

THE MOTHER OF ALL THE LIVING: THE ROLE OF THE VIRGIN MARY IN THE SPIRITUALITY OF THOMAS MERTON

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Thomas Merton did not write very much about the Mother of Jesus Christ. He did, though, write this: "All that has been written about the Virgin Mother of God proves to me that hers is the most hidden of sanctities." He goes on to say, ". . . the sanctity of the Blessed Virgin is in a way more hidden than the sanctity of God: because He has at least told us something about Himself that is objectively valid when it is put into human language. But about Our Lady He has told us only a few important things—and even then we cannot grasp the fullness of what they mean."¹ In an article on Mary's role in the spirituality of Merton which has been published in the quarterly journal, *Spiritual Life*, I have suggested that it may have been because of these sorts of "reasons" that Merton did not write more about Mary.² Perhaps we find an even more telling "explanation," though, on the same page of *New Seeds Of Contemplation*. There Merton also says: "What people find to say about her sometimes tells us more about their own selves than it does about Our Lady." But these are just speculations, and Merton's actual reasons for not saying more than he did about Mary (if he had any such "reasons" at all) are unavailable to us. The article in *Spiritual Life* provides a survey of some of the major areas in Merton's writings (particularly his prose writings) where he speaks of Mary. Since then, I have reviewed more fully his poetical writings as well. But nevertheless, rather than another survey, I propose to focus, basically, on a few specific texts and on three related and I believe deeply important Marian images in

1. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, (NY: New Directions, 1961), p. 167. Hereafter referred to in the text as *NSC*.

2. "The Importance of Mary in the Spirituality of Thomas Merton" *Spiritual Life* 36:4 (Winter, 1990), pp. 217-228.

Merton's thought, belief, and spirituality. Specifically, these texts are: "A Homily on Light and the Virgin Mary" from *Seasons Of Celebration*, chapter twenty-three of *New Seeds Of Contemplation*, in conjunction with the poem "The Blessed Virgin Mary Compared to a Window," and the prose poem "Hagia Sophia" from *Emblems Of A Season Of Fury*.³ The corresponding themes I want to discuss are *light*, *transparency* or *transcendence*, and *wisdom*. Moreover, I want to illustrate something not only of the interconnectedness of these themes, but also, of their role in Merton's spirituality and, potentially, our own.

LIGHT

In 1962, Merton gave a homily on light and the Blessed Virgin which appeared in *Seasons Of Celebration* and is also now available, though in a somewhat different form, from Credence Cassettes under the title, *Mary: Light and Temple*.⁴ In that homily, Merton begins by offering us an illuminating vision of the nature of light:

The first of [God's] material creatures was light, the purest and most beautiful of all visible beings, from which comes the beauty and visibility of all other material creatures. Light was a material image of His own truth and beauty. Yet it was only the beginning of the work of God. It was not yet the pure light of God Himself, shining mysteriously in a created being: it was only so to speak a shadow of God's light.

To the decidedly Christian sensibility, the word light evokes, along with these Genesis images, other important phrases and meanings. We might think of John's Gospel where Jesus is described as "The true light, which enlightens everyone . . ." (1:9). Or we might remember Jesus' words to his disciples in Matthew's Gospel: "You are the light of the world . . . Your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father" (5:14,15). But when we consider these two usages in relation to Merton's creational vision, we may find we have some

3. Thomas Merton, *Seasons of Celebration* (NY: Farrar, Straus Giroux, 1965), pp. 158-170; *New Seeds of Contemplation* (NY: New Directions, 1961), pp. 167-175; *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (NY: New Directions, 1977), pp. 46-48 ["The Blessed Mary Compared to a Window"] and pp. 363-371 ["Hagia Sophia"].

4.. *Mary: Light and Temple* (Kansas City, MO: Credence Cassettes, 1988), AA2367.

trouble reconciling them. Christ, obviously, does not fit the subject of the last sentence in Merton's quote above. For Christ is not, strictly, a created being. Likewise, I doubt that many, if any, would actually consider themselves "the pure light of God Himself." And furthermore I do not think Merton was thinking of the light of discipleship in the above passage. For he already had, of course, a concrete person and a governing image in mind. The only one, in fact, who could fit the restrictions and radicality of his statement—Mary the Mother of Christ.

In Mary is perfectly realized God's whole creative and redemptive plan. That is why she is said to be for us a light of truth and a pattern of life. That is why her spiritual beauty includes in itself all the beauty which we see here and there, in partial and incomplete form in the universe. In her is all the beauty of the world, transfigured and elevated to a level beyond our comprehension: and yet since that perfection was reached by the fulfillment of the obediencial potency in her nature, which is also our nature, there is a certain connaturality in us which makes us respond to her transcendent radiance even though it remains obscure to us. We cannot help but see that she is, like ourselves, a human creature whose littleness has been glorified in the light of Christ and who has been saved from the power of darkness and evil by the grace of His Cross.

What Merton is doing, then, is situating all of Mary's privileges and graces in the redemptive action of Jesus. This Christological element is not only crucial to Merton's "Mariology," but also to his whole anthropology. That is why he is sure to constantly stress not only the unique connaturality of Mary and us, but also the reason why Mary was open to be the perfect realization of "God's whole creative and redemptive plan" in the first place. And with all of this, we already begin to move toward our next theme of transparency or transcendence. In fact, Merton himself, in his homily, makes this sort of move as well: "No one has ever more perfectly contained the light of God than Mary who by the perfection of her purity and humility is, as it were, completely identified with truth like the clean window pane which vanishes entirely into the light which it transmits."

TRANSPARENCY

The term "transparency" is not actually Merton's, but comes

from Kierkegaard.⁵ The term which Merton uses to describe the state which I will be referring to as transparency is “transcendence” or “transcendent experience.” But, especially considering the great variety of meanings the word transcendence can have, it seems to me that “transparency” is a better term for the state we will be concerned with here. Merton’s description of transcendent experience (as well as a major analogy of his which we will encounter momentarily) tends, I think, to bring to mind quite easily the idea of transparency. In *Zen And The Birds Of Appetite*, Merton writes of:

... a self that is “no-self,” that is by no means an “alienated self” but on the contrary a transcendent Self which, to clarify it in Christian terms, is metaphysically distinct from the Self of God and yet perfectly identified with that Self by love and freedom, so that there appears to be but one Self. Experience of this is what He here call “transcendent experience” or the illumination or wisdom (Sapientia, Sophia, Prajna). To attain this experience is to penetrate the reality of all that is, to grasp the meaning of one’s own existence, to find one’s true place in the scheme of things, to relate perfectly to all that is in a relation of identity and love.⁶

Those of us who are at all familiar with Merton know that the search for this kind of transcendence or transparency was his overriding life’s work and the undying message of his legacy. What I think we tend to forget, though, is that Merton had in mind and heart the image and vision of someone who has really attained more perfectly than anyone else this state of transparency. That is why Merton over and over again compares Mary to a window. We have already encountered one instance of this. Another is his wonderful poem, “The Blessed Virgin Mary Compared to a Window,” which we will consider momentarily. But perhaps his most complete statement of this “analogy” comes in the twenty-third chapter of *New Seeds Of Contemplation*. There, Merton says:

5. Kierkegaard says: “This then is the formula which describes the state of the self when despair is completely eradicated: in relating to itself and in wanting to be itself, the self is *grounded transparently* in the power that established it.” *The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 44.

6. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, (NY: New Directions, 1968), pp. 71-72.

Mary, who was empty of all egotism, free from all sin, was a pure as the glass of a very clean window that has no other function than to admit the light of the sun. If we rejoice in that light, we implicitly praise the cleanness of the window. And of course it might be argued that in such case we might well forget the window altogether. This is true. And yet the Son of God, in emptying Himself of His majestic power, having become a child, abandoning Himself in complete dependence to the loving care of a human Mother, in a certain sense draws our attention once again to her. The light has wished to remind us of the window, because He is grateful to her and because He has an infinitely tender and personal love for her. If He asks us to share this lover it is certainly a great grace and a privilege, and one of the most important aspects of this privilege is that it enables us to some extent to appreciate the mystery of God’s great love and respect for His creatures (NSC, p. 172).

Upon reading this passage, many familiar Merton terms may come to mind: poverty, emptiness, nothingness, hiddenness, union. What Merton urges for everyone—realization of the true self through this sort of transparency—he sees perfectly realized in Mary, by and through the excellence of her transparency. But there is also something more. Let us return to Merton’s poem which I just mentioned, “The Blessed Virgin Mary Compared to a Window.” The first four stanzas of that poem read as such:

Because my will is simple as a window
And knows no pride of original earth,
It is my life to die, like glass, by light:
Slain in the strong rays of the bridegroom sun.

Because my love is simple as a window
And knows no shame of original dust,
I longed all night (when I was visible) for dawn my death:
When I would marry day, my Holy Spirit:
And die by transubstantiation into light.

For light, my lover, steals my life in secret.
I vanish into day, and leave no shadow
But the geometry of my cross,
Whose frame and structure are the strength

By which I die, but only to earth,
And am uplifted to the sky my life

When I become the substance of my lover,
(Being obedient, sinless glass)
I love all things that need my lover's life,
And live to give my newborn Morning to your quiet rooms
(*Collected Poems*, pp. 46-47).

Here I think Merton beautifully and in perhaps the only language capable to the task, describes something of the depths of the radicality of Mary's unique transparency. Furthermore, I suggest that Merton not only connects this mystery with Mary's role as the Mother and first follower of Christ (which we have already touched upon), but also to the even more recondite meaning of her role as the Mother of God and Spouse of the Holy Spirit—she who has “become the substance” of her lover, and who “lives to give” her “newborn Morning” to us.

Even further, I hold—and here is the really essential point I want to make in all of this—that in Merton's vision, which springs from the depths of his spirituality, *the Divine Motherhood of Mary is intimately linked*, in and through her singular relationship with the Holy Spirit, *to the Motherhood of the Divine*, that is, to the feminine and maternal race of God—Hagia Sophia, Holy Wisdom.

WISDOM

Before moving on to Merton's reflections on wisdom, especially as related to Mary and considered in his monumental prose poem, “Hagia Sophia,” I want to digress a bit and briefly introduce a line of thought propounded by the Franciscan theologian, Father Leonardo Boff. In his magnificent book, *The Maternal Face Of God*,⁷ Boff offers, in a systematic manner foreign to Merton and his more spiritual and devotional style, a thesis that is, nonetheless, very close to the ideas both explicit and implicit in Merton's thought and writings concerning Mary, Hagia Sophia, and the Holy Spirit.

For the sake of brevity, and I think without too much distortion, we can condense Boff's main argument to three major

7. Leonardo Boff, *The Maternal Face of God: The Feminine and its Religious Expressions*, trans. Robert R. Barr & John W. Diercksmeier (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987) Hereafter referred to in the text as *Boff*.

points: (1) The feminine is both a path (expression or revelation) to and from God; (2) The anticipation of the reality of a full “divinization” of both the masculine and the feminine; and (3) Mary is the *eschatological realization* of the anticipated complete divinization of the feminine (as was Jesus, though in a different manner, for the masculine) (*Boff*, pp. 79-103).

The first of these points seems rather self-explanatory and, as well, the subject of much current discussion and collaboration. The second point, though, is not so clear. Boff describes “divinization,” basically, to “mean that the ultimate end of the human being is not only resurrection in the blessedness of the Reign of God, but an even more sublime reality: to be one with God, in all creaturely finitude...” (*Boff*, p. 91). He then goes on to further suggest:

As we know, it was the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, the Son, who was united with the male Jesus of Nazareth. It was not the Father or the Holy Spirit. It was through the eternal Word that the masculine was divinized and eternalized Now then, we ask which divine Person would be ordered to assume the feminine directly and divinize it directly? This will not be faith, but theology, where hypothesis has always been legitimate. We think that it is the Holy Spirit to Whom the feminine is appropriated. We hold this not only because in the Hebrew mentality the Holy Spirit is feminine, but because everything bound up with life, creativity, and generation is attributed to the Holy Spirit in the fonts of our faith (*Boff*, p. 92).

As regards the third point above, here Boff simply moves from a premise (“surely the Holy Spirit will divinize the feminine at the end of history”) to a hypothesis (“we believe that we have been granted a concrete eschatological anticipation of this infinitely sweet event in the mystery of the Blessed Virgin Mary”) (*Boff*, p. 92). This, then, what Boff also calls the “spiritualization”⁸ of Mary, is the central thesis of his whole work. He states this hypothesis formally as follows:

8. Boff uses the term “spiritualization” to avoid the sort of misunderstandings that could arise by using the term “incarnation” which is both near and far from the meaning he intends. See *Boff* p. 97.

We maintain the hypothesis that the Virgin Mary, Mother of God and of all men and women, realizes the feminine absolutely and eschatologically, inasmuch as the Holy Spirit has made her his temple, sanctuary, and tabernacle in so real and genuine a way that she is to be regarded as hypostatically united to the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity (Boff, p. 93).

I hope this digression, considering the brevity with which it was made, was not too treacherous. But I think even this sketchy introduction to Boff's hypothesis will prove helpful, because I now want to suggest that this thesis (the "quasi-incarnation" of the Holy Spirit in Mary) is, if not to an extent Merton's actual position, then at least the most clear and logical direction in which his thought points. And nowhere is this more clearly evidenced, I do not think, than in his prose poem "Hagia Sophia," to which we now turn our full attention.

There is in all visible things an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness, a hidden wholeness. This mysterious Unity and Integrity is Wisdom, the Mother of all, *Natura naturans*. There is in all things an inexhaustible sweetness and purity, a silence that is a fount of action and joy. It rises up in wordless gentleness and flows out to me from the unseen roots of all created being, welcoming me tenderly, saluting me with indescribable humility. This is at once my own being, my own nature, and the Gift of my Creator's Thought and Art within me, speaking as Hagia Sophia, speaking as my sister, Wisdom (*Collected Poems*, p. 363.).

Finally we have come, in the second sentence of this quote, to the image in the title of this essay: the Mother of all; the Mother of all the living, of the huge chorus of living beings and things. Here the Mother of all is, in a really ontological and not merely metaphorical sense, Uncreated Wisdom, Hagia Sophia—the "nameless Ousia" of the Trinity as Merton puts it, "the incomprehensible, 'primordial' darkness which is infinite light."⁹

9. Though these very notions are in "Hagia Sophia" itself, these quotes actually come from a letter Merton wrote to Victor Hammer dated May 14, 1959, concerning the poem and an inquiry Hammer had made about a picture of the Madonna crowning

The Catholic Church has traditionally and constantly applied to Mary not only many of the passages concerning the feminine wisdom in the book of Wisdom, but also the words in the book of Genesis which refer to Eve: "The man [Adam] called his wife Eve, because she became the mother of all the living" (Gen. 3:20). Mary is, to the Church's mind and heart, the new Eve, the Mother of the Second Adam, the Christ. Merton undeniably shared with joy the Church's mind and heart on this matter. What he does in "Hagia Sophia," though, is offer us, I think, a "new" and intuitive and deeply valid way to make this somewhat perilous parallel. Merton writes in the last section of the poem,

Now the Blessed Virgin Mary is the one created being who enacts and shows forth in her life all that is hidden in Sophia. Because of this *she can be said to be a personal manifestation of Sophia*, Who in God is Ousia rather than Person. *Natura* in Mary becomes pure Mother. In her, *Natura* is as she was from the origin of her divine birth. In Mary *Natura* is all wise and is manifested as an all-prudent, all-loving, all-pure person: not a Creator and not a Redeemer, but perfect Creature, perfectly redeemed, the fruit of all God's great power, the perfect expression of wisdom in mercy.

It is she, it is Mary, Sophia, who in sadness and joy, with the full awareness of what she is doing, sets upon the Second Person, the Logos, a crown which is His Human Nature. Thus her consent opens the door of created nature, of time, of history, to the Word of God.

God enters into His creation. Through her wise answer, through obedient understanding, through the sweet yielding consent of Sophia, God enters without publicity into the city of rapacious men.

(*Collected Poems*, pp. 369-370. Emphasis mine.)

Mary is then, for Merton, the perfect manifestation, the "incarnation," of Hagia Sophia—the *Ousia* of the Trinity. In the Church's devotion, Mary has been venerated as Daughter of the Father, Mother of the Son, and Spouse of the Holy Spirit. And in the the Christ child. Quoted in Thérèse Lentfoehr, *Words and Silence: On the Poetry of Thomas Merton* (NY: New Directions, 1979), pp. 47-48.

passage above, I think Merton speaks eloquently to all three. Merton stresses that Mary is truly a creature—a Daughter of the Father. He also stresses her role as the Mother of Christ, she who crowns Jesus with His human nature, and relates this singular role of hers to the reality of her personal identification with Holy Wisdom. But he does not leave it there. The *Ousia* that Merton understands Holy Wisdom to be, is I think quite clearly related to the place and function of the Holy Spirit in the Trinity—the love of the Father and the Son, the breath and the air of the Life which is God in three Persons.

And Merton links Mary's manifestation of Hagia Sophia in a most special way to her utterly unique relationship with the Paraclete as Spouse of the Holy Spirit. In fact, though in a poetic and sublime way, I think Merton is affirming basically the same belief that St. Maximilian Kolbe had (whom Leonardo Boff echoes) when he said: "...our human word 'spouse' is far too weak to express the reality of the relationship between the Immaculata and the Holy Spirit. *We can affirm that she is, in a certain sense, the 'incarnation' of the Holy Spirit.*"¹⁰

"Hagia Sophia" is a poem about awakening:

I am awakened, I am born again at the voice of this my
Sister, sent to me from the depths of the divine fecundity.

.....

It is like being awakened by Eve. It is like being
awakened by the Blessed Virgin. It is like coming forth
from primordial nothingness and standing in clarity, in
Paradise.

In the cool hand of the nurse there is the touch of all
life, the touch of Spirit (*Collected Poems*, pp. 363-364).

In the third section of "Hagia Sophia," though, Merton most clearly heralds this sort of "trinity"—of Mary, Sophia, and the Holy Spirit—to which we have been alluding and about which we have been speaking. In the ninth stanza of the third section, Merton says:

10. Quoted in H.M. Manteau-Bonamy, *Immaculate Conception and the Holy Spirit: The Marian Teachings of Father Kolbe* (Kenosha, WI: Franciscan Marytown Press/Prow Books, 1977), p. 50. Emphasis mine.

Sophia, the feminine child, is playing in the world, obvious and unseen, playing at all times before the Creator. Her delights are to be with the children of men. She is their Sister. The core of life that exists in all things is tenderness, mercy, virginity, the Light, the Life considered as passive, as received, as given, as taken, as inexhaustibly renewed by the Gift of God. *Sophia is Gift, is Spirit, Donum Dei. She is God given and God Himself is Gift. God as all and God as nothing: inexhaustible nothingness.* (*Collected Poems*, p. 368. Emphasis mine.)

There is much more I could and would like to say here. But I must refrain. Still, I hope we have at least touched on a way into this whole question and shown, to some extent, how Merton can be a valuable guide. I hope, even more, that something in us, too, might be awakened by these ideas and beliefs—by the *Donum Dei* that Merton (and Kolbe and Boff as well) are offering us.

CONCLUSION: THE HOPE OF THE WORLD

Originally, I had intended to end this discussion with the preceding remarks, offering more elaboration here and there on Merton's notion of the true-self as related to his vision of the Blessed Mother. But I decided, needless to say, against that route. Instead and in conclusion, I think we should at least mention, briefly, two other aspects of Mary's role in Merton's spirituality that are, as well, intimately related to her place as the Mother the living. Namely, and without any doubt, Merton consistently looked to the Mother of God as the hope of the world and, in conjunction, as the model of the union of the active and contemplative or prophetic and mystical lives.

Not long after the first of this year, I was again reviewing some of Merton's poetry that dealt with Mary, and one poem in particular struck me and held me, for a reason that I think will be obvious. The poem was entitled "To the Immaculate Virgin, On a Winter Night," and it reads as follows:

Lady, the night is falling and the dark
Steals all the blood from the scarred west.
The stars come out and freeze my heart
With drops of untouchable music, frail as ice.
And bitter as the new year's cross.

Where in the world has any voice
 Prayed to you, Lady, for the peace that's in your power?
 In a day of blood and many beatings
 I see the governments rise up, behind the steel horizon,
 And take their weapons and begin to kill.

Where in the world has any city trusted you?
 Out where the soldiers camp the guns begin to thump
 And another winter time comes down
 To seal our years in ice.
 The last train cries out
 And runs in terror from this farmers' valley
 Where all the little birds are dead.

The roads are white, the fields are mute
 There are no voices in the wood
 And trees make gallows up against the sharp-eyed stars.
 Oh where will Christ be killed again
 In the land of these dead men?

Lady, the night has got us by the heart
 And the whole world is tumbling down.
 Words turn to ice in my dry throat
 Praying for a land without prayer,

Walking to you on water all winter
 In a year that wants more war
 (*Collected Poems*, pp. 218-219).

Less than two weeks after I had read this poem, the guns did in fact begin to thump out where the soldiers camp. And like so many other people—though sadly not near enough—I was suddenly gripped by deep feelings of sadness and depression, rage and anger, fear and trembling at the despondent reality of another war in our violent century. A line from Merton's poem kept rumbling around in my head and I could not lose it.

Lady, the night has got us by the heart
 And the whole world is tumbling down.

So too did Merton's question haunt me:

Where in the world has any voice
 Prayed to you, Lady, for the peace that's in your power?

If Merton's question is challenging, then the sort of "answer" that I believe he offers is even more challenging. In *Seeds Of Contemplation*, published in the same year as *The Tears of the Blind Lions* (where this poem first appeared), Merton wrote these words:

Yet all generations must call her blessed because they all receive through her whatever supernatural life and joy that is granted to them. And it is necessary that the world should acknowledge her and that the praise of God's great work in her should be sung in poetry and that cathedrals should be built in her name. For unless Our Lady is recognized as the Mother of God and the Queen of all the saints and angels and as the hope of the world, faith in God will remain incomplete.

These are formidable words. They are not strikingly ecumenical or mystical or Zen-like. In a way, they might not even sound like the Merton we might be accustomed to recognize. But they are, indeed, his words. He wrote them in 1949 and reaffirmed them in 1961.¹¹ Would he have renounced them in 1968, just before his death? Or even today, were he still alive? I cannot say. I can, though, say this: Merton not only was a mystic, but was (and is) a prophet of God as well. And as a prophet and mystic, I think Merton once again looked to Mary whom he revered as the Queen of the Prophets and the Poets, the bearer of the light, the perfectly hidden and transparent one, Hagia Sophia.

In Mary, particularly seen as Our Lady of Mt. Carmel, I think we can also affirm that Merton found a complete image of the union of action and contemplation, propheticism and mysticism.¹² As is, I think, obvious, Merton was not averse to speaking and proclaiming

11. *Seeds of Contemplation* (NY: Dell Books, 1949), p. 96. This passage appears in almost the same form in *New Seeds of Contemplation* (p. 174) which Merton published in 1961.

12. On this point, see Merton's essay "The Primitive Carmelite Ideal" in *Disputed Questions* (NY: Harcourt, Brace & Jovanovich, 1960), pp. 218-250. Also, in regard to Mary as prophet, see Boff, *The Maternal Face of God*, pp. 188-204. Finally, in regard to Mary and the mystical life, see William Johnston, *The Wounded Stag* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), pp. 182-196 [the book was originally published under the title *Christian Mysticism Today*].

formidable, brave, and prophetic words such as those we have been encountering throughout this discussion. But neither was he inimical to getting past words, moving beyond their limits. This does not, of course, necessarily mean denouncing what one has said, but it does mean having the courage to announce the truth. The truth, that is, of a reality, both mystical and prophetic, beyond words and language. And I think this is why Thomas Merton could, in the last year of his life, look to Mary, Our Lady of Mt. Carmel, and pray: "Teach me to go to the country beyond words and beyond names."¹³

I think of a passage from the book of Wisdom (7:27):

And she, who is one, can do all things, and renews
everything while herself perduring;
And passing into holy souls from age to age, she
produces friends of God and prophets.

13. See Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), p. 528.