

Christ and the Birds of Appetite: Breathing Life and Beauty into the Body of Faith

By Christopher Pramuk

Readers of *The Merton Seasonal* already know well the qualities that draw so many people to Thomas Merton as an exemplar of the spiritual life. In this essay, I want to suggest that Merton offers the Church today something much more: a model for *healing*. There are certainly other figures to whom we could look, but Merton's account of Christian life in God – even more, his clear-headed description where it can go wrong – seems to me to decipher one of the chief ailments now crippling Catholic ecclesial life and theology. The following reflections weave together two strands of thought: on one side, an account of the dangers of “spiritual materialism”; on the other, the case for Merton as a signpost for new growth and healing in the life of the Church and its theology.

A word about method: I hope *Seasonal* readers will forgive me if what follows is more improvisational than what they are accustomed to find in these pages. My intention is by no means homiletic, but rather to correlate Merton's insights, if somewhat freely, to our own signs of the times.¹ Merton remains the explicit conversation partner throughout, especially his brilliant and often-overlooked collection, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*. In the cryptic “Author's Note” which opens the volume, Merton introduces us to the birds of appetite.

Where there is carrion lying, meat-eating birds circle and descend. Life and death are two. The living attack the dead, to their own profit. The dead lose nothing by it. They gain too, by being disposed of. Or they seem to, if you must think in terms of gain and loss. Do you then approach the study of Zen with the idea that there is something to be gained by it? . . . Where there is a lot of fuss about “spirituality,” “enlightenment,” or just “turning on,” it is often because there are buzzards hovering around a corpse. . . . Zen enriches no one. There is no body to be found. The birds may come and circle for a while in the place where it is thought to be. But they soon go elsewhere. . . . It was there all the time but the scavengers missed it, because it was not their kind of prey.²

Circling Christ like a Mob

Merton's striking imagery offers an important caution to the Western seeker fascinated with Zen Buddhism. But like the best of Merton's medita-



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tions – I’m thinking especially of his essay on Adolf Eichmann in *Raids on the Unspeakable*³ – this one ought to disturb us more than a little, if we allow ourselves to be judged by it. The frenzied birds of appetite represent a temptation any religiously-minded person will sooner or later have to face, and that is the temptation toward “spiritual materialism” in its many guises.

Whether the “object” of my insatiable spiritual quest is the Buddha of Zen or the Christ of Christianity, the same danger presents itself. Spiritual materialism turns the object of my fascination into a kind of prey, and my bent to possess “it” (as any other commodity) immediately kills it dead. I may manage to tear some scrap from the fallen beast and walk away with an opiate of self-satisfaction. “Look how Bohemian I am. Shall I tell you all about Zen?” You may be impressed, but an hour later we both are ravenous again.

Merton urges us not to approach Buddha or Christ with a predatory spirit, with the question, “What can I get from you?” This kind of spirit, formed in us unremittingly by the marketplace, short-circuits meaningful relationships in *any* dimension of our lives. In the religious sphere it has us accumulating trinkets and rituals, congratulating ourselves for brief spasms of ecstasy on baroque sitting-cushions, or quietly measuring our storehouse of holiness against the poor sinner next to us at church.

But who really does this? Is the Christian “Pharisee” not in fact a kind of caricature, a straw man set up by critics of religion from the outside? We might conclude this if by Pharisee we mean the religious *hypocrite*, the person whose behavior flies in the face of their professed (and highly trumpeted) beliefs. I think we can risk the assertion that bald hypocrisy, in this caricatured sense, is not a rampant problem in today’s Church. (Indifferentism or apathy would seem to be the greater illness.) On the other hand, the polarized atmosphere in which we now dwell may suggest that the worst kind of Pharisaism is alive and well in the Catholic Church. Sadly, many parish and diocesan communities have experienced deep division and bitter alienation in recent years. Whether the struggle pertains to church doctrine or structure, leadership failures, or liturgical practice, the contentious gulf between one person’s “right” and another person’s “wrong” often seems insurmountable.

*A Body of Broken Bones*⁴

Returning to Merton’s central image, it is precisely at the moment when our open hands become fists, instruments of grabbing, clinging, and fighting, that the body of Christ (like Zen) *disappears* from our midst. Finding ourselves unable to possess Christ in the way we possess everything else – i.e., in “a culture that thrives on the stimulation and exploitation of egocentric desire” (ZBA 31) – the birds of appetite grow weary and “soon go elsewhere.” Is this not happening now in parishes and dioceses across the United States?

Wherever Catholics fiercely tear away at one another, thinking that by doing so they are somehow “defending Christ,” in truth they are tearing away at Christ’s body, that is, at *themselves*. To be sure, inside the very public wounds of the Catholic Church there throbs a deep existential sadness, all the regrets of a family too long hardened against itself. In view of St Paul’s image of the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 12), this makes sense. For Paul’s language is not only metaphorical or eschatological, a mystical vision of the *not yet*; the church is literally, ontologically, and concretely the Body of Christ *now*. Like it or not, he reminds the Church at Corinth, by baptism *your very being* is knitted together in Christ, bone to bone, flesh to flesh. The cutting off and alienation of any member of the body does violence to the whole, the *imago Dei* we are meant to bear with humility and joy, fellowship and grace. Has *this* Christ turned out to be, after all, not our kind of prey?

Not only the baptized laity, but Catholic theologians and the episcopal *magisterium* would especially do well to keep Merton's birds of appetite humbly in view. It does not serve the church when its brightest intellectual leaders keep circling Christ like a mob, casting lots for their righteous piece of him. When theological wrangling leaves the contestants embittered, worn out, and, in some cases, out of work, then Christ may as well lie dead in an open field. The Church thus kills itself, allowing its essential catholic vitality to whimper away in a tired tug-of-war for the possession of truth. "By their fruits you shall know them."

The Eclipse of Humility

Merton's caution against spiritual materialism begins, I think, with a much more subtle poverty of imagination, over which Christians by no means hold a monopoly. Here the "Pharisee" is any person who forgets that everything he or she possesses (including being itself) is unmerited *gift*. To the degree his spiritual or material belly is full, the Pharisee is seduced by the power of his own agency: "look at me, see how wise I am, look at what I have accomplished." Merton's account of the "false self" borrows not only from Asian religion but also from the psychological realism of St. Augustine, who calls it "pride."

With great poignancy, Augustine observed that the greatest temptations are precisely the things that are *best* in us. No matter the area of life, our virtues – longing for God; love of American democracy; passion for Catholic tradition – become seeds of destruction the moment we presume to possess them by our own merits; and further believe ourselves to be *entitled* to such gifts over against others.⁵ The higher we ascend, the greater the temptation to perceive ourselves as the center and ultimate measure of all "reality."

Especially in modern culture, which is predicated on the primacy of *my* experience, *my* success, *my* pain, "truth" tends to become a closed circle (a *prison*) of self-reference, self-obsession, self-aggrandizement – the exact contradiction of Zen (and Christian) liberation. Pride sends its toxic ripples as far as the enmity between nations, as near as the alienation between friends, family, and fellow church members.

Surrender

Every day I kill Isaac – my beautiful dream about a silent, solitary, well ordered life of perfect contemplation and perfect monastic observance, with no intrusion from the world.⁶

The dreams we have for ourselves may be long dormant, recently shattered, or struggling like leaven to burst forth in the dough for the first time. It is an axiom of the human condition – i.e., original sin – that if we ourselves have not found some way to thwart, evade, give up on, or otherwise *kill* our own dreams, someone else will do it for us. But every morning God raises this dream (our vocation) again in our heart, so that its beauty keeps beckoning us toward our true identity. And all the while God patiently tills the soil in other people's hearts, many unknown to us, all of whom eventually play their part in pulling God's grand scheme off! In spite of our best efforts!

Merton's journals uncover this drama repeatedly. After reviewing the various players involved in publishing *The Seven Storey Mountain*, for instance, he writes, "All this was completely beyond my control. I didn't even know what was going on, and now it is about to be launched" (*ES* 213). In my life, I have certainly experienced the retrospective, "Of course!" looking back on a chain of events that paved the way to a surprising good. A failed outcome that once appeared random or even tragic

somehow tills the ground for subsequent graces. I now see that this kind of grace, born of earlier dark nights, is how my wife finally stole into my world, like a beatific vision. “*Gotcha!*” the Lord whispers, “You didn’t see that one coming, did you?” One is left shaking his head exasperated, or laughing in wonder. “*God can make a way out of no way,*” the African-American spiritual proclaims.

In the final analysis, I don’t think we could kill the dream even if we tried, as the twists and turns of Merton’s monastic journey illustrate. But we do have to be careful not to bury it alive, which so many of us do. The worst kind of death is the slow, imperceptible-because-habitual death. And this is no less true of *our dreams for the Church*. Indeed, the Body of Christ is *God’s dream* for all of us, beckoning each of us toward full personhood and life-giving community. “For I know well the plans I have in mind for you, says the Lord” (Jer. 29:11). As Jeremiah reassured God’s people in exile, it is not a matter of grasping and trying still harder, but of gratitude, trust, and surrender.

Touching the Ground of Openness

For through faith you are all children of God in Christ Jesus. . . . There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:26, 28).

Zen has much to teach us, Merton suggests, about *the experience* (not the concept!) of surrender. Indeed, the first thing to be surrendered is all conceptions of God (or Christ) *as object* – an age-old means of domesticating mystery. In the modern version, God-as-object tends to conveniently (but subtly) mirror the Enlightenment “subject,” or as Merton notes, the Cartesian “ego-self imprisoned in its own consciousness” (ZBA 22). Over against this self-legitimizing and dangerous construction Merton counterposes the Christian mystical experience of “God” and the Zen experience of “Void” or “emptiness.” In both cases the cardinal sin from which human beings need to be liberated is idolatry.

Cartesian thought began with an attempt to reach God as object by starting from the thinking self. But when God becomes object, he sooner or later “dies,” because God as object is ultimately unthinkable. God as object is not only a mere abstract concept, but one which contains so many internal contradictions that it becomes entirely nonnegotiable except when it is hardened into an idol that is maintained in existence by a sheer act of will (ZBA 23).

Returning to the ecclesial context, the next (and hardest!) things to be surrendered are the idols that kill the Body of Christ in the first place (level one: pet peeves, grudges, “non-negotiable” agendas; level two: apathy, stinginess, false humility, perfectionism; level three: dogmatism, paternalism, sexism, racism). What St Paul calls “putting on Christ,” Merton calls the “intuition of a *ground of openness*” (ZBA 24-25), the experience of coming to rest in “an infinite generosity which communicates itself to everything that is. ‘The good is diffusive of itself,’ or ‘God is love.’ Openness is not something to be acquired, but a radical gift that has been lost and must be recovered (though it is still in principle ‘there’ in the roots of our created being)” (ZBA 25).

What matters first is not a host of many truths or practices but *the shape of the whole*, resting together in the ground of God’s love and mercy, in the community of Jesus enlivened by the Spirit. This wider womb of Trinitarian love relativizes everything else. Suddenly our agendas appear, by no

means trivial, but less absolute, less constitutive of Catholic identity. It is not a question of abandoning the battles that need to be fought; nor does it mean being superficially nice to everybody, or the artful dodging of serious issues and disagreements. It means, rather, as Merton writes, being liberated “to enjoy the freedom from concern that goes with being simply [who I am]” (ZBA 31) and working with things as I can. “The self is not its own center and does not orbit around itself; it is centered on God, the one center of all, which is ‘everywhere and nowhere,’ in whom all are encountered, from whom all proceed. *Thus from the very start* this consciousness is disposed to encounter ‘the other’ with whom it is already united anyway ‘in God’” (ZBA 24; emphasis added).

“In God” there is room again to breathe, and to let others do so. In contemplation, the experience of God’s unmerited love for me casts the other, even the offending other, in a whole new light. If this sounds abstract, we only have to recall Merton’s well-known epiphany in Louisville “at the corner of Fourth and Walnut,” the climax of which may be the wonder-soaked proclamation, “*There are no strangers!*”⁷ Merton’s experience shows that a genuine conversion to others is not something we can achieve, but is utter gift. Still, like Zen awakening, it is a gift we can prepare for, by discipline, self-examination, and prayer.

Perhaps only prayer can prepare us to sit in wonder before every human being – black, white, yellow, red, and brown – and see there (like Simeon!) the face of God incarnate. For in God there is neither Jew nor Greek, Hindu nor Muslim, stranger nor outcast. Christ calls us to become charitably disposed to the other, Merton writes, “*from the very start.*” With this phrase, Merton puts the emphasis where it must be for followers of Jesus. That is, we must always critically examine our own disposition first, not that of our neighbor or enemy. No matter how great our differences appear, we must ask for the grace of biblical faith, the conviction that human kinship in God can never be sundered. Where we have been loved and forgiven first, we are freed to forgive others and thus to let loose our gifts in the Church and world. Striving simply to be vehicles of grace and reconciling presence (never without failure), God’s dream for humanity becomes real in us.

Discipleship, Theology, Prayer

Everything said up to this point leads to the question of discipleship. It is not our calling to circle around the figure of Christ like sheep before a marble idol, his dead body on the cross like medical students circling a cadaver, nor the empty tomb like cultists conjuring a ghost. A mob is a mob, whether vicious and predatory, or dumb-struck and cowering. This is clearly not our calling. Christ has changed the human person. We have what we need (the Holy Spirit), we *are* what we need (baptized people of God), and the time (*kairos*) is once again pregnant to shoulder our burdens and follow.

And so more than orthodoxy, it is courage that is demanded of the Christian. For today, as Merton writes, “Christ is where men starve, and are beaten.”⁸ Christians must follow Christ into such places. Discipleship separates the birds of appetite from the followers of Jesus, the Church as a paschal sacrament of Christ in the world. Discipleship means walking firmly (i.e., in resurrection faith) by roads fraught with ambiguity. It means swimming through our particular history with our own particular gifts – “A tree gives glory to God by being a tree” (NSC 29) – and sometimes, as Merton observes, navigating our way in the belly of a paradox.

In what respect can Catholic theology be a force for healing and discipleship? The temptation to turn Christ into an idol finds its way with special force (or subtlety) into theological language. The community was never meant to eat from a dead body, but from bread that satisfies, teaching and

preaching that awakens the *imago Dei* in every person who eats of it. Like an invitation to a wedding banquet, Catholic theology (and preaching) ought to shimmer at least a little around the edges. The task of all God-talk is to awaken freedom with the symbols of faith, and so quicken the corporate life of discipleship.

For all of these reasons the theologian, too, must be a person of prayer. In a word, she must be a contemplative, infusing her work with wonder, gratitude, and love. Like Jonah, whose steadfast prayer belied a rather serious situation, she must nurture in herself the joy of Christ's presence in the world, the eschatological hope of Christ's quickening of history. To be sure, her eyes must remain fully open on Auschwitz – the “silent blue sky” which mocked the faith of a little Jewish boy named Elie Wiesel. But even before the maddening horizon of evil, she who prays can remain true to her theological vocation.⁹ Theology rooted in the prayerful encounter with the life, cross, and empty tomb of Jesus, injects the brooding darkness with the solidity of a quivering mustard seed. It engenders the hope for a love so great its flowering will reduce the darkness to a nothing, a shadow of our true being in God.

Neither the empiricist nor the spiritual materialist within us ever remembers to pray. In either case we collect knowledge (*gnosis*) compulsively, in the way we collect electronic gadgets (and their runic instruction manuals). But Christ, the Wisdom of God, did not want to give us yet another mystery cult. St. Paul spoke the truth: without love, even the highest knowledge merely adds to the cacophony of voices already trying to sell us something.

Nor is it sufficient for catechetical theology to be “orthodox” when its aesthetic is poetically barren, laboring to breathe life into a picked-over carcass. In tomorrow's Church apologetics will have to recover a more daring poetic spirit – “Stay awake, the bridegroom is coming!” – if it is not to be dismissed as quickly as the adolescent's dead-pan “Whatever.” Like the birds of appetite, another generation will soon go elsewhere, following their parents into Buddhist sanghas and Protestant mega-churches.

And so the Catholic academy will have to ask whether it still has a place for joy and spontaneity, for the monk's prayerful (and electrified!) expectation of Christ's immanent arrival. To borrow Merton's image, the theologian should be formed to share something of John's leap of eschatological joy in the womb of Elizabeth, a hope awakened spontaneously in the presence of Jesus.¹⁰ Whether it is finally issued in the classroom or from the pulpit, on teeming streets or wind-swept hillsides, Christian theology will take root in good soil when its hearers say, as on the road to Emmaus, “Did not our hearts leap within us?”

“Love is the Resetting of a Body of Broken Bones”

The love the world longs for today begins in the silence of Christ's desert. Love begins in the stillness of boats lapped by waves on the Sea of Galilee. It begins in the artist's eye, the prayerful reception of creation's “suchness” which shines forth, as Hopkins writes, “like shining from shook foil.” Like the wisdom of Zen, Merton invites us not to seek ecstatic visions but to *awaken* to our own humanity, and, to be sure, the luminous (and sometimes terrible) world of nature. His theological imagination resists any freezing of the wondrous into an idolatrous system. In an age thirsty for deep religious insight *and* for beauty, Merton continues to be a writer and poet for the common man and woman.

But he is more than this. Precisely *because* of his deeply rooted mysticism, Merton wrote prophetically and prolifically on the most pressing social issues of our time.¹¹ By joining mystical

practice and social commentary across what had been impermeable religious, cultural, and racial boundaries, Merton models the very best of the Catholic imagination. And unlike the more virulent expressions of political and Catholic pietism today, Merton forwards this integral Catholic worldview with a humility and openness that can only come through critical self-examination. Indeed, his life models the conviction that openness to all of God's people, near and far, is not an "add-on" but integral for the followers of Christ. This, I believe, is what finally makes Thomas Merton a preeminent signpost for renewal in Catholic theology, and healing in ecclesial life for many years to come.¹²

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

1. In the foreground here, by "signs of the times" I mean the experience of polarization in the post-conciliar Roman Catholic Church, long simmering but raised to a boiling point by the worldwide sexual abuse scandal. This intra-ecclesial horizon, however, must never insulate us from what are unquestionably *the* signs of the times: the poverty, violence, and exploitation that deal death to countless human beings and destroy nature on a massive scale. We might call this the ongoing crucifixion of the *universal* or cosmic Body of Christ. While emphasizing the former context, I will also recommend Merton as a model for prophetic response to the latter.
2. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968) ix; subsequent references will be cited as "ZBA" parenthetically in the text.
3. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1964) 45-49.
4. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1962) 70-79; subsequent references will be cited as "NSC" parenthetically in the text.
5. Augustine's insight is not cynical with regard to human psychology (as in the Pharisaic caricature) so much as the poignant confession of a spiritual convalescent. He is a bishop who at the height of his success would still say, "I am a burden to myself" (*Confessions*, X.28.39).
6. Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer. Journals, vol. 2: 1941-1952*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 307; subsequent references will be cited as "ES" parenthetically in the text.
7. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 142.
8. Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation. Journals, vol. 1: 1939-1941*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995) 453.
9. Johannes B. Metz says that Christians can still pray after Auschwitz only because *Jews* prayed in Auschwitz.
10. Thomas Merton, "The Quickening of John the Baptist," in *Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 199-202.
11. Merton writes: "I would say from the outset that the important thing is not to *oppose* this gracious and prophetic concept to the metaphysical and mystical idea of union with God, but to show where the two ideas really seek to express the same kind of consciousness or at least to approach it, in varying ways" (ZBA 25).
12. For a perspective on Merton and Catholic formation, see Christopher Pramuk, "The Song of Faith: Hearing Music Again with Thomas Merton," *America* 186:12 (8 April 2002).