

Four Reflections on Thomas Merton

By M. Basil Pennington, OCSO

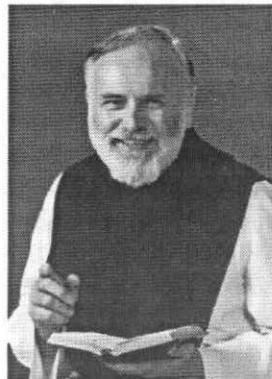
Fr. Basil Pennington, a Cistercian monk of St. Joseph's Abbey, Spencer, MA, was a prolific author whose works included a number of books about his friend and fellow Cistercian, Thomas Merton, including *Thomas Merton, Brother Monk: The Quest for True Freedom* (1987), *A Retreat with Thomas Merton* (1988) (reissued as *Engaging the World with Merton* [2004]), a collection of his essays, *Thomas Merton—My Brother: His Journey into Freedom, Compassion and Final Integration* (1996), an edited volume of essays on Merton by others, *Toward an Integrated Humanity* (1988), and a Merton anthology, *I Have Seen What I Was Looking For: Selected Spiritual Writings* (2005). Fr. Basil also served as a member of the Board of Directors of the International Thomas Merton Society and was Keynote Speaker at the ITMS Second General Meeting. Before his death on June 3, 2005, as a result of injuries suffered in an automobile accident in March of that year, he sent the following four short pieces on Merton to John Collins, his friend and fellow columnist for the *Catholic Free Press*, the Worcester, MA diocesan paper. They were written for his column in the *Free Press* but never published, and appear here for the first time, thanks to the courtesy of John Collins and with the permission of Fr. Basil's literary executor, Fr. Simon Sansone, OCSO of St. Joseph's Abbey.

I. Thomas Merton, Lovable Bearer of Good Tidings

One of the things I think the Church can learn from Thomas Merton – I am thinking here of the teaching Church, bishops and priests – is how effectively to do just that: to teach. Our Lord's final command to the apostles was to go forth and teach. It is a primary duty for the apostles' successors and those who join them in their ministerial ordination. Tom was and is an effective communicator of the Good News. I do not think any Catholic author has ever reached a larger audience. His books continue to sell and sell, as do tapes of his talks. Hundreds of other writers are engaged in making his message heard and in translating him into a multitude of languages. Every publisher is happy to have Merton material.

What are the qualities that make Tom such an effective and attractive communicator of the Truth? Fundamentally, there is his *openness*, an expression of his freedom in the Spirit. He kept open to every channel of truth, and he constantly drew on a vast array of sources. He was *up to date and well-informed*. He knew whereof he spoke. He proclaimed the absolute centrality of the Paschal Mystery, fully in the context of our times. He constantly read, and read widely. He listened and he called forth response.

A busy bishop or pastor might say, "All well and good for a man who enjoys the leisure of the contemplative life. But I don't have the time to read." Tom's life was not so leisurely. He made the time and he made choices. For over ten of his very productive years he held the second most important position in one of the largest abbeys in the world. He was always vitally concerned and vitally involved in all that went on in his community and in his worldwide order. Yet he never allowed



Fr. Basil Pennington

himself to become provincial or even merely ecclesial. He did keep up an active participation in all that concerned the universal Church. He wrote to popes and bishops and to the laity at large. He followed closely all the developments of the [Second Vatican] Council. He kept up with Catholic theology, and Orthodox and Protestant theology as well. And he is well known for his outreach to other spiritual traditions. The whole world was his because it was Christ's and because he was a member of the human family – the family of God. He kept up-to-date on political events, especially all that concerned peace, social justice, and racial equality. He was well-informed about Marxism and communism. Nothing human was foreign to him.

So that when he proclaimed the Good News, his hearers knew that he was speaking to them, speaking into the context of their lives and not from some detached ecclesiastical realm. Even though he was a monk who had chosen to live apart and did live apart, he was at the heart of things.

Although Tom was well-read and well-informed, his message always remained *personal*. He never sought to impress or overwhelm with his erudition. He never simply passed on learning. He shared what he had assimilated and related, in the fabric of his own being, with the central reality of the cross, death, and resurrection of Jesus as Lord. His message was always existential, in the best meaning of the word. His teaching came out of what he believed enough to live and, in the living, found to be truly life-giving.

Finally, Tom *respected his hearers*, whom he loved. He respected their time, their intellects, their sophistication, and their simplicity. Above all, he respected their freedom. He never came on with threats; he never tried to force anything down anyone's throat. Rather he let the Truth, which he shared out of love, speak for itself and call forth its own assent.

Our Lord told us we are to be perfect even as our heavenly Father is perfect, adding, "He lets his rain fall on the just and the unjust alike." Rain comes down in many ways. It may be a driving storm. But I suspect the Lord was thinking here of that gentle rain spoken of by the prophets. Whatever way it comes, though, the receiver is free to receive it as he will. He can hide from it and ignore it, or he can welcome it and use it for cleansing or to slake his thirst. God respects our freedom. His worthy minister will do the same.

The breadth, the depth, and the *manifest love* of Thomas Merton have won for him an enduring and eager audience. All of this, enshrined in a very disarming *humility*, has made him a most attractive and lovable bearer of good tidings. He has a lot to teach anyone who wants to proclaim effectively the Good News.

II. A True Christian Philosopher

Thomas Merton's review of Aldous Huxley's *Ends and Means* in the *Columbia Review* shows he was quite familiar with the works of Huxley. The "new" he found in *Ends and Means* was the prominence of love – that is, the denial of ambition, self-assertion, and even the seemingly harmless exhibitionism inexorably called forth by a society where men are judged by their material possessions. In this insight received from Huxley Tom Merton found a new freedom. I think it would be difficult to exaggerate the impact that Huxley had on Merton. It may seem paradoxical that such an influence should have come from a secular prophet or a "rational idealist," as Huxley frequently called himself, but it was this rational idealism that not only spoke to Tom when he was young but enabled him in time to speak so powerfully to the young of the next generation as well as to his own contemporaries.

However, with Tom the idealism took an infinite step, into the realms of faith – there is the secret of his perduring power. His rationalism, not contrary but complementary to faith, remained in touch with and probed the real fabric of life, creating the realistic, hope-engendering connections between our everyday struggles, our very real humanness, and an ideal grand enough to enkindle the human heart. Tom took Huxley's peace and love and elevated them to the all-embracing peace of Christ and Christ's total, transcendent love.

One of the things that has come to me more in my recent reading of Merton's writings is how much a philosopher he is. He really took the best of medieval philosophy, studying the masters, Aquinas and Scotus, with the help of Étienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain, and then read widely in the moderns, being most profoundly influenced by Gabriel Marcel. In an abortive biography of Merton we are let in on a rather humorous scene that took place in Merton's hermitage. When John Howard Griffin brought the aged Jacques Maritain to visit Gethsemani, Tom tried to open the old Thomist to some existentialist thinking by playing for him Bob Dylan's "Highway 61" – at top volume. On the dedication page of *Raids on the Unspeakable* – a book that Tom considered different from all his other books and more to the point – Tom gives a quotation from Marcel, which I think sums up his own aspirations as a philosopher: "Today, the first and perhaps the only duty of the philosopher is to defend man against himself: to defend man against that extraordinary temptation toward inhumanity to which – almost without being aware of it – so many human beings today have yielded."

III. The Genuine Article

Lord, help me to escape all superficiality, all phoniness, especially in my relationship with you, but also in everything.

I think this is one of the things most attractive about Thomas Merton. He was totally genuine, or at least trying to be, trying to get completely free from the false ego, the phony self we so deeply identify with and so carefully protect for so many years. I think of some of the pictures of Tom from his college days – the put-on sophistication of his three-piece suits (I still wear a three piece suit!), his fedora worn at a rakish angle, the cigarette dangling from his lips. He certainly bought into the false self, the projected image. Yet that something genuine, deep within him, finally won out. He went through the image of the monk before that happened. How many of us, especially us Cistercians, or even more those who hang onto the label of Trappist, get caught in the image of a monk.

When Father Flavian was elected abbot, Tom felt a new freedom. He publicly proclaimed to the community, "I am a professionally scandalous person. I do all sorts of crazy things." He wasn't saying this is the way we all should act. We all do need to find a freedom to be truly ourselves. The true self is the only thing that is real. This is the only thing that can glorify God, not any pretense or put-on performance of a monk. This is the only real gift we can give each other. Anything else is phony – not worth giving. If we are going to be a sacrament of God's love to each other, then we have to be the sacrament, the expression of his love, which he himself is creating and not something we are fabricating on our own. The only real gift I can give you is who I really am. Here it is; it is yours. Take it or leave it. It is all I have to give. It may not meet your expectations, your image of the "good monk." It may not be much of a monk at all, but it is what it is. Being true to itself, it can be an expression and channel of God's love. That doesn't mean that I shouldn't strive to be a better person, a better Christian, a better monk – for that is my vocation – but I shouldn't pretend

to be what I am not yet.

We do have one way of judging whether we are truly walking in the way the Lord wants for us. Jesus said that we can judge a tree by its fruits. If the path we are following brings forth in us the fruits of the Spirit, those wonderful fruits Paul lists in his letter to the Galatians (love, peace, joy, patience, kindness, long-suffering, meekness, mildness, and chastity), we can be sure we are walking in the way of the Lord. Such fruits do not come from our poor human efforts; they are a gift from the Lord.

Being united to God, entering more fully into the experience of that union through prayer, is supposed to do something to us. We are not always comfortable with that transforming power. We tend to cling to what we have experienced ourselves having and being. But, if we want to get to our deepest self, we have to go to the place where it originates. If we want to experience our deeper self, we have to experience the place of our origin and that is something ever new. For God ever calls us forth from nothingness. We have to be willing to experience our nothingness, the *nada* of John of the Cross, to be able to come to the experience of the call of God which is the core of our being, the deepest self, our person at its roots. Furthermore, because we have sinned, we have to realize that we are called not only out of nothingness, but more importantly out of sinfulness as well. If we are willing to experience our sinfulness, we can then truly experience Christ as our Savior and know deeply the joy of salvation. Experience it, not just know it in our heads and pay lip-service to it; but experience actually being called out of nothingness and sinfulness. We want to have the consciousness that this is who we truly are. These two experiences, negative and painful though they may be, are the beginning of our experience of God, who is capable of calling us from nothingness and sin and bringing us to perfection so that we can, indeed, be perfect even as our heavenly Father is perfect. This depends on faith in God and hope in his mercy and love. Without faith and hope we cannot face our own nothingness and sinfulness, because this is so contrary to our instincts for self-preservation. The image of our own nothingness opens to us an abyss that is truly frightening. We don't know where it will bring us, but we are asked to live by faith.

There are a lot of things about our lives that we cannot bear until they are upon us, for it is in that moment that we receive the grace to handle them. There is no master who has it all put together. Not even our Lord Jesus, our Master. The Scriptures tell us he learned by what he suffered, in the desert, in Gethsemani, and on the cross. The only way we become true masters is the way Jesus did, by resurrection from the dead. That is the only way. We have to die to the false self, in order to live in the fullness of our Christ person.

IV. Freedom

What is Thomas Merton's most significant contribution? Dom James, his abbot for many years, might say his obedience. Others might point to his prayer and contemplative life, while others would indicate his social concern. I think it is his freedom.

It stands out in the context of his obedience and makes that obedience true. It was his freedom that enabled him to be completely available to God in prayer and to be taken beyond himself in contemplation. His freedom opened him to let the whole world, with all its concerns and needs, walk in. His freedom from himself enabled him to remain open even when those concerns and the people who shared them – though often in a much less deep way than he – shredded him and left him tattered.

And what does Tom have to say to us? He might say, “I really don’t have anything to say. I don’t have any answers. Live the questions.” There is struggle – all the way. *Be free!!* Be yourself. How? by prayer. I don’t mean saying prayers. I mean the kind of prayer where you leave all your thoughts and images behind, your phony self, and find your true self in God. At the same time, we find everybody else there. And we realize how we are all one in God, and everything else follows.

I remember the Zen story of a terrible outlaw who was terrorizing villages. Whenever the people heard he was coming, they fled and left all for him. As he approached one village, everyone fled, except one monk. When the outlaw heard that the monk had remained in his monastery, he was outraged. He broke down the gates of the monastery and confronted the monk. “Do you know who I am? I am the one who can kill you on the spot.” The monk looked at him calmly and replied, “Do you know who I am? I am the one who can let you kill me on the spot.” Freedom!

Whatever decision I make about my future, I want to make it freely – free to let go or free to go on. I pray the last words of the *Benedictus*: “Give light to those who live in darkness and the shadow of death. . . . Guide our feet into the way of peace.” The monastic charism is a charism of freedom, including the freedom not to count in the world and not to give visible results in it, the freedom not to have to talk if you don’t want, not to have to pronounce judgment on anything, or contrary-wise, to speak out without hesitation when you think something has to be said (not just when you think somebody else wants you to say it for them). Above all, the monastic charism is a freedom from set routine and official tasks. A monk does not have to do any of these things. Not because he has a secret luxury product for a somewhat esoteric market, but because he is liberated from the need to produce anything with which to justify himself in the eyes of other men. He is not accountable to them for his life because it is something that cannot be drawn up on a balance sheet for anybody’s inspection.

Our greatest freedom is to be completely free to say a total, unconditional “yes” to God and God’s wondrous plan of love for each and every one of us.