

THOMAS MERTON AND ST. BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX

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On the occasion of the ninth centenary of the birth of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, I have been asked to suggest some parallels between him and Thomas Merton. It is not in order, I suppose, to compare St. Bernard to Merton — something that Merton himself would have abhorred — but rather to compare Merton to St. Bernard. These two men, one of the twelfth century, and the other of the twentieth, had this in common: they were both monks of the Cistercian Order. They were also writers and through their writings had great influence in their own times and afterwards. Both had a message, even a teaching, for their readers who were also their disciples.

I

It would be hazardous to compare them in the field of doctrine, if only because they lived in such very different times and cultures. We do not know — though it is not entirely nonsensical to imagine — what Bernard would have said about Merton. But we do know what Merton thought of Bernard.

From the very first letters I received from Thomas Merton, in the late 1940s, he shared the impressions he got from his readings of the works of St. Bernard and from writings about him. He asked some very good questions, which were quite pertinent. His reactions were personal ones. It was Bernard who offered me the first opportunity of contacting Merton (Fr.

Louis): I needed a microfilm of a medieval manuscript kept in the library of the Abbey of Gethsemani [this was from the Obrecht Collection, which is currently on permanent loan to the Institutes of Cistercian Studies Library at Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, Michigan]. Our correspondence immediately became an exchange of views on Scripture, theology and St. Bernard.

Shortly afterwards, in view of the eighth centenary of the death of St. Bernard, in 1953, a very learned and bulky volume entitled *Bernard de Clairvaux*, was in preparation and the editor thought that it would reach a wider reading public if it had a preface by Thomas Merton, who was already famous as a writer. He accepted and did a good job. He was well aware of the fact that he was no historian, but he had discovered, mainly after the success of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, not only, as he admitted, that he was "an author," but also what it meant for him to be one and what it meant for his readers. The fact that he had been requested to preface an historical work was something with which the editor was immediately reproached. An illustrious European university professor — who perhaps would have liked to write the preface himself — pointed out that this American star-writer was not a scholar — as he himself was — and that he was nothing of an historian or a medievalist. However, the volume was published, and even reprinted. It is still the most valuable synthesis we have of the life and activities of St. Bernard. And Merton's preface is still being read.

In the meanwhile, Merton continued to talk about St. Bernard to the novices and juniors of Gethsemani. He also wrote a few items, articles and even books, which I have not read, on St. Bernard. His talks were tape-recorded and then transcribed. After his death they were collected and made up a little book on St. Bernard. When asked to write the introduction, I was ill at ease: would I too have to point out that he was not an expert? To my surprise, I discovered that he had gone to the heart of the matter. His powers of penetration were so great that he was immediately able to grasp the essential and to express it in a way which met the spiritual and practical needs of the present-day reader.* [See *Thomas Merton on St. Bernard* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1980)].

II

If now we turn to the biographies of Bernard and Merton, there are certain similarities which catch the eye at once. Both had lost their mothers

when they were young boys.. But unlike Merton, Bernard never expressed any feeling about his mother, be it sorrow at her death or any other sentiment. All that has been written on the subject is legendary.

Both Bernard and Merton underwent a process of conversion to the monastic life when they were already young adults. And both spent several years reflecting and thinking things over before deciding to become monks. The decision was a good one and they both found fulfillment in the Cistercian life even though other possibilities were open to them. Both profited from the rich culture they had received in the years preceding their entry into the monastic life: they read widely and developed the talent of expressing their thoughts in beautiful and elegant writing. Both had a tendency towards what some people today would term mysticism, that is to say, a kind of spiritual experience and the ability to put it into words, either orally or in writing. They felt a certain need and attraction for an encounter with God, without however losing either their practical common sense or their intellectual capacities.

Eventually, in the last period of their lives — the last dozen years or so — from about 1139 for Bernard and 1956 for Merton — they became involved, more or less directly, in political activity which aimed at pacifying their contemporaries and persuading them to reduce and limit the violence inherent in their cultures. Has the Vietnam War not been compared to a crusade in favor of human rights and religious freedom? I remember being in Saigon shortly after Francis Cardinal Spellman had been there to justify with such arguments the intervention of the United States and its bombing raids. That had greatly disturbed some people, Christians and others. Furthermore, every evening a Christian minister was blessing the bombers at a base on Guam Island with no mention of the victims. When I shared my impressions on this matter with Merton in a letter, he agreed with them.

As for St. Bernard and the crusade to free the Holy Land, it is true to say that he had never thought of it until he was asked to wield his pen in this cause which, as recent studies have shown, was supported by the majority of Christians at that time. "Crusading as an Act of Love" is the title of a recent historical article quoting many texts to that effect. And another learned publication, *Criticism of the Crusades*, establishes that if any criticism was indeed made it was not about the fact of taking the Cross, but about the taxes that were sometimes imposed on the faithful to finance the expeditions. In a treatise Bernard had written earlier, *In Praise of the Templar Knights*, while justifying the fact of fighting to ensure the safety of Christian pilgrims, he endeavored to restrict as much as possible any armed

violence and reduce it to the minimum. He exhorted the Knights to resort to violence only for justifiable reasons and with pure intentions. He warned them never to fight for glory or through ambition and greed. I remember having once quoted the words, at an American university, in which Bernard says that victory can be unfortunate: *infelix victoria*. Armed violence was part of the societies to which Bernard and Merton belonged: the latter dreamed of suppressing all forms of violence, and Bernard did all he could to restrict it. Both worked for peace and were in favor of those realities which are true signs of the presence of God in and among humans: faith, love, confidence in salvation, and assistance given to all in a truly human and Christian culture.

Such activism on the part of these two monks made them seem to be the “chimera” of their age while yet remaining deeply committed monks. And indeed there is a much quoted text in which St. Bernard says of himself: “May my monstrous life, my bitter conscience, move you to pity. I am a sort of modern chimaera, neither cleric nor layman. I have kept the habit of a monk, but I have long ago abandoned the life” (Ep. 250.4). This is an authentic text, but it betrays a certain desire for literary effect — and that too is a typically authentic Bernardine trait — by means of the use of exaggeration. But there are other more finely nuanced texts which are applicable to both Bernard and Merton. For example:

That soul will be considered perfect in which are to be found these three things: grieving over oneself, rejoicing in God, serving one's neighbors; pleasing to God, prudent towards self, useful to others. But who is able to do all that? Please God that after some years there might be seen in each one of us, I do not say all these qualities, but at least one of them.

(On the Song, 57.21)

The perfect individual, the fulfilled person who has achieved his own synthesis is the one in whom humiliating lucidity about self, illuminating certitude about God, and work for the good of one's fellow human beings are to be found in balanced harmony, working either alternately or simultaneously. We must not let ourselves be deceived by rhetoric. Men of this metal have acquired self-unity, they are one with themselves, no longer at odds with self as a general rule, though there may be some ups and downs.

III

Bernard and Merton had something to do with politics, but their chief concern was in the field of spirituality and monastic renewal or

reform. The evolution which actually took place, in their own Order and elsewhere, shows that they were efficacious. At the bottom of this urge to intervene in these different fields of activity was the consciousness they had of their gift for writing and they considered that their "mission" was to use this talent in the service of as many people as possible, even of all humankind. They were stimulated by the fact that people listened to what they had to say about Church matters and social issues. As one of the Desert Fathers said in antiquity: "From our cells we judge bishops." This was an avowal of the ambiguity of their position as monks and hermits. They had no role to play on the public scene. Yet they did not hesitate to do so and that without the slightest feeling of guilt. Bernard occasionally struck out at himself in irony because of the ambiguity of his position in the Church, and Merton did so too. But this did not stop them from continuing to write. To be sure, they were also aware of their own limits. Bernard had always been reluctant to take a stand in the controversies going on among professional masters in theology, in spite of the pressure that some of them exerted on him, people like William of Saint-Thierry or Guerhoh of Reichensberg. He never raised his voice against Abelard until late in both their lives. Likewise Merton was cautious not to appear as a dogmatist, a speculative or systematic theologian: he wrote on the practical ways of seeking God.

Both these monks were writers and they resembled one another in several ways. They both liked to use paradox, with striking formulas, sometimes not without a certain exaggeration, and even at times with biting, unjust irony. Both were poets. Bernard composed only a few hymns, but many of his pages in prose are poetic — poetry in prose, so to speak — with verses, rhymes, plays on words in sound and sense. Merton left more formal poems, but he too was generally attentive to his style, polishing the musicality of the words and sentences. In fact, neither he nor Bernard ever had to make an effort in that field: they had no need to struggle in order to produce literary beauty. They had a gift for it. Their literary qualities are evident even in their private letters destined for a particular person with apparently no public purpose. They were excellent letter writers and have left an enormous number of letters, many of which are valuable for their literary interest, but also as historical documents revealing something of themselves and their times. [See the first two volumes of Merton letters: *The Hidden Ground of Love*, edited by William H. Shannon, and *The Road to Joy*, edited by Robert E. Daggy. A third volume is pending publication, *The School of Charity*, edited by Brother Patrick Hart. All three volumes published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux.]

IV

Having looked at their biographies and their works, let us now turn to their characters. In both St. Bernard and Merton the awareness of having a mission in the Church and in society, as well as the talent to fulfill this mission, in spite of the cloistered life which they had chosen, engendered a sort of complexity, a questioning as to their personal identity. Bernard does not seem to have been particularly subject to depression, though he excelled in describing some of the feelings of sinfulness, limitations, "finitude" as philosophers of today say. Such feelings are common to all human beings and perhaps are more deeply experienced by Christians in the light of God. In making these descriptions, Bernard did not shy away from speaking in the first person, saying "I," as if he were describing what was going on in himself. It is not always easy to discern, in all that he says, what part is rhetoric and what part is sincerity. The result was not only a lesson in humility given by the saint writer to the reader, but also a sense of confidence in God and in self: everyone could understand that the shadow side in him or her was normal and to be found in all humans, even in Bernard. So there was no reason to despair: the grace and the forgiveness of God are stronger than our sinfulness.

Merton, especially in his later writings, was more inclined to such declarations about his life being a failure, about his psyche being full of unresolved problems. But there, too, there is an element of the rhetorical. Since the writing of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, and probably before, it was typical of Merton's style that each of his readers could identify with him. More than once, both in the 1950s and more recently, in various parts of the world, I have heard people (generally monks) say: "When reading him, I discovered that his story was my story, and I followed him all the way through the process of conversion to morality, to faith, to Christianity, to Catholicism and to the monastic life." By dint of digging into his later writings, especially the more private ones — letters and journals — it has become the fashionable and easy thing to discover, or to invent anxieties, doubts, protests, even rebellions. Now I can vouchsafe that the Merton I got to know through our conversations together was a unified, even a joyful person.

I was recently asked: "Do you have the impression of having been his spiritual father?" This question provoked my immediate and strong negative reaction! I do not know whether Merton ever had what is fashionably called "a spiritual father," and I personally am loathe to have any such

relation with anyone, and I was certainly not a spiritual father for Merton. When we walked the paths of Gethsemani together, he confided himself with great sincerity, either clearly or by way of allusion. But our walks always led to joy and often we ended up joking in one way or another. The Merton I knew was much less paradoxical, much less problematic than the literary Merton may lead his readers to think, especially when Merton writes about Merton. On such occasions, as with St. Bernard, he knew that he was expressing himself in the name of many others. A nineteenth-century French poet has declared: "O insense qui crois que je ne suis pas toi" — "O you silly one, who thinks that I am not yourself!" Both Bernard and Merton confront us with the difficulty already alluded to, that of combining sincerity and artifice. I have tried to formulate the dilemma of literary interpretation in the case of St. Bernard in a book of psycho-historical essays (*A Second Look at St. Bernard*, Chapter II, Cistercian Publications, 1989). A similar and somewhat delicate endeavor should now perhaps be undertaken in regard to Merton. What makes a "poet?" That is to say, what makes a man a "creator?" Precisely his ability to voice the universal while speaking of the particular, the specifically specific.

Both Bernard and Merton were sometimes humorous and sometimes very serious, but never dramatic if drama means a tragedy to which there is no solution, no other issue than despair. There is no such thing as an easy "happy ending." But there is hope. Both Bernard and Merton wrote with great beauty using God's gift to the utmost and thus expressing all the wealth of their personal experience. They were true reformers, measuring and taking all the risks that it meant, accepting all the upheavals that such a vocation entailed. At the end of his life, in his last writings Bernard made a sort of examination of conscience, a revision of his life, a review of what he called "the state of the Church." Just as St. Augustine had managed to do, Bernard left in his final work, *On Consideration* a retraction, a "treating again" of all the causes he had served during his lifetime, and he was clearly aware of his partial failures on certain issues. Merton did not have time to write a book of retractions. He merely hinted at some points he would have liked to have gone over again. These hints are now helping scholars to linger over the figure of the posthumous Merton.

V

Both Bernard and Merton have a posterity. Bernard's has lived on over eight centuries and it is becoming increasingly difficult to discern the

real Bernard from among the many conjured up by myth, legend, history, his own literary output, and those many other Bernards imagined by innumerable historians of all times and tendencies, from monastic apologists to Marxist enemies, even in these days of Glasnost, not to mention Lutheran and Calvinist admirers and recent experts in theology.

How long will Merton's posterity last? We do not know. Who can say? But already, twenty-two years after his death, several post-Mertonian Mertons have contributed to a deeper knowledge of the wealth and complexity of the real Merton. We are now discovering that there was not one Merton, but several successive or simultaneous ones, even while he was still living. Somebody asked me recently: "When he died, was he not going through a crisis?" I answered: "I think he had always been in one long continuous crisis." Hence the many aspects of his work and his character. Who was the real Merton? Towards the end he himself distinguished between the "image" of himself he had given in *The Seven Storey Mountain* and the man he really was. God alone knows the secret of Merton's grace, of Merton's own self. But one thing is certain for us: among all his writings, those which are still converting people — whether he would have liked that or not — are his early monastic books, his writings on the Psalms, on prayer and contemplation, all that he wrote to help countless people become united with God.