

Spirituality, Scholarship and Biography: An Interview with Anthony T. Padovano

Introduced, Conducted, and Edited by Jonathan Montaldo

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This interview of June 14, 1996, records a scholar/theologian/dramatist's reflections on one subject of his dedicated study: the life and work of Thomas Merton and Merton's influence on contemporary culture and the spiritual life. Since Thomas Merton's death in 1968, a diversity of professionals has produced a significant body of scholarship on Merton. While dedicated scholars are aware of the secondary literature directed toward Thomas Merton's legacy, the general Merton reader is understandably unaware that a wealth of reflection exists which helpfully deciphers Merton's message and its meaning. This interview with Anthony T. Padovano inaugurates plans for a series of interviews with scholars whose research about Merton holds

continuing significance as Thomas Merton's appeal to both scholarship and general readership shifts toward the twenty-first century.

Montaldo: When did you first read Thomas Merton?

Padovano: *The Seven Storey Mountain* came out in 1948. I was a sophomore in high school in 1949 when I read it, and the book made a profound impression on me. So profound an impression, in fact, that the next year I took a bus trip to Gethsemani. It was an enormously moving experience. It turned out to be archetypical for a lot of what would later follow in my life and studies.

Montaldo: Did you realize that at fifteen years of age in 1950 you could have entered Gethsemani? There were actually Trappists postulants that young in those days!

Padovano: I was not aware of that, but I was thinking seriously of becoming a Trappist. I was inspired by Merton's autobiography, by the Gethsemani community and what it stood for, and by the contemplative way of life. Looking back on it now, I'm not quite sure that was the right place for me. I think the arrangement we had for seminary in the Archdiocese of Newark was effective. We were not taken out of the normal events of growing. I was able to start preparing for seminary studies as a high school freshman at a regular, private prep school, Seton Hall, in Northern New Jersey. The only difference between my course of studies and that of the regular students was that I took more Latin and Greek and I was formally registered as a divinity student. But other than that, from athletic teams to dances to the yearbook to the school paper and clubs, as a theological student you were not treated exceptionally. I think that was a good system.

Montaldo: Give me an overview of your seminary studies.

Padovano: I started seminary in 1948, when I entered high school, but for those four years, and for the first two years of college the system I have already described prevailed. In my first two years of college at Seton Hall University, I was formally registered as a seminary student but existentially I was in a position not much different from that of any other college student. In 1954, as a college junior, I formally entered Darlington Seminary for the Archdiocese of Newark. Darlington was academically affiliated with Seton Hall University from which I received my B.A. in 1956. I actually had three majors: classical languages, philosophy, and literature. In the normal course of events, I would have remained at Darlington for four more years to do theology, but I received an assignment to the North American College

in Rome to study at the Gregorian University from which in 1960 I received a Licentiate in Sacred Theology (STL), which is equivalent to a master's degree. My archbishop then requested I stay another two years to finish a doctorate in theology and appointed me to the seminary faculty at Darlington. In 1962 I came back to New Jersey and started teaching at Darlington as a professor of systematic theology. I stayed with that until 1974 when I resigned and married.

Montaldo: Your wife Theresa and you have raised a family?

Padovano: We have four children. Our eldest, Mark, is twenty-one. He's in aeronautical school. Andrew is twenty and studies in the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University. Paul is sixteen and Rosemarie is fifteen, both in high school.

Montaldo: There is a gap in your life between your personal interest in Thomas Merton, which you date from 1949, when you were fifteen years old, and the beginning of your scholarly interest in Merton. When and how did you turn your critical attention to Thomas Merton's life and work?

Padovano: My scholarly interest in Merton, as I recall, began with an essay I wrote at the request of Canadian theologian Gregory Baum for a book he was editing entitled *Journeys*. Baum had asked a dozen Canadian and American theologians to write about people who had most shaped their theological thinking and to reflect on the ways these personalities had influenced their own theological system. I chose John Henry Newman, who had been the topic of my doctoral dissertation in theology at the Gregorian, John XXIII and Merton. I knew a great deal about Newman and John XXIII, but I realized then how relatively little I knew about Merton in terms of cognitive and scholarly content. So that essay for *Journeys* led to more systematic studies of Thomas Merton.

Montaldo: Newman, John XXIII and Merton. Why these three?

Padovano: I believe strongly, and this may be a Merton influence on me from the beginning, in the fusion of biography and scholarship. I have always been less moved by Thomas Aquinas, for example, whose work is fully accessible without any reference to his biography. I am more moved by Augustine, although I disagree with him on many things. It's hard to read Augustine without knowing the life. So this reflection on how trying to figure out how your life impacts your theology, I think, was a creative idea on Baum's part. Newman, John XXIII, and Merton, I concluded, were major influences on my own theological thinking and personal-spiritual development.

Montaldo: Why Cardinal Newman?

Padovano: John Henry Newman had a great influence on me for many reasons: the drama in his own life, the eloquence with which he writes—he's a marvelous stylist—the soaring creativity of his thought. Newman was a considerable influence on Vatican II. He reached out from one century to another to shape it. Newman's themes in *The Grammar of Assent*, for example, the idea that we reach certitude by a convergence of probabilities rather than by moving from certitude to certitude, is an impressive insight. His whole idea that a thousand difficulties do not make a doubt, that to be perfect is to change often.

Montaldo: "To be perfect is to change often." That's an important insight with references to both your own life and to Thomas Merton's, isn't it?

Padovano: Ralph Waldo Emerson thought consistency the hobgoblin of little minds. This penchant that we have to be absolutely consistent all the time is a terrible problem for our lives and in our thinking, this assumption that consistency is somehow or other a mark of intellectual maturity. Obviously people can't be so capricious, so random, so idiosyncratic that one hardly knows where one is going to be from one moment to the next. But one would think that if one's mind is creative, one does move in different directions and one has to recast one's thought.

Montaldo: Returning to Newman's influence, in your series of taped lectures, *Thomas Merton: A Life for Our Times*, you speak approvingly of Newman's proposing a toast, after the ending of the First Vatican Council, in which he first lifted his glass to "Conscience" and then offered a second toast to the Pope. I imagine Newman's toast still resonates with your approval?

Padovano: Very much so. The deepest levels of Catholic theology always say that you are obliged to follow your conscience, even if your conscience is wrong. This is the supreme norm by which our integrity and authenticity is judged. By conscience—Newman himself was clear on this—I don't mean whatever we self-indulgently choose to call conscience and I certainly do not mean by conscience that you are not subjecting your conscience to the possibility of growing, of being enriched, of being enlightened and of being in dialogue with alternative viewpoints. But as one goes through the process of forming one's conscience, one has to do, after all, what one thinks is right.

If you do what is objectively the right thing—Thomas Aquinas was clear on this—but your conscience informs you it's the wrong

thing, that is a sinful act in Aquinas' system. Protestantism has a tendency toward anarchy while Catholicism tends toward fascism and tyranny. If we push the Catholic principle too hard in an extreme direction, then you have no conscience: you have tyrannical control. On the other hand, if you push the Protestant principle of conscience too far, without a counterbalancing and countervailing influence of institution and community, then you have anarchy. But, in any case, I think the papacy and the Church have always to be second to the conscience of the individual. If one, after all, left the Church in good conscience, one is saved. If one stays in the Church with a bad conscience, one is lost. So I think Newman was quite correct. The problem is, as I said, that at times the category of conscience can in our own day be trivialized and identified with whatever happens to be convenient. Conscience is something far more profound than that.

Montaldo: John XXIII was a second influence.

Padovano: Emotionally I felt very connected to John XXIII because I was in the square of St. Peter's on the night he was elected to the papacy and I remember receiving word, within ninety days of his election, of his call for the Second Vatican Council which has been a major shaping influence not only on my life but on an entire era of Catholic thinkers. John XXIII represented for me, as did Newman and Merton, a movement to reach out and bring into the Church the entire world, this desire to exclude no one, yet not being, in the process of inclusion, merely arbitrary. One knew exactly where those three leaders stood even though one felt included in their life and thought. I was in Rome for all the preparations for the Council but I was due back to begin teaching at Darlington in September. The Second Vatican Council opened on October 11, 1962. I unfortunately experienced it only from a distance.

Montaldo: You were teaching systematic theology at Darlington Seminary from 1962, but your scholarly interest in Thomas Merton only began in earnest in 1974.

Padovano: Yes, it began at New York University after I had completed a master's in American literature and had started a doctoral program. I had made up my mind that I wanted to do a dissertation on Merton in both literature and theology, but I could not find any professor at NYU, this was in 1973, who was willing to direct an interdisciplinary dissertation in the fields of literature and theology especially focused on Thomas Merton. I decided I did not want to spend a few years of my life researching a dissertation in something that did not

have great meaning for me, so I moved to Fordham in 1974. It happened that I also resigned from the Archdiocese of Newark in 1974 and married, but, as I recall, there was no causal connection between that decision and the decision to go in the direction of Merton.

Montaldo: You first visited Gethsemani in 1949. You revisited the abbey in 1975. Did you return to research your dissertation on Merton?

Padovano: My visit to Gethsemani in 1975 was both a scholarly and personal pilgrimage. Certainly the idea of returning to Merton and Gethsemani was spiritually and emotionally rewarding. And, of course, there was no way I could do a doctoral dissertation without first reading absolutely everything Merton had published. Secondly, I was trying to read all the available unpublished material at the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine College. The access to unpublished material was more limited in 1975 than it is now. Thirdly, it was important to visit the monastery, the hermitage, Louisville itself. I had the opportunity to interview the people who were key to Merton's life both at Gethsemani and in the Louisville area. I can't quite recall whether I made two or three trips while I was working on *The Human Journey*, which was the title of my published dissertation at Fordham.

Montaldo: Was your interview with Dom James Fox, Merton's abbot at Gethsemani, extensive? Did you audiotape the interview? Did you save your notes?

Padovano: Yes, I have my notes. I saved the notes on every interview. But I did not audiotape. It could have been interesting, but it might have inhibited some people. But no, I have my personal notes on all those interviews [archived in The Padovano Collection at the University of Notre Dame].

Montaldo: I want to preface my questions on *The Human Journey* by remarking that, as time passes and when all of Thomas Merton's primary material is published or accessible, it's my assessment that *The Human Journey* will remain an important and decisively perceptive study on Merton's life and influence. Your prose and your analysis resonate deeply with symbols and metaphors embedded in Merton's writing. Were Merton alive to read the secondary literature published since his death, I think he would without doubt enjoy and learn from *The Human Journey*. Rehearse for me—it has to be understandably brief—the reasons for your calling Thomas Merton “symbol for a century.”

Padovano: My concern was to figure out why this man has the appeal that he does. What is there in this man that is so attractive?

Merton's appeal did not originate with any one element in his writing that in itself was so extraordinary that it merited world-class attention. For example, I did not find that his theology was first-rate or that his spiritual writing was anything like Teresa of Avila's or John of the Cross'. He was not a major poet. So as I went through the elements I kept saying “well, where's the appeal?” And the appeal seemed to be in two things: first, in the fusion of biography and theology. Secondly, and perhaps more important, Merton resonates in a subliminal way for people when they read him; he captures the dynamics of the age in which they are living. He is dealing with the same tensions, the same problems, the same prospects that his readers are, but he is solving his difficulties by holding in tension what seem to be polarities. He deals with polarities such as the sacred and the secular, east and west, male and female, conscience and authority, polarities that fuse brilliantly in his writing. And then I began to think that the tensions in these particular polarities were the issues that the twentieth century was and is dealing with more energetically and creatively than any previous century did.

In the nineteenth century, for example, the either/or mentality prevailed. One was either this or that. In the twentieth century we are trying to say that, “No, maybe we are both/and. We are both Catholic and Protestant, both male and female, both east and west.” In the twentieth century the preference is toward balance. What would have been seen in the nineteenth century as a betrayal of principle—one had to be totally one thing to the exclusion of anything else—one true Church and all the others were false—in the twentieth century is seen as intellectually myopic and emotionally arrogant.

Montaldo: You said that Merton seemed to solve the problem of “dialectics,” which is your own technical word for the tensions inherent between two apparently irreconcilable experiences or ideas in *The Human Journey*.

[*Padovano:* Yes.] But I would not say Merton “solved” because, to my reading, Merton's biographical tensions were solutionless. You yourself have said elsewhere that tensions exist in every aspect of our lives and that we not only cannot escape these tensions but we do not even have a right to escape them. Does Merton's writing really represent a solution to the “dialectics” of the twentieth century?

Padovano: In Merton there is what I might call an existential solution: his willingness to live with the tensions and to realize they can never be solved. What attracted Merton to Buddhism was his reaction

to his and our western tendency to think we can resolve problems once and for all and get on to something else, our western penchant for problem-solving. Buddhism says that you live with the insoluble problem and that this is the solution. Merton lived fully with the tensions inherent in ideas like conscience and authority, being unable and unwilling, I think, on the deepest levels, to compromise an understanding of either conscience or authority in ways which would remove the inherent tension between them. The non-resolution—if this is not playing with words too much—the non-resolution *is* a resolution in the sense that you realize this is the creative, healthy tension that you must live with for your whole life. So, I would say that Merton “solved” the tension by saying that the ambiguity is inescapable.

Montaldo: You are a theologian by extensive training and profession. You have written that Thomas Merton is much more profound in living his theology than he is in articulating his theology.

Padovano: Karl Rahner once said that all good theology is a step or two after life, that the life happens first and then the theology later codifies it. Theology doesn't create the life, but follows the life. I think that Merton intuitively knew where to go even before he had theologically worked it out. And where he was going, I think, was theologically coherent even if he was not able to explain where he was moving with theological coherence. For example, something in Merton made him know that the secular world was good even though at times he wrote about it savagely. But he couldn't let the secular world go; he could not cut ties to the world at large. All the letters, all the articles, all the correspondence he received, had a lot to do with the need to stay in contact with the world. Merton could not let the monastery become the world or the world become a monastery, even though at times, in his autobiography at least, he wrote as if he wanted the world to be a monastery and every Catholic a monk. In his early writing he gave the impression he hated the world, but he intuitively understood that the secular world was terribly important for his own calling and his own religious life.

I think the same thing happened with his problems with conscience and authority. He wanted to be an obedient monk. He also wanted to be—and was right from the beginning, I think—a monk aware of having to follow his own path. Later, when he entered and thought through the tensions between Eastern and Western spirituality, he didn't first work everything out before he moved into experiencing and studying these tensions. He moved into the tension and

then later realized how it was proper he should have explored this direction in his experience. So for these reasons, I think Merton's life was ahead of his theological synthesis. Only decades after Merton experienced these things can we begin to give them the kind of formal theological explanation for which he appears to have been either unwilling or incapable.

Montaldo: Could you share any critical reaction from your colleagues, professional theologians, to your research interests in Thomas Merton?

Padovano: I cannot recall any direct criticism. A great deal depends on how one views theology. If one is a theologian who deals with major theological thinkers only, like Edward Schillebeeckx or Karl Rahner, then you would not be impressed by Merton. I do think the more creative theologians see Merton's value. Theology, as it has been formulated for most of this century, has put theology and spirituality in different camps but I believe they are fused. Good theology is always spiritual. I can be a good literature professor or a good philosopher without necessarily moving toward spiritual dimensions in my field of study, dimensions that might change my life. But theology is a different discipline: good theology passes over into life and prayer. Good theology is profoundly meditative. A profound Christian theology should lead you to a spiritual encounter with Christ.

Montaldo: A distinctive mark of your Merton scholarship, although you are not alone, is your having taken Merton's poetry seriously. You have had an especially analytical interest in the later poetry, in *Cables to the Ace* and in Merton's “epic,” *The Geography of Lograire*. Yet Merton's poetics is another element which does not, in your opinion, account for his first-class cultural influence.

Padovano: Some have described Merton's poetry as being first-rate minor poetry. I think in his own mind he wanted to be a greater poet than I, at least, see him as having been. But the deepest cast of Merton's mind is poetic. Merton is like the writer Albert Camus in this way. Camus doesn't write any poetry to speak of but the whole tone of his prose is poetic. Strange to say, Merton's poetry shows itself best in his prose. And yet, paradoxically, I believe what was most true about Merton's soul, if we want to talk this way for a moment, got through more easily in the poetry. Merton is a poetically powerful writer. When you consider solely the form of his prose, the poetry helped the prose a great deal. But in terms of Merton's actual revelation of himself, I think the poetry allows things to get through that are more guarded in

the prose. Let me be concrete: in the scene in *The Seven Storey Mountain* when the young Merton in Rome has a mystical experience of his dead father's presence in his bedroom, an experience which significantly turns his life around, had Merton cast the experience into a poem there would have been little hesitation about the rightness of everything that he was experiencing. In the prose he was more conditional, not quite willing to claim that the experience in Rome was essentially mystical.

In *The Geography of Lograire*, for example, Merton makes references to his love for a "vanished nurse," to early loves and to his "wailing for a mate." He tries to reach his lost mother, now suffused into Church imagery, with his "Sing A Song to Mama."

In an earlier and more simple poem, "Grace's House," Merton encounters the charm of children in a way not revealed in his prose. And in *Cables to the Ace* Merton does not hesitate to identify the world's need for God as Father with his personal need for an abiding father figure he cannot find.

Montaldo: You raise the question of mysticism. In your analysis Merton's prose describes and reveals four significant experiences which you have characterized both as mystical and as marking turning points in Merton's life. Merton describes two of these in his autobiography: his sensing the strong presence of his father, Owen, in Rome and then the powerful experience ignited when he hears children crying "*Creo en Diós*" as he attends Mass in Cuba. The third experience, described in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, is at Fourth and Walnut Streets in Louisville. He describes the final experience in *The Asian Journal*: "Merton approaches the Buddhist monuments at Polonnaruwa in Ceylon and feels he has finally gone "beyond the shadow and the disguise." I am frankly skeptical about claims that Merton was a mystic and that these experiences are important, life turning points. These four experiences are narrated, remembered events. Perhaps "moments of clarity" for Merton, none of these recounted experiences definitively alleviates the abiding insecurities and uncertainties of his being a human being and alive. I think commentators, and we readers following their lead, have exaggerated these events as both "mystical" and "definitive turning points" in Merton's biography.

Padovano: I guess I define mystical by saying that it is that which helps us see everything as harmonious. I think the mystical experience is one in which all the contradictions and the negativities, the liabilities and the assets, fuse together: in some way one sees continuities where

before there were only interruptions. So the mystical experience is holistic with a wholeness that is absolutely riveting because it is a wholeness that incorporates elements that one would have thought were excluded. The second element of mysticism, which is really a sub-set of wholeness, is the idea that one becomes aware of the deepest depths of one's own authenticity, one's own calling, one's own identity. These two things go together. Now to address what you have said was what we now call a mystical experience little other than Merton's having worked out very painfully a conclusion which could have been worked out on the level of the cognitive, of the logical, without introducing this other element of the mystical?

First of all I guess I'm willing to take the testimony the way the author presents it. I think Merton, as few people, tried to be scrupulously honest with his own life and I do think that the mystical in his life was something that embarrassed him. I mean he did not readily admit any of his experience was mystical. You get his guardedness certainly with his description of his father appearing to him in Rome. There's a tension in the way Merton describes it. The prose clearly carries Merton's emotional realization that something terribly important happened. His writing is vivid and electric in the narrating. But then he imposes a cognitive overlay, in which he questions if he's being foolish, that it really wasn't a mystical experience and maybe it was indigestion and maybe it was only a psychologically distraught situation. I believe he inserts this cognitive overlay either because the Trappist censors wanted it or he thought they might have wanted it. His own superego as a Trappist might have imposed on that experience the need to dismiss it as mystical. A reader can usually sense where a writer is emotionally very much involved. I think the appearance of his father in Rome was a deeply mysterious experience and it shattered his previous categories. It introduced him to levels of authenticity with himself that he had never before experienced. It came in a flash, a *eureka* moment. And it gave him a sense of wholeness. I think I can replicate that through the other three experiences as well. However, your point is well taken: the fact that these narrated events are put to paper at the same time that he is trying to make a painful decision about his own life probably means that the narrated event was preceded by a lot of agitated thinking. My guess, however, is that, without that kind of transcendent experience, the agitated thinking would not have led him forward. The transcendent experience convinces him of the rightness of what he is to do although the certifica-

tion and validation of that rightness is coming from outside all the resources that he is able to attract to himself.

Montaldo: I sense a current exploding of texts focused on the private spiritual journey, especially among women writers. Annie Dillard was seminal in *A Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974). Patricia Hampl's *Virgin Time* (1992) is another important example. Kathleen Norris' second effort in this genre, *Cloister Walk*, has just hit bookstores (1996). To what do you attribute this popular emergence of spiritual writers as journalists of their own souls?

Padovano: Some of it is deeply ingrained in the American psyche. America, although a more superficial reading would think otherwise, is not an essentially materialistic country. America from the beginning has been on a spiritual journey. That's certainly how the Puritans got here. That is even to a large extent, although we do not have time to explore all of this, how the Revolutionary War was fought, with a Declaration of Independence, a Constitution and a Bill of Rights: there was something profoundly spiritual in those documents. They were not just political documents; they were documents searching for something perfect, a utopian place for power, authority and a government to be. If one traces American literature through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, if one really reads Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Faulkner, and certainly if one reads Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, and Melville, there is a profound spiritual yearning and hunger that has never been absent from the American soul. Alexis de Tocqueville, the French visitor to our country in the 1830s, said in his classic work *Democracy in America*, that if there is a materialism that will come about in the new country, it will be something the world has never seen before: it will be a "virtuous materialism." Nonetheless, I don't want to go too far down that road at the moment, but merely point out that Dillard, Hampl, and Norris are probably being more quintessentially American than would appear at first sight. I also think that the idea of the explicitly spiritual journey, certainly with people like Emerson and Thoreau, and even to some extent with people like Martin Luther King and Dorothy Day, and clearly with Thomas Merton, you get people very much interested in cataloging the explicit spiritual journey itself. So those two things are more traditional than one might expect. I think the third element that explains it is more contemporary and the reading on it is less benign, that is, the failure of the institutional churches to address the spiritual hungers of the age has led people to catalog and to retreat into their own spiritual journeys.

People are tending to examine their private experiences as a way of addressing their spiritual needs in ways more adequate than are being offered in traditional church structures. This is true for both Protestant and Catholic church structures although my interest is more in the Catholic, of course. I think Merton experienced the inadequacies of the religious institution.

Now, Merton's commitment to Catholicism, even on its institutional levels, was whole-hearted. But nonetheless, when one reads *The Seven Storey Mountain*, one is already beyond the boundaries a monk, and a Trappist monk especially, should have observed. In some ways I think Merton subconsciously understood that the institution would never be able to give him all the spiritual nourishment that he needed. So the journals and his own experience became a terribly important way of dealing with that. And later the inadequacy of the institution becomes more explicit as he takes stands against the institutional structures and as he moves toward the East and so on, never losing his Catholicism. Now this is always the tricky thing: people think Merton's move to the East was somehow or other a diminution of his Catholicism. I find him more Catholic at the end than he was in the beginning because he's gotten to the core of Catholicism. Paradoxically he becomes more committed now that he sees viable alternatives to Catholicism. He wants to be Catholic, but not in ways the institutional Church can easily accept.

Montaldo: One of the features which I find ties Merton to writers like Dillard, Hampl, and Norris is the turn toward nature. I don't know whether to capitalize Nature or not. Merton and these writers seem to find reflected in the rhythms and patterns of nature the rhythms of an earlier pattern for interior life which they sense as more congenial to their spiritual development than the more artificial patterns experienced in contemporary society. This turn toward nature is typically American.

Padovano: Yes, I think it's more traditional than we realize. The American Puritans were convinced that God revealed who God was both in scripture and in nature. Emerson puts the whole of his spiritual journey into nature. Certainly Thoreau does that on the shores of Walden Pond. Huckleberry Finn does that. It's out on the Mississippi River that Finn really finds God, not on the shore, not in civilization nor in institutional structures, but actually in some kind of flight from them. I think it is also quintessentially Merton who is very much attuned to nature and the soil and the natural. Merton's father, Owen,

was influential here. Merton's experience of the spiritual in the patterns of nature connects him with eastern spirituality and native American spirituality as well.

Montaldo: The profusion of spiritualities and the literature expressing them disorients: Jewish spirituality, Buddhist spirituality, Womanist spirituality, St. Bernard's spirituality, Annie Dillard's and Merton's! What is spirituality and what do we mean when we attach a qualifier, like "lay" or "clerical," to spirituality?

Padovano: I think there is only one spirituality and I think both clerical spirituality and lay spirituality are misnomers. The essence of the spiritual is to encounter God on whatever transcendent reality one is seeking. Certainly if one stays within the intellectually defined resources of the human, one is not spiritual. The spiritual always transcends what seems to be only human and encounters a cosmic presence or God, as we would say. The transcendence of the familiar human categories as a definition of spirituality makes the essence of the spiritual true for both a Buddhist and a Christian. Merton's distinction between the empirical self and the real self can help us understand that. When you reach the real, you are always connected to everyone else. The empirical is divisive: it's the surface of reality. So one might say there is a clerical and a lay spirituality as long as one stays on this empirical level. But when one journeys to the inner heart of things, it doesn't matter whether John of the Cross was a priest or Teresa of Avila was a woman religious or Dorothy Day was a lay woman or John XXIII was a pope. These things which connote difference and distinction fade into insignificance in terms of their ability to witness for others what it means to move in a spiritual direction. Jesus, after all, is technically a lay person. He is not a Jewish priest. The spirituality represented by Jesus has nothing to do with whether he is lay, priest, Jewish or even first-century. There's something timeless and boundaryless when you encounter that level of spirituality. So I don't think there is a lay spirituality as such.

Montaldo: Does a person need a spiritual guide? Where can you find a spiritual guide today?

Padovano: I have ambivalent feelings about spiritual guides. One of the great problems with spiritual directors—Merton notes this himself in his book on spiritual direction—is that they can lead you to become something other than you are. What is it that Chinese Taoism says so incisively: "The leader, when he has done his job well, leads those he has led to feel that they never needed him." The best spiritual

guide is the one who sets you free and doesn't try to keep you in bondage. Parents and professors, for example, may do the same thing, i.e., keep people from being free. That's the great danger, so I'm very wary of spiritual directors on that level. On the other hand, the spiritual guide who is a partner with us in dialogue and allows us to be different, but at the same time acts as a catalyst for our growth, is the healthiest guide of all. Those kinds of guides we always need, whether they are the contemporary spiritual writers you were citing before or the more traditional ones. Certainly reading the *Confessions* of Augustine or the autobiography of Newman or of Gandhi can be a tremendous help to us.

Montaldo: You have written that "spirituality is autobiography." Unpack that.

Padovano: Spirituality is autobiographical in the sense that spirituality only makes sense to us within the context of our own lives. You can't approach the spiritual without taking into account all the conditions of your own life. The spiritual journey must first be a personal journey. A spiritual guide should not impose on another a Benedictine, Franciscan, Ignatian, or Salesian kind of spirituality unless the person's own journey calls for that. Our spiritual journey is tied up with the sacred moments in our own lives. Each of us lives a sacred history. God is constantly revealing us to ourselves through the events and experiences of our own lives. Merton found God by reflecting on the sacred moments in his own life. If, on the other hand, we try to use Francis of Assisi or Teresa of Avila or Thomas Merton as concrete models, then we do not become who we have to be.

Allow me to reflect on the three people who influenced me. No one can doubt that Newman was a very unique individual. John XXIII was not trying to be Pius XII, his brilliant predecessor, next to whom he may have felt insignificant in some ways. But John XXIII was enough in touch with himself to say "This is who I am and I will follow this path." Newman did that. Newman doesn't come across as a Franciscan or a Benedictine but as Newman. In some ways Merton doesn't come across as a Trappist, although that obviously was what he was and it influenced what he became.

I get very concerned when spiritual writers, and sometimes even the institutional Church, give the impression that your personal experience must not be validated, that it is better to follow someone else's path. Merton once warned us to be wary of people who know what is best for us.

Montaldo: But is spirituality possible without its being grounded in a disciplined practice?

Padovano: Life itself has to be disciplined. Life can't work, much less be spiritual, without discipline. Love needs discipline: you can't be undisciplined and be in love. Without a structure, life, spirituality and love become random and spontaneous without any sense of substance and continuity. In the spiritual life, yes, there has to be the discipline of prayer and the discipline of *accepting the consequences* that results from one's praying. Approaching life by making definite choices from one's prayer is part of spiritual discipline. But if the structure gets too rigid you have got a problem. In *The Way of Chuang Tzu* Merton quoted with approbation Chuang Tzu's statement that "when the shoe fits, the foot is forgotten." Merton talks explicitly about the danger of over-organizing your life, of crushing your spirit. The ambiguities we were talking about earlier, Jonathan, are very much in play here. One has to have a discipline, but it must be a discipline that allows a fair amount of spontaneity and freedom. Even when Kathleen Norris goes to that Benedictine monastery in Dakota she doesn't pretend she is a Catholic and she certainly doesn't want to join the monastery, but yet she is able to gain from that exposure to Benedictine discipline enormous amounts of potentiality for development, but without losing her self. This is the great fear I have: if the self is lost, one has lost everything.

Everything we do can be done better by someone else *except* to be the person we are. That is the only thing we do better than everyone else. Someone else can be a better father, a better professor, a better physician, a better writer, a better poet, there is not a talent that you or I have that cannot be exceeded by someone else's talent. But to be Anthony and Jonathan, only we can do that. The self is terribly important for the spiritual life.

Montaldo: Merton, like Paul of Tarsus, hoped he could be "all things to all people." Especially in the last decade of his life Merton spoke of seeking to bridge gaps between the west and the east, between the latin and orthodox churches, between north and south American cultures. But can any of us really become "transcultural persons"? Doesn't an attempt to transcend cultures belie the principle of the Incarnation? How does one act transculturally?

Padovano: It depends on how one defines transcultural. I agree that one has to be who one is. The irony of it is you can't become universal without being particular. Dostoevsky used to say a lot of people love humankind but hate their neighbors. Thus on one level transculturalism

can be evasive because one may say "I don't have to be anything, I can be everything," which is a way of being nothing. If I can be a Buddhist this year and a Muslim the next and a Catholic the next and Jewish the next, I am committed to nothing at all. So I think that we become universal by becoming emphatically particular. Jesus is clearly a first-century Jew. He is not a Samaritan; he is a first-century Jew limited to Israel. He doesn't go outside of Israel. He doesn't visit any other place, yet all of his universality comes from taking that particularity to its depth, by finding all the possibilities of freedom and love in his incarnation.

James Joyce does that in *Ulysses*. Leopold Bloom has one day. *Ulysses* takes place in twenty-four hours. If you have just one day in your own life you have everything. All you need is a day. We used to have a beautiful insight in pre-Vatican II spirituality, and I believe it is reappearing: the sacrament of the present moment. If I can take the present moment to its sacramental depths of mystery and infinity, then I reach everything, but I have to stay with the present moment to do that. So, I would agree with you on that level. You can't be transcultural by denying you are a male, white, American, of the twentieth century, a Catholic. At some level all of that must be affirmed without hesitation or embarrassment. But if that is taken superficially, then it is not transportable beyond one's own culture. If that is taken in depth, then one does become transcultural. What does it matter to us that Gandhi was a Hindu? It was terribly important for him, but Gandhi to me is as Catholic and American as I am in the sense that I can connect with him fully in his Hinduism. Gandhi transcends his Hinduism by the fact that he not only did not forsake his Hinduism but affirmed it in its core. So, I think transculturalism's deepest meaning comes from the affirmation of one's own biography and geography.

In its shallow meaning, transculturalism means that you can be absolutely everything to everyone. I don't think that is how Paul meant it. Let me put it another way very simply: a lover reaches everyone. John XXIII was a lover. Does anyone really care he was Italian? Or about his age? Or the fact that he was the patriarch of Venice before he was elected? It doesn't even register on the radar screen. Who cares about that? All of his particularities, of course terribly important to him, get transcended precisely because he embraced who he was. John XXIII was unmistakably Catholic, there was no doubt about that at all, and yet Protestants and Jews felt that he was their ally and their brother. At that moment, when the particular is taken to its depths, the universal is communicated for all to see.

Montaldo: You have written, "I believe non-violence is the hallmark of spirituality, [*Padovano:* (passionately) Yes.] the touchstone and measure of its authenticity and depth." [*Padovano:* Indeed!] Can you elaborate on your judgment?

Padovano: I don't think anything is more distinctive of Jesus than non-violence. Certainly that is the most concrete expression that his love takes. If Jesus indeed, as later Catholic theology affirms, is the Son of God, if that be true, the fact that Jesus is so non-violent in going to his death is enormously illustrative of what we are supposed to be as Christians. The early Christians understood that, which is why they would not bear arms for centuries and would not fight. They went to their deaths meekly at times, as Jesus did, rather than die in anger and protest. I do not think there is anything that is more corrosive to the human spirit than violence or power, not genuine authority, but oppressive power. If a church or a community or person can witness to the ability to lead life non-oppressively, that one can go through life and not take hostages and make victims of others, I think to the extent that we can demonstrate that, we can make Christianity and Christ more credible to others than in any other way. Non-violence basically means that you always see the other, not just the self but also the other, and that you find a way to reach the other. Violence says, "I want to eliminate the other." Non-violence says, "I want to include the other." This does not mean everything is permissible or that all behaviors go unprotested. Gandhi said it so well, "If you must choose between violence and cowardice, do violence." Gandhi could not think of anything worse than to use non-violence as a mask for cowardice or as a mask for not taking a position or not standing for something. It was clear what Gandhi stood for.

It was clear what Jesus stood for. It was clear what Merton stood for. But they believed that they could go about their tasks unoppressively. If we can do that, we unleash enormous creative possibilities in ourselves and in the human family, and we ignite incandescently a kind of spirituality that can enlighten and save and heal the whole world. I can't think of anything more important than non-violence as a hallmark of spirituality.

Montaldo: May your words be of benefit, Dr. Padovano. Thank you very much.