

Our Lives, a Powerful Pentecost: Merton's Meeting with Russian Christianity*

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Looking back on the three visits which I made to Gethsemani during Thomas Merton's lifetime, in 1963, 1967 and 1968, I have often wondered what it was that I could have brought to him. News from England, occasional small presents from friends of his I had encountered, a direct contact with Oxford and also with the Anglican tradition as a whole? But I also soon discovered that there was another world that Merton knew of only through books where I happened to have direct personal knowledge. This was the world of Russian Paris, or more specifically the Russian Orthodox theological community there. Since my student days I had had friends in that Russian world, very close friends, and I was able to give Merton personal information and anecdotes about people whom previously he had known only as writers of books.

Merton had for long been aware of the existence and the importance of this group of Russian theologians in Paris. They represented the first major intellectual presence of Eastern Orthodoxy in the Western Christian world since the schism nine centuries before. Already, in a letter to Jean Leclercq in 1950, Merton had shown his appreciation of Vladimir Lossky's pioneering study *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*.¹ He already had seen how important it was for a proper understanding of the first Cistercians, Bernard and William of St Thierry in particular, to understand the way in which they were

* This paper was presented on the occasion of the opening of the new Thomas Merton Center in the W.L. Lyons Brown Library of Bellarmine College, Louisville, KY, on 10 October 1997.

1. London: James Clarke, 1957.

indebted, not only to the theology of the Latin West but also to the teaching of the Greek Fathers. He writes in that letter, rather wistfully, 'The thought of reunion with the Greeks is one that haunts me'.²

It is clear from the opening section of the Lectures on Ascetical and Mystical Theology,³ which Merton gave at the monastery in 1960, that the writings of Lossky and George Florovsky had helped him to shape his basic idea of the nature of mystical theology itself. I have already written in *The Merton Annual* 5 about those lectures and the picture that they give us of Merton's understanding of the Greek Fathers and of Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor in particular.⁴ Now in the newly published volumes of the Journals it has become clear how much Russian theology Merton was reading in the years 1957-62. This discovery has brought back to me elements of our conversation during that first visit in 1963.

I

I have told this story and come to this particular place, to the Russian theological world in Paris, because it brings me to the subject that I want to look at in this article. This is the influence of a number of those Orthodox theologians on Merton at a crucial point in the development of his life, the years from 1957 to 1961 when he began to see more clearly the way that was to lead him further and further into the universal mystery of God's love and knowledge, the journey he was to make during the last decade of his life. Reading the volumes of his journals as we now have them, I have been struck by the significance of these writers for Merton, and the part that they played in the development of his heart and mind at this crucial period.

What I intend to do in these pages, after a brief look at Merton's correspondence with Pasternak, is to examine something of the influence of two of the principal figures of the first generation of the emigration, Berdyaev and Bulgakov, as we see it already in the journal of 1957.

Then we shall look at Merton's response to the work of a younger Orthodox writer, Olivier Clement, a Frenchman who was converted to Christianity in its Orthodox form, a writer who, in the last 35 years,

2. Patrick Hart (ed.), *The School of Charity: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Renewal* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990), pp. 23-26.

3. 'An Introduction to Christian Mysticism: From the Apostolic Fathers to the Council of Trent', lectures given at the Abbey of Gethsemani, 1961.

4. A.M. Allchin, 'The Worship of the Whole Creation: Merton and the Eastern Fathers', *The Merton Annual* 5 (1997), pp. 189-204.

has become an acknowledged spokesman for the Christian faith in France, his writings appreciated by Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox alike.

Finally, after a fleeting reference to Paul Evdokimov, we shall come to Vladimir Lossky, whose first book, as we have already seen, Merton had read in the 1940s, and whose study of Meister Eckhart he received with joy in the summer of 1961.

This subject of Merton's meeting with the Russian theologians has, so far as I know, not been much studied until now. It is not a subject that emerges at all clearly in Merton's own published writing, with the exception of a deceptively simple looking essay on the Russian Mystics in *Mystics and Zen Masters*, an article which recent events have shown to be almost prophetic.⁵ But it is one element, and I believe a vital element, in the total picture of Merton's growth into maturity. I have been moved to tackle this subject by the fact that there is at present the beginnings of a Thomas Merton Society in Moscow and that the first translations of Merton's writings into Russian are now being made. We have prospects of collaboration and exchange between ourselves in the West and our friends in Russia which until recently would have been unthinkable. I believe, in the present Russian situation, Merton's viewpoint may be of particular importance and encouragement.

I have to say at the beginning that I do not intend to deal at length with the most moving and perhaps the most important of all Merton's Russian contacts, that is to say, his correspondence with Boris Pasternak and what that correspondence meant to him. This is one of the most beautiful of all Merton's friendships, a friendship which in a brief period had a profound and creative influence on his own vocation as a writer and as a friend of other writers. Surely Mgr Shannon is right in saying, in *Silent Lamp*, that in this correspondence with Pasternak we have the root of Merton's sense of mission to the world of writers and intellectuals.⁶ Out of his sense of a deep and spontaneous communion of heart and mind with Pasternak, a communion established across all the barriers and boundaries of his day, he gained a new confidence that God meant him to cultivate such contacts with men and women of letters, contacts which in the end

5. Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (London: Sheldon Press, 1965), pp. 178-87. In this essay on the Russian mystics Merton clearly delineates the conflicting tendencies to be found in the nineteenth-century Russian monastic renewal.

6. W.H. Shannon, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), p. 186.

spread across the continents. There was, he felt, some deep and healing mystery in these friendships.

One of the things that moved and fascinated Merton most in that exchange with Pasternak was the sense that in their discovery of one another they had broken through the iron curtain, which at that time divided East and West; a barrier whose strength it is very difficult, for those who did not live through those years, to understand. In his contact with Russian Paris, of course, Merton was in touch with the Russian emigration. But he felt rightly that he was also in touch with Russia itself, for the writers whose work he was reading were Orthodox Christians, either directly under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate, like Vladimir Lossky, or members of the diocese that had put itself under the jurisdiction of Constantinople, a Patriarchate which always remained in communion with Moscow.

None of them belonged to the third Russian jurisdiction existing at that time in the West, the Russian Church in Exile or the Russian Church outside Russia, as it now calls itself. This is a body which has long had its headquarters in New York, and has as its very reason for being its refusal of communion with the Patriarchate of Moscow. That church, which is 'too Orthodox' to recognize its fellow Orthodox, not surprisingly has never wished for contacts with Christians from the non-Orthodox West, whether Catholic or Protestant.

Another thing that is clear in this connection is that Merton's fascination with Pasternak's writing predates the publication of *Dr Zhivago* and that Merton's interest in Russian religious thought predates his first discovery of Pasternak. Indeed it was his knowledge of such nineteenth-century thinkers as Soloviev and Khomiakov that enabled him to read the Christian meaning of *Dr Zhivago* with more depth and assurance than most Western commentators.

If we look at Volume 3 of the journals, one of the first and most striking of Merton's expressions of interest in the ideas of this Russian tradition of thought, theological and philosophical, is to be found in the entry for 25 April 1957. In it Merton speaks of the two writers Sergei Bulgakov and N.A. Berdyaev, both of whom had been at the height of their powers in the Paris of the 1920s and 1930s.

Bulgakov and Berdyaev are writers of great, great attention. They are great men who will not admit the defeat of Christ who has conquered by his resurrection. In their pages ... shines the light of the resurrection and theirs was a theology of triumph.

One wonders if our theological cautiousness is not after all the sign of a fatal coldness of heart, an awful sterility born of fear, or of despair. These two men have dared to make mistakes and were to be con-

demned by every church, in order to say something great and worthy of God in the midst of all their wrong statements. They have dared to accept the challenge of the sapiential books, the challenge of the image of Proverbs where Wisdom is 'playing in the world' before the face of the creator. And the Church herself says this. Sophia was somehow, mysteriously to be revealed, and fulfilled, in the mother of God and in the Church.

Most important of all—man's creative vocation to prepare, consciously, the ultimate triumph of divine wisdom. Man, the microcosm, the heart of the universe is the one who is called to bring about the fusion of cosmic and historic process in the final invocation of God's wisdom and love. In the name of Christ and by his power, man has a work to accomplish—to offer the cosmos to the Father, by the power of the Spirit, in the glory of the Word. Our life is a powerful Pentecost in which the Holy Spirit, ever active in us, seeks to reach through our inspired hands and tongues into the very heart of the material world. Created to be spiritualised through the work of the Church, the mystical body of the incarnate word of God.⁷

This powerful conflation of ideas from Bulgakov and Berdyaev might suggest at first that Merton had not altogether realized how different the two men were. It is true that as a theologian Father Sergei Bulgakov was both daring and speculative, and that at a certain moment in the 1930s the Patriarchate of Moscow condemned his teaching about the divine wisdom, his sophiology. But in Paris, Bulgakov's position was assured; he belonged to that part of the Russian diaspora which was in communion with Constantinople so that the condemnation of Moscow did not touch him directly. At the St Sergius Institute, as Professor of Dogmatic Theology, he taught with great authority. He was highly valued as a preacher, a confessor and a spiritual guide, as well as a theological writer; he was emphatically a man of the church.

Berdyaev on the other hand was an outstanding example of that line of free religious thinkers who have characterized Russian Orthodoxy in the last 150 years. They are writers who do not fit easily into our Western categories. They are too openly religious, indeed explicitly Christian, in the substance and inspiration of their thought to be considered genuine philosophers. On the other hand they are too free and speculative, too non-conformist and idiosyncratic in their approach to ultimate questions, to be thought of as real theologians.

Nevertheless, in putting together Bulgakov and Berdyaev in this way, despite their manifest differences, Merton was bearing witness

7. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude* (Journals; ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), pp. 85-86.

to some of the thoughts that they shared, elements of their teaching that were to become more and more important to him in the development of his own thought in the years ahead. First there is the cosmic vocation of humankind. We are called to be at the centre of creation. We cannot opt out. The monastic vocation may indeed involve a radical separation from the world, but it cannot involve an abandonment of the world. It is a life lived for the sake of the world. Secondly there is the vocation to a life of prayer, worship and contemplation itself. This too must always be seen in a cosmic context. It is lived on behalf of all creation. It must also be seen in its Trinitarian dimensions, a call to offer all things to the Father, through the life-giving death of the Son, in the transforming power of the Spirit. Thirdly, the Holy Spirit is to be at work through our hands and through our tongues, spiritualizing the material world. All this is to be done with power, in the freedom which the Spirit gives, as we become co-creators working with the Spirit who is the Creator of life.

Undoubtedly one of the elements in Berdyaev's thought, which was of most importance to Merton at this time in his life, was his idea of the ethics of creativity. Human beings grow towards maturity, begin to become the people God intends them to be, not by conforming to an externally fixed and static pattern of behaviour, but by discovering within themselves a potential for growth and transformation, an inner dynamic of change which enables them in the end to become free in God, and thus co-creators with the Creator. In such a view God is seen not only as continually holding creation in being but himself constantly working towards the realization of creative freedom on the part of his creatures. God himself withdraws from his creation so that his creation may begin to become free.

On 8 June, 1959, Merton writes

Berdyaev's distinction between ethics of law and ethics of creativeness is a very good one for me now. So good, perhaps, that it is a temptation. In any case: the ethics of law says stay at Gethsemani and the ethics of creativity says go out and do something that has not been done. The ethics of law says—Who is this Berdyaev? What authority has he? He is a heretic. You are doing your own will. What is creativeness? An illusion, which would lead the whole place into madness if everyone followed the same principles! It's safer to accept what is established, even if it is not so good. God works in and through the community. The individual has to conform to theirs in order to find God. And so on.⁸

And then there comes a very telling paragraph. Supposing he does just conform? What then? 'If only it were a simple question! Suppos-

ing for instance there is really in me nothing creative ... But what a question to ask! That is what one must start by believing and hoping, otherwise Christ died in vain'.⁹ Here we see the real urgency of his inner questioning. To deny his own power of creativity would be to deny God, to deny Christ, to deny Christ's death.

But the whole series of questions ends with a very interesting, if still quite uncertain conclusion, nevertheless a conclusion that points us towards the way which, in the end, Merton was to discover. 'Meanwhile it is very important to get out of the dilemma. Either Gethsemani or not-Gethsemani. Both. Neither. There has to be a way of rising completely above the division and going above it.'¹⁰ It was this which, by God's grace, Merton in the end succeeded in doing.

II

It is very typical of Merton that, during these years, he ranged widely over the literature which was available to him from the Russian community in Paris. In July 1960 we find him in correspondence with Olivier Clement, at that time a man in his thirties, teaching in a private college in Paris and just beginning to be known as a writer on Orthodox subjects. Merton comments about him as one who was 'brought up by atheist parents in Languedoc, converted to Orthodoxy, writing for *Contacts*'.¹¹ *Contacts* was an Orthodox quarterly which had printed an article of Merton's about Mount Athos, and through *Contacts* Merton came into correspondence with Clement and through him with the Orthodox monastery in England founded by Father Sophrony.

We are not surprised to find Merton already busy reading Olivier Clement's first book, a small but very significant work called *The Transfiguration of Time*. He notes in his journal that 'this book of Olivier Clement is really excellent. Only now that I am in the middle do I realise that I have missed much by not reading with very close attention. A book to read twice. Few books deserve two readings'.¹²

Two days later he felt he was penetrating to the centre of the work.

The heart of Clement's book—that 'fallen time' has no present. *Fallen time is simply that pure transience where the present is only a point with no*

9. Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, p. 288.

10. Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, p. 289.

11. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World* (Journals; ed. Victor A. Kramer; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p. 23.

12. Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, p. 39.

8. Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, p. 288.

content, between the abyss of the past and the abyss of the future, only emerging from the former to be swallowed up in the latter. It is only the expression of an absence—the absence of God, and thus the absence of man to himself and to others. Redeemed time is concentrated in a ‘present moment’ and born of the presence of God even in our misery, insofar as our misery does not fall into despair, but rather, as one might put it, falls into the divine love, becoming therefore an opening of humility onto the new life in the risen Lord.¹³

‘Keep your mind in hell and do not despair’, said Christ to the Staretz Silouan, ‘for’, as Father Sophrony comments on these words, ‘in condemning himself to hell and thus destroying all passion, man liberates his heart to receive the divine love’. Merton adds with enthusiasm: ‘This is great reading for a Sunday, an Easter, a renewal in Christ! I praise the Lord Christ for his great mercy.’¹⁴

Clement points out that this understanding of the fullness of the divine presence, revealed in the midst of time, gathers up our longing for a return to the state of paradise and at the same time looks forward towards the end of all things, anticipating here and now the fullness which shall be in the end. Already in this fallen world the dynamic power of the divine forgiveness and healing is at work within us drawing us to the future. The divine future itself draws us towards itself:

This liturgical repetition is not an impotent return to the origin of things but an ever new meeting with the one who does not cease to come to meet us. Each Easter, each Sunday, since Sunday is itself Easter, helps us to interiorise the sacramental life, and thus make this meeting more intimate.

‘When the water of tears is united, under the sand of the passions, with the life-giving water of baptism... then the light of the one and only feast, the one and only Sunday, the one perpetual Easter, the light of the eighth day illumines every one of our moments.’¹⁵ If, in his reading of Bulgakov, Merton had found his life as a powerful Pentecost, here, in Clement, he finds it as an Easter constantly renewed. In either case one has a personal appropriation of a typically Orthodox understanding of realized eschatology.

13. Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, p. 42. I have added the lines that are in italics, translating from Olivier Clement’s original, *Transfigurer le temps* (Neuchâtel: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1954), p. 166.

14. Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, p. 42.

15. Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, p. 42. I have supplemented Merton’s quotation with two sentences from Clement, *Transfigurer le temps*, p. 167.

Two days later Merton applies this vision to his own situation and to his own particular vocation.

The importance of being able to rethink thoughts that were fundamental to men of other ages, or are fundamental to men in other countries. For me especially—contemporary Latin-America-Greek patristic period—Mount Athos—Confucian China—Tang dynasty—Pre-Socratic Greece. Despair of ever beginning truly to know and understand, to communicate with these pasts and these distances, yet a sense of obligation to do so, to live them and combine them in myself, to absorb, to digest, to ‘remember’. *Memoria*. Have not yet begun. How will I ever begin to appreciate their problems, reformulate the questions they tried to answer? Is it even necessary? Is it sane? For me it is an expression of love for man and for God. An expression without which my contemplative life would be senseless. And to share this with my own contemporaries.¹⁶

Here we find Merton beginning to realize something of the catholicity, the universality of the human person, discovering his own vocation to become, through the power of the Holy Spirit, that truly universal catholic person whom we see at the end of his life. His vocation is to cross frontiers, to cross frontiers in time, searching back into the past, and to cross barriers in space, barriers of language and culture and political situation and deep historical prejudice. We see here his sense that he is called to unite in himself the vision, the experience, the understanding of many times and many places, to hold them together in one and to share them with his own contemporaries.

Merton has not only seen the value of Clement’s book in itself, he has also seen it as a way through into an experience of the life and witness of Staretz Silouan, the Russian monk on Mount Athos who Father Sophrony had discovered as a spiritual father and guide in the 1920s and who died in 1938. Sophrony had felt it his duty and calling to make known his life and writings in the West. How that in fact has happened in the last 40 or 50 years is a whole story in itself. It is the story of a Russian monk, a peasant by upbringing, a man with only two years’ formal schooling, never ordained, never well known, becoming, in his own lifetime, through his life of prayer, repentance and devotion, a greatly valued Staretz, a spiritual guide and father to a handful of his monastic brethren. And now, in this last decade, Silouan has been recognized as a saint of the Orthodox Church, canonized by the Patriarch of Constantinople, a figure who becomes more widely known, his name more widely invoked. Already in 1960,

16. Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, pp. 42-43.

privately at Gethsemani, Merton was beginning to keep his anniversary.

Today is the anniversary of the death of the holy Staretz Silouan, at St Panteleimon on Mount Athos—September 11th, 1938...

Staretz Silouan did not want to die in the infirmary because they would put him in a room with a clock which would disturb his prayer.

Sitting at a table with other stewards he refused to join all the others in criticizing one of their number who had failed in some monastery business.

His combats and sorrows. The Lord said to him, 'Keep your mind in hell and do not despair.' This is to me one of the most enlightening and comforting of statements, lifting a weight from my heart, inexplicably. (Ten years ago it would have weighed me down with foreboding.)

In so far as hell means apparent rejection and darkness, some of us must elect it, as it is ours and Job's way to peace. The far end of nothing, the abyss, of our own absurdity, in order to be humble, to be found and saved by God. In a way this sounds idiotic and even heretical. Yet no—I am one who is saved from hell *by God*.

Or rather that is my vocation and destiny.

If I spend my time saying 'I have been saved', then I may have to resist the awful fear of falling back, of saying I have not fallen back, of denying that I have fallen back when I have...etc. And never knowing at any time where I am. Foolish concern.

To have the flames of hell around you like Sylvan and to hope I shall be saved. Thus I *am* saved, but no need to insist on myself. Jesus, Saviour.¹⁷

So already, more than 35 years ago Merton had discovered the Staretz Silouan and the heart of his message. Already, at a time when Silouan was scarcely known to Western Christendom, he had been able to identify with him and to recognize in his monastic experience a monastic experience very close to his own.

How Merton would have rejoiced to read Sophrony's account based on his experience of Father Silouan, of the paradoxical way in which the true monk, having left all things for God, finds them again, mysteriously, in God.

Having started by breaking with the world, through Christ he finds it again in himself, but now in an entirely different form, and becomes linked to it by the bonds of love for all eternity. Then, through prayer, he integrates everyone into his own eternal life, whatever the geographical distance or historical time between them. Then he discovers that his heart is not just a physical organ or centre of his psychic life, but something indefinable yet capable of being in contact with God, the source of all being. In his deep heart the Christian, after a certain fashion, lives

17. Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, pp. 44-45.

the whole history of the world as his own history, and sees not only himself but all humanity, the whole complex of ideas and spiritual experiences, and then no-one is alien to him—he loves each and everyone as Christ commanded.¹⁸

This discovery of the Staretz Silouan was also something that brought Merton and myself together in an unexpected way, for on my first visit to Mount Athos in August 1955, landing at the Russian monastery, St Panteleimon, with a friend, we were shown around the buildings by an elderly Russian layman who was staying with the community. Almost at once he took us to the charnel house, and one of the first things which our guide did was to pick up a numbered skull and say, 'This is the skull of a monk who *some* of the Fathers thought was a saint'—it was Staretz Silouan.

III

We have been looking at the influence on Merton of two writers of the older generation of the Russian emigration, Bulgakov and Berdyaev, and one of the new generation, that of a convert to Orthodoxy, Olivier Clement.

But for any full account of Merton's meeting with this school of writers one would need to look at two major figures in the generation in between, the generation of those who were born in the first decade of the twentieth century and who left Russia after the Revolution, during their student years. Among them the two outstanding figures would be Vladimir Lossky and Paul Evdokimov.

This is not the place to look at both, so I have chosen to concentrate my attention on Vladimir Lossky. This is not because there is little material about Paul Evdokimov. Quite the reverse is the case. In Volume 3 of the journals there is ample reference to Evdokimov.¹⁹ It would be a fascinating task to work through the quotations there in direct reference to Evdokimov's originals and see how it is that Mer-

18. Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), *Saint Silouan the Athonite* (Maldon, Essex: The Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 1991), pp. 233-34. Father Sophrony's first publication about Staretz Silouan, *The Undistorted Image*, which Merton had read, was published in 1958 (London: The Faith Press). This book is a very much fuller version of that work, with a great deal of new material.

19. It is unfortunate that Paul Evdokimov's name does not occur in the index of Volume 3. It should have the following references: pp. 124, 152, 276, 330, 334. Many of the entries for Russian writers in the index are incomplete. In the case of Bulgakov, who is wrongly noted as Macarius instead of Sergei, the following references should be added: pp. 104-106, 108, 109, 226, 237, 253. In the case of Berdyaev, pp. 194, 211 and 284 should be added.

ton responds to his characteristic positions. I will say only one thing about Evdokimov. Merton assumed that he was a priest. I was able to assure him that, like Vladimir Lossky, he was a married layman. It is interesting to note that much of the most vital Orthodox theology of this century in Russia, Romania and Greece has been written either by married lay-people or married clergy. Creative monastic theologians have been few. Here is another thing that makes Merton's work particularly precious for the Christian world of East as well as West.

The high point of Merton's involvement with Russian theology, judging by the journals, seems to have been in the years 1958–61. But although references to Russian writers become much less frequent in Volume 5, those that are to be found are highly significant.

This is particularly the case with the reference to Vladimir Lossky in the journal entry for 5 December 1964. In the pages of this journal we can see that that December was a particularly fruitful and creative time in Merton's development. He was at last beginning to be able to experience directly both the challenge and the gifts of a more solitary way of life. It was a time in which he was continuing to work on some of his favourite authors, as well as beginning to initiate new explorations.

'Thank God I have been purged of Sartre by Ionesco. I don't think Ionesco is a great artist but he is healthy and alive and free. Sartre is not free...' Merton's preference for the Romanian playwright is very evident.²⁰

But it is also a time in which he is drawn back by solitude onto the vital need for prayer, a prayer which is constantly confronting the reality of penitence and death. Like John Henry Newman in the *Oration* at Birmingham, Thomas Merton too has the *Preces Privatae* of Lancelot Andrewes to hand.

In the hermitage one must pray or go to seed. The pretence of prayer will not suffice. Just sitting will not suffice. It has to be real—yet what can one do? Solitude puts you with your back to the wall (or your face to it!) and that is good. One prays to pray. And the reality of death, Donne's poems and Lancelot Andrewes.²¹

The day before he had quoted Lancelot Andrewes: 'Evening: the heart is deceitful above all things. The heart is deep and full of windings. The old man is covered up in a thousand wrappings.'²²

20. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life* (Journals; ed. Robert E. Daggy; New York: HarperCollins, 1997), p. 176.

21. *Dancing in the Water of Life*, pp. 174–75.

22. *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 173.

December 1964 was, however, not only a time of new beginnings for Merton himself. It was a time for new beginnings in the church and in the world. Sister Mary Luke Tobin, one of the very first women to be invited as an auditor to participate in the Second Vatican Council, came over to Gethsemani from Loretto to talk to a group of monks about the session that had just concluded and to tell them about its achievements and its frustrations.

It is in this context that Merton notes, on 22 December, 'Am finally reading Vladimir Lossky's fine book, *La vision de Dieu*, which reminds me that the best thing that has come out of the Council is the Declaration on Ecumenism, particularly the part on oriental theology'.²³ In its radical rethinking of the Roman Catholic attitude towards all the other families of Christendom, the Council had especially insisted on the importance on being open to receive the witness and tradition of Eastern Orthodoxy.

Let us pause for a moment at this point to ask who this writer Vladimir Lossky was. It so happens that as a student and a newly ordained priest I came to know him well; his family became almost a second family for me in Paris. His son and his two daughters, who all still teach in Paris, remain among my closest friends. It is therefore a particular joy to speak of them at Bellarmine, as it was to speak of them to Merton 30 years ago at Gethsemani.

Vladimir Lossky belonged to the middle generation of the writers we have been considering. Thirty years younger than Berdyaev or Bulgakov, he was contemporary with Evdokimov and Florovsky. But unlike them he died in his fifties, in 1958, with only one major book published, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*—a book which, as we have seen, Merton already knew in French in 1950. After Lossky's death more of his books began to become available. There was a massive study of the theology of Meister Eckhart,²⁴ the first study in depth of a major figure in Western Christendom to come from the pen of an Eastern Orthodox writer (the second such study is the work of Lossky's son: Nicolas Lossky's study of Lancelot Andrewes²⁵). This book on Eckhart was one which Merton received with special delight. Despite its highly technical nature, at least in certain parts, it spoke directly to him. In a letter to Etta Gullick on 25 July 1961, he writes,

23. *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 181.

24. V. Lossky, *Theologie négative et connaissance de Dieu chez Maître Eckhart* (Paris: Vrin, 1960).

25. N. Lossky, *Lancelot Andrewes the Preacher (1555–1626): The Origins of the Mystical Theology of the Church of England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

[T]oday came the Lossky book on Eckhart. It is fabulously good, not only that but it is for me personally a book of immense and providential importance, because I can see right away in the first chapter that I am right in the middle of the most fundamental intuition of unknowing which was the first source of my faith and which ever since has been my whole life ... I cannot thank you enough.²⁶

It is very significant that this highly specialized work should have moved Merton so much. It was not only its contents that spoke directly to Merton but also something of its spirit. As I look back on Vladimir Lossky over 40 years, I can see him as a man who had much in common with Merton. He was a man who lived every minute of his life to the full. One of his sons said, after his death, 'He wouldn't have known what "wasting time" meant'. He was a man of great intelligence, and of strong aesthetic perceptions. Like Merton's, his life was uprooted; growing up in Russia, exiled first in Prague, then in Paris, knowing all the upheaval of World War II and the German occupation of France. He was a man to whom the difference between sacred and secular simply did not exist, for he lived his life and his faith with the whole of himself. If Merton has showed us what a monk in the twentieth century may be, people like Vladimir Lossky have shown us the real meaning of the witness of a layman as a true man of the church, a Christian scholar and intellectual whose whole work is at the service of the mystery of God revealed in Christ.

Lossky's book *The Vision of God*, published in 1963,²⁷ is based on lectures given at the Sorbonne 20 years earlier. It is a careful, lucid, exposition of the Eastern Christian tradition from the apostolic age to the culminating moment in the fourteenth century, the last full century of the Eastern Christian Empire. This was a time marked by the theology of St Gregory Palamas, a theology that was confirmed and canonized in the Councils held in Constantinople in 1341, 1347 and 1351. It is a tradition of Christian faith and understanding which down to the present has been too little studied in the Christian West, whether Catholic or Protestant, and which even today is considered by many to be of only marginal importance.

But for Merton this tradition is anything but marginal. Reading Lossky's book seems to have released in him a kind of personal confession of faith which is at the same time an affirmation of the whole tradition which he has received and which has become his life, in the

26. W.H. Shannon (ed.), *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985), p. 344.

27. London: Faith Press, 1963.

years that have followed since that moment of his conversion and reception into the Catholic Church in his student days at Columbia. The tradition of the centuries of East and West has become a life-giving experience in him and for him, and through him it has become so for many others. These are paragraphs of such a quality, both as a personal testimony and as an exposition of the whole inheritance of Christian East and West, that I intend to quote them at length and I intend that they will bring this essay towards its conclusion.

Here in the hermitage, returning necessarily to beginnings, I know where my beginning was, hearing the Name and Godhead of Christ preached in Corpus Christi Church. I heard and believed. And I believe that he has called me freely, out of pure mercy, to his love and salvation, and that at the end (to which all is directed by Him) I shall see Him after I have put off my body in death and have risen together with Him. And that at the last day '*videbit omnis caro salutare Dei*' (all flesh shall see the salvation of God). What this means is that my faith is an eschatological faith, not merely a means of penetrating the mystery of the divine presence resting in Him now. Yet because my faith is eschatological it is *also* contemplative, for I am, even now, in the Kingdom and I can, even now, 'see' something of the glory of the Kingdom and praise him who is king. I would be foolish then if I lived blindly, putting off all 'seeing', until some imagined fulfilment (for my present seeing is the beginning of a real and unimaginable fulfilment!). Thus contemplation and eschatology are one, in Christian faith and in surrender to Christ. They complete each other and intensify each other. It is by contemplation and love that I can best prepare myself for the eschatological vision—and best help all the Church, and all men, to journey toward it.

The union of contemplation and eschatology is clear in the gift of the Holy Spirit. In Him we are awakened to know the Father because in Him we are refashioned in the likeness of the Son. And it is in this likeness that the Spirit will bring us at last to the clear vision of the invisible Father in the Son's glory, which will also be our glory. Meanwhile it is the Spirit who awakens in our heart the faith and hope in which we cry for the eschatological fulfilment and vision. And in this hope there is already a beginning, an *arrha* ['earnest'] of the fulfilment. This is our contemplation: the realization and 'experience' of the life-giving Spirit in whom the Father is present to us through the Son, our way, truth and light. The realization that we are on our way, that because we are on our way we are in that Truth which is the end and by which we are already fully and eternally alive. Contemplation is the loving sense of this life and this presence and this eternity.²⁸

28. *Dancing in the Water of Life*, pp. 181-82. The passage is included in Merton's posthumously published 1964-65 journals, *A Vow of Conversation: Journals 1964-65* (ed. Naomi Burton Stone; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988), pp. 116-17.

IV

In the article already alluded to I stated my conviction that in our proper admiration for Merton's contribution to the inter-faith dialogue we ought not to underestimate the value of his contribution to Christian ecumenism. The two elements in his thought are inextricably related to one another. It is not by chance that in *Mystics and Zen Masters* a large part of the book is taken up with the discussion of urgent but sometimes technical questions of inner Christian debate. Merton's capacities in this field too need to be fully appreciated for they were part of his total view. In the two paragraphs from the journal for 1964, which have just been quoted, paragraphs at once deeply trinitarian and incarnational, Merton has succeeded in giving us a summary of the tradition that is true to the perspectives both of Christian East and Christian West. He has done more: he has given us a way of reconciling two contrasting strands in the Christian tradition—the contemplative or mystical on the one side, and the prophetic or eschatological on the other; strands which it is still commonly assumed are inimical to one another and mutually exclusive. How much it would alter our whole perspective on what Christianity is, how much it would alter the relation between Catholic and Protestant in the Christian West, if this view of the complementarity of these two strands was generally accepted and understood.

We need Merton's teaching, and we need it today, not only for our dialogue with peoples of other faiths. We need it above all to overcome the present tendency towards polarization which we can see today in all the churches, Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant alike, the tendency towards a needless, and in the end sterile, controversy between people who call themselves progressive and people who call themselves traditionalist. What true progress can there be unless it is rooted in the eternal, given realities of the tradition? What true tradition can there be unless it is seen as something living, changing, adapting and improvising with the creative power of the one Holy life-creating Spirit? It is only in his coming that our life can become a powerful Pentecost, a transformation of creation, both inner and outer, a manifestation of the light and life of the Risen Christ, who by his death has destroyed death.