

# PHOTOGRAPHY AND PRAYER IN THOMAS MERTON

-by Brother Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O.

Is there a connection between photography and prayer? We read in the Bible that all creation came into being through God's creative Word. St. John tells us that "not one thing had its being but through Him." Further, God sustains all things in existence, for in Him all creation "lives and moves and has its being." Each moment the world is created anew. In touch with God's silence in unspoiled nature contemplation is born. The inanimate world is filled with a natural silence, and all animate creation throbs with God's silent power.

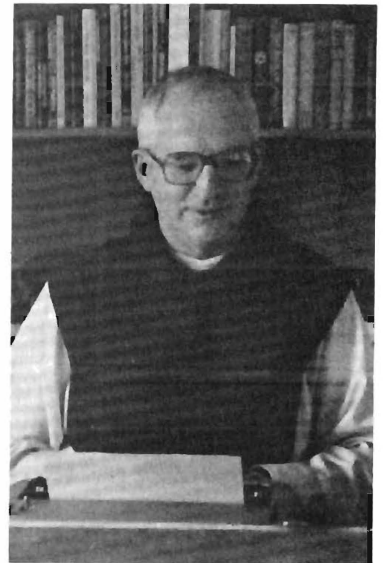
The English Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, wrote of the world as "charged with the grandeur of God. It will flame out like shining from shook foil."<sup>1</sup> To see creation truly as it is, it is necessary to take a long loving look at the real about us, to take time to really see all the simple beauty which we so often overlook in our busy lives.

Brother Carlo Carretto in *THE GOD WHO COMES* relates how he experienced prayer through God's creation while in the solitude of the desert. "When I come to pray in the desert, I prepare my prayers by contemplating things. I think the Lord put things there just for that. . . Before beginning my dialogue with God, I look round at the bit of earth where He wants me to be. It is no waste of time to wander about looking at things, touching them, contemplating them."<sup>2</sup> Thus, to begin, we must learn how to see and respect the visible creation which mirrors the glory and the perfection of the invisible God.

Writing of things in their indentity in *NEW SEEDS OF CONTEMPLATION*, Thomas Merton used the word *inscape* (coined by Hopkins) to express the unique sacredness of each created reality in the universe: “The forms and individual character of living and growing things, of inanimate beings, of animals and flowers and all nature, constitute their holiness in the sight of God. Their inscape is their sanctity. It is the imprint of His Wisdom and His reality in them.”<sup>3</sup>

All creation takes on a special sacramental character for the Christian. Since Christ lived on this earth in the flesh, and walked along its roads, and enjoyed bread and wine with his friends, a totally transfigured universe has emerged. A tree, a spring of flowing water, a child lost in wonder, all assume an entirely different reality as a result of the Incarnation of the Son of God. In all truth, we live in a “new creation” which ever draws us to the Father.

But where does photography fit in? Thomas Merton used the camera as an instrument of contemplation. John Howard Griffin, who had encouraged Merton in his serious camerawork and loaned him a Canon FX, wrote in *A HIDDEN WHOLENESS*, referring to Merton’s photography: “His vision was more often attracted to the movement of wheat in the wind, the textures of snow, paint-spattered cans, stone, crocuses blossoming through weeds -- or again, the woods in all their hours, from the first fog of morning, through noonday stillness, to evening quiet.”<sup>4</sup>



Brother Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O.  
Courtesy of Gethsemani Archives

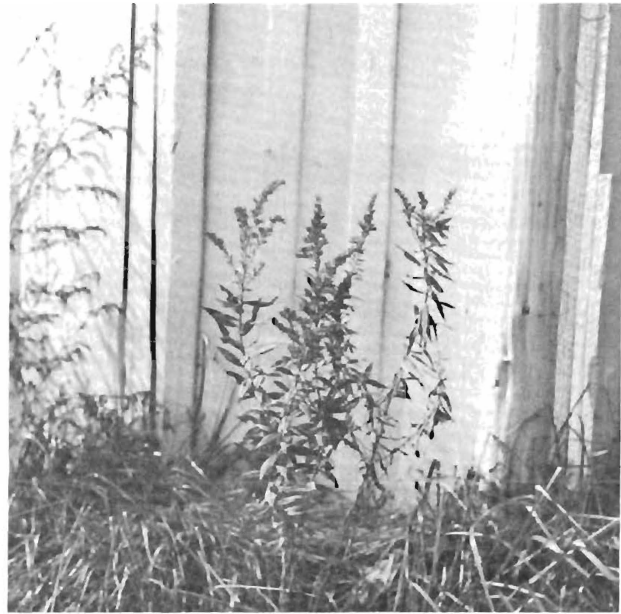
While walking in the woods, Merton photographed the images of his contemplation as he saw them, as they really were, not manipulated in any way to create an artificial effect. Thus, he photographed whatever crossed his path, a dead tree root, the texture of weather-beaten clapboard on an abandoned barn, a rusted distillery, or the play of light and shadow on dry leaves in the woods. As Griffin rightly observed: “he (Merton) photographed the natural, unarranged, unpossessed objects of his contemplation, seeking not to alter their life, but to preserve it in his emulsions.”<sup>5</sup> His contemplative and incarnational vision of reality was quite simply “things as they are.” As such, they spoke eloquently to him of their Creator.

The camera was, then, for Merton a potential catalyst for contemplation. In an excellent photographic book entitled *OCTAVE OF PRAYER*, the author, Minor White, comes to a personal realization that at times “photography and prayer overlap.”<sup>6</sup> I think Merton would agree to that. Photography for many today has become a substitute for religion. But for Merton, I would suggest, it was more of a preparation for prayer, and in some sense prayer itself.

Photography as an art form, like poetry and music, creates mental and vital values which can be turned to a higher end. “Like all things that are capable of linking our consciousness to God, they can become spiritual and a powerful aid to prayer,” writes White. He concludes his essay by stating that “meditative camerawork could lead to deeper prayer or even to a life of prayer.”<sup>7</sup>

The very real connection between prayer and camerawork is not always realized by the photographer. Yet, photography allows a consciousness of things, a heightened awareness very similar to meditative prayer, and an experience of union, of oneness with the object photographed. In contemplative prayer the experience is that of being united with God, as the mystics universally verify. For them, it is not so much a way of finding God, as resting in Him Whom they had found.

Thomas Merton expressed it succinctly in a passage from *NEW SEEDS OF CONTEMPLATION*: “Our discovery of God is, in a way, God’s discovery of us. We cannot go to heaven to find Him because we have no way of knowing where heaven is or what it is. He comes down from heaven and finds us. He looks at us from the depths of His own infinite actuality, which is everywhere, and His seeing us gives us a new being and a new mind in which we also discover Him. We only know Him insofar as we are known by Him, and our contemplation of Him is a participation of His contemplation of Himself.”<sup>8</sup>



Photograph by Thomas Merton  
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Photography can lead us to that discovery, which remains a great grace, a gift of God’s love.

#### NOTES

1. Gerard Manley Hopkins, *A HOPKINS READER*, Edited by John Pick, (New York, Doubleday Image Books, 1966) p.47
2. Carlo Carretto, *THE GOD WHO COMES*, Translated by Rose Mary Hancock, (New York, Orbis Books, 1974) p.5
3. Thomas Merton, *NEW SEEDS OF CONTEMPLATION* (New York, New Directions, 1961) p.30
4. John Howard Griffin, *A HIDDEN WHOLENESS: THE VISUAL WORLD OF THOMAS MERTON*. (Boston, Houghton-Mifflin, 1970) p. 49
5. *Ibid.*, p. 50
6. Minor White, *OCTAVE OF PRAYER: AN EXHIBITION ON A THEME* (New York, An Aperture Book, 1972) p. 18
7. *Ibid.*, p. 26
8. Thomas Merton, *NEW SEEDS OF CONTEMPLATION*, p. 39