

Your Will and Your Vocation

By Thomas Merton

In November 1955, shortly after he had been appointed novice master at the Abbey of Gethsemani, Thomas Merton wrote an essay about monastic vocation evidently aimed at his young charges. There is some evidence that at one point he intended to publish it along with other articles discussing aspects of religious life. In the archives of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University in Louisville, KY, there are two sheets of reader's comments discussing three articles: the first is "Spiritual Direction," which eventually became an appendix to Merton's novitiate conferences on "Monastic Observances" (currently being edited for inclusion in the Cistercian Publications Monastic Wisdom series); the second is "The Neurotic Personality in the Monastic Life," which did not appear during Merton's lifetime but was published in The Merton Annual, volume 4 (1992) 3-19. The third is the present article. It is evident from these notes (which have a brief headnote at the top of the first page) that these three articles had been forwarded to the unidentified publisher in this order; whether there were further articles that received comments on subsequent pages that are no longer extant cannot be determined. The reason why the collection of articles was never published is unknown (the queries raised are quite theologically literate, suggesting it was destined for a religious publisher, but about relatively minor points, and certainly do not suggest any reluctance to proceed with publication); but Gregory Zilboorg's strongly negative comments about the second of the articles (see Brother Patrick Hart's introductory comments in Merton Annual 4, 3-4) may well have been a deciding factor. In any case, the 22-page typescript of "Your Will and Your Vocation" has remained unnoticed and unpublished for over a half-century. As an exploration of the meaning of the call to monastic life dating from the very beginning of the period when Merton had assumed a primary responsibility for discerning and nurturing that call in prospective monks at Gethsemani, the essay provides insight on Merton's initial understanding of his own role as novice master and is thus a document of some significance in revealing the development of his own monastic life. Except for minor alterations in capitalization and punctuation, the essay is printed below substantially as Merton left it. Thanks are due to the Trustees of the Thomas Merton Legacy Trust for permission to publish "Your Will and Your Vocation," and to Merton Center Director Paul M. Pearson for providing a copy of the material and for assistance and encouragement in bringing it into print.

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We have come to the monastery to seek God. But how does one seek God, Who is invisible? How does one travel to Him, Who lives in no place? We seek God not with the eyes or members of our body, not by a journey in space, by travelling with our feet: we seek Him by a journey that is made with the spiritual faculties of our soul – with our mind and our will. For God is present in our own soul, and present all around us. Our journey to Him is then to a progressive purification of our mind and will so that we become like unto Him, so that we adjust ourselves to His ways, and thus come to be united to Him and know Him.

Therefore St. Benedict tells us that we who have departed from God and gone far away from Him by disobedience, seek to return to Him by obedience. Also he tells us that the way of disobedience was a way of sloth and cowardice, while the way of obedience requires effort and faith and generosity.

Jesus tells us without ambiguity, and in considerable detail, that union with God by knowledge and love is reached by obedience.

"In that day you shall know that I am in the Father, and you in me, and I in you. He that hath my

commandments and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me. And he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and manifest myself to him” (John 14:20-21).

In order to arrive at this union with God by knowledge and love, we must use our minds and our wills. But we must learn to use them in a new way. It is clear from the very beginning Jesus demands of all who seek Him a definite and resolute act of will – an act of choice, of self-commitment, a decision to leave all other desires in order to do His will. He demands that we make up our mind to embrace the truth He offers us and all its practical consequences, most of which we do not yet know.

“*Si quis VULT post me venire . . .*” “If any man *wills* to follow me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24).

Here Christ demands of His disciples not only a velleity but a deep, sincere, efficacious desire of the will. He demands not a daydream but a decision, a personal decision, for which we assume full responsibility and which we commit ourselves to follow through in all its consequences. We will the end (following Christ), and we also see and choose the means (the Cross). This acceptance of the Cross demands the denial of our “own will.” That is, it means the renunciation of our fancies and passions, so that we give the preference to a higher set of values. But it by no means implies that we stop willing. On the contrary, the decision to follow Christ requires a strong act of will, and leads on to still further acts of will, every day. Some of these will require heroism. Such acts of will are necessary to prove and to ratify our original desire to seek Christ. If that desire is tested and proves to be genuine, then we shall receive what we have sought with all sincerity. We must truly seek, in order to find.

Consider the story of the Syro-phoenician woman, who kept asking Jesus for help in spite of every discouragement. Finally He said to her: “O woman, great is thy faith, be it done to thee *as thou wilt*” (Matthew 15:24). If she had not *willed* the salvation of her daughter, if she had not sincerely desired it and put aside everything else in order to make her desire known to the Lord, she would not have received what she had asked for.

Again, Jesus says to the rich young man: “If thou *wilt* enter into life, keep the commandments. . . . If thou *wilt* be perfect, go sell what thou hast and give to the poor and thou shalt have treasure in heaven, and come, follow me” (Matthew 19:17-21). But the young man did not really will to be perfect, and therefore he could not follow Christ.

Another text is frequently used as the Gospel on feasts of Our Lady and in her votive masses. A woman cries out in praise of Jesus: “Blessed is the womb that bore thee,” and he replies that Mary is blessed not so much by the mere fact that she was His mother but by the fact that she heard the word of God and obeyed it. Her sanctity came not only from her divine motherhood, but from the “*fiat*” by which she willed to act as God’s instrument and entered freely into the plan by which His love had served to save the world.

Notice that all Jesus asks of us is this sincere and determined will to receive salvation. The man at the pool of Bethesda was helpless to go down into the water. Jesus merely asked him: “*Vis sanus fieri?*” Do you really want to be cured? The man answers that he has no way of getting into the pool, implying that all he wants is to get there. In return, Jesus cures him immediately, and he does not even have to go into the water. All that is required is the will to be saved.

Controversies on free will and grace have tended to separate man’s will and God’s grace in such a way that we forget that in practice their action, in all supernatural movements of the will, is really inseparable. St. Paul says: “It is God who worketh in you both to will and to accomplish, according to His good will” (Phil. 2:13). God gives us our will; He provides the natural power by which it acts freely

so that our free acts are both His and ours at the same time. He gives us grace, so that our free acts can also become supernatural and be “His” acts in an even deeper sense – moved by His love and terminating in Him. They are acts performed “in the Spirit.” They become acts of Christ, living and moving in His Mystical Body. We are free to reject grace and to refuse our consent to God’s will. The salutary acts of will that God demands of us, for our salvation, and which we can freely refuse, are acts of consent to His grace and His will, acts by which we move ourselves in the direction indicated by His love, and move ourselves with the power which His love gives us. They are, in a word, acts of will in which we freely allow ourselves to be moved by God, but in being “moved by God” we have to “move ourselves” also, we have to make acts of will, acts of decision. Without this will and this decision we do not receive the fruit of grace, which is precisely the power to make these free acts which we could not otherwise make in any such way.

Hence while no supernatural act of will can be performed without the grace of God, and although it is grace itself which trains and forms us most perfectly in the life of the Spirit, we have to understand *the importance of our will* in the spiritual life. We renounce it, yes, but only in order to use it more perfectly and more freely under the guidance of God.

It is therefore a great mistake to enter upon a religious vocation imagining that from the first moment all will be done for us by God. It is true that He will certainly give us all the grace and strength we need, but in order to receive that grace we have to act with our wills, we have to use our freedom in His service. We cannot expect that the renunciation of our wills makes us into passive robots moved entirely from the outside. To expect this is to court failure and to invite the loss of our vocation.

It is important then that we realize that our education in the supernatural life is above all an *education of our will*. We must understand the difference between true and false education of the will. If we have wrong ideas about the will, and wrong ideas about grace too, we will deform our will instead of forming it, and we will ruin a most perfect instrument given us by God.

Let us consider how the will naturally acts, and how it must be properly trained.

What is the will? It is the faculty of man’s soul by which he freely directs his actions and his life itself towards an end which his intelligence apprehends to be good. The will is the principle of autonomous spiritual acts, acts that are “mine,” because they proceed from the deepest and most intimate center of my own personal and spiritual being. It is by these acts that we give glory to God. My will is the inner fortress of my own independence, in which I can assert myself against all comers, even against God. Therefore my will is in fact the principle of my greatest dignity and value, as well as of my complete ruin if I misuse it. In other words, the will is the faculty by which I determine the course of my life, my eternal destiny, by attaching myself freely either to good or to evil.

Notice that there is no neutrality in the Bible between good and evil. A false passivity, an evasion of responsibility, will not deliver us from the inescapable necessity to choose – by an act of our own free will – between Christ and Satan. “He who is not with me is against me.” If I do not freely choose God’s will, if I allow myself knowingly to be drawn into sin, then I have put myself in the corner of those who are opposed to God and I fall under the power of their will and it is to their interest to keep their slaves in passive subjection. To become free, I must use my freedom, which I am always being invited to use by the grace of God, for His glory and for my own happiness in Him.

How great is the mystery of the human will, that power hidden in the sanctuary of our inmost being, the power by which we can unite ourselves to God!

The more freely and perfectly I use my will, the better will my life be, the greater will be the dignity

and value of my whole being. The less freely and perfectly I use my will, the less I am a true person, the less “real” I become. In the natural order, mental health and psychological maturity depend in large measure on the education and formation of a mature will. In the supernatural order, sanctity and union with God depend on the purification and elevation of man’s liberty and its perfection in pure love.

The fruitfulness and happiness of my life, both naturally and supernaturally, depend on the use I make of my will. If I deliberately make wrong choices and commit my life to the following of false values, then I will be responsible for my own ruin. Most people soon become conscious of this fact; by a perverse instinct they begin at once to cloud the issue, to darken and confuse their own conscience and to obscure the way of their own inner freedom so that they will “avoid,” as they hope, the necessity of taking full responsibility for themselves and for their decisions. They prefer a way of confusion and uncertainty in which they do not make the highest kind of choice – in which they avoid decisions that involve their whole moral being. They seek the “sloth of disobedience” in which they feel responsible to no one in particular, not even to themselves. They just vegetate, hoping someone else will answer the necessary moral questions and make the decisions.

This danger must be seen at the very beginning of the monastic life, for otherwise we may find ourselves entering a monastery precisely in order to do this – to avoid making any more serious decisions.

It is of course permissible to enter a monastery in order to avoid certain difficulties and responsibilities of life in the world which would be too great for us to cope with. But the monastic life is not and cannot be an escape from responsibility. Entering the cloister, we leave some responsibilities and embrace others. The obligations of monastic life are much more definite, its responsibilities are limited to certain fields, but in a sense that only makes them more difficult. In the monastery we commit ourselves, we bind ourselves by vow to take on the responsibility for our own life and to seek God by the activity of our will. Our vows bind us to make certain acts of will which effectively renew our consecration to God and bring us to union with Him.

It is true that in the monastery we submit to the direction of our superiors and we are glad to have them regulate the conduct of our life in its externals. But this must never mean that we leave to the superior the full responsibility for our life and for our will. For example, it is not the superior who makes our vows for us. If we do not make vows for ourselves, they cannot be valid. It is not the superior who makes the act of choice by which we respond to God’s call to the holy priesthood; we are the ones who must make that response. The superior can indeed forbid us to make vows, or refuse to accept us as candidates for ordination, but he can never make the interior act of acceptance which must proceed from our will alone if we are to respond to the call of God inviting us to the cloister or to the sanctuary.

We must never think, then, that our life of obedience is a training in “not willing.” It is true that we have to renounce our will and deny ourselves in many things, but only in order to will something else, something more perfect and ultimately better for ourselves – the will of God, manifested by our superior. In other words we must clearly realize that in our obedience we do not simply let the superior will everything for us. We do not carry out his will as mere automatons. We are free agents, conforming our will to that of the superior. He makes known his will, and we, in turn, *will* to put it into effect. If we do not will to do what the superior asks of us, then even though we carry out his request or his command we are not being obedient. That is why St. Benedict insists so strongly, in his chapter on obedience, that we must obey spontaneously and with alacrity, not with resistance or complaints. Obedience is essentially the will to do the will of another, so that if one fails to carry out that will through no fault of his own, the mere desire to do it is obedience. Let us learn to be free agents and not automatons. The religious

who obeys merely automatically, who lets the superior do all the thinking and willing, and just responds with enough action to carry out the exterior command, although he may satisfy his obligation he does not really gain anything for his own soul – he does not grow in liberty and he does not come closer to God by his so-called obedience.

Let us then consider what are some of the characteristics of a “strong” will – a well-trained will. A strong will is not merely stubborn. A stubborn will does not change its direction even when intelligence would show that there is a real motive for doing so. A strong will not only perseveres in a single aim, but also knows how to change its aim in order to will something better. A stubborn will clings to any apparent good that it happens to be holding on to. The inability to “let go” is a sign of weakness. However a strong will is not fickle – does not change without reason, but clings to a real good without being diverted by lesser value.

A strong will moves with ease and spontaneity. Therefore the will that cannot act without great effort – and often enlists the apparent support of useless muscular tension, is a weak will whose efforts dissipate themselves in the pursuit of what is secondary. A strong will goes to the substance of the good that is desired; a weak will wastes itself on accidentals because of a *fundamental hesitation* to accept the good for what it is.

A strong will is undivided – it rules the whole good in its unity. A weak will, however, is torn between various conflicting ends. It cannot decide between true and false goods. A strong will is content to fix itself upon a lesser good that is within reach, while a weak will, in aiming recklessly for a supreme good that is out of reach, ends in failure and frustration and overpasses the good that can actually be attained.

It is important to say all these things, but even more important to qualify them, to prevent misunderstandings. As a matter of fact, all talk about the value of a strong will lends itself to serious misinterpretation in our time, which degrades the human individual and the dignity of the person, while exalting the theoretical idol of a superman. In this age in which the deepest roots of man’s spiritual health are drying up and withering away, men are obsessed with the feeling that they are supposed to be omnipotent, and overwhelmed with guilt because they are, in fact, so weak and helpless.

In training our will we have to do away with this interior division, confront ourselves as we really are, accept our limitations and face the reality around us.

To speak of the necessity of training our will generally leads to several wrong impressions.

First of all, people think that education of the will means education in omnipotence and, implicitly, in self-exaltation. Hence the confusion of those who come to the religious life and fall into the opposite error, thinking that all exercise of the will is self-exaltation, and that the religious ideal is total self-destruction in the moral order.

We are not supposed to be able to do everything by the mere movement of our own will. We are men, not gods. We are not supposed to make all creation obey us. We are not even supposed to take full conscious control of all our own instincts, down to their least movement. Yet we wrongly assume that a man who has a “strong will” is one who, among other things, is able to bring everything in his being under the conscious control of his will, so that he makes every movement of instinct, every impulse, conform to a strict preconceived pattern which he has formed in his mind. Actually, anyone who lived like that would be a monster. It is not natural for man to control all his instinctual life by conscious acts of will. That would destroy all spontaneity and, ultimately, all life. The will *directs* all our activity, conscious and unconscious; it guides our being to the attainment of what is good for the whole man, body and soul. It is not, and cannot be, a dictator with absolute power commanding everything that is

in us. To seek such power is indeed pride, and it is a self-exaltation which, having no basis in reality, leads to self-destruction.

However, if we have this misconception, we will inevitably come to think that a spiritual life in which we serve God by the exercise of our will is a life of great hardship. Those who feel troubled when they are urged to use their will are usually laboring under this misconception: they are thinking about the impossibility of achieving complete conscious control of all their instincts and living a life of godlike omnipotence by their own power. Naturally, this is folly. They are right to be troubled over the impossibility of such an aim, and they are justified in thinking that it cannot be meant for them. They are very unhappy when, out of a mistaken “obedience,” they try vainly to put this crazy program into effect.

Actually, if we use our wills rightly, we will make the spiritual life much easier and happier, because more fruitful. The true spiritual education of the will is first of all an education in contact with reality and in cooperation with grace – both of which make the action of the will easy and effective. Then our will-training is not just a training in forced acts, but on the contrary an education in the *spontaneity of love*. Since love is natural to man, and since man’s happiness consists in loving God and his brethren, it is clear that to learn how to use our wills in true spiritual love is to learn how to be happy and free. The Cistercian life, which St. Bernard called a *schola caritatis*, is in fact a school of freedom and joy in the Lord in which we are delivered from the obstacles that block our will in its efforts to love Him.

Note then that the community life of the monastery is considered by St. Benedict to be a powerful factor in the education of our will. We cooperate with one another in our search for God, and we share together the monastic peace which is produced by the action of our wills, living and working together in unity.

It is impossible to educate the will without at the same time educating the intelligence, for in order to train the will, we must exercise it in a rational manner. But the will does not act rationally merely by forcing itself to when it is guided by solid motives and has a definite intention to achieve an end which is believed to be worth attaining. Merely to force the will to “act” without any real motive or solid conviction is to go against the most fundamental laws of our being. But since these laws are an expression of the will of God for us, it is manifestly absurd to seek perfection and union with God by a series of violent acts of will without a real interior motive and without any corresponding intellectual conviction. Such acts would not be a real gift of our will to God.

This shows clearly that to train the will it is not sufficient to make repeated acts of the will, even if they be “forced acts.” Such acts do not in fact make the will any stronger. Still less does it help the will for us to concentrate on the act of will as we make it, or associate with it some fixed muscular effort, as though to make our will strong by a feeling of strain, or by summoning up a lot of nervous energy. Such actions are not only useless, but they are childish. They are expressions of magic thinking, in which we pretend, by making ourselves “feel” the desired effect, to produce the effect in all truth. We will never make our wills strong by trying to feel strong when we act.

A clear example of the harmfulness of this method is seen when we try to drive out an obsessive thought, or a severe temptation, by violent acts of the will. To keep repeating “No,” with much shaking of the head and muscular tension, not only does not drive the thought away but only roots it more firmly in the imagination until we cannot possibly get rid of it. By such conduct, the will is not only not strengthened, it is actually weakened and gradually loses its power, giving way to scruples and *abulia* which are the result of psychic exhaustion.

Let us take another illustration. Supposing a man is locked up in a room, and someone calls through the door: “The house is on fire. You **MUST** get out.” Without stopping to ask how, the man immediately

tries to batter down the door with his fists. He throws himself against it with all his weight, but can do nothing. The one outside says, "Hurry, hurry, push harder! You *MUST* do it!" So the prisoner throws himself all the harder against the door until he finally drops from exhaustion. Yet all the time he has the key in his pocket, and all he has to do is put the key in the lock, and turn it, and open the door.

This is the situation of the one who tries to train his will by forced repeated acts in which he concentrates intently upon his own psychological processes. He locks himself up in his own helpless introspection and beats his head against the door trying to force his way out. Yet all the time he has a simple key. This key is simply the right way, the normal human way, of using the will. What is it?

In learning any new movement of the body, in learning any kind of action, we need first of all to acquire some image of the action within ourselves. We need to know what it is like to carry out the action. Until we have done it a few times, our muscles and limbs do not have, in themselves, the experience of the movements we need to make. Once we have experienced these movements, we can will to reproduce them more and more perfectly. In these cases, the will directs the muscles to perform actions corresponding to what is represented in the memory. The will acquires greater and greater control of these muscles by moving them to conform more and more perfectly to the pattern in the mind. Eventually the pattern drops out of consciousness altogether and the least movement of the will results in the immediate, spontaneous performance of the proper action.

In these cases the will is educated and strengthened not so much by concentrating on its own movement, as by moving some other part of our being and making it conform to an objective pattern of action.

The true solution to the problem of will-training is then to give the will an *adequate motive* for acting, something outside itself to aim at, something that supplies direction and meaning for its action. In other words, to make our will strong we have to *will something that we are convinced is worth willing*. Our attention must be directed not to the process of willing, but to the thing willed and to our motives for willing it. Intensity and strength of volition do not depend on the "push" we give to our will, but on the strength and seriousness of our motives. As Lindworsky says: "The degrees of volition are not in the line of the energetic will, but consist in *the plus or minus of what is seriously meant* . . . in the interior turning toward and devotion to values."¹ Hence the crucial factor in will-training is the formation of clear and persuasive motives for action. Not only that, but we must train ourselves to call these motives to mind when we want to use our will. If the will can find an adequate, intelligent motive for acting, it will be strong enough to attempt anything. The will depends, for its power to act, on the light of the intelligence, just as the man locked in the room depends, for effective action, upon the light to realize that he has a key in his pocket, and not on the brute force with which he hopes to batter down the door. Once the motive is brought into view, the will can act smoothly and effectively. It may not be able to overcome all exterior obstacles, but it can dispose of every interior block that hampers effective volition.

The ability to make strong acts of will depends on our ability to envisage a clear and significant aim, for the attainment of which we are ready to make ourselves responsible. We have to not only *want* to do something, or feel an obscure need to do it, but we must see that it is to be done, and will to carry it out. If we are not convinced, in the depths of our soul, that the action is morally worth doing, we will not seriously attempt it, even though we may seem to force our will and expend a great deal of energy in "trying" to will something we do not really believe worth while.

Note that the conviction which is necessary to give us real motives is a *sincere moral conviction* of the rightness of our action, of its true moral value in the sight of God. To act against the convictions of

our conscience, or to act with a positive doubt of conscience, is to weaken our will. To do so habitually will seriously impair our spiritual life and its strength, and leads to spiritual death. Education of the will is impossible without formation of the conscience.

The real reason why we do not have will power in some moments of crisis is that in the depths of our heart we lack the conviction that the whole business is important to us. Or we may be faced with deep subconscious motives that conflict with our will. It may, indeed, seem crucially important for us to avoid a particular fault: yet we do not have the will to do so, because our reason for avoiding the fault is not very substantial. A person may want to apply himself to study, for example, because he will displease the professor if he comes to class unprepared. But that is actually not enough of a motive, and the reason why he fails to study effectively is that he does not have enough interest in the subject to apply himself to it. On the contrary, when a student is interested in his subject, he can easily make the acts of will necessary to put aside other things and open his books: he has present, in his memory, the sense of fruitfulness and well-being which comes from work well done. He does not need to pay any attention to his will or to its movement. All he has to do is direct his mind spontaneously to the work to be done, and he easily wills to do it.

In order to educate our will in the service of God, we need to give ourselves strong and effective motives for action. These motives are all the stronger in proportion as they are more *personal*, that is in proportion as they are for us a *matter of experience*. Our will acts most effectively when we experience the value of the end we have in view – and it is very easy to pray when we have “tasted and seen that the Lord is sweet!” We cannot always rely on this consolation, and we should not depend on it, but we must nevertheless realize that it plays a normal part in our development!

But the most powerful of all the motives in the spiritual life is the awareness of the fact that we are loved by Christ – not so much that we have loved Him and that we can depend on our love for Him to continue, as that *He has first loved us* and His love is unending. All we have to do then is desire to love Him in return and our desire cannot fail, for He Whose promises are infallible will bring it to completion.

St. Benedict nowhere speaks of forcing the will, concentrating ourselves upon strong volition, and other such things, but he talks about the presence of God, heaven and hell, the love of Christ. Hence in order to train our will we must meditate on the great truths of our faith, and penetrate deep into the motives which God Himself has given us to open our eyes to His way. The first step in the supernatural education of the will is *belief*: faith must show us the supernatural goal to be attained, and hope must tell us that we can attain it with the help of Christ. Again, faith fixes our attention on the Cross, and the power of the Cross in our lives. It shows us the relative insignificance of obstacles, difficulties and sufferings we may meet with in this life. It reminds us always that “we can do all things in Him who strengthens us.”

It is very important, first of all, that we *control our thoughts* by meditation on the truths of faith, by setting aside lesser values and merely human motives. But it is not enough merely to have motives that are objectively high. We must also make them *real and attractive to ourselves*. This we cannot do by ourselves. But by humbly begging for the light of grace we can gain a spiritual insight into the reality of these hidden values, and can come to experience their meaning in our own lives. This experience is a great grace, which should be humbly desired, because it has the greatest power to move our will to give itself entirely to God.

However, in the monastic life we never really have to give ourselves over to deep reflexive concentration upon will-training. The monastic life itself is a deep and thorough pedagogy of the will. The liturgy

constantly confronts us with the deepest mysteries of our faith, and presents us day after day with all the big motives for spiritual action. At the same time, the chant, the ceremonies, liturgical art, etc. contribute to present these things to us in an attractive and pleasant way, forming happy associations and linking the idea of things to be done with memories of fruitful achievement and lights of grace in the past. The cumulative effect of recurrent liturgical feasts is to deepen the convictions in our mind and make our wills ever more ready to grow in love for God.

Outside the liturgy, the monk is always engaged in simple tasks which can usually be done easily and effectively, keeping his mind from concentrating too much on itself, developing sensitivity to values, and creating more and more fruitful associations. The many opportunities for self-denial and charitable devotion to others keep the monk confronted with his deepest motives, and call them to mind, giving them a stronger and stronger hold on his will.

The many opportunities for obedience and self-denial remove obstacles to the development of our will – destroy the self-love which breeds capriciousness and indecision and which does not possess the ability to discern true values from false.

Finally, in all this complex of observances and prayers, the grace of God is always at work taking possession of our will and strengthening it and setting it free from illusions and natural restraints. Eventually, if we are true to our monastic vocation, we can grow in spiritual freedom and strength of soul until we are able to praise and glorify God in all things. We will become the “cheerful givers” whom God loves, men who can rejoice in sacrifice and who fear no hardship because they have learned to despise all difficulties as nothing in comparison with the love of Christ. They can say, with St. Paul: “Who shall separate us from the charity of Christ? Shall tribulation? . . . etc.” (Romans 8:35-39).

1. Merton includes a note number in his text, but there is no corresponding note in the typescript. The reference is to Johann Lindworsky, SJ, *The Training of the Will*, trans. A. Steiner and E. A. Fitzpatrick, 4th ed. (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1932) 60, and is actually a quotation from an article by P. B. Barth, OSB in *Benediktin. Monatschrift* (1925) 72; the full quotation, transcribed slightly inaccurately by Merton, reads: “These degrees of intensity of volition are not in the line of the energetic will, but consist in a plus or minus of what is seriously meant and of the exclusive nature of innermost turning toward, and devotion to values.”