

A Conference on Integration: Praying from the Heart

By Thomas Merton

Edited by David M. Odorisio

In this conference, recorded in late 1965,¹ Thomas Merton connects – in an integral, cohesive, and meaningful way – Celtic monastic lore, the spiritual anthropology of a twelfth-century Cistercian monk (Isaac of Stella), the insights of modern psychoanalysis (C. G. Jung), the mysticism of late-medieval Germany (Meister Eckhart and John Tauler), the hesychast tradition of prayer, yogic psychology, and St. Irenaeus. One of the series of Sunday-afternoon presentations, open to the entire community, that Merton regularly gave after his permanent move to the hermitage on August 20, 1965, this conference highlights his giftedness as a teacher of the world’s spiritual traditions. Not only is he able to make creative and inspired comparative connections among varying religious traditions, he is also able to do so in a way that brings these traditions to life with a stunningly contemporary relevance. This lightly edited, slightly abridged transcription of the conference retains the flavor of Merton’s oral delivery, as well as the use of non-inclusive language that was usual at the time of its presentation.²

* * * * *

Now let’s get down to the restoration of man in Christ. And this time I’m going to start on a new approach, with an Irish story, which has a great deal of wisdom. This is an ancient Irish monastic story going back to about the fourth century, I suppose, maybe earlier than that. And the story goes like this: what was the best and the worst nail in the ark? The best and the worst nail in the ark was this: when building the ark, Noah didn’t have any iron nails and he made holes and put pegs in them. So he made holes for every peg that he put in the ark and he made one hole and forgot to put a peg in it, right down in the bottom of the ark, where it was going to be under water.

And when all the animals and the people got into the ark, and everybody was in the ark, and the thing was closed up, the devil got in too, and the devil was in there with all these other animals in the ark. And at this point, Noah blessed the whole joint, so the devil wanted to get out, so he turned himself into a snake and he tried to crawl through this one hole that was left, but he got stuck in that hole, and therefore he plugged it up, and all the time the ark was floating the devil was plugging up that hole. So the devil was the best and the worst nail in the ark.

Now, that is a very wise story – there is a great deal to that. That’s an extremely important story for the monastic life – because the devil is the best and the worst nail in the ark of the monastic

David M. Odorisio earned an M.A. in the History of Christian Spirituality and Monastic Studies from Saint John’s University (Collegeville). A member of the International Thomas Merton Society since 2001, he has held numerous positions of service, including Young Adult Advisor to the Board of Directors. He has taught and worked as campus minister at both the high school and college levels. He is currently a resident volunteer at the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health, Stockbridge, Massachusetts.

life. And he's the best and the worst nail in our spiritual life in a sense. What is the wisdom of this story? That in us which is evil and we don't like is important; it has to be integrated in our whole being. This is an important fact. Why? because this is just [what] we don't want to have to look at. If there's something in our life that we don't like, something that seems to us to be evil and bad, well, we would like simply not to have anything to do with it – just to completely get rid of it and have none of it around and be through with it. We came to the monastery to be through with evil. Once we go through the door of the monastery there is no more evil – except the evil that's in the monastery! Which is the best and worst nail in the ark. [Laughter]

But this has to be taken into account. And I want to develop that a little bit in those same terms from Isaac of Stella.³ For example, Isaac of Stella talks about man, and he has very much the same idea that your best modern psychologists have, and it's also the idea you have in the Fathers. It's a completely realistic idea of man's life, of the dynamism of man's life. Because there is nothing in us that is evil in itself, but the evil in us comes from something good that is out of place. And the evil that we run into in our life does not consist of getting rid of [the particular evil], it is a question of re-adjusting the balance and *keeping* whatever it is that is out of order.

Now Isaac of Stella says this about man, and of course this is the old classical view of man – it's Plato and something you get in the Fathers. It's this three-fold structure of man, but he gives it in a graphic manner. And he says in this way: man himself is not just in paradise, but he *is* paradise. . . .⁴ Man is therefore, not just man in paradise, but man is Adam and Eve, *and* the serpent – and *all three* are man. And this is very important, because we tend to look at it as man is Adam and Eve, but for heaven's sake not the serpent! [Merton draws on the chalk board a diagram of this “three-fold structure.”] What he calls the serpent is the flesh, the body, whatever is immediately in contact with reality by the senses and is therefore vulnerable to sensible “stirrings” and that kind of thing. The *anima*, the woman [“Eve”], is the feminine soul, which Jung talks about. What's the *anima*? the emotional, the aesthetic, the affective. Man is [also] the *spiritus*, not just the intelligence, but the highest part of the soul, the *apex animae*, that which you surrender to God and by which you give yourself to God and which is directly under God. And when you have this setup then the flesh is not any longer “serpent”; it's perfectly OK. It is, simply, “the flesh” and so therefore we don't have to destroy the flesh, [or] be without the flesh. The flesh isn't bad; [it's] only bad when it's running everything. So that is the first setup that he's got.

But now, when man falls, the devil makes use of this “serpentine element” and puts the flesh [as in, disordered desire, or “passions”] on top, [so] if you've got the serpent in between you and Christ you're out of contact. So therefore, this blocks the whole thing off, and what happens then, is that the main part of man is divided off from himself, exiled from himself. And he is in a state of spiritual death and division because he is cut off from God, because you cannot be in contact with God merely with your senses. Your sense life enters into your contact with God, but it is not *through* your senses that you enter into contact with God; it is in this highest part of the soul.

So what is necessary, then, in order to restore this, is for Christ to come back into this position and draw the highest part of the soul up to himself so that everything is re-established in the order in which it is supposed to be.

Now this is the life of prayer. And this is what we're in the monastery doing, and if you want to know what your prayer is for, it's precisely that: getting into contact with Christ. The most

important thing in the life of prayer is learning how to experience the fact that you are in contact with Christ in the depths of your soul, which can be done. This is what you learn in the spiritual life after a certain amount of experience. You realize what it is like to be completely integrated in this particular sense. And when a person is “in order” he should be able to know it [and] there is such a thing as knowing – for keeps – this is correct, this is right. And it doesn’t change, and nothing can change it. And God gives us a few instances in our life in which we are aware of this.

Now in what part of yourself are you aware of this? You can’t say. But there are all these classical expressions: “the deepest part of the soul” or “the ground of one’s being.” The best people that talk about this – if you really want to understand this – you’ve got to read guys like Eckhart and Tauler. Eckhart’s got all kinds of phrases [such as] the “ground” and the “spark” – the metaphysical ground of our being.⁵ You’ve got this in modern Protestant theology. [Paul] Tillich is always talking about this – he talks about the ground of our being.⁶ When you say “ground” what do you mean? What does that convey to you? You can see it right away if you don’t try to figure it out. You see them fine if you don’t reason about them. You just grasp them or you don’t. What is the value of this image “the ground of our being”? What does that convey? You can’t go any further down [in a metaphysical sense]: the lowest part, the most basic.

Now there’s a very simple technique for this, a technique of prayer, which is the *hesychast* technique of prayer,⁷ which is, if you’re going to pray, you will not pray unless you find the ground of your being and get firmly established on that first. What is their way of finding the ground of your being in prayer? [There is] a very simple, physical, direct way of doing it.⁸ What is the hesychast approach to finding the ground of your being? [If] you’re going to find something in yourself you’ve got to find your heart. What is the purpose of finding your heart, and what is meant by finding your heart? What they start out with is the idea to be conscious of the heart as, so to speak, “the center” of their being. Now this is easy, because you’ve got a heart, you know where it is, and what you do is you breathe in and you think of your breath going down there, but then you tie it in [with prayer].

This is mostly an imaginative technique; this is not scientific or anything, but if you think a little bit you realize that when you really mean something, if you try to say something that you really mean, it seems to come from some place inside you and that’s why you say “it comes from the heart,” because, as a matter of fact, that is the way we experience it. When we really mean something, we are really saying it as though it were really coming right out of our heart; we just do.

The yogis – I didn’t mean to talk about this – but they operate on these centers – and they have about eight of them that they work on [called] *chakras*.⁹ And that is the purpose of all these yoga exercises is to loosen up all these *chakras*. And it usually loosens up a few other things, too! [Laughter] So you have to be a little bit careful. You’re liable to come [out of it] missing two or three vertebrae or something like that. But the purpose is to be aware of these centers and to be able to turn them on if you want to. The supreme thing about yoga is supposed to be that you learn how to let loose a kind of a current that starts from down at the bottom of this line of *chakras* and zips right up to the top in one leap.¹⁰ And this is supposed to be *the* thing in yoga. I don’t know how to do this. I haven’t done this, so I can’t give any kind of reports as to whether it’s good or bad. [Laughter]

But the fact remains that if you use this [hesychast] kind of prayer where you experience the center of your being in your heart, and you “enthroned” in your heart not just the thought of Our Lord, or just the name of Our Lord, but the Lord himself, so that your whole being is centered on

him, which they do by means of the name of Jesus, by repeating his name. What is the prayer that they say? What is the Jesus Prayer? They keep repeating this in their heart: “have mercy on me, a sinner.” It’s the prayer of the publican.¹¹ [So] the idea of this hesychast prayer is that with your heart, with all the sincerity [and] meaning you can muster, you keep repeating, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” It’s real easy. And there isn’t an easier and a simpler form of prayer. And when you get distracted you just start saying it over again. You just keep on saying it. And if you’re Russian you can say it about ten million times a day. But if you’re just like us you say it a few times and then you go onto something else.

And if you mean everything that’s contained in [the Jesus Prayer] you find this prayer saying everything. What more do you need to say? The whole story is there. You’ve got your relationship to God in Christ; you’ve got the reality of our position, which is that we’re sinners; you’ve got the reality of our need, which is the need for mercy.

So this is an imaginative technique but it’s based on theological reality. The ground of our being is not just something in our nature. The ground of our being is really Christ. The true ground of our being, which we can’t reach just by imagination, we can reach by faith. So the purpose of this is to stir up the faith by which we do reach to Christ as the ground and the root of our whole being. And what this does is it “hooks us in” to the Holy Spirit. And this creates a situation where we’re fully alive. And this is what gives glory to God.

You’ve got this phrase of St. Irenaeus, which sums up his whole theology and it should sum up our whole theology [Merton writes on the black board in Latin and jokes, “This might be the last time Latin is ever written on this board!”]: “The glory of God is living man,” and living in this particular sense: fully alive.¹² And that is the purpose of prayer. You give glory to God when in your prayer you come fully alive. And you come fully alive when you are “lined up” the way you are [in Isaac of Stella’s anthropology] and that is the way you are lined when you are saying the prayer of Jesus, when you are completely “hooked up” with him as the ground of your being and your whole being is directed to him, and everything is oriented to him and you seek nothing but him and you desire nothing but him. This is it! This is what we’re here for. And this is what we have to learn how to do in such a way that it’s practical and you can keep on doing it. It goes fine the first week and it goes great the second week, and then after that you forget about it and then all of a sudden it’s Christmas! You find that something else is coming into the picture.

But you keep going back to it, and it works. And your whole life is just simply a matter of returning to this fundamental basic thing. This way of orienting ourselves totally to Christ in prayer, in such a way that it doesn’t get more complicated and it doesn’t get harder, but it gets easier and gets simpler and gets more real. It’s something that you have to start over again and again and again all your life. Something that you re-discover all the time in all kinds of different ways, and it doesn’t necessarily have anything whatever to do with the kind of thing I was talking about. You don’t have to be a hesychast. You don’t have to think in terms of the “prayer of the heart.” You don’t have to even find your heart for two seconds as far as I’m concerned, so long as you do what this implies – this total orientation of yourself, consciously, to God as present in you and present in the ground of your being as He by whom you live, and He for whom you live.

Now Irenaeus ties this up [with] what he calls the *opus Dei*, the work of God. [It] isn’t just a question of singing psalms in a particular place, getting together, lining up in a particular way

and singing psalms. That's *opus Dei*, too, but this is *the opus Dei*. The work of God is this work of praise in ourselves where we are getting ourselves "lined up" so that we are "hooked into" Him, so to speak.

Now Irenaeus says that what this involves is a spirit of poverty, a poverty in activity [as opposed to a material poverty], in which we do not add anything to what is required by this love. And if you live in such a way in which you are totally centered on this kind of prayer, this orientation to God, well then your work and everything else gets hooked into it and it comes fine. You don't get distracted by working and it isn't a question of "when the end of work comes I will begin to pray again." The thing to do is to "hook" this in so you are able to pray in one way or another and work in a very simple way. So you don't have to stop and think, "I am now praying"; you just pray. And it doesn't have to be something explicit, it doesn't have to be something you formally drag up, an image of Our Lord and construct a picture of him, or that sort of thing. It's a movement of your being. It's like breathing. So the idea of prayer is to get so that prayer is simple enough – so simple that it is as easy as breathing – and you're not aware of yourself praying. If you're going to be standing back and saying, "here I go praying again," well that's no good; that doesn't count; that's cheating! – because that spoils it.

What it amounts to rather is a sense of constant need, a sense that one is nothing without Christ. And this, I would say, is something that if you know yourself at all you find that this comes back almost all the time because what else is there to know? We are nothing without him. And so what [Irenaeus] means by this poverty idea is if we build up for ourselves another life in which we seem to be something then we're missing the boat. [Bell rings to end conference.]

1. Thomas Merton, Tape #156-2 [recorded 11/17/65], archives of the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY; published as *Prayer: Response of the Creature* by Credence Cassettes [2261:2].

2. I am deeply grateful to the International Thomas Merton Society for the award of a Shannon Fellowship which made possible research on Merton's taped conferences, to Merton Center Director and Archivist Paul Pearson and Assistant Archivist Mark Meade for their gracious assistance, and to the Merton Legacy Trust for permission to publish this transcription.

3. For a brief yet thorough study of Isaac of Stella, specifically his anthropology, see Bernard McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism: Gregory the Great through the Twelfth Century* (New York: Crossroad, 1999) 284-96; see also Bernard McGinn, *The Golden Chain: A Study in the Theological Anthropology of Isaac of Stella* (Washington, DC: Cistercian Publications, 1972).

4. Here Merton briefly traces this concept to Augustine, Ambrose and Gregory of Nyssa, referring to their commentaries on Genesis.

5. For a thorough introduction to both Meister Eckhart and John Tauler, as well as Eckhart's mysticism of the "ground" and the "spark," see Bernard McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany* (New York: Crossroad, 2005): 83-93 (mysticism of the "ground" [German: "grunt"]); 94-194 (Eckhart); 240-96 (Tauler).

6. See, for example, Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951).

7. For an extensive collection of writings by and about Merton on hesychasm and Eastern Christian spirituality, see Bernadette Dieker and Jonathan Montaldo, eds., *Merton and Hesychasm: The Prayer of the Heart* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2003).

8. A monk answers, "sit down," and Merton jokes here that you simply sit down on the ground of your being.

9. Chakra is from the Sanskrit, meaning "wheel" or "circle." The number of *chakras* listed varies among traditions: most contemporary books on yogic psychology list seven; B. K. S. Iyengar lists ten (see B. K. S. Iyengar, *Light on Yoga* [New York: Schocken, 1966] 517).

10. Merton is referring to the *kundalini shakti*, which literally translates as "coiled female serpent energy." Iyengar describes this force as "divine cosmic energy," which, when aroused, places the yogi "in union with the Supreme Universal

Soul” (*Light on Yoga* 523). For an excellent psychological and anthropological commentary on this process, see C. G. Jung, *The Psychology of Kundalini Yoga* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

11. See Luke 18:9-14 for the parable of the Pharisee and the publican (tax collector).

12. *Adversus Haereses* IV.20.7.