you considered to be frothy or trendy in the renewal process! Cenobitic life is surely not “some kind of a chummy picnic-cum-hairshirts” (p. 157). “There is a lot of nonsense going around under the guise of ‘personalism,’ fulfillment, etc., etc. Much of this is in reality very immature and pseudo” (p. 269).

I agree that the thing we need to keep vocations is not to make silly concessions and play around with recreation, TV and what not, but to make the monastic life fully serious and solid, as it should be. The problem is to distinguish between real seriousness and the pettifogging regularism that puts exaggerated emphasis on trivial externals and the letter of outdated usages, thus preventing a real return to the essence of the life which is in solitude, silence, contemplative prayer, reflection, time to penetrate the word of God and listen to His voice, etc., etc. (p. 285)

Your early correspondence with Father Roland Roloff, O.S.B., is particularly enlightening. Amid the discussions of “Benedictine vs. Trappist vs. Cistercian” and of the opportunities “for special kinds of apostolate and for special kinds of contemplation, for eremitical solitude, for community projects in study and research, for special ways of poverty and labor, for peculiar forms of monastic witness, for unusual and pioneering dialogue,” you are able to cut through such conversations with essential questions: “The big thing is, do we really seek God?” (p. 147). You admit to another correspondent: “Perhaps the temptation of monks is to think more of ‘monasticism’ and ‘liturgy’ and ‘works’ (or ‘contemplation’) than of God” (p. 263).

In your response to American culture and the significant events of our country in the 1960s, you were profoundly marked by your younger years in Europe. It is especially in letters to your European friends that you reveal your critical perspective on American culture. And your “later solitary years,” 1965-1968, seem only to have deepened this critical view. In 1965 you confessed to believing that “true simplicity, in the depths of the heart, is almost impossible for an American or a European” because of the tendency of those societies to create division, doubt, distrust and conflict within the human person (p. 286).

I was struck by the “summary” of your own life which you wrote to Sister J. M. in the summer of 1968 where you describe your outlook during your first years in Gethsemani as “highly unworldly, ascetical, intransigent, somewhat apocalyptic.” You say it was your openness

to the world, especially through reading psychoanalysis, existentialism, Zen Buddhism “and other things like that” that you grew. But your grasp of the reality of the world was not only theoretical. The Vietnam war, the racial question, the reality of poverty in our own country were not distant “problems” to you but were part of your own *reality*. You confide to Dom Jean Leclercq in March of 1968 that you “have a very great problem about staying in America (U. S. A.) and thus to some extent remaining identified with a society which [you] believe to be under the judgment of God and in some sense under a curse for the crimes of the Vietnam war” (p. 369). How did you live in the depth of your *one* human heart this prophetic critique of the culture which was your own? Had you lived longer, would you, in fact, have fled from it, to Chile or Nicaragua, as a prophetic gesture? or would you have remained within as a voice of judgment?

It is especially in your understanding of yourself and the unity of your vocation that your struggle to be *real* is obvious. You saw yourself “as an exile two times, three times over,” not only as an exile from the continent of your youth, but also from a constantly changing society. You saw yourself as “a strange and funny creature” at Gethsemani (p. 144). The deep call to solitude which led you to the hermitage also made you a sort of exile within your community.

To me, the struggle to integrate your double vocation as a writer and a hermit witnesses once more to your search for the REAL which is simplicity. Though you express a theoretical unification of these two vocations as early as 1953 — “I do not feel I will ever write anything worthwhile, if I cannot have access to the depths which solitude alone seems able to lay open to me” (p. 52) — your desire for solitude at that point seems much more externally motivated than it will later in your life. And you seem to see the two vocations as incompatible: greater solitude will mean cutting down on writing. The tension between a hermit call and a writer’s talent is evident throughout your life and yet that tension did, in some sense, define your personal vocation and the gift that you gave to all of us. There are moments when you are confident of the gift: “As I reflect over the past and over God’s grace in my life there are only two things that are more or less certain to me: that I have been called to be at once a writer and a solitary *secundum quid*. The rest is confusion and uncertainty” (p. 211). You wrote in April 1965 to Dom Andre Louf that in solitude you had “the complete sense of having found [your] monastic vocation” (p. 276). Two weeks later you reveal to Leclercq that you have “no secret hope left of making complete sense out of [your] existence which must remain paradoxical” and recognize that others too will see it as paradoxical (p. 280). Was the heart of your struggle to be faithful to the “concrete and existential demands of the Spirit here and now, and of the vocation?” (p. 213). You considered that fidelity to the “most authentic and original monastic spirit” — and, I would add, *Christian* spirit — is not a “question of measuring one’s acts by minutely detailed rule and observance. You refuse to say that because you are called to live in solitude you must *never* leave your monastery. Did you ever imagine that your fidelity to the “concrete and existential demands of the Spirit” would lead you eventually to Bangkok and to your ultimate encounter with the REAL?

In your search for truth and simplicity, fidelity to the Spirit required that you deny neither pole of your two-fold vocation, though often their deepest unity was not obvious to you. That fidelity in spite of ambiguity is surely a gift that you continue to give to many of us in the Church today: to religious who still struggle to be totally committed to God in the “world” of American consumerism; to women who continue to believe that they can be truly equal and truly Christian at one and the same time; to Americans who strive to be both loyal citizens and lovers of peace.

Well, I’ve said enough. Put in a good word to the God of Reality for me. And thanks, brother, for your letters to so many religious men and women during a period of extraordinary change in the life of the Church. Their humor helps us not to take ourselves too seriously. Their content continues to challenge and sustain us.