

THOMAS MERTON AND THE RENEWAL OF RELIGIOUS LIFE

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In a considerably discussed 1987 article, Albert Dilanni wrote about the renewal of religious life from the disturbing perspective of the precipitous decline in its vocations.¹ In his view, a basic flaw had skewed much of the post-Conciliar drive for reform, and it was the fallout from this distortion which had so lowered the attractiveness of modern religious life. Some conventional wisdoms being offered for the decline, he thought, were not so much reasons as excuses. Attributing the loss to consumerist attitudes of the younger generation and to their general inability to commit themselves to anything begged the question about the Orders themselves. Equally questionable was the tendency to explain away the numerical success of some highly conservative groups by a blanket dismissal of their applicants as inadequate and sheltered personalities in search of quick role status and a risk-free life style. The core reason for the falloff, he argued, was that in their desire to be one with the modern world, many communities had lost what it was that originally made them valuable to that world. The heart of their particular brand of presence to their culture had been cut out in an overaccommodation. Dilanni argued for the reappropriation of whatever it was that galvanized the group in the first place and set it in relief against its world. Only a move at this level would anchor the "right kind of renewal."

Reaction to his article was spirited, to say the least. Some complained he had unduly discounted the results of the reform so painstakingly set into

1. Albert Dilanni, "Vocations and the Laicization of Religious Life," *America* 156 (14 March 1987), p. 207ff.

* This paper was delivered on 15 October 1988 at *Thomas Merton: A Symposium*, St. John's University, Jamaica, New York.

motion after the Council and had too conveniently forgotten the distortions of the era before. For these people, Dilanni was sounding the restoration trumpet and was arguing for a journey back to the "ancien regime." Others responded in an opposite direction, applauding what they took to be a well deserved repudiation of all the "experimentation." They heard a clarion call to return to the tried and true and if anything, thought Dilanni had been too lenient. Pricking sensitivities in both camps, his logic resisted quick categorization.

One especially relevant aspect of Dilanni's article is the context it gives to the present status of renewal in Religious Orders. The nerve he struck reveals how dated the glory-sounding language of its post-Conciliar youth now sounds and how the effort presently moves in a stormy, perhaps young adult stage. Paralleling the mood in economics and politics, much of the heroic tone has dropped away and reform is now pursued with a decidedly pragmatic edge. Does religious life have a future at all, and if so, what forms will bear it into the next century? A final piece is the air of contestation brought on by the so called backlash factor, lending even more ambiguity to the effort and pressing still more insistently for feasible directions.

Onto this scene we introduce Thomas Merton. Our contention is that from his pre-pragmatic 1960s view of renewal, he laid out a number of constants which paradoxically enough serve all the more usefully as beacons to see through the present murkiness. And interestingly enough, he too was found to be slippery as to position. At one time he took issue with the so called progressives, labeling them dabblers in "superficial pastimes" and engagers in "spurious and adolescent forms of spontaneity."² In other instances — and more commonly — he ruffled the right, accusing them of mediocrity and of being purveyors of a "safe institutionalized life in which there are many ways of evading reality . . . and of living a sort of indifferent, loveless life" (CWA, p. 238).

Curiously enough, a direct entrance into Merton's convictions about renewal is through the recruitment question. He held a number of clear views about what was happening at the outer edge of his community, at that intersection between Trappist existence at Gethsemani and the lives of the entering candidates with whom he himself was working. There was real turbulence brewing there, and within it Merton caught the lines of a

2. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1973), p. 238. Hereafter referred to in the text as CWA.

wider picture concerning renewal about which he had been writing for years.

He counselled paying close attention to the best of the entrants, to the ones who were coming for the right reasons and who showed themselves on a genuinely spiritual search. They were exerting a pressure on life in the enclosure and as Merton saw it, it was the pressure of a prophet. Annoying and disturbing, their demands were generating a countermove to sweep their criticisms under the rug. But ultimately they were a saving grace for the monks, the Lord Himself coming in the guise of a stranger.

Merton analyzed the elements churning at this pressure point. Initially, there was the instinct to slough off such complaints by attributing them to the "influence of the world" out of which the young men were coming. The postulant was simply wrongheaded and until he was cleansed of his secular strain, he had nothing of substance to say to the Order. Merton insisted that, in many respects, exactly the opposite was the case (CWA, pp. 101-109).

He heard the objections of the novice as a voice of renewal. A number of entrants came because they felt they had that deep call to be "new men" and had realized that their previous way of living could not rise to that demand. The attractiveness of Trappist life was the journey it appeared to be toward an expanded Christianity. But when the newcomers arrived, they were subjected to a regimen which revealed itself to be yet another version of the same locked-in lifestyle they had left behind — only now it was called "religious." A number of them, Merton sadly testified, were driven to the paradoxical decision that to respond to the deeper demands of the cloister, they would have to leave the cloister (CWA, p. 122ff). What blessings were lost, he rued, when these unselfconscious prophets, having a firmer fix on the Trappist vision than did many Trappists, departed to pursue their goal elsewhere. Merton observed that there were many potential Trappists abroad in the world, anonymous monks as it were, who would flock to the monasteries if those institutions would lose some of their tentativeness in embarking upon that much sought inner quest (CWA, p. 13ff).

Within this analysis of the recruitment situation can be found Merton's more general vision of renewal. To allow monastic life its true attractiveness, the monks must regain their founding experience. But the access to that comes only through vital linkage with the current culture. That is to say, Trappists of today must make the spiritual experience of people like Anthony of Egypt, Pachomius and Benedict both available and

engaging. But these qualities come to the fore only on the condition that such spiritual experience is in a type of symbiosis with the twentieth century world of meaning. For the fact is that the original vision arose precisely from its interchange with the third century culture. In a nutshell, that core spiritual encounter must be both a root one, getting back to the inner lives of the early monks, and a real one, in dialogue with the pressing issues of the present day.

Charting a renewal course by this formula brings its own kinds of benefits and costs. We cite them here summarily and will develop their implications in the remainder of the article. In the first place, the retrieved experience provides the base from which to critique both present and proposed structures. Secondly, its reassimilation by some people will provoke resistance from others attached to the arrangements and attitudes currently in possession. Thirdly, a particular kind of disciplined creativity will be required both to get at and then channel the primitive inspiration. And finally, even though new and competing structures will be generated from the energy set loose by renewal, the struggle between them and the older ones will avoid destructive polarization because both can be seen to spring from the same spiritual ground.

MERTON'S RENEWAL FORMULA

We note at the outset that while monasticism is not the only embodiment of religious life, it is certainly a basic form of it and has at its center something essential to all the others. Merton's guidelines, even though about the rebirth of monastic existence, can therefore shed light on reform issues for most all varieties of vowed life.

A. REGAINING THE CORE EXPERIENCE

In recent years, Gerald Arbuckle has written extensively from the stance of cultural anthropology about the need for the refounding person in religious orders.³ A far-seeing individual who by word and action can build bridges between the old and the new, this "second founder" has laid hold of the power of the originating myth but, perhaps more importantly,

3. See, for example, Gerald Arbuckle, *Strategies for Growth in Religious Life* (New York: Alba House, 1987); *Out of Chaos* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988); and various articles.

has been able to recast it into some culturally resonant expression. Twenty years earlier, as a monastic theologian, Merton had made much the same point. For him, the refounders are those who regain that “wilderness perspective” of the early monks at such a deep level that they are able to appreciate any particular historic form the monastic impulse has taken, but also relativize it and thus be free to discover more relevant embodiments (CWA, p. 28).

Merton is lyrical in his description of these truly charismatic individuals. The new founders are those who in detachment and purity of heart become attuned to the depths of human experience (CWA, p. 118). They are those who focus on the interior quality of life rather than on its quantity, those who explore the inner ground of human love and understanding and, on their journey there, reach new centers of motivation for knowing and loving (CWA, pp. 27, 175). They are the ones who go on a pilgrimage to the source of human truth, who struggle with the death within them all while trying to find something deeper than death (CWA, pp. 212, 306). They are the courageous pioneers, borrowing from Claude Levi-Strauss, who “dip into the ocean of unexploited forces which surround a well ordered society and draw from it personal provisions of grace and vision” (CWA, p. 196).

One corollary here is the useful norm a distinctive founding experience provides for deciding which form of religious life might be best for a given individual. Much of Merton’s spiritual journey was a growing awareness that his own search for meaning had followed much the same path laid out by the early monks. Nothing so strongly confirmed his choice to be a Trappist as the realization that his life’s project (i.e., the struggle for his genuine self wrested from the heap of the illusory ones) was meshing with theirs. Discernment involves a putting on of the primitive spiritual experience.

Still another effect is the way in which the originating insight indicates the whereabouts of anonymous pockets of monasticism in the twentieth century. Merton would search them out among the future oriented people, those natural allies of the monks, who, because they chose not to line up with the established powers, are “free to roam” and to critique present arrangements from the vantage point of what of God is beginning to appear from the hidden ground of their own human experience (CWA, p. 235).

B. THE PRIMITIVE EXPERIENCE TAPPED BY THE PRESENT CULTURE

A second thrust of reform is the correlative of the first. Living contact with the prevailing culture, according to Merton, is the indispensable door of access to the riches of the past. The only stance from which monastic experience can be reappropriated is critical and intimate engagement with the contemporary world.

Over the years, Merton's thinking shifted in regard to the place from which access to the founding experience is given. Early on, his prime insistence was that "worldly matters" deflected the monk from his true purpose and that many of the answers the culture gave to questions of meaning were shallow and dangerously deceptive. One had to establish a distance from that ethos in order to see it as it truly is. One had to peer into the *saeculum* through the "doors of perception" opened by deeper encounter with God.⁴

But as the years passed, Merton also began to assert that the place for encountering that primitive experience was not just, and not even primarily, within the walls of the enclosure. "The monastery is not a ghetto and will not profit by being kept as one," he argued (CWA, p. 218). The monastic vocation will grow to the extent that it stays in vital touch with "what and who in the world is open to change" (CWA, p. 327).

As mentioned earlier, Merton sensed an affinity between the monastic insight and certain future oriented groups in the culture. He gives special attention to three of them. First are the people who find themselves in the various faith crises set off by modernity. Struggling with the absence of God and the very ability to believe at all, these are the journeyers who like the first monks are walking in hope through empty places of the world (CWA, p. 201). Much is to be gained, he claimed, by standing with these pilgrims who first let go and then endure the bleakness which follows before recovering on a new level the nearness of the God whom they have come to know through their painful unknowing (CWA, p. 178).

Second is the group with whom Merton himself felt much kinship. These were the so called unpropertied intellectuals who are on the one hand beneficiaries of culture but who, because they are not totally vested in it, are nevertheless able to take the long view and maintain a relatively

4. "If you want to pull a drowning man out of the water, you have to have some support yourself. Nothing is to be gained by simply jumping in the water and drowning with him." "Marxism and Monastic Perspectives," CWA, p. 341.

disinterested stance at society's edge. From this vantage they not only can critique the power establishment but even take up the cause of the marginalized (CWA, p. 235ff).

The third group is the most general of all. Those individuals who, in some sustained way, give themselves over to the self-transcending aspirations of humanity are, for Merton, the hidden comrades of the monk (CWA, p. 200). Solidarity with this widest of human pursuits again recalls his insistence that the intersections between the visible monastery and the deeper lying monastic quest are those junctures in the social fabric which show themselves especially supple to the first stirrings of God's Absolute future.

The danger in any renewal attempt is that it follow only one of its two roads; i.e., either simply reaches back into history for the founder's insight or simply marches forth into society to encounter spiritual breakthroughs. The authentic program, more difficult because bivalent, is to keep one's feet on both paths at the same time. For Merton, the very survival of monasticism depends upon its simultaneously attending to its ancient vision and to the wisdoms of its current eschatological sympathizers. Interestingly, the very conflicts arising from this tension lend a distinctive and sobering twist to the notion of charism. That energizing signature of a particular community is without a doubt a gift of the Spirit. But in this case, givenness means anything but complacency (CWA, p. 237). "One must struggle to preserve and keep the gift," Merton warns, walking a fine line between the disciplines of solitude and prayer so needed for internalizing the gift and the continual efforts to dialogue with those outside the cloister who embody it in the culture (CWA, p. 239).

C. STRUGGLING FOR THE CHARISM: COSTS AND REWARDS

To the extent that a religious community sets its course by both bearings, it will inevitably bear fruits which, though initially bitter, will one day be enlivening. The foundational one, of course, is that the Order will have more in hand its touchstone for discernment. That anchoring vision, caught from within and without the cloister, becomes the internal norm for critiquing both its present arrangements and future proposals.

It is from such a base that Merton began to assess current Trappist practices. He reserved his most biting criticisms for the exaggerated worth

he judged placed on certain historic forms then in practice.⁵ Focus is to be in the monastic religious experience, he insisted, and not on the monastery itself, as if the individual had come to serve the institution and not that pursuit of God which gave rise to the institution in the first place. Merton observed, for instance, that the efforts at renewal since the Reformation had normed themselves, not by the wisdoms of the desert monks, but rather by traditions of later times, notably the Carolingian reforms of Benedict of Aniane (CWA, p. 196). He also noted a distinctively American managerial atmosphere which he thought had gained a strong foothold in the cloister. Suffused by it, the monastery was imaging itself as a kind of machine, a "spiritual dynamo" well oiled and smoothly ticking (CWA, p. 38). The critique had not gone deeply enough.

Merton directed his most stinging criticisms of historic forms at what he termed "the accepted spirituality." This meant the whole world of assumptions at Gethsemani, attitudes not exactly official but nonetheless given common credence, or behaviors supposedly foundational but in actuality justifications of the present community (CWA, p. 102ff). The comfort which such a world view held out only served to reinforce its hold on the group and, like every ideology, disguised its own intent. In truth, however, this spirituality was losing, not only its nurturance, but most drastically its power to mediate genuine love to the monastic vocation. While it sustained some of the monks, it did not give life to many others. The newer entrants especially intuited this and observed impoverishments in the humanness of veteran monks because of it. In any case, the reigning wisdom had little reference to the deeper realities of life. It conspired to eliminate the risk factor so fundamental to monastic existence. Both the conventional spirituality and the institution built to reinforce it only insulated the monks, creating a hothouse within the cloister (CWA, pp. 199). According to Merton, the system committed the unpardonable sin of "substituting the penultimate for the ultimate," or, more colloquially, of making the announcement that "I am going to go to the North Pole and then proceeding to take a walk around the block" (CWA, p. 204). Still further, it narrowed the monk's appreciation for authentic asceticism, distorting useful disciplinary practices into perfectionistic excess or, in his words, into "mere methodologies of will and concentration" (CWA, p. 120). Not surprisingly, his antidote for monastic decay was return to the

5. See Jean Leclercq, "Introduction," CWA, p. 12.

originating experience. The whole point of desert life was the exact opposite of security and comfort. Its formative thrust was to train the monk precisely for walking with God in the wilderness, for "wrestling with Satan in vulnerable freedom." It was designed to make the individual as unguarded as possible before the "unpredictable and unexplained illumination that flashes out of the ground of one's being" (CWA, p. 201). For Merton, the loss of such unsettlement causes the life to grow mediocre and loveless, and in time, to shrink into "organized narcissism" (CWA, p. 233).

Merton was not naive about resistance to reform. He saw clearly that ingrained practices would not be dislodged by clear arguments and historical insights alone and predicted a struggle that would severely tax the cohesiveness of the institute. In his assessment, monastic orders were among the most stable forces in the church, but their blessing of stability did not come unmixed (CWA, p. 23). A certain compulsion to organize members' spiritual energies so tightly that their "outbreaks of the Holy Spirit" were literally legislated away was the prime instance (CWA, p. 226). Such repression could often enough surface in a certain unconscious identification with one particular class in society. In proportion as the monastery became institutionalized, Merton observed, there was always some unreflected alignment with one or another social stratum. A number of cloisters, for instance, had identified with certain reactionary groups, absorbing their attitudes and ideologies (CWA, p. 233). Such alliances were hardly socially neutral and, in fact, stood in the way of any real chance of solidarity not only with the future oriented types noted earlier, but sadly enough with the world's poor.

Typically, Merton did not restrict his criticisms to the right. To him the activism of the left threw up as formidable a barrier to renewal. When monks tended to justify their existence by the amount of outside service they engaged in, they too lost access to the core experience. Such activity, looking apostolic but rooted too shallowly to merit the name, only served to spread "the contagion of one's own obsessing aggressiveness, ego-centered ambitions, prejudices and ideas" (CWA, p. 179). Merton's analysis of obstructions is hard headed and recognizable. Resistances to renewal are alive and well, take many virtuous guises, and if not approached intelligently will tear apart the fabric of any community. Only when the reform anchors itself in the founding experience will the divisions over rebirth be overcome.

D. A DISCIPLINED CREATIVITY

Merton would have the Order be faithful, not to a past set of practices, but to the inner life out of which those activities grew. In his words, the monk's journey is to be "a living ascent to that current of uninterrupted vitality" (CWA, p. 42). But far from a tranquil inner climb, this ascent is hard work and requires its own kind of discipline. Reform is anything but "drifting along . . . , a lackadaisical floating with events which excludes those dimensions of life which in fact cannot be found unless the monk to some extent works hard to uncover them" (CWA, p. 126). Neither is it abstract prognosticating nor, in Merton's image, a distributing of maps which sketch out the exact way. The project rather is the more ambiguous one of honing up one's sense of direction so that ". . . when we really get going, we can travel without maps" (CWA, p. 127). To drink from the true fount of renewal is to imbibe heady waters. The creativity unleashed will run wild unless channeled by that rigorous discipline of nurturing the inner life and doggedly pursuing one's authentic self.⁶

E. NEW FORMS

When moving to the more practical matter of structural renewal, Merton is not half so expansive. He is much more the theorist than the organizational designer, and in fact never participated in any of the world wide reforms of the Trappists. In addition, the few suggestions he did make are dated, something certainly to be expected at this remove of more than twenty years. But granting even these qualifications, he still shows a prescience which only testifies to the depth of his insight.

Merton saw the need for transitional forms and spaces. He argued for a certain breathing spell during which the deeper motivations and purposes of the experiments would be allowed to surface (CWA, p. 127). Throughout such times, generosity of spirit was needed by those who preferred the older forms; e.g., a willingness to make space for the others who could not be silent and meditative in the same exact way (Conner, p. 178).

Merton wrote frequently about the role of authority in renewal. In general, he advocated a more grass roots participation in reform efforts

6. Tarcisus [a.k.a. James] Conner, "Monk of Renewal," in *Thomas Merton / Monk: A Monastic Tribute*; ed. by Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1974), p. 184.

and, in addition, proposed that religious power be reinterpreted as openness to the demands of love as found in the needs of the neighbor (CWA, pp. 101, 128). His more specific suggestions to extend the monastic invitation to married couples and to conceive it as temporary were radical in their day, even though these outer groupings would be centered around a permanent nucleus of celibate monks (CWA, p. 208). The religious vow also interested Merton. The promises which the monks made were not to the religious institution, he pointed out, but rather to the eschatological fidelity of God. Any focus falling short of this covenantal relationship could not justify the renunciations involved nor bring about that total inner transformation at which monastic life aimed (CWA, p. 337). The worth of any structure was to be judged according to how it did or did not promote "faith in God alone."

CONCLUSION

We return to our beginning issue, why it is that religious communities are not appealing to the religious aspirations of young people today. Thomas Merton would deny the fault is to be found in what is most precious about the Orders; i.e., the alluring experience which gave rise to their existence in the first place. Neither is it to be found in the alleged shrunken religious capacities of modern men and women (CWA, p. 29). On the contrary, faith should be renewed in precisely their ability to be monks.

His criticism is that, while the capacity for living religious life is present in today's world, an enabling manner of living it is not. The imagination of the culture will again be captured by monastic life when the vitality which got it underway in the first place is made both clearer and more accessible. Efforts at renewal must therefore be: (1) radical, getting down to the roots of the experience and scraping away whatever covers them over; (2) existential, being in touch with issues of meaning for the twentieth century person; (3) courageous, struggling in darkness through predictable resistances; (4) creative, arising from the wellspring but in a disciplined way; and finally, (5) paschal, hopeful that the dying involved will issue in more abundant life.

And to be sure, Merton remained hopeful, and even in awe, as to the outcome. This communal and Spirit-directed recovery of meaning will bring a renewal entailing much more than wise legislation and innovative processes. In the last analysis it will be "a kind of miracle of water in the

desert" (CWA, p. 200). For Thomas Merton, this ongoing miracle, so hard won in its making, is the real, saving and perennial attraction of religious life.