
Thomas Merton

THOMAS MERTON IN ALASKA:

Prelude to The Asian Journal:

The Alaskan Conferences, Journals, and Letters

Introduction by Robert E. Daggy / Preface by David D. Cooper

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Reviewed by **Diane Foster**

Bardo Thodol — your own true nature confronts you as Pure Truth, “subtle, sparkling, bright, dazzling, glorious, and radiantly awesome . . . Be not terrified . . . From the midst of that radiance the natural sound of Reality, reverberating like a thousand thunders simultaneously sounding, will come. That is the natural sound of thine own real self. (p. 5)

Not the properties of an individual nature, but the unique relationship of each being with God — a relationship by the Holy Spirit and realized in grace — is what constitutes the uniqueness of a human person. (p. 17)

Sunday 6 a.m. on KHAR Anchorage A good thought from a respectful potato. (p. 17)

Bluegreen Juneau. The old cathedral. The deserted hospital. The deserted hotel. The deserted dock. The deserted school. (p. 27)

Noise of heat walking around in the walls. I am hungry. (p. 28)

. . . copies of *Ave Maria* on the table but I did not get to look at them to see if my statement on draft record burning was there. Nor have I had any repercussions. A letter from Phil Berrigan . . . He does not mind prison life. But demonstrations & draft card burnings are not understood. (p. 28)

Dillingham — grey sky, smelling of snow. Cold wind. Freezing. Brown tundra. Low hemlocks . . . Another distance with snow covered mountains vanishing into low clouds. Lake Aleknagik speaks to me. A chain of lakes far from everything. Is this it? (p. 31)

The journal entries of *Thomas Merton in Alaska* offer yet another kaleidoscopic view of the personality, Thomas Merton. One senses with him the tundra, thunder, cold, cutlery and crockery, bays with small islands, the old town of Valdez, an enormous jigsaw puzzle, a lovely, ageless Eskimo woman, the smell of bacon, fallen birch leaves, seagulls flying by in the rain, a volcano to which one speaks with reverence, a chain of lakes far from

everything. "Is this it?" Merton is, as ever, on the scent of his quest for God, being with God in ever deeper ways, ever more inclusively. His journal entries, a potpourri, imbue the reader with his here and now as he wends his way through Alaska with Asia on the horizon.

The letters, sixteen in all — to four people, principally address business or social concerns, with scattered descriptions of Alaska. For the Abbot [Flavian Burns], he goes into further details depicting all the potential sites for a true solitary life. Though predominantly prosaic, when inserted in their chronological sequence with the journal entries, the correspondence reveals the "complex self-contradictory temperament" of the author.

A superficial reading of the six workshop conferences and two "day of recollection" conferences fails to disclose the gems hidden in the midst of Merton's bright ideas and farfetched connections. If one tastes the conferences in a *lectio* type of rumination and allows them to engender further questions leading to deeper personal exploration of one's perception of oneself, God, neighbor and world, a continuity of monastic process appears through one conference to the next. In "This is God's Work," Merton weaves together a description of contemplative life including one's depths where God's voice is heard, the problem of alienation, a way to freedom for what really matters.

"contemplative life" . . . The main point is the action of God's grace in our life . . . God's work in us is a very, very deep call which is heard in silence in the deepest part of our being . . . The covenant consists in listening to the call and believing the promise, and always listening and always believing . . . Alienation . . . somebody who is never allowed to be fully himself. . . . the truth will make us free. This relationship to God through the Word of Jesus makes us free because it does not merely give us political liberation, it gives us the Holy Spirit . . . What really matters is that God is here and now and loves us and dwells with us and we are called to realize this.

(pp. 71-74, 76, 79-80)

In "Prayer, Personalism, and the Spirit," Merton continues with the Holy Spirit and freedom addressing the need to allow for differences in the life of prayer, moving freely with the Spirit "without violating the rights of others, and to fulfill love without violating love" (pp. 88-89).

All the old ways are good and all the new ways are good. We can't do everything, so you pick the way that is good for you at the time that it is good for you . . . let's respect individual differences and let each one do what is best for him or her and not feel badly if nobody else is doing it . . . We are not used enough to the idea that several people can be right in different ways, and there can be different ways of being right. (pp. 89, 91)

It is clear that the author is not advocating individualistic practices, rather

the more difficult asceticism of being led by the Holy Spirit to a "freedom to be ourselves without infringing on others" (p. 88).

In "Building Community on God's Love," remembering what really matters with a spirit of freedom, Merton touches basically upon the necessity of not preferring things to people, believing in the power of God's grace to enable the solving of problems, and trusting one another while knowing that trust can fall and be rebuilt.

... community ... is God's work and the basis ... is not just sociability but faith ... the importance of poverty is that we are supposed to be free from things that we might prefer to people ... people come here ... to see you as a community of love ... When we live together with people we have strong feelings of rebellion against them ... tend to repress this ... they cause anxiety ... You have sufficient grace to solve all your problems in the ordinary human way; ... to deal with them, not to be without them. You have to work at it all the time ... the power of God's love will be in it. We are going to make mistakes, but it really doesn't matter that much.

(pp. 97, 98, 101, 102, 105)

Much of the context of Merton's words on building community on God's love is quoted from Eberhard Arnold. I found it appropriately based upon God's grace and somewhat simplistic when considering the specific work required personally and communally to realize a community of love.

In "Community, Politics, and Contemplation," Merton tells us: "We have to be where love is and it is really the harder position, but it is also the creative position and the constructive position ... you can't have any real non-violence unless you have faith in God" (p. 109). Again, quotations from Arnold on community provide the backdrop for Merton's own commentary on a community built by God, where love prevails over power and a longing for the sacred working in people's lives brings nonviolent revolution.

Contemplation is the realization of God in our life ... prayer is our real freedom ... liberation from ... alienation ... It is in prayer that we are truly and fully ourselves and we are not under any other power, authority, or domination. (p. 113)

In "Prayer, Tradition, and Experience," Merton moves to the heart of the matter.

It is always hard to talk about prayer because everybody prays in private and everybody is different ... You speak from your heart ... That is what prayer is and that is what we have to do ... after a while the only rule that there is in prayer is that you never say anything that you don't mean ... you seek a deeper level to just be with God, just to listen to God ... We used to have in monastic life a sort of guru-disciple relationship ... someone who knows intuitively how to bring out what is deepest in a person and, believe me, that is what we really need ... We know it is there and yet we can't get to it. That is really why I want to go to Asia. I want to find out how Asian

Buddhists are trained . . . to get down into the depths of a person . . . in the Desert Tradition . . . if the old man was really charismatic, he would bring out in the novice the deepest power of prayer . . . There is no reason for contemplative monasteries to exist if you are not able . . . to develop a different kind of consciousness from that experienced outside.

(pp. 118, 119, 122, 123, 126-127)

Contemporary Western monasticism is found lacking by the author. Where indeed are those who "would bring out . . . the deepest power of prayer?"

In the next conference, "Prayer and Conscience," Merton further develops his notion of the relationship of prayer, consciousness, identity and conscience.

Who is it that prays? . . . Where is conscience? . . . What is it? . . . It is by the activity of my conscience that I create my identity and make my life what it is . . . the deepest sense of conscience is conscience with grace, not just me, but the Holy Spirit and me. . . . Prayer is opening up this deepest conscience and consciousness, a mystical conscience and a mystical consciousness, in which God and I work together. (pp. 129-131)

It is perhaps from this mystical place that Merton says:

. . . I am not just an individual when I pray, and I am not just an individual with grace when I pray. When I pray I am, in a certain sense, everybody. The mind that prays in me is more than my own mind, and the thoughts that come up in me are more than my own thoughts because this deep consciousness when I pray is a place of encounter between myself and God and between the common love of everybody. (pp. 134-135)

Merton speaks eloquently and experientially of distractions. In part he says:

You have to take God and creatures all together and see God in His creation and creation in God and don't ever separate them. Then everything manifests God instead of hiding God or being in the way of God as an obstacle. (pp. 139-140)

"The Life that Unifies," a conference given at a day of recollection, concluded with these words: "Down deep in you there is something that sustains you because you are letting it sustain you, and, if you let it, it will" (p. 155). Sufi mysticism and Martin Buber in *The Way of Man* assist Merton in his evocative portrayal of the essence of contemplative and monastic life, the power of God in one's soul and the secret/yes in the task of one's final integration.

The whole essence of contemplative prayer is that the division between subject and object disappears . . . final integration . . . real maturity is for a person to become a mystic. That is what man is made for . . . The purpose of monastic life is to create an atmosphere in which people should feel free to express their joy in reasonable ways. This final integration and unification of man in love is what we are really looking for . . . real people . . . in the core of our soul the Divine force in its depth is capable of acting on the soul, changing it, binding the conflicting sources together, amalgamating the diverging elements. It is capable of unifying it . . . our life

demands breakthroughs . . . we must break through and go beyond where we are . . . Sufism looks at man as a heart and spirit and as a secret, and the secret is the deepest part. The secret of man is God's secret; therefore, it is in God . . . this secret . . . is the word "yes" or the act of "yes." . . . My destiny in life — my final integration — is to uncover this "yes" so that my life is totally and completely a "yes" to God . . . Deep in our hearts is the most profound meaning of our personality, which is that we say "yes" to God, and the spark is always there. All we need to do is to turn towards it and let it become a flame. (pp. 144, 146, 147-151, 153-154)

The last piece in the book is a day of recollection for priests, entitled "Prayer and the Priestly Tradition." Herein, Merton paints a picture of contemporary challenges and the choices needed to meet them.

Today, the only way we priests can live and keep our sanity amidst all the complications of life is by breaking through to a deeper level of simplicity. The real level of course is the level of death, and that can only be reached by prayer . . . to be a Christian today is to be in trouble . . . we have to live in this trouble on the deepest level, not on the level of apologetics, but on the level of faith and personal commitment to Christ . . . self-knowledge . . . I must find myself. I must solve my identity crisis, if I have one, then find myself as one loved by God, as chosen by God, and visited and overshadowed by God's mercy which I now experience as totally in terms of God's mercy . . . To wonder if you believe is not to doubt God, it is to doubt yourself.

In the "Introduction" and "Preface," Robert Daggy and David Cooper carefully situate and describe details of *The Alaskan Journal* period of Thomas Merton's life that might not be found elsewhere. Until Merton gives conferences, his words are sensual, direct from whatever level is finding expression, and then, the reader — if a seeker — will be awakened as the author risks the edges of deepest darkness with its hidden power of prayer. All in all, the book is not stellar, not immediately gratifying. It simply exposes yet another facet of the piece of a star that Merton is, the spark of which may possibly ignite the piece of a star that the reader is, that each person is.