

TWO HOMILIES

From the SECOND GENERAL MEETING of the ITMS
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Nazareth College, Rochester, New York

I.

“A Life without Care”
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by **William H. Shannon**

The most important task of the Christian is to learn to depend on God. And of course what that really means is facing reality as it truly is. For we are radically dependent on God, whether we realize it or not. Our great need is to become aware of this radical dependence and live always in the context of this awareness. As we gradually move in this direction and come to appreciate the power and love of God acting in our lives, we know that at a superficial level we are earthen vessels easily broken, but kept together by the mighty and loving hand of God. We may be afflicted but never crushed, full of doubts yet never despairing, struck down but never destroyed. So we don't worry about our lives because they are in God's hands. If God can take care of the birds and the flowers, surely then God will take care of us also. This means that the life of a Christian must be free from worry and anxiety. It must be a life without care. This, of course, does not mean that we have no concern for the poor and needy, the marginalized and oppressed in our society, but our care for them becomes a participation in God's care for all the creatures God made. We care mightily and strongly and with a deep sense of responsibility — but our care is without anxiety, without worry. Paradoxically we care without caring.

On August 20, 1965, the feast of St. Bernard, Merton gave a conference in the novitiate before heading out into the woods to take up residence in the hermitage. It was a light hearted, jovial talk with a good bit of in-house humor. “The general impression I get,” he says, “is that people are saying: ‘Well, good old Louie, he made it anyhow’.” He assures them that he did not get his hermitage by twisting the abbot's arm, “because you can't twist that man's arm. He gets ornery . . . I don't say that I've never tried to twist it, but it doesn't work.” Yet in the midst of this

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breezy banter there is a thoughtful spelling out of what the solitary life is intended to be. What is essential to it turns out to be what is really essential for all monastic life and indeed for the Christian life as a whole. Deceptively simple, it is this living out of the sentiments of today's Gospel: namely, living a life free from care. That's all. To live with the belief that it is possible "to put away all care, to live without care, to not have to care": this is at the heart of authentic Christian living. As I have already suggested, to live without care does not mean to live without responsibility. It simply means refusing to let responsibility breed anxiety. Hence it is by no means an "I-don't-give-a-damn-about anything" attitude. On the contrary, when you live without care you are enthralled by everything. But you don't think of anything in terms of how it's good for you or how you can manipulate it to serve your purposes. Instead, in utter forgetfulness of yourself, you just see things as they are. And when this happens, things cease to be opaque. They no longer hide God. You come to realize that you are living in a world that is transparent: God is everywhere. He is in everything and everything is in God.

In his very thoughtful and moving exchange of letters with D. T. Suzuki, Merton accepted Suzuki's idea that we are in paradise all the time. Our problem is that we don't realize it. We have to be awakened and that is what is meant by contemplation. Thus, redemption becomes for us, not so much recovering something we have lost, but remembering something that we had forgotten and actually always were and are. Life without care, the contemplative life, is a way of remembering who we are and where we are. It is hearing that huge chorus of living beings telling us that they and we are all in God. We are one with God. We are one with one another.

The mystery is that we can only remember our true selves when we forget ourselves, when we forget that we are even there. We can only see reality as it is when we cease thinking of it in terms of the ways in which it is able to serve our own needs, wants and desires. It is then that we are free from care, because in a sense there is no longer "anybody" there to care.

In reading the text of Merton's conference to the novices, it is not difficult to see the visage of Chuang Tzu peering between the lines. Just a few weeks earlier Merton had finished his book, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*. One of the poems sums up well his message to the novices about "not caring." Called "The Need to Win," the poem shows the harm that can result from "caring."

When an archer is shooting for nothing
He has all his skill.
If he shoots for a brass buckle
He is already nervous.
If he shoots for a prize of gold
He goes blind
Or sees two targets —
He is out of his mind!

His skill has not changed. But the prize
Divides him. *He cares.*
He thinks more of winning
Than of shooting —
And the need to win
Drains him of power. (Way, p. 107. Italics added.)

Merton concludes his words to the novices with the hope and prayer that he — and they too — may recognize their vocation in the Emmaus disciple: "They came running back to Jerusalem bubbling over with joy and happiness, not because they understood the mysteries of another world but because they had seen the Lord. This is what we are all here for. We are all here to see the Lord, and to see with the eyes of faith. To see that the Lord really lives and that the Lord really is the Lord."

So it was that “Uncle Louie” left the novitiate after twelve years there — two as a novice and ten as novice master (half his monastic life up till then) and made his way to the place of his new freedom. It was a new and crucial stage for him in that real journey in life that is interior, that involves growth and an ever greater surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts: a love and grace that cares — and cares so mightily that we become free to live a life which, though responsible and responsive, can yet be a life without care.