

MERTON'S DILEMMA: THE SEARCH FOR MEANING IN MODERN TIMES

by **Richard S. Mathis**

In a series of letters included in William H. Shannon's recent edition, *Witness to Freedom: The Letters of Thomas Merton in Times of Crisis*, Thomas Merton addresses one of the key personal issues of our times. The quest for an authentic existence, for meaning, is one that continues to arise in our culture. Merton identifies some of the central problems in a letter written on July 10, 1965. "Modern man," he writes, "leads a life that is low in authenticity. Things are decided for him, foisted on him, and even experienced for him by others. His existence is more and more secondhand, and even his moments of truth tend to be fabricated for him" (*WTF*, pp. 253-254).

The condition Merton describes is even more true today than it was thirty years ago. Today we not only have the inauthenticity thrust upon us by social convention, but also by a much more well developed entertainment industry. Now life can very easily be lived passively and experienced vicariously. Yet Merton sees humanity as possessing an almost inherent desire for meaning. He says that where there is life there is "resistance to inauthenticity." This resistance is also present today. People continue to show a deep concern for spiritual matters and a number of popular books are published each year on topics associated with meaning and authenticity.

The dilemma Merton accurately poses for us is this: we, as humans, maintain a desire for an authentic life. At the same time, our culture presents us with strong obstacles against such a life. What are effective means of dealing with this dilemma? Merton's answer, found within his letters and in the example of his life, focuses upon the possibility of engagement in life and the recognition of struggle. In terms of engagement, Merton suggests that we live a life not seeking such things as income and status, but one where we attempt to become "more real." This involves entering into "direct contact with life" and living more as "free and mature" persons, able to give more of ourselves to others and able to understand ourselves and the world better (*WTF*, p. 255).

It might be easy to assume from this that a person only need to make a single decision toward authenticity, and that wrestling with this decision is the only struggle needed. Merton emphasizes that such a decision is only the beginning. The decision to enter a monastery, for example, is "only the beginning of a very long road, not the end" (*WTF*, p. 255). In choosing authenticity we put ourselves on a long road of struggle, the struggle of determining what is meaningful for us in a world that, as previously mentioned, does not always foster authenticity. How can I, for example, enter into a more direct contact with life? What does that mean for me? How can I give more of myself to the world and honor the various responsibilities I have to my family? Such questions are obviously important initial steps in the authentic life.

With respect to struggle, Merton reminds us that authenticity and meaning are not the paths of ease. There will be time when the world questions us, and when we question ourselves. It is important to note, however, that, like Merton, we will experience moments of bliss as well as pain as we struggle to live in truth before God and in peace with one another.