

CONTEMPORARY
MYSTIC STUDY:
Thomas Merton
as Supported by
Evelyn Underhill's
Stages of Mystical
Development

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Thomas Merton's life was one of lived paradoxes: he wrote extensively, yet desired the life of silence; wanted to travel, yet intensely desired solitude and the life of a hermit; affected millions of Catholic, Protestant and Jewish consciences during the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement and the testing and use of atomic weaponry, yet seldom stepped outside the monastery. He vowed obedience to his abbots, yet frequently challenged their authority; fell in love with and visited a young nurse in Louisville, yet desired a monastic life; possessed tremendous independence, while he submitted himself to the discipline of the strictest religious order in the Roman Catholic Church.

In all of these paradoxes Merton proved himself completely human — human, fallible and obedient. It was not Merton's obedience to the

* This paper is dedicated to Msgr. Richard A. Graeber, a pastor in the Diocese of Buffalo.

Church or to his abbots which made him extraordinary. It was his obedience to the life-force of God dwelling within him that marked a mystic. From Thomas Merton we come to know what authentic human living is, plus we can acquire a paradigm for our own spiritual growth through reflection on his writings. Although Merton wrote prolifically, his greatest contribution seems to be the particularity of his person. Merton is a sort of "prototype for those for whom mysticism must be a way of life involving progressive growth in union with God, with other persons and with creation in general."¹

Although his earlier writings were devotional and pietistic, Merton was not a devotional mystic.² He was one of the same substance that produced giants like Augustine, Gregory and Bernard, public men, preachers, administrators and writers, who left their imprint on the history of the Church and of the world. These people utilized their spiritual resources in attacking the political, social and ecclesiastical problems of their respective periods. Their journey inward led to reservoirs of energy sufficient to face the challenges of the world and effect change. The writings and biographies of these people suggest that mysticism involves a life of authentic charity.

Evelyn Underhill explains mysticism as an authentic life process involving transitory experiences, but transcending them with an ordered movement inward and toward union with God. She believes that it is the living, unchanging God who initiates, motivates and directs the mystic on his journey. For Underhill, the mystical life is a process that involves four stages of growth, each stage leading the person closer to union with God. These stages include a period of seclusion and struggle, which results in the realization of self-knowledge. It is a new and deeper level of consciousness, which exposes the vacuity of one's former life and a determination to set out toward future purgation to higher levels. This is followed by the stage of purgation where one feels a sense of contrition, unworthiness, and a need for penance. This is a time of discipline and a willingness to suffer to break out of the prison of one's self-centeredness to further the journey toward unity with God. The third stage consists of illumination, a joyous detach-

1. Harvey D. Egan, S.J., *What Are They Saying about Mysticism?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), p. 51. Hereafter referred to in the text as *What?*

2. Robert Ellwood, *Mysticism and Religion* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1980), p. 53. Devotional mysticism as defined by Ellwood is a type of mysticism that is triggered by the use of visible and conceptual supports, images and ideas of God. Oneness is attained in the ecstatic union of human and divine lovers, and the rapture of this merging through love is its own validation. Some devotional mystics are: Bernard of Clairvaux, Francis of Assisi, Teresa of Jesus, and Catherine of Genoa.

ment from the old world wherein a presence of God may be experienced. Now there is greater tranquility and surface calm. "The person knows God by way of participation in His life, and no longer as a meditative observer" (*What?*, p. 45). It is here that the "dark night of the soul" occurs, leaving the mystic in a state of abandonment, yet profoundly joyful. Finally, Underhill states that the unitive stage results in the mystical marriage where God and the mystic merge into one, yet remain two. It is from this intimate mystical union that the mystic is free to manifest this love in practical involvement in social situations.

Thomas Merton, Fr. M. Louis, was such a mystic. I will support this by applying Evelyn Underhill's criteria for mysticism in charting Merton's mystical growth from age eighteen until his untimely death on 10 December 1968. Merton's life, a life lived in obedience to the Spirit of God, offers us a paradigm for our own spiritual journey. A study of this sort provides insight into the development of mystical spirituality, a possible paradigm for all who claim the title "Christian."

I

STAGE ONE: THE AWAKENING OF SELF

Throughout history, scholars, saints and mystics themselves have tried to define the term "mysticism." To various people the term connotes different meanings depending on one's culture, religious affiliation (if any) or type of discipline espoused (i.e., psychology). In order to establish a solid foundation for this study it is important to present an adequate definition of mysticism appropriate to my purpose. Using this as a point of departure I shall proceed to present the first of the four stages in Underhill's stages of mystical progression, the awakening of the Self to consciousness of Divine Reality. Once the model of this process is presented I shall correlate it to a particular time in Merton's life in an effort to develop my argument: Thomas Merton became a contemporary mystic.

Mysticism is not theoretical, nor is it passive. For my purpose it is not a religion, or a philosophy, or a psychological experience. Mysticism is an authentic life process, an ordered movement toward union with God, which involves human experience at all levels. Through this process God actively initiates, motivates, and directs a person to a deeper and more profound surrender to the mysteries in which true life is embedded. Mysticism is dynamic, kenotic, and transforming. It is an experience of holiness

that welcomes ongoing conversation so as to lead a person to greater levels of intimacy with God and simultaneously with all of humankind.

As mysticism is a life process, the mystic is one who has identified the invitation of God, and gradually through a process of detachment, has been liberated in order to live in harmony with Truth. Once liberated, the mystic's vision enables him or her to cut confidently through the illusions of materialism and false values which society endorses as real and meaningful. The mystic is one who is convinced, through experience, that God is the source of and is at the heart of all things. The true mystic is one who is a paradigm of human authenticity whose common sense, practicality, social and political action, compassion, dedicated service to humanity and mercy challenge others to reevaluate the life they, too, are invited to live. We must bear in mind that "the authentic mystic is not a special kind of person, but every person, specially formed, is a special kind of mystic."³ Indeed, Thomas Merton was a special kind of mystic. His contribution to us is the priceless gift of his life story, painted with the struggles and success of one who sought to be obedient to God and simultaneously to self. As we study Merton's story we are able to witness and, therefore, to understand God's process of creating a mystic.

Evelyn Underhill believes that the first stage of mystical development is the awakening of Self to the consciousness of Divine Reality. This awakening may proceed in various ways, albeit abruptly or gradually. She states:

It is a disturbance of the equilibrium of the self which results in the shifting of the field of consciousness from lower to higher levels.

... it usually involves a sudden and acute realization of a splendor and adorable reality in the world — or sometimes of its obverse, the divine sorrow at the heart of things never before perceived.

... it is the abrupt realization of reality, "all things are made new": from this point the mystic's life begins.⁴

Merton experienced an abrupt shift in the awakening process. He journeyed through the stages of adolescence with the naturalness of most boys his age, except Merton had a heavier burden to bear. His mother died of stomach cancer when he was only six years old. The day she died, he was left sitting in the family car outside the hospital. It was raining. Ruth Jenkins Merton forbade Tom to see her before her death. The only communication

3. William McNamara, "Spiritual Formation and Mysticism," *Studies in Formative Spirituality* 5: 1 (1984), p. 59. Hereafter referred to in the text as *SFM*.

4. Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness* (New York: World, 1963), p. 177. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Mysticism*.

she had with her son was a note telling him that she would not be returning home. Merton never overcame her cruel distancing and abandonment at such a sensitive time in his life. Just over nine years later, while he was studying at Oakham, his father died of a brain tumor. At the age of sixteen, he was orphaned. Dr. Thomas Izod Bennett, who had been Owen Merton's close friend and physician, became Tom's legal and financial guardian. The Bennetts and Tom got along well at first. However, they failed to understand the boy's insecurity, confusion, sense of abandonment and loneliness which eventually threw him into a dark abyss of depression. Tom, in an effort to alleviate his intense loneliness and suffering, traveled, drank excessively, squandered his money, engaged in promiscuous sexual behavior, lost a scholarship from Cambridge, and lost Tom Bennett's respect (which tormented him as much as his mother's rejection).

In the midst of all this "stripping," God was busily at work in this young, sensitive soul. As a gift for having won the scholarship to Clare College and on the occasion of his eighteenth birthday, Bennett financed a trip for Tom to Rome. This was his second visit to the Eternal City. Michael Mott states: "[T]he second visit was to be the most important and 'turning' event in Merton's early life."⁵ He is correct for it was here that Merton begins to respond to the grace of conversion to which God was inviting him.

While in Rome, Merton, having a need "to pray," visited the churches of Santos Cosmas and Damian, Santa Maria Maggiore, Santa Sabina, and the Trappist monastery of Tre Fontane. He felt comfortable in these churches yet needed to keep this desire to pray a guarded secret lest someone find out, especially his family or Tom Bennett, that he was becoming religious. One night in Rome, Merton had a profound experience:

He began to feel that his father was with him in the room where he sat. The wind was trying to turn the pages of his open Bible in front of him, and he stared at the quivering pages, unwilling to look around. A star or two in the constellations with Greek names showed through the slats of the shutters. The Piazza Barbarini was silent, except for the splash of water in the fountain, a sound confirming the silence and enclosing it like the fall of rain. A babbling chant started in his head, close to the mixing of sounds in Ulysses, so that "Abba" became "Owen" and the chant grew something like "father forgive Abba forgive, Amen, Abba (Mott, p. 69)

It was after this momentous experience that Merton's eyes and heart were opened. He began to realize how his behavior affected himself, Tom

5. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984), p. 67. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Mott*.

Bennett, his family and friends. He also realized that his behavior did not emerge from his authentic self, but from the false self that tried to escape the profound suffering he was experiencing. His personal reflection of this time in his life concretizes this stage in the mystical process:

I fell into the middle of a great depression, and within ten or fifteen minutes everything around me turned sour, I could actually feel myself turning to ashes inside. Wondering if this change might have some outward expression, I thought of going to the mirror and looking at my face — but I immediately realized that I would not be able to bear the sight of my own normal face in the mirror. It was a terrible feeling, but I became convinced that I was an unbearable person, my ideas were impossible, my desires were beastly, that my vanity was an offense and my pride monstrous. All my possessions expressed this, and carried my own pride like a contagion: I could not bear to look at anything I owned, but right in front of me was a diary I was keeping; I suddenly realized every one of its pages was horrible by reason of my conceit. Even letters from friends who were still at Oakham, scribbled full of the jargon we shared, seemed to reproach me.⁶

Tom's soul was prepared: grace had stirred the soul. A familiar theme throughout salvation history is God's intervention (though not always recognized or understood) in human experience while suffering and despair encompass the individual. It is during this time of depression, self-reproach and intense shame that God was again acquainting himself with the soul of Thomas Merton. God, reaching into Tom's experience, exposes him to an awareness of his personal sinfulness (the first stage of wisdom), and was evidently preparing him for the next stage on his journey inward toward truth and intimacy with God.

It is within this next stage that the more mature Merton emerges. Fortified by the grace of experience and ambiguously "knowing God," he sets out for Columbia University where God awaited him to lead him deeper into himself and into the second of Underhill's stages.

II

STAGE TWO: THE PURIFICATION OF SELF

Harvey Egan, S.J., succinctly captures the essence of Underhill's second phase of the mystical journey. He states that the purification of the Self involves:

6. Thomas Merton, *The Labyrinth*; unpublished novel in the Friedsam Memorial Library, St. Bonaventure University, p. 55.

... the double vision of God and the self which highlights the contrast between God's holiness, beauty, purity and reality, and the self's sinfulness, vileness and manifold illusions. The mystic painfully experiences the incredible distance which separates him from his heart's desire. Moreover, he became haunted by feelings of contrition, unworthiness, and the need for penance.

The elimination of some of the obstacles to the mystic's quest occur only through self-simplification, cleansing, stripping, mortification and discipline. The self instinctively knows that it must regain control of its vital centers and the surface intellect to begin to detach itself successfully from everything other than the Divine Reality. At this stage, the self seems to target self-love and the manifold vanities of its surface consciousness as its main enemies. It is willing to undertake pain and suffering to break out of the prison of its narrow individuality to unite with greater Life.

(*What?*, p. 42)

Thomas Merton was sensitive, sincere and absolutist. He had experienced tremendous psychological and spiritual pain stemming from the guilt of his adolescent sexual exploitations. Though the mere thought of any sort of asceticism or discipline scared him, he felt it was the only way he could atone for his sins of the past and cooperate with this grace of God, which called him to deeper conversion.

For eighteen months Merton lived and taught at St. Bonaventure University in Olean, New York. These eighteen months served as an initiation period into the demands as well as the struggles of the spiritual life. The foundations for his spiritual life were nurtured by Dan Walsh, one of Merton's teachers and friends. Under his direction, Merton seriously read Thomas a Kempis, John of the Cross, Therese of Lisieux, Meister Eckhart, Bernard of Clairvaux, Ignatius Loyola, Anselm, Bonaventure, Duns Scotus, and Thomas Aquinas. Attracted to Franciscan spirituality, Merton was inducted into the Third Order Regular on 19 February 1940. "He now wore a scapular, two pieces of brown cloth on a thin cord, under his everyday clothes. This was a constant reminder to him of his determination to live as a monk in the world" (*Mott*, p. 167).

This period of incubation when Merton was being prepared to step deeper into the "cloud of unknowing" demanded that he abandon his habits of smoking, drinking, "womanizing," and going frequently to movies. He gladly did this and more. He often participated in Mass and in the sacraments. He prayed, studied, and sought the serenity of solitude in the beautiful Allegany Mountains (the site he visited is now endearingly called "Merton's Heart"). He also fasted and submitted himself to acts of penance, mortification, and self-imposed disciplines which potential mystics undertake in order to contribute to the purposes of self-purification. He gradually came to understand the complexity of the self and diligently

strove to eliminate all thoughts or preoccupations with self.⁷ Yet for Merton, the absolutist, something was missing.

If he was to sum up the entire meaning of Christian asceticism, he would quote the Gospel of Mark (8: 34): "If any man would come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow Me." Merton did just that — he embraced the cross of self and followed Christ into the Cistercian Abbey of Gethsemani. When he entered in 1941 at the age of twenty-six, he set out to "conquer himself" in search of intimate union with God. He believed that:

Physical labor, ascetic deprivation, self-inflicted punishment, all the curriculum of the monastery, has one purpose: to create optimum conditions for cultivating mystical awareness of God's being. The consciousness sought is mystical in the sense of piercing the darkness and resolving the mystery.⁸

Monastic discipline provided Merton with multiple opportunities in which to engage in the kenotic process of emptying self. Monastic poverty was reflected in the monk's simple dress which consisted of a habit, scapular, cowl, and cape. The combined weight of the entire woolen habit was twenty pounds and it was horribly hot in the summer. Sleeping accommodations were dormitory style. Each bed, made of boards and a slight straw mattress, was enclosed by a green canvas curtain. The monks slept in their habits and each Friday they would assemble in the dormitory, each in his own cell, and for the duration of the Lord's Prayer, would engage in a period of self-imposed flagellation. Similarly, the monks would assemble once a week in the Chapter Room to participate in the Chapter of Faults. This was an exercise in which each monk had the opportunity to accuse himself or his brother monks, in charity, for infractions of the Rule. The monk would publically confess his fault, prostrate himself before the abbot in the presence of the community, and await a penance from the abbot. Once the penance was meted out, the monk, in all humility, was expected to perform the appointed task as an exercise in virtue to help him overcome his human weakness.

There was little communication with the outside world. Radios, newspapers, and news magazines were forbidden. The monk could write four letters a year on a half sheet of paper and these had to be censored. He could receive mail twice a year. All incoming mail was also censored. The

7. Underhill treats the purification of the Self well in her text, *Mysticism*. She draws on the experiences of Catherine of Genoa, Dante, and St John of the Cross as examples. See pp. 198-204.

8. Raymond H. Bailey, *Thomas Merton on Mysticism* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1974), p. 192. Hereafter referred to in the text as Bailey.

monk was required to seek permission for showers, haircuts, toilet articles, books for spiritual reading, a glass of water, or a walk outside the monastic enclosure. All monks were under the rule of absolute obedience to the abbot. For Merton, the vow of obedience was his greatest struggle. Obedience was an asceticism ordered to Merton's personality which challenged his spiritual growth throughout his monastic life. He, if anyone, knew the dynamic effects of well-intended and well-ordered asceticism. He saw it as an opening of the self to the perpetual work of God in the human person. Of the subject Merton wrote: "The whole meaning of Trappist isolation from the world, of obedience, of humility, of humiliation, of penance, of fasting, hard, manual labor, the discipline, the five vows . . . is this . . . to bring the monk into close, intimate union with Christ."⁹

Monastic asceticism and personal self-inflicted asceticism must be practiced carefully and prudently. They are means to greater ends. Merton learned this costly lesson when he suffered from physical and emotional exhaustion at the end of his novitiate, as well as after his ordination. In 1949 his condition had deteriorated to the point that it affected his writing for a year and a half. The asceticism of God's will and a willing acceptance of and surrender to that will eventually evolved as Merton's ascetical theology. He came to realize that the supernatural must build upon the natural and not negate it. The secret to the spiritual life was for the person to become holy through natural means, human ways, ways that would liberate the soul. Merton came to understand that "freedom is gained through discipline and suffering, a freedom that is never achieved but given by the Spirit to the degree that a person has but one desire: to know God's will and do it" (*SFM*, p. 61). This was Merton's purpose, motivation and goal in life. All of his efforts toward self-abnegation, pain and suffering led him to a stage in his life where he felt that:

Within himself the new man does not discover a complete identity, but a potential one. When the vessel has been scrubbed, the soul returns, as it were, to a pristine nothingness, ready to receive true being. As a polished crystal is also able to receive light, so the polished soul has the capacity to reflect the grace of God. (Bailey, p. 75)

This is exactly what Merton, like many great mystics, came to know through the "dark night of the soul" and the prayer of contemplation.

In a sincere desire to lose himself in Christ, Merton undertook a rigorous personal discipline which educated him far beyond his mortal expectations. His personal ascesis, to some degree, harmed him physically

9. Thomas Merton, "First Christmas at Gethsemani," *Catholic World* 170 (December 1949), pp. 170-171.

and mentally, yet taught him the importance of surrendering to the asceticism prescribed by God: complete surrender to His will. Human development is intricately woven together with spiritual development — the various dimensions of the human person cannot be compartmentalized. It was only through being so severe with himself that Merton gained the wisdom of gently embracing his frail humanity complete with its weaknesses and limitations, realizing now that the supernatural builds upon the natural. From this he gained a deeper insight into the uniqueness and complexity of the human person, and a more profound respect for the Providence of God, Who led the soul as He saw fit.

This particularly important lesson in spirituality prepared Merton for the true purification of the soul which John of the Cross classically refers to as “the dark night of the soul.” Here the soul is deprived of “feeling” the presence of God and is led to deeper levels of surrender and abandonment which are simultaneously more intimately united to God. It was directly into this intense purification and liberation that Merton was being led. As was characteristic of his profound sense of obedience, he willingly followed.

III

STAGE THREE: THE ILLUMINATIVE STAGE

The third stage Evelyn Underhill presents is the stage of illumination. Within this stage three types of experiences are likely to occur. The first possibility Underhill calls a “pleasure state of the intense kind” (*Mysticism*, p. 214). Simply stated, it is a sense of the presence of God as he is known ever more concretely and intensely. The second type of possible experience that accompanies this profound sense of the presence of God is “the complementing mark of . . . the vision of a new heaven and a new earth, or an added significance and reality in the phenomenal world” (*Mysticism*, p. 254). The mystic’s consciousness of God’s presence in the world increases and a sense of harmony with all of God’s creation is experienced. Thirdly, although Underhill discusses the possibilities of visions and voices, I simply mention them but will not dwell on them. There is, however, “an education which he [the mystic] is called to undertake, that his consciousness of the Infinite may be stabilized, enriched and defined” (*Mysticism*, p. 299). Contemplation is where this education takes place. There is yet another stage that Underhill discusses which is a transition stage between the Illuminative

and the Unitive which has traditionally been referred to as the “dark night of the soul.” The great mystics experienced the dark night as one of the final and complete purifications marked by confusion, helplessness, stagnation of the will, and a sense of withdrawal of God’s presence. It is during this period that the true seeker of God must die mystically and come to experience a sense of impotence, radical loneliness, complete isolation, and chaos, where unwanted trial and tribulations occur and the person learns a difficult lesson of selflessness. It is for love’s sake that the mystic bears the burden of lovelessness.

“This phase aims at the total and final purification of the mystic, which completely destroys the root of all self-love” (*Mysticism*, p. 48). It is a process of radical purification that cannot be effected by the mystic and in which the mystic’s only activity during this period is an ever deeper surrender to God. The mystic now knows God by way of participation in His life and no longer is a meditative observer. He knows from his heart that God is manifested in all aspects of the mystic’s life. An understanding of this can come only through having experienced the purification of “the dark night” in faith and the prayer of contemplation.

Thomas Merton, having persevered through this stage of mystical development, understood it well and was equipped to teach it, write about it and assist others through this painful segment of the contemplative journey. This stage of Merton’s life must be dealt with in a manner different from the other two. Instead of concentrating on the events in his life that occurred during this stage, I shall extract excerpts from his written works, most of the relevant ones written during this period — works that examine the mystical life. Therefore, this section will be organized as follows: Merton’s ministry within the Gethsemani community which prompted him to write so prolifically; examination of Merton’s mystical spirituality by presenting persons who influenced his spirituality and theology in relation to how he absorbed and blended them uniquely into his own; and finally, summarization of the basic components of his spirituality by citing some of his major work on the subject.

“The contemplative, who tries to preach contemplation before he himself knows what it is, will prevent himself and others from finding the true path to God’s peace.”¹⁰ Dom James Fox, abbot of Gethsemani, must have been aware of this when he appointed Merton Master of Scholastics in

10. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), p. 270. Hereafter referred to in the text as *NSM*.

1951. Merton held that position until 1955 when he was appointed Master of Novices, a post he held until 1965. Within monastic communities both of these positions are important because they deal directly with the spiritual development of the younger monks. Merton possessed the ability to perform these jobs, but his potential for personal conversion and transformation was also waiting to be cultivated further.

Thomas Merton had much to say about contemplative prayer, but what made him so effective was the fact that he spoke from his own experience within a Trappist monastery. I stress this fact because few books until Merton's time had been written and published from within a monastery. He tells us little that is new about mysticism. His appeal and authority are derived from his ability to synthesize the masters of spirituality and theology into his own life. It is his life that teaches us so much.

Recall that Merton's first serious encounter with the spiritual masters was at Columbia under Dan Walsh's guidance and Bob Lax's inspiration. Here clearly the foundations were being prepared as Merton read Augustine, Aquinas, Bernard, the Desert Fathers, Gregory of Nyssa, the sixteenth-century mystics, Teresa of Jesus, and John of the Cross. Let us examine what it was that Merton gleaned from these individuals and how he synthesized their spirituality into his own.

St. Augustine

Augustine's theological doctrine emphasized that humans, after the Fall, found themselves unable to attain spiritual union with God. This doctrine influenced Christianity's concept of love because, during Augustine's time, there was a transition to be made from the Hellenistic culture and philosophy to the tenets of Christianity. It was Augustine who synthesized the Hellenistic *Eros* (a love that ascends and seeks to satisfy needs) with the *Agape* (a love that descends so as to extend love to others). Augustine fused these two concepts of love within himself to form a spiritual unity. Often, within Merton's works one can detect a similar theme of unity.

A second concept from Augustine was the understanding of the function of grace. God extends this gift of grace in order to ascend back to Him. People possess the freedom of choice to accept or reject this grace. If we reject it, we freely choose to cut ourselves off from union with the rest of the world. However, if we accept this grace, we will come to realize as Merton realized: "The seeds that are planted in my liberty at every moment

by God's will are the seeds of my own identity, my own reality, my own happiness, my own sanctity" (NSC, p. 26).

Thirdly, Augustine calls us to pay attention to the function of desire in the spiritual life, a desire that can have meaning in God alone. If people fail to desire God, they fail to desire their full humanity and to find their true identity. This desire is a gift that is born in love, is nurtured by love, and culminates in love.

St. Thomas Aquinas

Thomas Aquinas had a major theological influence on Merton, for it was through Aquinas that Merton came to know and understand mysticism. Aquinas placed an emphasis on the necessity of developing the intellect. It was the intellect that would serve to safeguard the authentic mystical experience from the false mysticism of emotionalism, fanaticism, and occultism. Merton writes: "It is a paradox that the intellectualism of Thomas Aquinas turns out, after all, to be the supreme criterion of true mysticism, because there is no such thing as sanctity that is not intelligent."¹¹

Aquinas also found it important to combine theology and spirituality. Although he considered the contemplative life superior to the active, he did stress that the combination of both is superior as they strengthen one another. Finally, within Aquinas' thought we perceive the dignity which he attributes to humans. He is open to the world, respects the integrity of the human person and maintains that union with God is the highest state to which one can attain.

St. Bernard of Clairvaux

In many ways Bernard was similar to Merton: both were Cistercians; both were troubled by the question of contemplation and action; their personalities were similar; their interests were alike; and both possessed a natural aptitude for literary ambitions. Bernard was a mystic, but a speculative mystic whose mysticism is expressed as a theology. An important component in his mystical theology is that we are created for loving God and this love can only be expressed in freedom. "According to Bernard it is

11. Thomas Merton, *The Ascent to Truth* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1951), p. 325. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Ascent*.

liberty that constitutes God's image in man."¹² Another important tenet of Bernard's theology contends that the arena of spiritual conflict happens within the soul, not outside. Thirdly, Bernard possesses a systematic development of the spiritual life: conversion through penance, good works, prayer, contemplation, and spiritual fecundity. As Bernard represented a spiritual revival in his era, so too Merton influenced changes within one of the most traditional communities in the Roman Catholic Church and deeply affected people and organizations on a global scale regardless of religious affiliation, government, race, or culture: Merton spoke dynamically and directly to all people.

The Desert Fathers

The fourth century Desert Fathers had a profound impact on Merton. These were the men and the women who actually fled the world and their society in order to seek solitude and oneness with God in the desert. The Desert Fathers taught Merton the necessity of the desert. In the desert one had to face the reality of who and what he was before God. In the desert the Fathers sought above all else their true selves in Christ, thereby rejecting their false, formal selves which had been fabricated under social compulsion in "the world." It was this group which provided the foundations for monasticism. Although the Fathers were exacting in their self-imposed discipline and austerity, Merton acquired a wisdom as well as an appreciation for the necessity of asceticism, purification and mortification as a means not an end in themselves.

St. Gregory of Nyssa

Gregory played an important role in defending the Church against Arianism. That was vital to the infant Church for the survival of mysticism since Arians denied the divinity of Christ and the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity. Within Christian mysticism there are two major schools: those who were of the cataphatic tradition and who were termed "Theologians of Light" (i.e., St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, and St. Bernard of Clairvaux). The other school — the apophatic tradition — which had its roots in the ancient Hebrew tradition and was later developed by

12. Daniel Adams, *Thomas Merton's Shared Contemplation: A Protestant Perspective* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1979), pp. 110-111. Hereafter referred to in the text as Adams.

Clement of Alexandria and Origen was refined by Gregory of Nyssa. These were the "Theologians of Darkness," such as Pseudo-Dionysius and St. John of the Cross. This group emphasized the importance of "nothingness," that is, the importance of eliminating from oneself all falsehood and illusions so as to pass through a period of nothingness, or the "Dark Night of the Soul." Gregory, however, was different from the Desert Fathers who literally went into the deserts of the world and symbolically into the deserts of their own inner beings in order to discover reality. Gregory's main concern was that persons retreat into their own nothingness and there distinguish between illusion and reality, the ultimate reality of God.

St. Teresa of Jesus

Teresa's idea of contemplation was one of an apostle. She believed that her nuns, by their love of prayer and sacrifice, would do much to atone for the religious confusion of sixteenth-century Europe to save souls and to preserve the unity of the Catholic Church. Teresa was also the first to recognize the importance of mental prayer and made the radical distinction between meditation and contemplation. Of the two she believed that:

Meditation, laborious by nature, is the activity of beginners in the spiritual life, or by those who have not yet progressed very far in it. But, normally, one ought to attain a phase of spiritual progress in which meditation no longer adds anything, or even becomes psychologically impossible to carry out. Then it would seem, contemplation will flower of its own accord.¹³

St. John of the Cross

St. John of the Cross had the most outstanding influence on the mysticism of Thomas Merton, so much so that Merton was inspired to write *The Ascent to Truth*, a strictly theological work based, in part, on John's mystical theology. Merton referred to St. John as a "true Thomist" because he bases his principles upon complete detachment from creatures in order to arrive at union with God. Yet, where Aquinas took a more theological approach to contemplation, John took a more mystical approach. John's personal experience and poetic expressions gave his spirituality its uniqueness and vitality. His concept of asceticism made an impression on Merton.

13. Louis Bouyer, *Introduction to Spirituality* (New York: Desclee, 1961), p. 68.

John demanded the same severity and austerity of others that he demanded of himself. John's asceticism, though corporal and austere, was still not so demanding as the inner ascesis that is truly his hallmark. His asceticism is one of "desiring."

In order to have pleasure in everything
 Desire to have pleasure in nothing.
 In order to arrive at possessing everything
 Desire to possess nothing.
 In order to arrive at being everything
 Desire to be nothing.
 In order to arrive at knowing everything
 Desire to know nothing.
 In order to arrive at that wherein thou hast no pleasure
 Thou must go by a way in which thou hast no pleasure.
 In order to arrive at that which thou knowest not
 Thou must go by a way that thou knowest not.
 In order to arrive at that which thou possesses not
 Thou must go by a way that thou possesses not.
 In order to arrive at that which thou art not
 Thou must go through that which thou art not.¹⁴

Secondly, John's theology incorporates the necessity for total renunciation, the doctrine of "todo y nada."

The "todo y nada" of John of the Cross is a means by which we can see the material world for what it is, in and of itself — nada — nothing. At the same time we can see God for what he is — todo — all. It was for his almost ruthless dedication to this end that Merton admired John of the Cross, and John's conviction became a dominant theme in his life and work.

(Adams, p. 134)

For John total renunciation involved two aspects: submission to authority which requires humility, obedience, interior detachment and a certain amount of conflict. Secondly, one should turn away from genuine religious experiences, visions, revelations, raptures, locutions and merely rest securely in pure faith for the mystical knowledge of God is above all concepts, for "it is in the deepest spiritual darkness, the most profound night of unknowing, in the purity of naked faith that God unites the soul to Himself in mystical union" (*Ascent*, p. 107).

These individuals contributed to the dynamic spirituality of Thomas Merton. He obviously incorporated their tenets into his own being and what emerged was a person who possessed the authority to lead others to God. As Master of Scholastics and of Novices, Merton had more time to devote to the preparation of his classes which meant more time for research, study and writing.

14. John of the Cross, *The Complete Works of St. John of the Cross*; trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D., & Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D. (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1979), pp. 103-104.

Merton wrote several texts on the theology of contemplation, but I confine myself to a summary of his contemplative theology as revealed in *The Inner Experience*.¹⁵ He stresses the following points: the most essential element to be cognizant of is the fact that mystical spirituality and contemplative prayer are initiated by God. This is a gift given in love, and granted according to His desires and designs. A person cannot acquire this through his or her own effort. God prepares and predisposes the soul to receive this awesome gift, drawing the person into more intimate oneness with Himself.

In its own time the soul is guided through stages of purification and comes to realize that the greatest joy is to love God alone and to renounce all things for Him alone. It is through this mystical process that the soul comes to know God by actually becoming one with Him. This oneness is not an intellectual exercise nor an affective experience, but an actual work of interior unity and identification through, with and in the Divine. The soul is deeply convinced through experience that it is being led away by God's love to new levels of unity.

Yet there is a simultaneous experience of profound anguish at the acute sense of personal helplessness and powerlessness. This is a period of strange incapacity where faith, patience and obedience are the only guides that help the soul advance quietly in darkness. This "ray of darkness" by which God enlightens the soul is passive and makes one indifferent to self, to one's spiritual ambitions, and to one's own state in life. It is precisely this indifference and trust in itself which is a mystical grace of "Divine Counsel" whereby the person surrenders all decisions to God in the wordlessness of presence. This crucial abandonment is the deciding factor in the love relationship between the soul and God. It is only faith and obedience to the unpredictable action of God that inspires the soul with hope, as the soul perseveres in long-suffering. Eventually God rewards this loving soul by making Himself manifest in a secret, ineffable contact, revealing His presence in the depths of the soul. This presupposes, of course, that one has been engaged in the generous and total self-giving of ascetic self-denial.

In this process God is known only in darkness. The soul's activity is to withdraw itself from attachments to sensible things. There is a liberation of the mind and imagination from strong emotional and passionate clings. All thought is transcended. At this point in the development of the mystical

15. *The Inner Experience* was left unfinished by Merton and he stipulated that it might not be published "as a book." It has, however, been serialized in the 1983 and 1984 volumes of *Cistercian Studies*.

journey, St. John of the Cross, the authority on the dynamics of the "dark night," encourages the mystic to persevere during this intense suffering. He understands that this is the fire of God's love blazing a merciless attack upon the self-love of the soul attached to human consolation, and to the "lights" and feelings that prevail in the beginning stages of one's prayer life. The sacred fires have further purified the soul of the familiar and the comfortable.

There is no doubt that this process brings about a terrible interior revolution. Consolation in prayer is gone. Silence is repulsive. Meditation is hateful. Liturgical functions are unsupportive. The mind cannot think. The will is unable to love. One's interior life is filled with darkness, dryness and pain. The soul is tempted to think that it is all over and that, in punishment for its infidelities, all spiritual life has come to an end. This is a crucial point in one's development of prayer. People do not want to believe this and, therefore, are content to remain in obscurity. We want to see, not walk in emptiness. We want to know where we are going and be self-dependent, trusting our own reasoning powers, will, judgments, and decisions. Our logical side tries to convince us that this darkness and helplessness is foolish. We are cautioned to remain faithful in service, but not to immerse ourselves in activities and work in order to escape the pain and sense of defeat and what seems to be a collapse of all contemplation. St. Bernard tells us that love is sufficient to itself, its own end, its own merit, its own reward. The very act of loving is loving. The reward of deeper intimacy, indeed, unity with God in oneness is in and of itself sufficient reward. As surely as God had initiated this process, so, too, will He bring it to completion, given the soul is lovingly obedient.

As we have witnessed, Thomas Merton's life manifests this fundamental pattern of loving obedience. It is precisely because he had endured this mystical journey that he was able to speak and write of it with an authority that accompanies personal experience. The wealth of his personal mystical prayer and his broad scholastic background placed Merton in a position which allowed him, not only to minister to the spiritual needs of the young monks who came to Gethsemani seeking God, but also to all people who seek God through his myriad of publications.

IV

STAGE FOUR: THE MYSTICAL MARRIAGE & SPIRITUAL FECUNDITY

Of this point in the life of the mystic, Evelyn Underhill says:

The Mystic Way has been a progress, a growth in love: a deliberate fostering of the inward tendency of the soul towards its source, an erodiction of its disorderly tendencies to "temporal good." But the only proper end of love is union . . . the fusion of two selves for new purposes — as such spiritual marriage brings with it duties and obligations. With the attainment of a new order, the new infusion of vitality, comes a new responsibility, the call to effort and endurance on a new and mighty scale . . . The self, lifted to the divine order, is to be an agent of the divine fecundity: an energizing center. (Mysticism, p. 428)

As Merton's spirituality matured a change began to take place in the content of his works. He was now addressing topics that evidenced his responsibilities as monk, Catholic, and Christian. Merton had met God, had experienced his deepest presence, and now he sought to share that gift with the rest of humanity.

What happened to Merton is characteristic of Evelyn Underhill's fourth stage of mystical development. Flowing from this mystical marriage is a spiritual fecundity or a paradigm of social concern. One desires to share with others the gift they have been given, the very life, power and strength of God Himself. Underhill further qualifies this stage by saying that the mystic in this stage "is living in and of his native land; [he] is no exploring alien, but a returned exile, now wholly identified with it, part of it, yet retaining his personality intact" (Mysticism, p. 420).

It is a stage that bestows authority, conviction, serenity, freedom and joy. Utterly aware of divine sonship . . . and plunged into God's life, this love comes to fruition in the world's greatest activities. Lost in transcendental life, they rise to fertilize those levels of existence from which they sprang. (What?, p. 48)

Thomas Merton clearly felt an obligation to return to society with his findings. And he does that through various publications concerning matters of social consciousness. The seeds of his social consciousness were apparently already planted while Merton taught at St. Bonaventure and when he met Catherine de Hueck Doherty. Doherty had founded "Friendship House" in Harlem and, through his friendship with her and his own experiences in Harlem, Merton touched the reality of the plight of black Americans. He never really responded, however, to this injustice, as well as others, until later in his monastic life. While hospitalized for various reasons, Merton read papers, news magazines, and listened to radio reports. Friends, such as John Howard Griffin, Philip and Daniel Berrigan, Bob Lax,

and others, visited Merton with news of developments about various social problems. What was it that sensitized this solitary monk to respond as passionately as he did to these burning issues? I propose three factors.

The first occurred in Louisville on 18 March 1958 while Merton was on monastery business. This event is the celebrated and often quoted "Louisville Vision."¹⁶ This experience in Merton's life has been called an "epiphany" and a turning point in his life — the moment when he again became open to the world he had rejected in 1941 (*Adams*, p. 42).

The second factor to influence Merton was his study of Russia. Merton came to respect and admire both the person and the work of Boris Pasternak, who wrote the momentous *Dr. Zhivago*. Pasternak won the Nobel Prize for Literature on 23 October 1956, but declined it due to pressure from the Soviet government. In a letter to John Harris,¹⁷ Merton wrote:

Everything concerning Pasternak is extraordinary. The simplicity of this human voice speaking directly and reaching everyone, in spite of all the barriers erected around him, is a portent of immense significance in an age when men can communicate with the moon but not with one another. He is our greatest writer and poet, and more than that, he is a sign of hope and perhaps the first star of a new dawn for mankind.¹⁸

Although Merton admired the writer and the poet, he held great esteem for Pasternak as a person who knew well the contemplative life. Merton believed that Pasternak

... saw a new dimension of the contemplative life; that a true contemplative is subversive; his values are in opposition to the prevailing political structures. Pasternak's life provided a vivid example of the dangers of being a contemplative in the modern world. As his experiences have shown, the temptation to move from the realm of the supernatural to that of the practical and thus lose the basis of one's contemplation is always present. It is this temptation which caused much of the difficulty for modern man. (*Adams*, p. 216)

The injustice of censorship was always a sensitive issue with Merton and Pasternak's oppression provided the opportunity to speak out:

For twenty centuries we have called ourselves Christians without beginning to understand one tenth of the Gospel. We have been taking Caesar for God and God for Caesar. Now that "charity is grown cold" and we

16. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1966), pp. 140-141. Hereafter referred to in the text as *CGB*.

17. John Harris, a teacher in England, wrote to Boris Pasternak to applaud his work, *Dr. Zhivago*. In reply, Pasternak asked Harris to contact Merton to thank him for his letters and encouragement. See *Boris Pasternak/Thomas Merton: Six Letters* (Lexington, Kentucky: King Library Press, 1973).

18. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience & Social Concerns*; ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985), p. 385. Hereafter referred to in the text as *HGL*.

stand facing the dawn of an apocalyptic era, Pasternak reminds us that there is only one source of truth, but that it is not sufficient to know the source in that we must go and drink from it as he has done. Do we have the courage to do so? For obviously, if we consider what Pasternak is saying, doing and undergoing, to read the Gospels with eyes open wide may be a perilous thing.¹⁹

Another contributing factor to Merton's social action was his association and correspondence with many Latin American poets: Jorge Carrera Andrade of Ecuador, Cesar Vallejo of Peru, Pablo Antonio Cuadra of Nicaragua and others from Venezuela, Colombia, Cuba, and Brazil.²⁰ However, none influenced Merton as much as Ernesto Cardenal of Nicaragua who entered Gethsemani and was one of Merton's novices. It was the first hand information which Merton received from Cardenal which fueled his heart to a significant degree to speak out.

The "Vision of Louisville," the "Pasternak Affair," and living with Ernesto Cardenal were some potential "points" in Merton's life which most likely triggered his social sensitivity and his passionate response. Merton realized that he had an obligation to God and to his inner self to speak the truth that he had come to know — not as a theologian, for he was not a theologian; not as a social critic because he often stated that his enclosure limited his full study of a situation; but Merton spoke the simple truth as he had come to know it — as monk, mystic, and Christian.

Several significant thinkers influenced Merton's social and moral consciousness. Merton admired John XXIII whose effort toward peacemaking became evident in *Pacem in Terris*. Martin Luther King's dedication to and utilization of nonviolent resistance during the turbulent 1950s and 1960s also contributed to his social awareness. However, he admired no one more than Mohandas K. Gandhi. "Gandhi was a personal hero of Merton's. He looked to Gandhi as a sign of modern times of the genuine union of spiritual fervor and social action, as a model of integrity whom religious men cannot afford to ignore."²¹ What was it that Merton admired in this simple man? He said: "The cornerstone of all Gandhi's life, action and thought was respect for the sacredness of life and the conviction that love is the law of our being."²² Gandhi was dedicated to peace and, though

19. Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1960), pp. 60-61.

20. See Robert E. Daggy, "A Man of the Whole Hemisphere: Thomas Merton and Latin America," *The American Benedictine Review* 42: 2 (June 1991), pp. 122-139.

21. Frederic Joseph Kelly, S.J., *Man before God: Thomas Merton on Social Responsibility* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1974), p. 220. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Kelly*.

22. Thomas Merton, "Introduction" to *Gandhi on Non-Violence* (New York: New Directions, 1964), p. 11.

engaged in a struggle for national liberation, achieved his end through peaceful means. "Gandhi believed in serving the truth by non-violence and his non-violence was effective insofar as it first began with himself."²³ Without a doubt Merton confronted these same questions within himself, knowing that once self is confronted with honesty, there is no fear in challenging others as a natural authority is given the self-reflective soul. This principle is based on an ancient metaphysic, a philosophical wisdom common to Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity. In order to accompany this process of journeying inward to face the truth of self, Gandhi stressed the importance of solitude, prayer and fasting which sharpens ones' "inner eye."

Another reason Merton admired Gandhi was his unlimited dedication to social reform through a policy of nonviolent resistance. It was Gandhi's theory of nonviolent resistance which claims to respect the values and structures of civilizations even more than the social establishments which had been involved in the routine of retaining power and making money. Gandhi's approach was simply to follow one's conscience without regard for the consequences to oneself, believing that this was demanded of God Himself and the results would be the work of God — it may take time, but the end would manifest itself. These principles Merton applied to himself and believed that the monk, by his very life, lives a nonviolent, non-assertive, humble, and peaceful life which is in and of itself a statement of his position. "Merton made his monastic silence a protest and when he spoke it was to deny that faith and his Church could ever seriously be aligned with the faces of injustice and destruction" (Kelly, p. 100).

Integral to Merton's social consciousness was his belief that a person's relationship with God determined his relationship with his neighbor.

The problem of our time is the problem of love: how are we going to recover the ability to love ourselves and to love another? The reason why we hate one another and fear one another is that we secretly or openly hate and fear our own selves. And we hate ourselves because the depths of our beings are in a chaos of frustration and spiritual misery. Lonely and helpless, we cannot be at peace with ourselves, and we cannot be at peace with ourselves because we are not at peace with our God.²⁴

In the last decade of his life Merton addressed such topics as the threat of nuclear annihilation, war and peace, violent and nonviolent alternatives for social change, race and racism, modern trends toward dehumanization

23. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964), p. 224. Hereafter referred to in the text as *SD*.

24. Thomas Merton, *The Living Bread* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1956), pp. xii-xiii.

through technology and urbanization, the mistreatment of minority groups, Marxism and the threat of collectivism, unity of humanity and the need for reconciliation, ecology and the possible destruction of the environment from modern technology, renewal within the Christian church, ecumenism and interreligious dialogue, Oriental spirituality, secularism and the process of secularization. The breadth of Merton's topics is phenomenal and it would be an impossible task to try and summarize his views on all of these topics. Yet it is vital to this study to have an understanding of Merton's social thought in regard to certain key issues both domestically and globally.

On the global scene, in regard to militant conflict, Merton felt that the source of war was man's instinct for violence. War began when individuals were unable to accept their personal weaknesses and limitations, thereby projecting them onto others. Ultimately this occurs on a national level when the United States, for example, minimizes her sins and accentuates those of other nations. "Fanatical Nationalism and Racism are the prime causes of moral blindness which prevents men from seeing themselves as brothers."²⁵

He was more concerned with the morality of war than with the legality of conflicts. Merton was opposed to and spoke out vehemently against the use of nuclear weapons, nuclear testing (especially in the earth's atmosphere), stockpiling arsenals, chemical and biological warfare, the bombing of civilian centers and the fear of the possibility of accidental war resulting from technological or moral failure. With humanity in danger of annihilation, Merton could not tolerate the silence of the Church and, in particular, the American bishops. This quietism angered him so much that he took up the task of writing about war. In many of these writings Merton challenges the Christian conscience: the peacemaker is not considered to be a doctrinal pacifist and should be cautious so as not to be integrated passively into a warmaking society. Secondly, the Christian's responsibility is not to fight in war, but to contribute everything he can to find a nonmilitary and nonviolent means of defending human rights, human interests, and human ideals.

Merton also often voiced his concern about America's influence on other cultures. He believed that other cultures had much to offer Americans if only they would listen. He felt that Americans had a superiority

25. Thomas Merton, "Christianity and Defense in the Nuclear Age" in *The Nonviolent Alternative* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980), p. 89.

complex and an “unmitigated arrogance toward the rest of the world.” Merton was seriously concerned about the effect of American culture and its values on other cultures. Even more frightening was the fact that people in other cultures *believed* our propaganda and, in their desire to become like us, renounced their own heritage, especially in Asia where a materialistic communism imported from the West was replacing much that was authentically Asian.

The Asians have renounced Asia. They want to be Western, sometimes they are frantic about being Western. They want to go places. They feel that there have been centuries of inertia and stagnation, and there is a reaction against the humiliation and misunderstandings of colonialism, calling for a defeat of the West at its own technological game. All of this is dangerous and inevitable. (SD, pp. 287-288)

From this perception Asian culture possesses a heritage and history far more sophisticated than the young American nation. He cautioned Asians not to lose sight of their wealthy inheritance and squander it recklessly on “the American Myth.”

Between 1963 and 1968 Merton wrote twelve essays addressing the race issue. He drew upon Gandhi’s philosophy of nonviolent resistance as a solution to the rising problem in the United States: “The cause of the Civil Rights movement is basically Christian and could be advanced by non-violent means if the technique on non-violent resistance were properly understood and applied” (Kelly, pp. 268). Merton’s admiration and respect for King inspired him often, as King himself employed this very philosophy of classical Gandhian nonviolent resolution to social conflicts.

Merton was incensed by the attitude of whites who inferred that the blacks were somehow inferior and less than human. Merton challenged the basic assumption of white liberals that blacks wanted to be integrated into white society.

It is taken for granted that, since the White man is superior, the Negro wants to become a White man. And we, Liberals and Christians that we are, advance generously with open arms, to embrace our little Black brother and welcome him into White society. (SD, p. 58)

Merton’s keen perception and directness exposed the problem: White society is unable to face the fact that it cannot cope with its own drives, cannot defend itself against its own emotions, which are seemingly unstable in a rapidly changing and overstimulated society (CGB, p. 22).

The problem of racism, for Merton, was not limited to the Black American. The Native American experienced a similar oppression. Merton was sensitive to that exploitation and oppression. The historical manifestations of their plight go back to the frontier people who labeled them

“savages,” thereby automatically reducing the Indian, the culture, the value, the very essence and existence to standards of the white culture.²⁶ Contributing in a major way to this persecution was the myth that claimed America as an earthly paradise: the Native American did not fit the myth, therefore the white man had no other choice than to exterminate him.

As long as there was merely a frontier, the one camp of pioneers here, another there, what happened to the Indian was, in a way, happening to the devil. It was at any rate heroic — and well meant. The Indian could somehow seem to be the serpent in paradise, because he was outside the myth. (CGB, p. 23)

Merton provided us with an alternative vision of American history and challenged us to evaluate the militant mentality and behavior present in the early years of our nation. The discouraging point that he makes is that the militant mentality of the white American has not changed since the beginning when the Indians were driven from their land and their homes.

Merton feared for the future of race relations in America because, if progress were to come, the whites would have to face the ugly reality of their own fears. Until they did so, violence, conflict, injustice and degradation would continue. Merton advised white Americans to search their own souls in order to come to the realization that the black person, the Indian, indeed all people, are equal and have something to contribute both individually and collectively. The black person would, on the other hand, have to seek his freedom without assistance from white persons.

A genuine Catholic attitude in matters of race is one which concretely accepts and fully recognizes the fact that different races are correlatives. They mutually complete one another. The White man needs the Negro, and needs to know that he needs him Our significance as White men is to be seen entirely in the fact that all men are not White. Until this fact is grasped, we will never recognize our true peace in the world, and we will never achieve what we are meant to achieve in it. (SD, p. 61)

Finally, Merton has his views concerning technological advancements and sophistication and how this is a very real threat to the extinction of human dignity. He was not opposed to technology. He was opposed to its “ethic of efficiency” which threatened the moral worth of a person. “[He] considered the issue of technology the most important in our time, because technology has brought about a virtual revolution which is continuing as technology influences our lives more and more” (Adams, p. 226). Modern people must bear in mind that “the rapidity and sophistication of

26. See Thomas Merton, *Ishi Means Man: Essays on Native Americans*; foreword by Dorothy Day (Greensboro, North Carolina: Unicorn Press, 1976). *Ishi* consists of five essays based on Merton's reading about native Americans.

technological growth means greater wealth, greater military capacity, a higher standard of living, and, above all, the power to exploit and dominate others. Technology is the key to the power struggle . . . it can also alienate those who depend on it" (Kelly, p. 279).

Technology could be effective, it could alleviate problems and improve life only if it remained subservient to humanity's interests and remained respectful of the human person. However, contemporary America is in such a hurry that we have lost sight of the things which are most important in life. The heart of the problem is not technology but how humans abuse and misuse it! We must be cautious of too much dependence on technology because we could run the risk of losing sight of human dignity in exchange for efficiency and expedience.

In a highly technological society, considerations of persons are subordinated to the process and techniques of production. The person is valued more for the position he occupies, the influence he wields, the money he earns and the general usefulness in getting things done, rather than for himself. His personal integrity is dependent upon his function, his income, his possessions, not on what he is himself. If he has nothing, he does not count, and what is done to him or with him ceases to be a matter of ethical concern. (Kelly, p. 25)

If he addressed the uselessness of war, the influence of America's materialistic and superficial values on other nations and cultures, the injustice and inhumanity found between Americans due to their ethnic inheritance, or the possible extinction of the dignity of the human person as society continues to worship the "Golden Calf" of the technological machine, Merton spoke courageously, as did the Biblical prophets, on behalf of humanity's dignity, as people who reverence the sacred privilege of being created in the image and likeness of the Divine Creator.

Merton's chosen solitude provided him with the utter nothingness necessary to face the truth of who he was before God, among his brothers, and as a member of the human family. Merton spoke powerfully and universally to all people who seek God and, consequently, the truth of life: we are all brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, sons and daughters of a compassionate, gracious, just, and often too tolerant Father.

Evelyn Underhill calls this final stage of Merton's journey "Spiritual Fecundity." Silence, solitude, and prayer not only strip away the illusions of life, but carry with them a certain wisdom born of persistent long-suffering, which clarifies the mystic's "vision," simultaneously empowering his message. With this authority of lived experience and Divine empowerment, Merton emerges as a paradigm for those who seek God, authenticity of self, and harmony with all creation.

V

THOMAS MERTON: A PARADIGM FOR SERIOUS CHRISTIANS

Thomas Merton was a contemporary mystic, and I am convinced that all who seriously seek God are mystics as well. Christian formation emphasizes a Christo-centric life, and Merton would stress that one need not live in a monastery to be a mystic. It is precisely this point that impressed upon me the importance of a study such as this one. Evelyn Underhill was certainly not a monastic and Merton was no typical Trappist monk. Yet this one man, much like his spiritual father, Bernard of Clairvaux, helped to reform the strictest order in the Church. I am not looking to Merton to teach us how to reform religious communities or our Church, but I am drawn to his charismatic spirit which is able to teach us how to live authentically, purposely, and dynamically. Merton, the atypical monk, offers Christians of this century a paradigm based on the masters of spirituality.

To all who seriously seek God, Merton speaks as a prophet. His very life challenges us to re-evaluate our commitment to God, the Gospel, our neighbor, and ourselves. Importantly, Merton invites all Christians to re-evaluate their motives for commitment. Why are we Christian? He, like Gregory of Nyssa, calls us to spend time within our sacred inner space and there, in honesty, courage and faith, seek truth. This is the foundation for authentic Christian living. Further, we are encouraged not to lose contact with this inner wisdom. Christians must return daily from the marketplace, seek out necessary silence and solitude in order to listen to the presence of God in their lived experience.

Secondly, Merton, much like Teresa of Jesus, reminds us of the importance of nurturing our prayer lives, both personal and communal. Ironically, often and for many reasons, Christians are "busy about many things." Merton reminds us that Mary "had chosen the better part." As his desire for contemplation and solitude grew, he slowly removed himself from the monastery proper in order to secure himself in his hermitage surrounded by nature and immersed in silence and solitude to communicate with God. He, like St. Teresa, encourages the serious Christian to abandon the security of set prayer forms and teachings, and strive toward a more mature prayer of simply "gazing" upon the Lord in profound love and trust, so very present to all things and situations.

A truly mystical spirituality, however, cannot develop without a healthy asceticism. Merton, highly influenced by the spirituality of John of the Cross, came to appreciate the wisdom of the ascetic life. Many Chris-

tians live in a sophisticated, individualistic and materialistic society and do not lack for food, shelter, employment, and often prestige. All of this is good and necessary, yet a commitment to the Gospel bids us to live a simple lifestyle, detached from material possessions and persons, so as to rely upon the Providence of God. Merton challenges his readers to a revival of asceticism, but not to the discipline that was delegated by communities or even by the Church at large. He challenges each person to take personal responsibility for developing his or her own ascetic life. Personal asceticism flows from coming to know self in the midst of the desert. Gone are the days of the Church which regulate the ascesis of her members, or religious communities that employ the corporal discipline of self-inflicted flagellation, austere fasts, and participation in humiliating Chapters of Faults. We are called to a responsible and mature, healthy, balanced and creative discipline so as to atune the soul to the promptings of the Spirit of God.

St. John's influence on Merton's mystical spirituality is twofold: he not only promotes the necessity of a balanced asceticism, he also embraces a submission to Divine Providence and life lived within the Mystery of God which usually means an experience of the "Dark Night." Merton had occasion to experience the purification of this kind of intense suffering. He embraced his journey into the Dark Night, and it was within this emptiness, this abyss where no answers are found, where one is unable to run or hide, yet in which the soul comes to deeper knowledge and a more intimate love for God, that he found himself. For the majority of contemporary Christians, perseverance through this experience is frightening, for it automatically suggests the possibility of loneliness, confusion, isolation, intense pain and desolation. Yet there is no other possible way of attaining an intimacy with the Lord unless we follow the Spirit's lead and surrender to the stripping elements of the interior desert. A profound trust and abandonment to Providence is called for here. Merton encourages us to persevere through such difficult times and not to try to escape pain by over-involvement in ministries, preoccupations with self, or worse yet, abandoning the Christian call altogether. In the end, the grace received far exceeds the suffering endured.

Finally, if this single monk affected so many issues of social and moral concern from within the confines of his monastery, are not all committed Christians, by their very commitment, responsible for confronting society's conscience, challenging unjust systems that dehumanize and exploit people, ecological resources and the human potential? We not only have a responsibility, but a moral obligation to humanity and to our environment

to defend the Gospel values which have formed our consciences. Christians whose own efforts to live justly and nonviolently within a society whose values are dehumanizing and in chronic decay run the risk of facing the truth of who they are before God alone. It is this liberating truth which provides them with authority to confront the seemingly intolerable injustices within society.

Thomas Merton was a contemporary mystic — his life confirmed this. His mystical journey is captured nowhere better than in the conclusion of his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

I hear you say to me:

"I will give you what you desire. I will lead you into solitude. I will lead you by a way that you cannot possibly understand, because it is the quickest way.

"Therefore, all the things around you will be armed against you, to deny you, to hurt you, to give you pain, and therefore to reduce you to solitude.

"Because of their enmity, you will soon be left alone. They will cast you out and forsake you and reject you and you will be alone.

"Everything that touches you shall burn you, and you will draw your hand away in pain, until you have withdrawn yourself from all things. Then you will be all alone.

"Everything that can be desired will sear you, and brand you with a cautery, and you will fly from it in pain, and you will die to all joy and be left alone. All the good things that other people love and desire and seek will come to you, but only as murderers to cut you off from the world and its occupations.

"You will be praised, and it will be like burning at the stake. You will be loved, and it will murder your heart and drive you into the desert.

"You will have gifts and they will burden you with their burden. You will have pleasures in prayer, and they will sicken you and you will fly from them.

"And when you have been praised a little and loved a little, I will take away all your gifts and all your love and all your praise and you will utterly be forgotten and abandoned and you will be nothing, a dead thing, a rejection. And in that day you shall begin to possess the solitude that you have so long desired. And your solitude will bear immense fruit in the souls of men you will never see on earth.

"Do not ask me when it will be or where it will be or how it will be: On a mountain or in a prison, in a desert or in a concentration camp or in a hospital or at Gethsemani. So do not ask me, because I am not going to tell you. You will not know until you are in it.

"But you shall taste the true solitude of my anguish and my poverty and I shall lead you into the high places of my joy and you shall die in Me and find all things in My mercy which has created you for this end and has brought you from Prades to Bermuda to St. Antonin to Oakham to London to Cambridge to Rome to New York to Corpus Christi to St. Bonaventure to the Cistercian Abbey of the poor men who labor in Gethsemani:

"That you may become a brother of God and learn to know the Christ of the burnt men."²⁷

27. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1948), pp. 511-512.

Evelyn Underhill believed that mysticism was an authentic life process. Thomas Merton lived through that process, thereby becoming a contemporary mystic. Underhill researched, examined and provided us a schema for mystical spirituality's process: a profound self-realization, purification, illumination, and finally, the unity of God and His beloved in a mystical marriage. Merton, through his intense obedience, lived this schema: at age eighteen he recognized his narcissistic lifestyle and set out to "bury" himself through a severe self-imposed asceticism which began while he lived at St. Bonaventure and continued through his early years at Gethsemani. Although the third stage in his life is arbitrary, he did indeed endure the "Dark Night of the Soul" during the late 1940s and early 1950s. From here, a "new" Merton was born and his mystical marriage bore abundant fruit in the innumerable lives he touched both personally at Gethsemani and prophetically through his writings.

Merton would be the last one even to suggest that he was a mystic — he saw himself as a sinner in tremendous need of God's mercy. But above and beyond his obvious virtue, his life proves much more. A still more comprehensive study of his life would most likely verify his mystical progression — his authentic life process. He is for us a dynamic example of the mystical journey lived and a paradigm embodied.

Thomas Merton believed, as did Evelyn Underhill, that any person can become a mystic, whether inside or outside a monastery. The only natural prerequisite is a heart obedient to the Spirit of God. It is He Who leads us through the stages identified by Underhill. Ardently listening to Merton's story, and charting his mystical journey offers serious Christians hope and vision. This also encourages us to persevere through the life process of becoming truly human, truly holy, truly mystical.