

Solidarity and the Reshaping of Spirituality

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The word 'solidarity' has become as firmly a part of our contemporary theological and spiritual vocabularies as the expressions 'faith and justice' and 'the preferential option for the poor'. Not only has solidarity been a favorite expression in the homilies, addresses, allocutions and encyclicals of John Paul II, who knew its sociological reality very well from the labor movements in his native Poland, but it also appears with remarkable frequency in a wide range of religious as well as non-religious writing.¹ Indeed, we might not be far from the mark in suggesting that the term 'solidarity', more aptly and more adequately than 'spirituality', summarizes for today's believer what living in Christ is all about.

As a religious term, solidarity enjoys an important advantage over

1. See for instance, *On Social Concern (Sollicitudo Rei Socialis)*, Nos. 38-40. The Pope interprets the term religiously: 'Solidarity is undoubtedly a Christian virtue' (David O'Brien and Thomas Shannon [eds.], *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992], p. 423). Also, see the Index entries under 'solidarity' in J. Michael Miller (ed.), *The Encyclicals of John Paul II* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 1996), as well as the entries in Giorgio Filibeck (ed.), *Human Rights in the Teaching of the Church: From John XXIII to John Paul II* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994). The term had been used by Pius XII (*On the Unity of Human Society [Summi Pontificatus]*, Nos. 12 and 35), John XXIII (*Christianity and Social Progress [Mater et Magistra]*, No. 23), and Paul VI (*On the Development of Peoples [Populorum Progressio]*, No. 48). It could be argued that it was the notion of solidarity that provided the anthropological underpinning for the draft encyclical which Pius XI had commissioned John LaFarge, SJ to write. See Georges Passelecq and Bernard Suchecky, *The Hidden Encyclical of Pius XI* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1997). With respect to its theoretical and liberationist dimensions, see Matthew Lamb, *Solidarity with Victims: Toward a Theology of Social Transformation* (New York: Crossroad, 1982). And see especially Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1980), pp. 229-37.

the idea of *communion*, which was so integral to the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council.² Solidarity brings out more sharply than communion the political and social overtones of the Christian community's life in the Spirit. And while the word 'compassion' is certainly more biblical, solidarity may bring out more effectively for men and women of today the underlying scriptural idea. People may be *moved* from time to time with compassion, as was the Samaritan on the Jericho road (Lk. 10.33), but solidarity draws attention to a person's social location, political choices and commitments, and an identification with the world's poor and excluded which is both notional and real. Indeed, even divine compassion is never more striking than in that mysterious, even scandalous, solidarity with the human world (and especially with the poverty of our world) which Christian faith refers to as the Incarnation.³

An authentically prayerful person can be developing and growing constantly, of course, in terms of his or her solidarity with men and women in their poverty and oppression. Like perfect charity, the only upper limit of realized solidarity is the divine mystery itself. This growth process involves our intellects and imaginations, our capacity for moral reasoning and choosing, our affectivity and our prayer. Solidarity generates distinctive forms of asceticism and self-emptying, together with distinctive modes of imaging and experiencing God. Fasting, for example, instead of being a penitential discipline undertaken to win divine favor or as a fitting accompaniment to prayers of contrition, can become a way of reminding ourselves of the hunger that countless men and women are forced to endure each day. After

2. The note of communion is struck in the second sentence of The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*): 'Cum autem Ecclesia sit in Christo veluti sacramentum seu signum et instrumentum intimae cum Deo unionis totiusque generis humani unitatis ...' This theme has been developed in J.-M.R. Tillard, *Church of Churches: The Ecclesiology of Communion* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), and in Michael G. Lawler and Thomas J. Shanahan, SJ, *Church: A Spirited Communion* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995).

3. While the central scriptural text for the doctrine of the incarnation is Jn 1.14, we probably ought to turn to 2 Cor. 8.9 to appreciate the divine slant or option being revealed to us: 'For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.' Paul is clearly playing on the words 'rich' and 'poor'. But whereas *rich* obviously does not refer to material wealth, *poor* and *poverty* have to include social and economic aspects if the text is to make any sense. The Lord Jesus, in other words, does not enter into solidarity simply with the human condition in the abstract, or with all human beings indiscriminately, but with human beings in their materially real poverty.

all, was this not the kind of fast which God wanted from his people—a fast that would lead both to mindfulness and action on behalf of the homeless poor, the hungry and the oppressed (Isa. 58.6-7)? Looked at this way, the ever greater realization of solidarity might well be on the way to becoming the most noteworthy development within Christian spirituality on the eve of the twenty-first century.⁴

None of this would have sounded strange to Thomas Merton. In fact, one could accurately paraphrase one of the main themes of his *New Seeds of Contemplation* by stating that faith without solidarity is dead.⁵ It is likewise fair to say that Merton often drew upon monastic life as a parable of Christian existence. For Merton, whatever could be said of monastic life and contemplative prayer generally possessed a much wider relevance. He wrote, for instance:

The realization of these two things, that each individual monk, or each individual member of any Christian community, becomes himself only on condition that he functions with others to help them to become themselves. In this interaction there is no refuge in solitary tranquillity. One is exposed to constant dissatisfaction and suffering by the fact that this process is frustrating and *always incomplete*.⁶

4. One dramatic expression of solidarity which is at the same time both spiritual and political is the hunger strike. See, for instance, Javier Medina (ed.), *El testamento político espiritual de Luis Espinal* (La Paz, Bolivia: Hisbol, 1991), pp. 9-19. In his book *Heart of the World, Center of the Church: Communio Ecclesiology, Liberalism, and Liberation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), David Schindler warns of the consequences when action is divorced from contemplation (pp. 233-36). But the secret of keeping them joined and avoiding a dualism of prayer and practice lies squarely within the experience of solidarity. Although it contains a strong aesthetic dimension, Christian contemplation is not like going off by oneself to listen to a beautiful piece of music, or spending an afternoon in a museum gallery. Contemplation does not 're-charge' the energies spent in one's actions on behalf of others; the business of finding God is never a means to an end. Thomas à Kempis would not make a suitable guide for Christians today.

5. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1962). I have tried to develop this idea in some of my own writing, most recently in *Looking for a God to Pray to: Christian Spirituality in Transition* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994) and in *To Hear the Word of God, Listen to the World: The Liberation of Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), pp. 44-61.

6. Thomas Merton, *A Vow of Conversation: Journals 1964-65* (ed. Naomi Burton Stone; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988), p. 20. Monastic existence is truly parabolic: 'The monk is a man who, in one way or another, pushes to the very frontiers of human experience and strives to go beyond, to find out what transcends the ordinary level of existence' (see Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1973], p. 118).

And again:

Go into the desert not to escape other men but in order to find them.⁷

Mere living alone does not isolate a man, mere living together does not bring men into communion.⁸

The true solitary does not renounce anything that is basic and human about his relationship to other men. He is deeply united to them—all the more deeply because he is no longer entranced by marginal concerns.⁹

In lines such as these, Merton was obviously describing human nature or human existence in general. This fact explains why much of Merton's writing has proved to be so enduring. Lessons learned in a desert, a hermitage or in any other form of monastic solitude are not nearly as foreign to everyday life as some might be tempted to believe. That is why he could write in 'A Letter on the Contemplative Life', for instance: 'I will attempt to say in my own words what I personally, as an individual, have to say and usually do say to my brother who is in the world and who more and more often comes to me with his wounds *which turn out to be also my own*.'¹⁰ Perhaps the most stunning effect of the solitary life was paradoxically a social and ecclesial one: that form of life brought Merton into the deepest oneness with the world, that is, with his brothers and sisters whose woundedness was inseparably linked to the monastic identity.

Now just as the statement 'faith without solidarity is dead' paraphrases one of Merton's central insights, the insight behind his title 'a vow of conversation' could likewise be expressed in slightly different terms. If prayer is conceived on the model of conversation, then conversation with God presupposes an ongoing conversation with the world.¹¹ A person who cannot converse with the world, that is to say, who has not been engaged intellectually and morally by the circumstances and events of our particular place in history, will have a very difficult time maintaining a relationship with God. Whenever someone voices dissatisfaction with his or her prayer life, perhaps our

7. Merton, *New Seeds*, p. 53.

8. Merton, *New Seeds*, p. 55.

9. See Thomas Merton, 'Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude', in *idem*, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1960), p. 172. See also Merton, 'The Solitary Life', in Thomas Merton, *The Monastic Journey* (ed. Patrick Hart; Kansas City: Sheed Andrews and McMeel, 1977), pp. 151-62.

10. *The Monastic Journey*, p. 170. Italics added.

11. This point is considered at greater length in Reiser, *To Hear the Word of God, Listen to the World*, pp. 7-43.

initial response should be to inquire about the intensity of his or her engagement with the world, particularly with the world of 'broken bones'.¹² It is hard to imagine that Merton would not be posing this question to us if he were alive today. No one can read Merton and fail to notice the degree to which he was immersed in the literary, religious, political and cultural currents of the twentieth century. The novice director who had his novices listen to taped interviews with figures like Martin Luther King and Malcolm X obviously lived in contemplative contact with the world, and the monk whose correspondence with key cultural figures like the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz and the Nicaraguan poet/pastor Ernesto Cardenal had clearly taken the concerns of that world into his own soul and imagination.¹³ Above all, Merton's own poetry revealed the extent to which his interior life had become geographic and how a major feature of that interiority was a spiritual oneness with those men and women of every time and place who have fallen victim to exploitation and greed.¹⁴ His 1968 work *The Geography of Lograire* vividly reflected the quadrants of an inner compass, a religious sensibility about victimization and oppression which spanned past and present as well as north and south.¹⁵

As pressures mount on us to become more globally aware and ever more sensitive to our social responsibilities as a result of knowing more about the material and political conditions under which human beings are forced to live and work, we face a fundamental spiritual choice. We can either run away from this moral challenge, which will inevitably lead to desolation in its most elementary forms: alienation, moral blindness and religious isolation (what Merton referred to as the 'false self'¹⁶), the loss of spiritual appetite, and so forth; or we can

12. Merton, *New Seeds*, p. 70.

13. See Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: The Letters of Thomas Merton to Writers* (ed. Christine Bochen; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1993), p. 142.

14. I am indebted to George Kilcourse for pointing this out to me. See his study *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), pp. 184-95.

15. This work can be found in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), pp. 455-609.

16. Merton's journal entry for 11 April 1964 shows that he was not altogether satisfied with the way he had written about the self: 'The time has probably come to go back on all that I have said about one's "real self," etc., etc. And show that there is after all no hidden mysterious "real self" other than or "hiding behind" the self that one is ...' See Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life* (Journals; ed. Robert E. Daggy; New York: HarperCollins, 1997), p. 95. Merton's comment now sounds conspicuously postmodern.

cooperate with this dynamic tension and grow in the direction of greater solidarity. The consolation that confirms this choice or orientation is nothing less than the felt assurance that one is walking with the crucified and risen Lord.

Perhaps the *sine qua non* for Christian prayer and spirituality in our time has been summed up best in that richly challenging phrase from the Latin American church, 'the preferential option for the poor', which one writer has described as 'the most important event in the Christian churches since the Protestant Reform'.¹⁷ The reality underlying that phrase is, of course, both a *lived* and *life-giving* solidarity with the vast majority of men and women on our planet. Whereas a great deal of Merton's sense of oneness with the human condition took the form of an existential identification with the moral and religious burdens which we all have to shoulder, the option for the poor sharpens that identification along social, economic and political lines. For Merton, a spirituality which leads a person away from real engagement with the human community is basically unhealthy. The word *solidarity* thus points to that life-defining (and often scandalous) oneness with the world and with God, which has been a perennial hallmark of Christian holiness. Would it be too much to suggest further that the experience of solidarity might even provide a yardstick of orthodoxy, a touchstone that goes beyond fidelity to credal statements and even beyond the widely used term *orthopraxis*? An experience of God that does not lead people in the direction of greater solidarity might, by definition, be called religious; but it is hard to conceive how it could properly be called Christian.

Taking a cue from Merton's writing, perhaps it could be said that solitude stands to solidarity as contemplation stands to action; the one should not be conceived apart from the other. To separate them would violate the nature of a truly 'orthodox' Christian experience of God. Merton's words of caution are certainly worth citing here:

The contemplative who tries to preach contemplation before he himself really knows what it is, will prevent both himself and others from finding the true path to God's peace.¹⁸

Learning to be contemplative involves learning at first hand about the tension (*not* the contradiction or conflict) between solitude and being in the world. This tension runs like an electric current through much of Merton's journal entries. The tension can be exasperating,

17. José María Vigil, 'Is There a Change of Paradigm in Liberation Theology?', *LADOC* 28 (September/October 1997), pp. 1-13 (12).

18. Merton, *New Seeds*, p. 270.

but it is also creative and fruitful. Merton appears never to have eliminated the tension either by suppressing it or by mastering it. It was still haunting him in 1964:

At the same time I am beginning to see that the question of solitude for me is finally getting to be no longer a question of *wish* but of *decision*. I still do not know what scope for decision may be given me, but I do know that I must prepare to face a serious decision, and one about which I had more or less given up thinking. It seems to be a real 'encounter with the world' that I must not evade, and yet, as in all such things, I am not too sure just where the encounter is, except that my heart tells me that in this question of the solitary life there is for me a truth to be embraced which is not capable of a fully logical explanation, which is not rooted in my nature or my biography, but is something else, and it may also cut clean through the whole network of my own recent work, ideas, writings, experiences, etc., even those that in some way concern the solitary life, monastic renewal, etc.¹⁹

What Merton was experiencing, I think, was not the result of a basic indecisiveness about where God wanted him but a deep suspicion about a structural weakness at the heart of monastic existence—or any form of existence, for that matter—which defined itself by living outside the wider human community. It was important that Merton struggled with this institutional flaw as much as he did, because his experience richly anticipated the religious and cultural crisis in which many first-world believers would find themselves at the close of the twentieth century. How does a person grow in solidarity within a culture that cultivates and celebrates autonomy and individualism? In the end, however, I do not believe that Merton's real problem was that of trying to resolve how to integrate a desire for solitude with his need to converse with the world. What he craved was reconciliation and wholeness, and he had simply been unable to discover a path to oneness with the world in which, finally, such wholeness could ever have been realized. His writings and anxious reflections on war and peace testify eloquently to this fact of his interior life. How can an individual ever feel 'absolved' of sin when his or her society is rushing blindly towards the madness of war? For there is an eschatological and unfinished character to redemption, to humanity's definitive restoration and healing, and it was this experience which he had stumbled upon. Personal integration, forgiveness and wholeness

19. Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 156. Of course, the tension would take a different form in 1966, as touchingly reflected in *Learning to Love* (Journals; ed. Christine M. Bochen; New York: HarperCollins, 1997).

will necessarily feel uneasy and unfinished so long as the rest of creation continues groaning in labor pains (Rom. 8.22).

If Christian prayer presupposes a 'vow of conversation' with the world; if prayer presupposes an experience of solidarity with the poor and oppressed; if it is true that the divine Persons attend constantly to the world with an attentiveness which is both redemptive and loving, then 'the true path to God's peace' is going to land us in the middle of the events and circumstances of our times. The true contemplative, then, is not someone who simply contemplates the mystery of God from some safe distance; genuine contemplatives come to that mystery by letting themselves be engaged by the world which God loves so much. To quote John Paul II: 'And how could it be otherwise, since the Christ encountered in contemplation is the same who lives and suffers in the poor?'²⁰

The Experience of Solidarity and the Sacrament of Reconciliation

The development in one's life of a humanizing solidarity with the poor is at the same time an experience of God; it reconfigures our piety and how we express our faith in public. One particular place where the realization of solidarity could lend fresh meaning and purpose in everyday life is our liturgical prayer. Someone asked me recently whether people ought to be reading the newspaper while making an eight-day retreat; a retreat is not really a retreat, she was suggesting, if we bring the world along. I replied that a good newspaper can serve as an invaluable prelude for reading the Psalms, and other parts of scripture besides; many of the scenes and stories that appear in the newspapers, which are viewed on television or narrated on National Public Radio, provide us with the stuff we need to relate to the classic sentiments of faith embedded in the ancient prayers of Israel.²¹

20. *Consecrated Life: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of the Holy Father John Paul II [Vita Consecrata]* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1996), No. 82.

21. Pace Lawrence Cunningham, who writes: 'It has been my custom early each morning to read some of those psalms stipulated for the day in the Liturgy of the Hours ... One inflexible rule: no peeking at The New York Times before reading from the Psalter' ('Praying the Psalms: Some Notes', *America* 177.3 [2-9 August 1997], p. 7). More difficult to understand is the comment of William O'Malley: 'I no longer use petitionary prayers ... When we let down our facades and share with a trusted friend our fears, confusions, grief, anxieties, we haven't the slightest notion (or hope) that the friend will "solve" our difficulties or make them go away. All we honestly look for is a good listener, someone to share our weakness and

Even the Sunday offertory petitions are going to feel canned and distant when a community has little or no sense of its relatedness to the events and concerns of the wider world. Liturgical prayer, after all, expresses and promotes not an individual piety, but the interiority of the whole people of God. Christian interiority, that is to say, the dynamics of our spiritual lives, is intrinsically communal and essentially ecclesial. Christian interiority gravitates naturally to the heart of the world, for it is this very world which God creates, sustains, loves and redeems (following Jn 3.16 and the intuition underlying Rom. 5.8). Such is the instinct of Ignatius Loyola when, in the *Spiritual Exercises*, he asks us to imagine the divine Persons contemplating 'the whole round world' and encourages us 'to hear what the people on the face of the earth talk about'.²² The interiority of the people of God would include not only humanity's religious experience, but also its historical experience, since it is largely from within history and from within the 'signs of the times' that God addresses us.

Although the practice of sacramental confession has for centuries mediated God's forgiveness for personal sinfulness, it is no secret that many people today feel less drawn to this practice, even alienated from it. One explanation for this change may be that in our therapeutic culture some of us have lost that sharp sense of individual sinfulness which frequently characterized earlier generations of Christians. Another explanation might be that we need to learn how to 'embody forgiveness' more effectively in daily life.²³ After all, the fruitfulness or meaningfulness of what is being celebrated inside a sacramental ritual is conditioned by the faith and practice expressed in the everyday. The opening forgiveness story in Mark's Gospel (Mk 2.1-12) presents Jesus, a layman, forgiving a paralytic his sins not in the sacred precincts of the temple and not alongside the hallowed waters of the Jordan, but in Peter's home!

A third possibility, however, could be that we have become increasingly aware of social sin and our largely unconscious complicity in sinful economic and social arrangements. The more critically aware

lonely bewilderment' ('The Untamable God of Job', *America* [24 May 1997], p. 21). I doubt that the psalmist saw himself relating to God this way, and it is hard to imagine that the poor and oppressed of our world would settle for therapy over deliverance.

22. *Spiritual Exercises*, Nos. 102-109. The *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius can be found in many editions. See, e.g., *Saint Ignatius of Loyola: Personal Writings* (trans. Joseph Munitiz and Philip Endean; London: Penguin Books, 1996).

23. See L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 163-204.

we become, the greater our sense of moral responsibility to cooperate in every way we can to bring about a more just world. James Empeur and Christopher Kiesling made this point very well:

We live with some guilt about the misery of many people in the world, yet find it difficult to pinpoint our own personal responsibility, what precisely we are contributing to the evil; or, if we can pinpoint something, we have no way of avoiding it or assessing the degree of our cooperation's gravity. So we are left confronting and immersed in 'a mystery of iniquity', a 'mystery of sin.' How are we to deal with that?²⁴

Social sin is awkward, if not impossible to confess, even though we might experience a pervasive sense of moral failure over the way we have been living. Does one confess, for example, 'I bought strawberries and lettuce, knowing that migrant laborers had called for a boycott of these crops'? Does one say, 'I purchased a pair of Nike sneakers for my teenage son, even though I had read that the company exploits third-world labor'? Or does one add, 'and for all the evil I have been doing without knowing it by not being a politically and socially informed consumer'? How do citizens deal with the level of responsibility that falls to them when their elected officials make the country a partner to bloody military and political repression overseas? When the corporation that employs me is found guilty of discrimination, or of polluting the environment? How do we bring before the Lord our submerged prejudices, and to whom do we really need to confess them? How do we confess our sins to the communities or groups we have offended?

In short, the sacrament of reconciliation as we have understood and practiced it appears to have become incapable of meeting many of today's spiritual needs. What we may have to attempt, therefore, is to rethink the sacrament in light of the experience of solidarity. This rethinking could mean, for example, that an individual Christian, or individual Christian communities, will find themselves experiencing what should be described as a new form or dimension of sinfulness, in the sense of 2 Cor. 5:21: 'For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God' (NRSV).

To modify Paul's language, we could say somewhat clumsily: For the sake of reconciling the world to himself, God made us (we who would never consciously choose to do anything evil) become aware of

both the full dimensions of evil in the world and our unwitting complicity in that evil. It is precisely because of God's action in our lives that we have been growing painfully sensitive to the destructive power and consequent moral burden of structural sin. And to what purpose is this happening? In order that God's action of healing the world might be clearly evident in our lives. Through sacramental confession, we could satisfy a deep religious need to place before the Lord the sin of the world, a sin that is going to weigh more heavily upon us the more fully the Christ-self in us develops and matures.

This point is as important christologically as it is spiritually. We are so accustomed to the liturgical phrase 'as one like ourselves, though free from sin',²⁵ that our minds might surrender too much of the human religious experience, with the result that the figure of Jesus turns out to be increasingly unlike us. But it is inconceivable that Jesus excepted or excluded himself from the general human condition as he related himself to God. Would he have refrained from praying Psalm 51, for example, because of its expression of remorse and contrition? Would he have experienced himself as beyond needing God's mercy? Would he have skipped over prayers and rituals in which the motif was repentance and an acknowledgment of divine mercy? Would he have held himself excused from observing the Day of Atonement? Knowing that John had been preaching a baptism of repentance, was Jesus simply play-acting when he showed up at the Jordan? However we explain Jesus' being without sin, we cannot make him a stranger to such an elementary dimension of the human being's relatedness to God as dependence upon divine mercy. Jesus could certainly have identified himself with all other men and women in their experience of sin, guilt, contrition and renewal to the degree that he honestly felt the moral weight of their sinfulness and alienation. Perhaps Paul had something like this in mind when he wrote 2 Cor. 5:21. The more acutely aware a person is, in the depths of his or her soul, of the world's estrangement from God, the more will that person be drawn to lead a reconciled and reconciling existence. And, to develop an insight offered by N.T. Wright, such a person is thereby

25. The phrase appears in the preface for the Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time. It derives from Heb. 4:15, which the NRSV translates 'who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin'. The scriptural text does not exactly say that Jesus is unlike us because he did not sin, but that because he shared the basic human experience of being tested or tempted he is able to sympathize with our weaknesses. The stress, then, appears to be on similarity, not dissimilarity; solidarity rather than apartness.

24. James Empeur and Christopher Kiesling, *The Liturgy That Does Justice* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990), p. 152.

going to become a flesh-and-blood revelation of God's own covenant faithfulness.²⁶

What we are saying in the case of the sacrament of reconciliation could be extended to all the sacraments. The experience of solidarity affects the way we address and worship God, name and confess our sinfulness, deal with sickness and mortality, and ask the Lord's blessing upon lifelong commitments. It affects how we meditate on the psalms, read the prophets, and study and appropriate the Gospels. Thomas Merton remains one of the precursors of a spirituality of solidarity, a spirituality which has still to be worked out in greater detail. The reach of his religious sensibility was global; to be a Christian today, he was telling us, involves fostering a spirit that knows how to converse with the world. The germ of that insight must have been sown somewhere in his imagination long before the remarkable experience in downtown Louisville occurred; Merton's account of that moment shows how pivotal it could have proven in his own developing spirituality had he lived longer.²⁷ William Shannon writes:

This experience shattered the notion of a separate holy existence that went with living in a monastery. He thrilled to the glory of being quite simply a member of the human race, not separate from others, but at one with all men and women.

In experiencing his solidarity with all those people who did not belong to his monastic family, he experienced what he had said many times, namely, that in some mysterious way his solitude belonged to them as much as to him. 'I have responsibilities for it in their regard, not just in my own. I owe it to them to be alone, and when I am alone they are not "they", but my own self. There are no strangers!' ²⁸

26. See his essay, "'That we might become the righteousness of God': Reflections on 2 Corinthians 5:21', in D.M. Hay (ed.), *Pauline Theology*, II (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), pp. 200-208.

27. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), pp. 140-41.

28. William H. Shannon, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), p. 191. A truly 'radical humanism' would be impossible apart from solidarity: 'A humanism that "unites man to man [in] authentic love" bears further witness, then, to Merton's evolution of self-images: from the ascetic and his claims on interiority to the pragmatic humanist whose spiritual progress was measured, not by degrees of self-transcendence, but through the quality of his interpersonal relationships and whether they advanced, as a practical matter, "the unity," Merton says, "of the human family"' (David Cooper, *Thomas Merton's Art of Denial: The Evolution of a Radical Humanist* [Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1989], p. 244).

There is a profound spiritual energy and empowerment (which is precisely what consolation in its traditional ascetical sense consists of) to be discovered within the experience of solidarity. Prayerfully realizing and then living out one's profound oneness with others is a wonderfully joyous, dynamic and liberating experience. Tapping into that energy and recognizing that consolation for what it is, namely, a gift of the Spirit, belongs to the development of Christian spirituality for a new millennium. Writing from a different time and place than Merton's, a young political prisoner in South America reflected during the dark days and nights of his torture:

Pero también siento voces, sí, miles de voces que me gritan! Es El que se hace presente en mi debilidad! no para evitarme los dolores, sino para acompañarme y hacerme capaz de enfrentarlos sin temor; porque solo son dolores físicos, mientras no hieran el corazón, el valor, el espíritu... Sin embargo, sentí miedo, un miedo de muerte que nunca antes había experimentado. Sí, temor de que sus materiales torturas hicieran mella en mi espíritu, y me desalmaran. Pero, las voces que me acompañaban, nunca dejaron de gritar.²⁹

The thousands of voices that never ceased crying and that he never ceases to hear: they became his consolation and (because he is a believer) the confirmation of another's presence. From the context of monastic existence, Merton had reached the point where he was learning how to share his soul with countless others. Prisoners, laborers and monks might well prove to be the sources and the testing ground for the new experience of God which seems to be gradually, irreversibly emerging among us.

29. Juan Carlos Pinto Quintanilla, *Reflexiones libres de un encarcelado* (La Paz, Bolivia: Caritas Boliviana, 1997), pp. 9-10. 'But I also feel voices, yes, thousands of voices that shout to me! It is He who becomes present in my weakness! not in order that I might avoid the pain, but rather to accompany me and make me capable of facing it without fear; because my torments are only physical, they do not strike my heart, my courage, my spirit ... However, I felt fear, a fear of death I had never experienced before. Yes, fear that their physical tortures would damage my spirit and de-soul me. But the voices that were accompanying me never stopped crying out.'