

Stand on Your Own Feet!

Thomas Merton and the Monk without Vows or Walls

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“From now on, Brother, everybody stands on his own feet,”¹ proclaims Thomas Merton on the day of his death. He was quoting an abbot who gave this advice to the Tibetan monk, Chogyam Trungpa Rimpoche, confronted with fleeing or staying in the face of an advancing Chinese communist army. Merton interprets this saying to be “an extremely important monastic statement” and asserts that “The time for relying on structures has disappeared” (*AJ* 338). This paper explores the concept of a monk standing on his own feet without walls or vows. Traditionally, we view the monk as someone enclosed by physical boundaries, adhering to a particular spiritual tradition, bound by vows. However, stripped to its essentials, what constitutes the vocation of a monk? Can its essence be hidden within any vocation? With Merton as guide, this paper focuses on the basic elements of being a monk both for those in the monastery and for those in the world. It considers the visible monks in the world such as the lay monk, Brother Wayne Teasdale, those of the New Monasticism, and the New Friars, as well as those more hidden, invisible monks. Concentrating on Merton’s thoughts in regard to purity of heart and reconciliation, the paper will review the transformational process which molds all monks and guides them to “final integration.”²

An Atypical Traditional Monk

Thomas Merton is a model of a traditional although atypical monk who stands on his own feet. Secluded behind the walls of a monastery, he continues his vocation as a writer. His yearning for the freedom of solitude leads him into a hermitage. He advocates for peace by publicly decrying the Vietnam War and railing against the atomic bomb. He joins the civil rights movement. He studies Eastern religions. Through his writings and actions, he reflects someone who stands on his own feet, arrives at his

1. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 338; subsequent references will be cited as “*AJ*” parenthetically in the text.

2. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) 205-17; subsequent references will be cited as “*CWA*” parenthetically in the text.

own conclusions, and speaks the truth with the light that he is given. On the surface, he appears to be an anomaly – an outspoken monk afloat in the cultural waters of the Cistercian tradition, who bridges monastic isolation through diverse activities, including a dialogue with people of good will from various faiths, traditions and cultures, rendezvous with the famous such as Joan Baez, and affection for a student nurse. Although he shatters the iconic image of a monk, Merton personifies an authentic selfhood congruent with his interior convictions, a man of integrity. From him, we learn that monks who live from the center of their authenticity reveal their true self which is the image and likeness of God, uniquely expressed through their personhood as it exists at a particular place and time in history. For Merton, this meant integrating within himself other cultures, traditions and religions as he sought to expand his interior boundaries to become more inclusive, as expressed in his comments on “final integration”:

The man who has attained final integration is no longer limited by the culture in which he has grown up. “He has embraced *all of life*. . . .” . . . He passes beyond all these limiting forms, while retaining all that is best and most universal in them, “finally giving birth to a fully comprehensive self.” He accepts not only his own community, his own society, his own friends, his own culture, but all mankind. (CWA 212)

Merton realizes that the human race in all its diversity is the body of Christ, and that all of creation pulsates at its core with energy divine. “We must, first of all, see all material things in the light of the mystery of the incarnation. We must reverence all creation because the word was made flesh.”³ For Merton, the monk with this realization has begun his journey to attain final integration, which is not a discovery of the mind through words or images but an exploration of the heart.

He was a Trappist monk living in a monastery, within the enclosed walls of Our Lady of Gethsemani Abbey, at least most of the time. He was fed by the silence and solitude of a monastery which was “a tabernacle in the desert, upon which the *shekinah*, the luminous cloud of the divine Presence, almost visibly descends.”⁴ He felt both nourished and restrained by his environment. His writings suggest that at times he was dancing with angels, as when he proclaims, “Love sails me around the

3. Thomas Merton, *The Monastic Journey*, ed. Brother Patrick Hart (Kansas City: Sheed, Andrews & McMeel, 1977) 18; subsequent references will be cited as “*MJ*” parenthetically in the text.

4. Thomas Merton, *The Silent Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1957) 34.

house. I walk two steps on the ground and four steps in the air. It is love.”⁵ On deep issues of conscience, he appears bridled by convention and the arbitrary whims of his superiors and censors, as illustrated by his lament to James Forest in the Cold War letters: “The orders are, no more writing about peace. This is transparently arbitrary and uncomprehending.”⁶ However, of greater importance, he was bound by ascetic vows:

The whole ascetic life of the monk, in all its aspects both positive and negative, is summed up in his consecration of himself, his whole life, all that he has and all that he is, to God, by his five monastic vows. The life of the monk is the life of the vows. . . . Conversion of manners means striving to change one’s whole life and all one’s attitudes from those of the world to those of the cloister. . . . Obedience means the renunciation of our own will, in order to carry out in our whole life the will of another who represents God. Stability means renouncing our freedom to travel about from place to place, and binds us to one monastery until death. Poverty and Chastity are not explicitly mentioned in the Rule of St Benedict because they were considered by him to be included in conversion of manners, but they form an essential part of the monk’s obligations. (*MJ* 30-31)

Particularly during his hermetic solitude, these vows challenged him to the very depths of his existence:

The hermit, all day and all night, beats his head against a wall of doubt. That is his contemplation. . . . a kind of unknowing of his own self, a kind of doubt that questions the very roots of his existence, a doubt which undermines his very reasons for existing and for doing what he does. It is this doubt which reduces him finally to silence, and in the silence which ceases to ask questions, he receives the only certitude he knows: the presence of God in the midst of uncertainty and nothingness, as the only reality. (*MJ* 159)

In this desert, Tom Merton disappears (perhaps foreshadowing his last publicly spoken words before he is electrocuted [see *AJ* 343]) and is “swallowed up in” God (*MJ* 159). In union with the Holy Spirit, his liberated spirit radiates a creative openness to others, reaching fruition in his speech in Calcutta when he says “we are already one. . . . And what we have to recover is our original unity” (*AJ* 308). Transcending the limits of monastic formalism, a transformed Merton can ask: “Can there

5. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953) 120.

6. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 266.

be a monastic life without vows? Is a monastic life with vows necessarily better and more authentic than one without vows?” (*CWA* 191). He continues with the observation, “In the earliest days of desert monasticism, there were no vows, no written rules, and institutional structure was kept at a minimum. The monastic commitment was taken with extreme and passionate seriousness, but this commitment was not protected by juridical sanctions or by institutional control” (*CWA* 191-92). Merton is “convinced that a monastic life without vows is quite possible and perhaps very desirable. It might have many advantages” (*CWA* 195). He wonders, “Why could not married people participate temporarily, in some way, in monastic life?” (*CWA* 192). Finally, he questions the very structure of monasticism: “A greater flexibility in the monastic structure would permit the development of ecumenical monastic communities. There is no reason why non-Catholics and even unbelievers should not be admitted to a serious participation – at least temporary – in monastic community life” (*CWA* 195).

In *A Monastic Vision for the 21st Century*, several prominent authors reflect on the future of monasticism with a focus on traditional monastic communities. As a group, they concentrate less on the form of future monastic communities and more on the guiding principles that will shape monastic life. For Michael Casey, those are to be seekers of God, to radically renounce the world, to live simply, and within a spiritual tradition.⁷ Bonnie Thurston believes the monk’s pursuit of purity of heart is an indispensable ingredient of all future monasticism (Hart, ed. 75). Joan Chittister thinks future monks must distinguish the concept of cloister, “as if place were the determining factor in the making of a contemplative,” from that of contemplation, “as if Jesus was not a ‘contemplative,’ as if all of us are not called to be contemplative” (Hart, ed. 95). By contrast, Gail Fitzpatrick would retain monastic enclosure for its value “of guarding one’s heart” (Hart, ed. 150). John Eudes Bamberger’s “vision of Cistercian life for the 21st century is the monastery as a school of charity where all the essential, practical skills for attaining to union with God are acquired” (Hart, ed. 126-27). He views the task of the monk as “the recovery of the likeness to the Word of God” achieved “by developing the whole of our person, including the spiritual senses” (Hart, ed. 144). Similarly, Francis Kline views the lifetime work of the monk both now and in the future to be that of suffering and dying with Christ so that through the power of the Holy Spirit there is “the formation of the Risen Christ in the heart of

7. *A Monastic Vision for the 21st Century*, ed. Patrick Hart, OCSO (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2006) 24-25; subsequent references will be cited as “Hart, ed.” parenthetically in the text.

a monk” (Hart, ed. 180). Although Merton would agree with all of these viewpoints, he appears to transcend the boundaries of traditional monasticism when he states that monastic life without vows may be desirable, married persons could participate, and non-believers would be welcomed. Merton points us to non-traditional monks.

Visible Non-Traditional Monks

Wayne Teasdale

As if in response to Merton’s musings, self-declared monks in the world appear after Merton’s death. One of these, Brother Wayne Teasdale, referred to himself as a hermit in the city. Influenced by both Merton and Abbot Thomas Keating in the 1960s, Brother Wayne was no ordinary hermit secluded from others; he taught at a number of institutions, including Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. After living in an ashram in India for two years, he became a Christian sanyasi under the influence of Bede Griffiths, who explained to him that “the real challenge for you, Wayne, is to be a monk in the world, a sanyasi who lives in the midst of society, at the very heart of things.”⁸ In 1989, the Archbishop of Chicago formally professed him to be a lay monk.

A contemplative, Brother Wayne was active in a variety of social issues such as the cause of the Dalai Lama, homelessness and the environment. He also espoused interfaith understanding through “interspirituality” which he viewed as the commonality of mystical experiences in diverse religions. He defines a monk as “a person who has dedicated his or her life to seeking God” (Teasdale, *Monk* xxvi). Teasdale asserts, “The daily tasks of earning a living, paying bills, saving money, getting along with others, being entertained, enjoying healthy recreation, and learning how to interact with difficult people are all part of an active life. So they must also be part of life for a monk in the world, at the crossroads of contemporary culture and experience” (Teasdale, *Monk* xxiv). For monks in the world, he suggests, “the question becomes how to integrate their glimpse of monastic peace into their everyday lives in the world, how to cultivate contemplation within an active life” (Teasdale, *Monk* xxvi). He thinks, “To achieve this integration requires the realization that the real monastery exists within them as a dimension of their own consciousness” (Teasdale, *Monk* xxvi). According to Brother Wayne, the structure of “Monasticism in all its forms – Eastern, Western, primitive, inventive, contemplative, active, and mixed – exists to nurture the development, fruition, and gifts

8. Wayne Teasdale, *A Monk in the World* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2003) xxii; subsequent references will be cited as “Teasdale, *Monk*” parenthetically in the text.

of the inner mystic or inner monk” (Teasdale, *Monk* xxvii). He espouses Keating’s pronouncement that “The essence of monastic life is not its structures but its interior practice, and the heart of interior practice is contemplative prayer” (Teasdale, *Monk* xxvii).

Similar to the desert fathers who went out to the desert and were tested by demons, Brother Wayne thinks that “in our age, the desert is the city – that is civilization” (Teasdale, *Monk* 13). He desires that there be more monks in the world because he believes, “A contemplative in the heart of the world has the opportunity to be aware of, to relate to, to touch and heal this suffering, to be a sign of love and hope to those who are so vulnerable in this difficult and indifferent world” (Teasdale, *Monk* 15). He advises those who wish to be monks in the world to focus their life of prayer on contemplative meditation, spiritual reading, the practice of nature, including walking and sky meditation and allowing for silence and solitude (see Teasdale, *Monk* 23-24). He counsels that an effect of contemplation is to root out the hidden motivations in our unconscious, the seeds of selfishness and negativity, and to further our integration (see Teasdale, *Monk* 41). A monk transformed by contemplation can envision a society of compassion, mercy and love, and be the leaven to radically transform the world by transforming others, eliminating cultural and economic selfishness (see Teasdale, *Monk* 135).

Teasdale views Merton as a forerunner of interspirituality through his study and appreciation of Eastern spiritual classics. Brother Wayne believed, “Thomas Merton was perhaps the greatest popularizer of interspirituality. Not only did he acquaint his readers with the rich and vast tradition of Christian contemplation . . . but he opened the door for Christians to explore other traditions, notably Taoism, Hinduism, and Buddhism.”⁹ He also believes that Merton’s notion that “we are already one . . . and what we have to recover is our original unity” (*AJ* 308) goes beyond our cultural, psychological and religious differences, points to the future of monasticism and is key to transforming the world. To enable this transformation, Brother Wayne envisions a universal order of mystics or contemplatives which would “include people from all traditions and no tradition at all. They would include young and old, men and women, certain and skeptical, confused and enlightened” (Teasdale, *Monk* 218).

New Monasticism

Teasdale’s vision is illustrated in the new monasticism movement. Although some of these communities date to the early 1970s, with a heritage

9. Wayne Teasdale, *The Mystic Heart: Discovering a Universal Spirituality in the World’s Religions* (Novato, CA: New World Library 1999) 39.

going back to 1930, the term “New Monasticism” was popularized by Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove in the 1990s. It is based on Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s belief that “the restoration of the church will surely come only from a new type of monasticism which has nothing in common with the old but a complete lack of compromise in a life lived in accordance with the Sermon on the Mount in the discipleship of Christ.”¹⁰ In his brief book *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer discusses “directions and precepts that Scriptures provide us for our life together under the word.”¹¹ He perceives Christianity as “community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ” (Bonhoeffer, *Life* 21). Members of the fellowship spend the day with others in prayer and work and the day alone in meditation. He cautions, “Let him who cannot be alone beware of community; let him who is not in community beware of being alone” (Bonhoeffer, *Life* 77). As speech is essential for life in community, silence is essential for solitude. In the communal fellowship, Bonhoeffer proposes an atypical ministry which he refers to as “the ministry of holding one’s tongue” (Bonhoeffer, *Life* 91), “the ministry of meekness” (Bonhoeffer, *Life* 94), “the ministry of listening” (Bonhoeffer, *Life* 97), “the ministry of helpfulness” (Bonhoeffer, *Life* 99), “the ministry of bearing” (Bonhoeffer, *Life* 100), “the ministry of proclaiming” (Bonhoeffer, *Life* 103), “the ministry of authority” (Bonhoeffer, *Life* 108). For the community to have spiritual depth, each member must acknowledge his or her sinfulness and partake in confession to be reconciled one to another and each to God. “Reconciled in their hearts with God and the brethren, the congregation receives the gift of the body and blood of Jesus Christ, and, receiving that, it receives forgiveness, new life, and salvation. . . . The life of Christians together under the Word has reached its perfection in the sacrament” (Bonhoeffer, *Life* 122).

Following Bonhoeffer’s call, Wilson-Hartgrove proposes a new monasticism which would aim at healing fragmentation and eliminating the distinction of sacred and secular vocations. This would be accomplished by a small group of disciples who through intense theological reflection and commitment would lead contemplative and communal lives with a focus on hospitality and concern for the poor. In 2004, a number of existing communities formulated a rule of life, known as the twelve marks. They include living at the margins of society, sharing economic resources, hospitality, just reconciliation, submission to the church, a formative process like a novitiate, nurturing common life, support for

10. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *A Testament to Freedom*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1997) 424.

11. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1954) 17; subsequent references will be cited as “Bonhoeffer, *Life*” parenthetically in the text.

both celibate singles as well as married couples and children, communal geographical proximity of members, care of the local environment and support of local economies, peacemaking and conflict resolution, and commitment to a contemplative life.¹² Wilson-Hartgrove believes the work of a new monastic community “is to tend to a culture of grace and truth in the world” (Wilson-Hartgrove 135-36). Doing this requires a reliance on the church, where the “the church is called to be a people who love one another and make a life together, tending to a culture of grace in a world broken by sin” (Wilson-Hartgrove 145).

Among many others, the Iona Community and the Northumbria Community are examples of the new monasticism. The Iona Community, as described by Ronald Ferguson in *Chasing the Wild Goose: The Story of the Iona Community*, had Celtic monastic roots. The founder, Rev. George MacLeod, in 1938 led a group of craftsmen to rebuild a ruined medieval Iona Abbey on a small rocky island in the Scottish Hebrides, founding a community in the process. For its first twenty years of its existence, the community’s activity centered on its restoration project. Later it became a community “bound together by a Rule of private prayer, economic sharing, and work for justice and peace.”¹³ This ecumenical community is concentrated in Scotland, England and Wales, with full members numbering in the hundreds, but there are also associates and friends of the community.

The Northumbria Community’s beginnings are traced to the relationships of John and Linda Skinner and Andy Raine in Northumberland, England in the late 1970s and early 1980s, followed by the creation of the Nether Springs Trust with the involvement of Roy Searle and Trevor Miller. With a geographically dispersed community, “They attempt to find a practical modern expression of a new monasticism rooted in the vows of ‘availability and vulnerability’ and hold an uncompromising allegiance to the imperatives of the Sermon on the Mount.”¹⁴ Members progress in stages from being postulants to novices and finally to full companions. They follow a rule of “availability,” being available to God in the cell of their hearts as well as to others, and “vulnerability,” manifested as being teachable in prayer, and the “heretical imperative,” by challenging as-

12. Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *New Monasticism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008) 39; subsequent references will be cited as “Wilson-Hartgrove” parenthetically in the text.

13. Ronald Ferguson, *Chasing the Wild Goose: The Story of the Iona Community* (Glasgow, Scotland: Wild Goose Publications, 2006) 35.

14. Richard Foster, *Sanctuary of the Soul: Journey into Meditation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011) 94.

sumed truth, living among others as “church without walls.”

The New Friars

Another expression of this impetus may be the “New Friars.” Scott Bessenecker believes:

we are at the front edge of another missional, monastic-like order made up of men and women, many of whom are in their twenties and thirties, burning with a passion to serve the destitute in slum communities of the developing world – not from a position of power but from alongside them, living in the same makeshift housing, breathing the same sewage-tainted air, subject to the same government bulldozers that threaten to raze their communities. They are new friars, flying just below our radar because they have not come under any single denominational or suprachurch banner.¹⁵

Like their historic counterparts, he views this movement as having the same roots and reflecting the same qualities, which he describes as incarnational, devotional, communal, missional and marginal. Bessenecker thinks, “Slum communities are kinds of chapels in which one can meet face to face with Christ in the dispossessed” (Bessenecker 87). The new friars’ spirituality revolves around Christ’s pledge, “I tell you solemnly, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me” (Mt. 25:40). Their vocation is lived out over months or years alongside the destitute, those who are garbage scavengers, prostitutes, homeless, abused children, and those who are dying.

Brother Wayne Teasdale, the New Monastics and the New Friars appear to be heroic individuals who stand on their own feet, open to grace. They have responded to the invitation of Christ’s Spirit to “Follow Me” as they serve Christ in their work with the poor and the marginalized. Although their numbers may be small, their hearts are large and their efforts like mustard seeds will have their fruition in the kingdom of God. These individuals are very visible monks in the world. But there are more invisible ones who, without vows or walls, live outwardly a very ordinary life.

Invisible Non-Traditional Monks

Merton’s attestation on the day of his death – “From now on, Brother, everybody stands on his own feet. . . . The time for relying on structures has disappeared” – may herald the work of the Spirit generating invis-

15. Scott A. Bessenecker, *The New Friars* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006) 16; subsequent references will be cited as “Bessenecker” parenthetically in the text.

ible non-traditional monks without walls or vows or monastic structure. Invisible monks, called to contemplation and solitude, live and work in all strata of society. Their external circumstances appear to be like those of their neighbors. They may work, marry, have children and socialize while nourishing a hidden vocation to live a life of prayer and to dwell in God's presence. The path of their work in the world and that of their interior life may appear in conflict early in their spiritual journey, with time set aside for solitude and contemplation stolen from time set aside for family or work. Ideally, at some point the inner and outer paths join so that in both being and doing their whole life becomes a living prayer.

The hidden vocation of this invisible monk is the same as that of the professed; it is to dwell in God's presence through a life of prayer. All monks quest to see the face of the Living God and this steadfast pursuit, either inside or outside the walls of a monastery, either with or without vows, characterizes this individual as a monk. The quest of the invisible monk is that of all monks who desire to be transformed into a new creation in which the old man becomes a new one dwelling in the presence of God.

The monastic monk, assisted by vows, monastic practices, the office, the liturgy and the support of his brothers, seeks God alone. However, even with monastic support, such a monk faces doubt, interior struggles and obstacles to his pursuit. Similarly a monk in the world faces these as well as worldly activities which often seek to separate him from God. For the invisible monk without walls or vows or a rule guaranteeing time set aside for prayer, much of his life may be consumed by an occupation or worldly concerns. However such a person discovers that the Spirit which calls one to contemplation also arranges time for silence and solitude. This individual with his whole life surrounded by the obstacles of a secular environment may find the core of his existence wound around the pursuit of the presence of God.

What sets both the visible and invisible monks apart is their focused response to the invitation of the Holy Spirit to pursue the beatitude, "Happy the pure in heart: they shall see God" (Mt. 5:8). The means to this end is contemplation, a flight of the will and mind and heart towards God. This lifetime journey begins with an assent to an invitation from the Holy Spirit to allow the divine fire of contemplation to burn them. Like fire burning a log, this spiritual fire as described by St. John of the Cross is oppressive to the soul as it burns away the grime and habits of sin.¹⁶ This solitary work digs at the roots of sin and gives rise to self-

16. See St. John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, ed. and trans. Kieran Kavanaugh & Otilio Rodriguez (Washington DC: ICS Publications,

knowledge of the interior division and strife and the self-hatred which results from sin. It uncovers the boundaries separating one from one's true self and from others and from God. As the Spirit breaks down these boundaries, monks open themselves more fully to the presence of God, particularly as expressed in the presence of others. This presence of God may be discerned not only in those like them but in those who differ, not only in Christians but in Buddhists and Muslims as well as agnostics and atheists – in all of creation and the family of man. The goal of a mature discernment would be to realize, as Merton did, that “we are already one” and we have to recover “what we are” (*AJ* 308).

Of course, the journey to this awareness may be turbulent, as monks falter and soar. They appear caught up in the liturgical cycle of the birth, death and resurrection of Christ as He comes to be born, to die and to rise in them as they live out their lives interpenetrated by sin and grace. Yet this spiritual work wrought in them by God's grace and His Spirit remains hidden from them. They see it dimly but do not know its fruits. In fact, their way of living in the world does not make sense even to themselves. They question their sitting, their meditation, their contemplation, their leisurely gazing and their dim awareness of the realization of the presence of God. They wonder about the futility of their existence as measured by the productivity of their more active brethren. Days, months, years, decades pass and it seems like they have not even made a beginning in the spiritual life. However they are at peace living this marginal life which appears to them to be not only marginal to the world but seemingly even marginal to God. They live in a no man's land at the interface between Eden where they witness to the light emanating there and a redeemed world darkened by sin. Somehow through the merits flowing from Christ's sacrifice, they hope to participate in His mediation.

Christian monks participate in that mediation by their interior exploration in which they encounter not only their own heart, but the heart of mankind in which both grace and sin abound. Although they may be aware of the presence of God and the light of grace, they are also in contact with the darkness of sin and its destructive power in themselves, the world and others. In some small measure, it is their mission to bring this darkness to the light of Christ. As a consequence of being a conscious meeting point of the light and darkness, monks seek reconciliation for themselves. In doing so, they become instruments of reconciliation for others. Theirs is a never-ending task. The solitary journey into the center of their own heart becomes a journey into the center of mankind's darkened heart as

1979) 350; subsequent references will be cited as “John of the Cross” parenthetically in the text.

they seek to discover the center of their true self where they find God. In their journey, every arrival becomes another departure.

Stand on Your Own Feet

With each arrival and departure, monks increasingly learn to stand on their own feet. They do this by withdrawing from a false self, concentrating through solitude on the exploration of an inner realm in which they seek God.¹⁷ In the process they deepen their capacity for obedience, faith, freedom and love – all critical elements for monks to stand on their own feet before God.

Merton emphasizes that our false self originates in our disobedience to the call to be a true son or daughter of God. Our disobedience makes us afraid and we hide like Adam. We hide from God, we hide from our true self and we hide from others. We fear that we will be discovered, unmasked, unclothed, and be naked before the truth of God which is God's truth in us:

The man and his wife heard the sound of Yahweh God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from Yahweh God among the trees of the garden. But Yahweh God called to the man. "Where are you?" he asked. "I heard the sound of you in the garden," he replied. "I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid." "Who told you that you are naked?" He asked. "Have you been eating of the tree I forbade you to eat?" (Genesis 3:8-13)

This false self is the lie of our self-creation which results from our profound refusal to be the image and likeness of God. This wound of the false self has primitive roots extending back to the Garden of Eden.¹⁸ As noted by John Eudes Bamberger (Hart, ed. 144), the restoration of this image and likeness is the primary defining task of the monk, whether living in the monastery or within the world. "God created man in the image of himself: in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27). Through obedience, the monk's task is to return to Eden, to return to the presence of God. The path to this restoration passes through a dark night of dread which arises from the realization that one's external identity is inauthentic and illusionary. Merton observes: "The purpose of the dark night, as St. John of the Cross shows, is not simply to punish and afflict the heart of man, but to liberate, to purify and to

17. See Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960) 177-207.

18. See Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1961) 50-68.

enlighten in perfect love. The way that leads through dread goes not to despair but to perfect joy, not to hell but to heaven.”¹⁹ At its secret roots, dread opens into faith. If one opts to live at the center of this dread, the dread itself becomes a school of faith. In this barren desert, faith blossoms within the obscure and opaque boundary between the ground of ourselves and the ground of our being, the interface between us and God.

Monks stand on their own feet through their growth in faith in God and dependence on Him and through their growth in faith in their community and dependence on them. Through the gift of faith monks encounter God whose Love is their freedom. Merton suggests that monks through their journey in faith realize that God is the supporting ground of their existence.²⁰ They may discover this support as expressed through others. Often, it appears, God stands such persons on their own feet by allowing them to lean on the backs of others, drawn from family, friends, workplace, community and church. However, paradoxically, the cement holding them in these relationships may dissolve as monks surrender their group identity for their unique individual identity, hidden in the mystery of their union with God. Later, these relationships may be recovered at a more profound level as they become more centered on God. They may even realize St. John of the Cross’s pronouncement, “the soul knows creatures through God and not God through creatures” (John of the Cross 645).

As monks receive the gift of dependence on others, they share with them the gift of presence, not only their own but that of the risen Christ. By their fidelity to the quest of seeking the face of the living God, their union with God, however limited, allows them to become a transparent bearer of God to others. Merton notes:

The presence of God in His world as its Creator depends on no one but Him. His presence in the world as Man depends, in some measure, upon men. Not that we can do anything to change the mystery of the Incarnation in itself: but we are able to decide whether we ourselves, and that portion of the world which is ours, shall become *aware* of His presence, consecrated by it, and transfigured in its light. We have the choice of two identities: the external mask which seems to be real and which lives by a shadowy autonomy for the brief moment of earthly existence, and the hidden, inner person who seems to us to be nothing, but who can give himself eternally to the truth in whom he subsists.

19. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969) 138; subsequent references will be cited as “CP” parenthetically in the text.

20. See James Finley, *Merton’s Palace of Nowhere* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1978) 93.

It is this inner self that is taken up into the mystery of Christ, by His love, by the Holy Spirit, so that in secret we live “in Christ.”²¹

Through interior exploration, monks recover their true self by the intervention of the Holy Spirit. For those in monasteries as well as those in world, the monk’s journey entails a life of prayer, grace, silence and solitude. Prayer exposes their interior through self-knowledge, allows the mercy of God to heal their interior wounds,²² leads them to union with God and communion with others. Grace liberates them from the false self through the actions of the Holy Spirit who prompts them to seek the truth of themselves as they seek the Truth that is God. Grace restores the lost innocence of Eden through the promptings of the Holy Spirit, their source of grace, their guide and their destination. Silence guides them to the solitude of their true self and the ground of their being where they encounter God and peace.²³ Through their interior exploration, they are hollowed out and experience their emptiness. Merton perceives the depths of this emptiness to be pure freedom and love. “The character of emptiness, at least for a Christian contemplative, is pure love, pure freedom. Love that is free of everything, not determined by anything, or held down by any special relationship. . . . This purity, freedom and indeterminateness of love is the very essence of Christianity” (*CP* 118-19).

To experience the reality that God became man that man may participate in the divine (so often expressed in the liturgy of Eastern rites) is the deepest aspiration of monks. Their whole solitary journey revolves around this notion. It forms the core of the “work of God” which has been traditionally expressed through the office, choir and liturgy, and assisted by monastic stability and the vows – all designed to facilitate an encounter with God through which monks are transformed. The monk without walls or vows may incorporate some of these practices as well as other paths seeking the same result. All of these means exist to provide the individual time, silence and focus, to seek God, be transformed by God through grace, and through union with God participate in his divinity, which is to participate in His Love. Merton suggests:

But in fact the Resurrection and Ascension of Christ, the New Adam, completely restored human nature to its spiritual condition and

21. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 295.

22. See Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton in Alaska: The Alaskan Conferences, Journals, and Letters*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: New Directions, 1989) 160-161.

23. See Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979) 20-21.

made possible the divinization of every man coming into the world. This meant that in each one of us the inner self was now able to be awakened and transformed by the action of the Holy Spirit, and this awakening would not only enable us to discover our true identity “in Christ,” but would also make the living and Risen Savior present in us. . . . Each one of us, in some sense, is able to be completely transformed into the likeness of Christ, to become, as He is, divinely human, and thus to share His spiritual authority and charismatic power in the world.²⁴

With the recovery of their true self, monks stand on their own feet by discovering their real but hidden identity in Christ in which their spirit and God’s Spirit become one (see *IE* 38). As they awaken to the mystery of the presence of God and increasingly live in this presence, they accelerate their maturity as sons or daughters of the Father. They have not attained to final integration but they are awake and aware of their shortcomings and strive to overcome them. They seek wholeness by pursuing integration of their bodies, minds and spirits subject to the Spirit of God, which enables openness to all persons of cultural and religious diversity, and love for the family of man. They hope for a final and complete integration through full union with the Divine – conscious within Consciousness – realized within Reality – Heaven – where they will experience the deepest aspiration of a monk, to stand on his or her own feet before God and see Him, face to Face.

24. Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation*, ed. William H. Shannon (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2003) 38; subsequent references will be cited as “*IE*” parenthetically in the text.