

Monasticism and Thomas Merton, Monk-Priest and Author: His Contributions to a Wider Understanding of Spirituality

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When Thomas Merton died in Bangkok 30 years ago, he was 53 years old, and had spent the last 27 years of his life as a monk. In reporting his death on its front page, *The New York Times* referred to him as the best known monk since Martin Luther. Perhaps it would have been more fitting to have described him as the most widely read monastic writer since St Bernard of Clairvaux, who died in 1153. While Luther had rejected monasticism when he attained the age of 30 and wrote bitterly against the spirituality that inspires it, Merton continued to remain enthusiastic about his monastic vocation to the very end of his life. 'Keep telling everyone that I am a monk of Gethsemani and intend to remain one all my days—only I just happen to be out of the monastery, just as some have been absent to go to Rome...'¹ he wrote shortly before his death. Two days before he died, in a letter to his secretary at Gethsemani Abbey, he expressed his feelings about being a monk in warm terms.

I think of you all on this Feast Day [the Immaculate Conception]. Also with Christmas approaching, I feel homesick for Gethsemani. But I hope to be at least in a monastery—Rawa Seneng [Trappist Monastery in Indonesia]. Also, I look forward to being at Hong Kong and maybe seeing our three volunteers there (or is it two?) [three monks from

1. A letter to Brother Patrick Hart, in Patrick Hart (ed.), *The School of Charity: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Renewal* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990), p. 399.

Gethsemani were helping out at the Trappist monastery in Hong Kong at this time]. No more for the moment. Best love to all, Louie²

The 30 years since Merton's death are a relatively brief period in the history of a monasticism that has lived through any number of periods of rather radical change, sometimes for the worse, at other periods clearly for the better. Obviously, any summing up of his influence on that history must remain open-ended, especially since the monastic world as a whole, and the Trappist-Cistercian Order in particular, continues to be in a process of an evolution that became more radical the year after Merton's untimely death in 1968. It would seem useful, nonetheless, to give some appraisal from a current point of view of Merton's writings and his life as they bear upon the Order of which he was so conspicuous a member.

Contributions to Understanding Monastic Life

Describing the kinds of contributions he made to monastic life during his lifetime and the ways his writings have exerted a lasting influence on the way monks and nuns view and live their vocation has been considerably facilitated by the publication of a volume of his letters treating of these matters, as well as the publication of his private journals. Moreover, a considerable literature has been accumulating in which a wide variety of persons, many of them monastics, even more laymen and laywomen, express their views concerning Merton in ways that bear upon our topic of his contribution to monasticism.

The very fact that so many laypersons not only read Merton but study him, write books about him and his teachings, and interest themselves in communicating their interest in a monk and the life he lived is itself perhaps the most important and surely the most original of contributions that he has made. The life and work of Merton brought monasticism to the attention of the world outside the cloister in a way that has but seldom been the case in the past. Only a few monks in the whole of monastic history have been of such widespread interest to persons of all persuasions and manners of life. St Anthony the Great and St Bernard of Clairvaux are perhaps the only other two whose personalities and teaching engaged the attention of a comparably disparate and numerous audience. Both St Gregory the Great and St Augustine were monks whose audience was, and remains, wide and varied, but they were engaged in the activities proper to a

2. *The School of Charity*, p. 417.

pope and bishop respectively, and were not thought of primarily as monks, but as bishops.

His broad contact with a variety of persons active in the world of religion, politics, race relations, writing and other arts, psychology and anthropology among other fields of endeavor, had the effect of changing the fixed image that so many had of monks and of monastic life. Merton did much to restore a human face to the monastic life; his autobiography (*The Seven Storey Mountain*) represented a breakthrough in this regard, leading those who read it to realize that someone who was and remained a modern man could be happy and fulfilled as a monk. Many of his later writings followed up on this initial work that showed the monk author to be more aware of many of the more significant issues and developments that were characteristic of modern times, and able, as few others, to influence them.

This fresh impression concerning the character of monastic life did not arise by accident; it was one of the aims of his writings to break down such prejudices as distorted in people's minds the nature and meaning of the vocation he had adopted with enthusiasm and persevered in through many trials. Fr Jean Leclercq has noted that such an intention was a deliberate purpose that Merton set for himself in his writings.

Although Merton wanted to read about Bernard's life eight centuries later, I don't think he himself was writing so that people in the future would know what monastic life was like today. He was thinking of the present... He was a monk, and he knew there were so many strange ideas on monastic life, that it was a refuge for sadness, or extreme austerity, and things like that. So he wanted to react against the myths and to show the reality as he found it himself. He was a very happy man.³

The service rendered to monastic life by managing to present a fresh image of what kind of person might happily follow such a call was and remains an important one for various types of people: for those attracted to monastic life, for those with prejudices concerning the Church and the place of monastic life in its traditions, among others. As a result of this quality of his writings his message had a particularly convincing message for many who were attracted to a deeper way of prayer. His works persuaded them that it was possible to aspire to a life of contemplation in our times, and encouraged them to follow this interior way. He wrote about the faith in such a way as

3. In Paul Wilkes (ed.), *Merton: By Those Who Knew Him Best* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), p. 128.

to make it seem the normal thing for a Christian to remain a modern participant in society and live a serious life of prayer. Secularity was not the only possible response to those current values and ideas that are embedded in our culture; cultivation of the interior life, Merton demonstrated, not only was compatible with much that is modern, but contributed to its enhancement by taking up into the search for God the legitimate values that it emphasizes, notably concern for human rights for all (especially the oppressed), inner freedom, cultivation of the individual's gifts, and interiority as the way to resist alienation in a consumer society.

Observations about Monastic Life

For those who had decided to enter the monastery, and live according to the Benedictine tradition, Merton's approach to the monastic life imparted a sense of freshness and humanity to that tradition. He had a genuine enthusiasm for prayer and contemplation, for the works of the Fathers and great monastic authors, which can be felt in much of his writings. Those of us who sat in his conferences and classes, discussed spiritual matters with him and shared in the same community life were helped to get a view of what is best in monastic culture and encouraged to assimilate it without denying what was valid in our experience of the world we were formed in. This verve and humanity continue to resonate in much of the writings and add to the appeal of the message. This is no small contribution to monastic formation. Because his voice still is that of a modern, though it is now 30 years since his death, familiarity with his works continues to exert this influence on many monks and nuns today. In the more distant future, as it seems to me, because so much of his personality is conveyed by his style, his writings will serve to make the contemplative life appear within the reach of dedicated Christians, and especially to those called to the monastic way.

A particular aspect of this rejuvenating of the monastic charism that characterizes Merton's life and work is his integration of the intellectual life with the practices of committed devotion to the Lord, the Blessed Mother and the saints. Fr Louis was often at pains to point out he was not an expert in anything; even less was he a specialist. He would admit, however, to being an author and poet, and took care to write well, cultivating an effective style, at times with brilliant results. Anyone who had a serious conversation with him could quickly note that Merton was widely read, thought a great deal about things that mattered and gave great importance to ideas as well as to prayer. He

felt most at ease with intellectuals, cultivated contact with them, read their books and discussed and criticized them; he thought of himself as an intellectual, as he explicitly states in his Journal. 'My frustrations are to some extent those of all intellectuals in a society of business men and squares'.⁴ In brief, Merton was persuaded of the value of the intellectual life for the fuller living out of the monastic call, not only for himself, but for those monks who had the talent and attraction for it.

In a letter to Fr Jean Leclercq he remarked that 'I never felt any sympathy with de Rancé's ideas about erudition [de Rancé was strongly opposed to monks engaging in a life of study], and I am sure that the work done by Benedictines today in this field is perfectly monastic and truly fruitful in the line of monastic spirituality'.⁵ He maintained a demanding program of reading and continued to be an eager student all his life. He considered this study to be important not only for his writing but especially for the furthering of the interior life and union with God.

In this way he showed that there need be no conflict between contemplation and study, between devotion and an intellectual life. I recall one day his telling his class of young monks who were studying for the priesthood that we should all become theologians. This emphasis on the intellectual life and study was not the least of his influences on monastic spirituality and the life of prayer. His approach to the formation of monks was holistic, seeking to cultivate and integrate all the faculties, especially the mind and the will, in the service of spiritual union with the Lord. He passed on to a number of us a love for the Cistercian Fathers and the Fathers of the Church, many of whom he read assiduously.

Today monastic formation in our monasteries regularly includes conferences on major monastic writers such as Cassian, St Basil, Evagrius and the desert fathers. Patristic courses in monasteries include expositions of the original texts of some of the more prominent Fathers of the Church, especially St Augustine, St Gregory the Great, Origen and St Gregory of Nyssa. While a variety of influences have been responsible for such interests, the fact remains that Merton regularly lectured on these authors at a time when only a few monks of our Order studied them for their spiritual contributions and their

4. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage* (Journals, 5; 1963–1966; ed. Robert E. Daggy; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p. 50.

5. *The School of Charity*, p. 76.

theological thought. His genuine involvement with their ideas and experiences was evident and contagious and acted as a stimulus for cultivating a personal interest in them. This remains a characteristic of his writings as well. Even while, in the last decade of his life, he was writing various works dealing with topical issues of racial justice, war and peace, he continued to read, lecture and write on such relatively unknown authors as Ammonas, Philoxenus of Mabbug, Isaac of Nineveh, Ruusbroeck and Christian of Markyate.⁶ His journals especially witness to the ongoing role they played in his inner life in addition to furnishing material for his lectures and publications. He had a particular attraction to St Anselm as well as to John Cassian's writings. He made frequent use of the latter's works in the talks he gave to his novices and others. For example, in a letter to the scholar of Celtic monasticism, Nora Chadwick, he writes:

Certainly I agree with you about Cassian. Ever since I had him as a Lenten book in the novitiate, I have kept close to him, and of course use him constantly with the novices. I have done a little work on St. Anselm lately, however, and though he is quite a different sort of person I am quite fond of him too. I have a long essay on his 'argument' coming out. I think it is not appreciated.⁷

Merton's language here is typically personal. He does not state that he finds their writings of interest, though that is obviously the case, but that he is fond of these two men. For him they were living persons whom he came to know and love through their works and through his prayer and theirs. As he had observed on another occasion, the ancient monks were more alive for him than the people living in Louisville. This personal dimension of his teaching and writing explains in good measure why he was able to communicate so convincingly in class and in his publications. He conveys the impression that he is treating of living persons and experiences, not only of ideas and thought systems. He was quite conscious of this aspect of his influence and understood that his contribution to the spiritual life consisted in good measure in conveying to others, and to monks in particular, the primacy of persons over ideas and systems. He was passionately convinced that a great deal of the political abuses and

6. Cf., e.g., entries in the Journals for 1963–1965 (*Dancing in the Water of Life*) and 1966–67 (*Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom* [Journals, 6; 1966–1967; ed. Christine M. Bochen; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997]) where these and others are referred to and serve to stimulate his thought and contribute to his prayer.

7. *The School of Charity*, p. 283.

tyrannies of our century were caused by adherence to abstractions in the form of ideology and of systems of thought. He often made the point to his students that ideals and strict application of principles of ascetic and moral behavior could readily bring about unintended effects, and would insist that persons transcend in value all systems.

Transformation of the Inner Man: Contemplation and the True Self

As significant as his stress on the role of the intellectual life and the study of the Fathers was, Merton's main contribution to monastic spirituality, as I see it, was the prominence he gave to the cultivation of the true self and the spiritual transformation of the inner man. Closely associated with this concern was his dedication to contemplation and pure prayer. The conception he formed of the monastic life centered on the inner work of the heart, as the Fathers referred to spiritual prayer. While his interest in all kinds of matters relative to the ascetic aspects of the monastic life remained constant, he understood from the beginning that observances and ascetic practices are useful only in so far as they contribute to the purity of heart and the transformation of the inner man that are essential to union with God. In taking up this manner of envisaging the monastic practices and usages, Merton inserted himself into that series of monks who had, at the best periods of monastic history, so developed this point of view that it became the classical mystical teaching. He gave fresh life to this concept of transformation and an expanded description of the elements involved in this process.

This brings up what was perhaps Merton's most original contribution to monastic renewal and to the modern Church: his taking up of traditional terms and giving them fresh significance through the life he breathed into the expanded descriptions of their authentic meaning. I recall on one occasion his telling us in class that renewal meant giving new meaning to familiar words. Such terms as sanctity, contemplation, prayer, silence, solitude, meditation, monasticism and any number of other terms that had become trite and stereotyped by frequent rather lifeless usage for many took on a newness of significance as he related the meaning they held for him after he encountered them in the Fathers and they contributed to his own experience. Nowhere is this freshness of vocabulary more evident, it seems to me, than in his treatment of these and other related terms found in the word field of transformation and realization of the true self.

Take the term 'sanctity'. What does it mean to become holy?

Obviously there are any number of ways to answer this question which is so fundamental to the spiritual life. Merton's approach to it gave the issue a relevance for our times that made the question a significant one for many readers. Somehow they felt questioned by it when they came to read his comments, for they perceived that it converted what had seemed a rather abstract topic into a practical, concrete matter. His answer pointed out a specific path to follow that they otherwise would not have known how to find.

If, then, we want to seek some way of being holy we must first of all renounce our own way and our own wisdom. We must empty ourselves as He (Christ crucified) did... We must live by a power and a light that seem not to be there. We must live by the strength of an apparent emptiness that is always truly empty and yet never fails to support us at every moment.

This is holiness...

I who am without love cannot become love unless Love identifies me with Himself. But if He sends His own Love, Himself, to act and love in me and in all that I do, then I shall be transformed. I shall discover who I am and shall possess my true identity by losing myself in Him.

And that is what is called sanctity.⁸

This concept of sanctity already points to contemplation and the entry into 'the place of God' as the practices most suited to realize the project of sanctity.

There exists some point at which I can meet God in a real and experimental contact with His infinite actuality. This is the 'place' of God, His sanctuary—it is the point where my contingent being depends upon His love. Within myself is a metaphorical apex of existence at which I am held in being by my Creator.⁹

This line of thought naturally leads to a dynamic conception of salvation, another word which takes on a more contemporary freshness as he relates it to inner experience.

But if I am true to the concept that God utters in me, if I am true to the thought of Him I was meant to embody, I shall be full of His actuality and find Him everywhere in myself, and find myself nowhere. I shall be lost in Him: that is, I shall find myself. I shall be 'saved'.¹⁰

That Merton himself was aware he was refurbishing the well-worn term 'salvation', opening a window that allows for a more appealing

8. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1962), pp. 62, 63.

9. *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 37.

10. *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 37.

view of its marvelous content, appears in a subsequent passage of this same work.

It is a pity that the beautiful Christian metaphor 'salvation' has come to be so hackneyed and therefore so despised. It has been turned into a vapid synonym for 'piety'—not even a truly ethical concept. 'Salvation' is something far beyond ethical propriety. The word connotes a deep respect for the fundamental metaphysical reality of man. It reflects God's own infinite concern for man, God's love and care for man's inmost being, God's love for all that is His own in man, His son.¹¹

In a work to which he gave the title 'The Inner Experience', Merton treated these questions once again, at considerable length. This essay, incomplete as it remained at the time of his death, is a reprise of these fundamental concepts of the spiritual life. It serves as a complement to the earlier treatment found in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, which remained one of Merton's favorites among his books. He takes up the question of the proper approach to contemplation by indicating its relation to the true self.

The first thing that you have to do before you start thinking about such a thing as contemplation, is to try to recover your basic natural unity, to reintegrate your compartmentalized being into a coordinated and simple whole, and learn to live as a unified human person. This means that you have to bring back together the fragments of your distracted existence so that when you say 'I' there is really someone present to support the pronoun you have just uttered.¹²

This hidden self is deeper than psychological reality; it is not subject to direct control but must be approached through a process of discovery that involves a turning aside from the many layers of the person we appear to be not only to others, but even to our self. This self in fact exists more in God than within the boundaries of my own circumscribed being, so that I come to identify with it by discovering God, present within, to be the key to my truest identity. Until I know myself as having my being within him I do not yet know what is most real.

Cassian's first Conference dealt with this theme, and so when Merton lectured and wrote on this teaching he was at one with the ancient author in showing how purity of heart was the immediate aim of all the monk's efforts, and the final end was attaining to the kingdom of heaven. This concept serves as a norm by which the monk

11. *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 38.

12. 'The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation (I)', *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 18 (1983), pp. 3-15 (3).

judges the usefulness of such matters as vigils, lectio, fasting and manual labor. What contributes to purity of heart is to be put into effect, but only in so far as it leads to this desired result. Thus, for example, it is not the monk who works at the heaviest tasks who profits most from manual labor but the one who works in such a way that he becomes more detached from his own will, more selfless and freer to respond to God's will.

A number of terms are closely associated with this fundamental concept of inner transformation in Merton's works, each of which serves at various times to bring out one or other aspect of this process. Such key words as freedom, liberty, discovering the true self, entering into the virgin point of the soul, contact with the spark of the soul (*scintilla animae*), the new man, attaining the likeness of God—all these relate to the same radical, mysterious reality that is operative at the center of the monastic way of life in Merton's view. Merton's concept of monastic life as a process of transformation which engages the whole person and leads to increasing simplification of his thoughts, desires and affective life is the key to understanding his considered views on monastic spirituality and monastic reform. Changes of usages and liturgy, experiments with various ways of relating to the world, and dialogue among members of the community he judged to be useful or fruitless depending upon their contribution to this process of inner transformation in view of encounter with God and eventual union with him in Christ.

This radical focus on the interior, on the actual dispositions of the heart, is what most characterized his monastic teaching and his writings from early years in the monastery. To be situated in a right existential relation to God by virtue of a sincere obedience of the inner man is more important for him than any activity, even that of contemplation. He described himself as holding to an eschatological spirituality. 'If it were a matter of choosing between "contemplation" and "eschatology" there is no question that I am, and would always be, committed entirely to the latter.' He goes on to comment on this in connection with his hermit vocation which he understands to be a way of living out the grace of baptism received at his conversion, while at Columbia University.

Here in the hermitage, returning necessarily to beginnings, I know where my beginning was, have 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.¹³

Rightly to appreciate Merton's attraction for solitude, his persistent efforts to live a hermit life, his repeated returns to solitude after certain infidelities to his chosen hermit way of life, we must understand the fundamental role of this process of inner transformation and of preparation for union with Christ in the risen life of glory. He often returns to this thought in his last years, as appears in a number of journal entries. About six months before his death he reflected on his spiritual state in view of defining more specifically the direction his efforts should take.

In our monasteries, we have been content to find our way to a kind of peace, a simple undisturbed thoughtful life. And this is certainly good, but is it good enough?

I, for one, realize that now I need more. Not simply to be quiet, somewhat productive, to pray, to read, to cultivate leisure—*otium sanctum!* There is a need of effort, deepening, change and transformation. Not that I must undertake a special project of self-transformation or that I must 'work on myself'. In that regard, it would be better to forget it. Just to go for walks, live in peace, let change come quietly and invisibly on the inside.

But I do have a past to break with, an accumulation of inertia, waste, wrong, foolishness, rot, junk, a great need of clarification of mindfulness, or rather of no mind...¹⁴

Inconsistency and Honesty

Merton was not always just to others; his penchant for exaggeration which served him well in his frequent excursions into satire and caricature was deep-rooted in his character. In the passage above he presents himself as standing out from the rest of the Order in his search for transformation. Certainly, he was deeply committed to that process, but so were others, many quite explicitly so. Few were articulate enough to write about it, or even speak of it much; indeed, it would be difficult to find more than a handful of authors in this century who were as articulate as he when it came to analyzing and describing its workings. Such ability of expression is an uncommon gift. But many other monks appreciated his lectures and writings on

13. Journal entry for 22 December 1964 (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, pp. 181-82).

14. Journal for 30 May 1968 (Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey* [Journals, 7; 1967-1968; ed. Patrick Hart; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998], p. 113).

this theme precisely because the same values were important in their life; they felt an affinity with this spirituality which is essentially that of a progressive transformation of the whole self into Christ. After all, the whole purpose of monastic life is to put on Christ, and it surely would be extraordinary to come across anyone who perseveres in a monastery who did not have the same goal that Merton set for himself.

At the same time, it is quite usual to find that after he has delivered himself of some such judgment as is instanced in the passage above from his journal, he makes another statement that modifies or even contradicts his critical note. He was quite conscious of this dialectic and refers to it as a deliberate choice on his part. For he considered himself to be a chronicler of the phenomena of consciousness. It was in the service of self-knowledge and the involvement of the whole self in the project of transformation that he engaged in such extensive analysis and record-keeping as is witnessed to in his voluminous journals and many of his letters which he saved. This function of his journals is illustrated perhaps no place more clearly than in Volume 6 of the recently published series. The following entry for 24 June 1966 illustrates this role and Merton's awareness of the often contradictory nature of what he recorded and of how he acted.

I think probably that what I was doing was slipping back into an act I had given up long ago, 'when I was a kid on Long Island', playing a very old role that was so phony that even I could detect it.

The real wrong is playing these roles and taking them seriously. I do not think I take any role too seriously, but still, one has to play roles in order to communicate with the rest of the world. The beauty of the solitary life (this business of trees that say nothing and skies that are neutral) is that you can throw away all the masks and forget them until you return among people.

The mask I was putting on at that moment was the very old, worn out, dilapidated one of my Columbia days: I am the guy who finds his happiness in drinking and in love. But I am not, I have never been able to convince myself that either of these *produced* happiness. They just go along with it...

Since the thing that is most important to me is the deepening and the exploration of consciousness, then obviously if I catch myself lying about *that* I will be deeply embarrassed.¹⁵

Merton's insistence on self-honesty, on genuine self-knowledge as an essential element in the work of deepening consciousness and of opening oneself to the Spirit who is the transforming agent is another

15. *Learning to Love*, p. 344.

of his contributions to the monastic and contemplative life. That he was capable of self-deception is nowhere more clearly evidenced than in the events recorded in this volume of his journal which covered the years 1966 and 1967. Later when he had come to a highly critical view of his behavior during much of this period, he never seriously considered that the lengthy descriptions of what he now considered his folly should be suppressed. At the same time, he did not hesitate to chronicle its termination.

How evident it becomes now that this whole thing with M. was, in fact, an attempt to escape the demands of my vocation. Not conscious, certainly. But a substitution of human love (and erotic love after all) for a special covenant of loneliness and solitude which is the very heart of my vocation. I did not stand the test at all—but allowed that whole essence to be questioned and tried to change it. And could not see I was doing this... I think it is clear to both of us that the affair is over—and that it has been very silly.¹⁶

He did not shrink from criticizing the whole relationship in blunt terms and drawing the bitterest of conclusions from his part in it.

Basically I am much more ready now to admit that the whole thing was a mistake, a subtle and well-meant seduction to which I too easily and too completely yielded... This must never happen again. Also it is clearly over.¹⁷

Almost two years later, on 20 August 1968, a brief entry shows how far he had distanced himself from attitudes and relationships that had been the greatest threat to his vocation as a monk and priest.

Today, among other things, I burned M.'s letters. Incredible stupidity in 1966! I did not even glance at any one of them. High hot flames of the pine branches in the sun.¹⁸

This frankness in recording such delicate and self-incriminating matters and his decision to record his folly for posterity is consistent with his open expression of criticism of others. It is deeply rooted in Merton's approach to monastic ascesis and characterized his monastic teaching as well as his letters and journals. His readiness to take a position, especially a critical one, did not exclude his own behavior and attitudes. It is one of the reasons why he appealed to so many, both monastics and laypersons.

He rarely explained his intent in speaking so openly about his

16. *Learning to Love*, p. 155.

17. Journal Entry for 31 October 1966 (*Learning to Love*, p. 154).

18. *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 157.

feelings, but he said enough to allow an understanding of his conscious intentions. For one thing, he knew a good deal about the struggles of those who wanted to live a spiritual life and who were subject to temptations. He felt it was an encouragement to others to reveal that a man called to a life of holiness as a monk and priest was not spared his own struggles and was not always successful in resisting them but continued to seek God after confessing his failures. In addition, he knew that many idealized him and he had a genuine horror of falsity. Manifesting his own failures was a way of correcting any such idealization. Even though, as he admitted, he was aware of a certain need for recognition, that he had some measure of an author's vanity, yet truth meant a very great deal to him; his being simple and true was fundamental to his whole approach to the spiritual life. Thus even when he found it embarrassing and knew it gave his critics more ammunition he often chose the way of frankness and a broad openness. He knew that he had been quite critical of others, including his own community; not to let his own faults be known would be to use a double standard.

There was still another reason: Merton had a great deal of confidence in his vocation. Although he knew he had some very real weaknesses, he also possessed a profound confidence in his call, and in his commitment to persevere in it until death. As he repeatedly affirmed, even in his weakest moments, he never seriously considered for any length of time leaving the monastic way of life. He was not so threatened by what he knew of his sins and faults as to need to deny them to himself, at least at his better moments, or even to hide them from his reading public, though he did exercise a certain healthy discretion. In a letter he wrote in January 1967 to a writer who was working on a biography of Merton, he gives a brief summary of his self-evaluation.

But I would only remark that like every other Christian I am still occupied with the great affair of saving my sinful soul, in which grace and 'psychology' are sometimes in rather intense conflict. I am certainly aware of the fact that my life is not necessarily a history of fidelity to grace. Like every other Christian, I can only admit my failures and beg the Lord to have mercy on me. I would like to say that I have never claimed any other position than this. If certain readers have taken an exaggerated and perhaps distorted view of some of my books, it may be due to my faults as a writer. If in trying to give God thanks for His mercies I have sometimes helped others to do the same in their own lives, I am glad. But I still need the prayers and the compassion of my fellow Christians.¹⁹

19. *The School of Charity*, p. 326.

The Mercy of God and Conversion

Deeply imbedded in monastic spirituality is the theme of conversion. The life of a monk, from one point of view, can be viewed as a living out of the conversion that brought him to the monastery in the first place. In the Prologue of his Rule, St Benedict describes the monk's course from beginning to end as a return journey, carrying the monk back to the Father from whom he had departed through the disobedience of sin. Gregory the Great gave a forceful emphasis to this view of monastic life in his writings for monks that proved to be so influential on the early Cistercians. Sin is, among other things, in practice an expression of contempt for God, at least in the sense of refusing him the reverence of obedience that is his due. Accordingly, as a believer grows in knowledge of God, and so comes to reverence his will, he inevitably turns with increasing repugnance from all forms of sin, and attaches himself progressively to every indication of God's good pleasure. This is precisely what conversion is, and this way of understanding it explains why the whole of a monk's life should represent a progressive conversion.

Merton was highly successful in filling the term 'conversion' with a modern, fresh significance for countless readers, the large majority of them laypersons. His autobiography presents his life as the story of a conversion. The early part details the steps by which he lost his way and found himself a prisoner of sin and unhappy in spite of having so many advantages and gifts. As the narrative progresses the reader accompanies him as he struggles to get free of the moral confusion of his life and recognizes the first glimmerings of light that reveal to him how far away he had wandered from the truth. As he turns to God and takes his first steps on the return to him he experiences the awful binding force of evil habits and the dividedness that prevented him at first from remaining faithful to the light he had been given. Finally he is able to get free from inveterate habits that tied him to a world in which he had become so unhappy, and enters upon the King's way, as it were, of the monastic life, which, as he first experienced it, leads straight back to God and to paradise.

His later writings, especially the journals, reveal how he was again to take some bypaths that complicated his journey for a time, and threatened to cause him to take a false road through pursuing what he later called dangerous illusions. But in the solitude of his hermitage he once again returned to the direct way of contemplative prayer sustained by a greater fidelity to monastic austerity. Each stage of this journey is not only marked out but described in very human

terms and often in vivid detail. Once again he found an enthusiasm for the monastic way that had been dulled by compromises he consented to when suffering from the severe inner testings of an increased solitude.

In this way both his early and late writings depict in a modern context a convincing, realistic and, for many, a hopeful and appealing image of what a life of conversion could be. 'Conversion', then, is another word, and not the least significant, into which Merton infused a new, modern content, giving it a plausibility for contemporaries, both monastics and lay. Conversion is, of course, the fruit of grace as well as the assent of the believer, together with the requisite efforts to avoid future sin and to cultivate a life of virtue in view of union with God. Merton, it seems to me, had a strong sense of having received the mercy of God. He never lost the sense of gratitude and wonder that God had sought him out when he had strayed so far and entangled himself in the thickets of sensuality and pride. At bottom, this sentiment of grateful appreciation of the loving kindness and forgiveness the Lord showed him fueled his life of psalmody, prayer and contemplation. He did not speak of it often, but he always lived from this profound experience of grace as mercy. His emphasis on his need for God's loving forgiveness, expressed in the manly, direct language of which he was a master, remained a prominent characteristic of his spirituality. Though he referred to his continuing sense of being a sinner who put his hope in God's mercy, in his later years, as the citation from his letter above reveals, he never improved upon the reflections he made upon this theme at the end of his early monastic journal, *The Sign of Jonas*. These closing words of that remarkable book are closer to poetry than to prose, and manage to express more directly something of his most personal spiritual experience. Let them serve as a conclusion to this essay, for they disclose well the inspiration that gave his teaching such a moral force; they are uttered from the heart of his spirituality, and reveal too his blend of subtle analysis and expressive imagery.

The Voice of God is heard in Paradise:

'What was vile has become precious. What is now precious was never vile. I have always known the vile as precious: for what is vile I know not at all.

'What was cruel has become merciful. What is now merciful was never cruel. I have always overshadowed Jonas with My mercy, and cruelty I know not at all. Have you had sight of Me, Jonas My child? Mercy within mercy within mercy.'²⁰

20. *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1953), p. 362.