

MERTON & CHRIST:

Demonstrating the Medieval *Speculum*

by **John Albert**, O.C.S.O.

A Prefatory Note

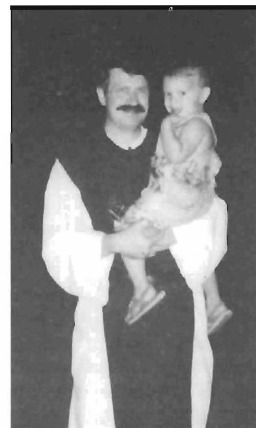
The following essay and sequence of poems represent a period of transition in my life and in appreciation of Thomas Merton. "Merton and Christ: Demonstrating the Medieval *Speculum*" developed out of a lengthy manuscript concerning the conversion experience of Merton and Augustine of Hippo. This original essay was written in the form of a *speculum* after more than twenty five years of reflection on *The Seven Story Mountain* and the *Confessions*. The four poems were written during the time of my recovery from congestive heart failure in 1988 and related health problems which kept me out of the mainstream of monastic life and Merton studies. A monk is blessed by his friendships and these poems are tributes to those who helped me along the way: an infant and his parents, a young man, my abbot at the time, and the editors with whom I was working. In September of 1989, *The Atlanta Constitution* published a series of articles about Tim Willis, a young, blind athlete who overcame his obstacles by having his foot tethered to the foot of his running coach. Although we have never met, his inspiration can be detected in "The Gentle Deception." Thomas Merton never stopped allowing himself to be converted, to be changed and transformed by life, by reality. He continues to teach me that infirmities are blessings and failures are invitations to greater freedom.

Introduction

The monk dwells in profound silence. Each spoken and written word is a bridge spanning the shore of another existence. The art of monastic language is a movement from solitude and silence into communication and community. *Abyssus, abyssum, invoat.* (Ps. 41:8) The depths call us into a dialogue of shared experience with God and others—in poverty, trust and truth. The monk dwells in communion with all who have gone before him, with his contemporaries, and those who are to come.

The special character of "monastic" literature

The literature of monasticism is original, of lasting quality because of its universality, and deeply self-expressive. The monk studies to learn about his own experience. Monastic writing reflects a wisdom gained from life, being sapiential, not scientific. The monk writes toward further self-understanding. The scientist of whatever academic discipline works for the acquisition of information for further speculation while the monk ventures beyond this into the realm of dynamic images, archetypes and literary figures. The scientist works at the conceptual level of abstract ideas. The monk employs a language of uniquely resounding symbols. Scientific literature has a recognized usage. Monastic literature is oriented to the person. Monastic literature is universal because it can be appropriated by each reader. The images and symbols of the monk impact differently on differing cultures in their historical contexts. They touch what persists in the human spirit and thus having lasting value. The monastic and scientific approaches to learning are not in conflict. Each complements the other.



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JOHN ALBERT & FRIEND

Even the prose of monastic literature is poetic. It approximates by description rather than containing by definition. While the medieval scholastics preferred the methods of questioning and disputation (*quaestiones disputatae*) and reading for the sake of fortifying intellectual positions, the monks wrote of God's activity in their lives for a readership known to them. Letters, dialogues, sermons, meditations and commentaries on scripture and the patristic authors, chronicles and histories of communities and countries seen from their vantage point preoccupied the monks and captivated the imaginations of their audience. Monastic writings are directed to the practice of the Christian life, inviting all to a more virtuous life and a deeper love for God.¹

The medieval *Speculum*

Along with the marginal and interlinear *gloss* (many became celebrated in themselves) and the *florilegium* (or bouquet of quotes from famous writings) the monk also made special application of another form of medieval writing: the *speculum*. The *speculum* (or mirror) is not a systematic treatise or a thesis defended in a logically argued manner. It employs the *repetitio*, repeating a central theme or themes within the wider context in which it is written as allowed by opportunity over an extended period of time. Monks are busy about other things: the sacramental life, their *lectio divina*, the choral office, manual labor. Many of the associated ideas of the *speculum* may seem irrelevant, out of place or even jarring to the reader. For the author, however, each word stems from his own experience and has meaning. The reader may find the *speculum* dull if not boring in style, without clear direction or precise intention. The *speculum* becomes effective when the reader approaches the text with an open mind, in silence and stillness of spirit. By reflecting its theme or themes from many perspectives, the *speculum* reveals the personality of author and reader alike.²

Merton

Sacred Scripture reminds us that in this life we see reality indistinctly, as in a mirror (1 Cor 13:12) and that, in looking into the mirror of the face of God, we are ourselves changed (2 Cor 3:18). The following pages are a selection of texts by Thomas Merton in which the central theme is Merton's relationship with Christ.

Merton and Christ

Christianity in its essence is a relationship. The place of Jesus Christ in it is the first question put to the world of reality by those who confront Him. And it is the primary preoccupation of the Christian to meditate upon the life of Christ and to imitate His goodness.

The dictum of Saint Jerome (c. 331-420), "For the ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ," has from his time to the present been used as a guiding principle for the integration of intellectual development and personal piety.³

Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea (d. c. 340), in *The History of the Church* wrote: "Any person who intends to commit to writing the record of the Church's history is bound to go right back to Christ Himself, whose name we are privileged to share, and to start with the beginning of a dispensation more divine than the world realizes."⁴

On November 16, 1938, Thomas Merton was baptized into the Roman Catholic Church and received his first Communion. He was twenty-three years of age at the time. This momentous event took place at Corpus

1. Jean Leclercq, OSB, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study in Monastic Culture*; translated by Catharine Misrahi (New York: Fordham University Press, 1961), pp. 187-194.

2. Aelred of Rievaulx, *The Mirror of Charity*; translated by Geoffrey Webb and Adrian Walker (London: A.R. Mowbray & Co. Limited, 1962), p. xi.

3. Saint Jerome, Prologue to the *Commentary on Isaiah*. In *dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)* in *The Documents of Vatican II* ed. Walter M. Abbott, SJ (New York: American Press, 1966), VI:25, p.127.

4. Eusebius of Caesaria, *The History of the Church from Chris to Constantine*; translated by G.A. Williamson (New York: Dorset Press, 1938), I:1, p. 33.

Christi Church on 121st Street in New York City.⁵ The name of the structure would take on greater significance as Merton matured spiritually. Like Saint Jerome and Bishop Eusebius before him, Merton always felt bound to go back to Christ in articulating himself.

1

Growing increasingly disillusioned with himself and with all the false promises of life without God, Thomas Merton followed the promptings of Dan Walsh, his philosophy professor at Columbia University, and made a Holy Week retreat at Gethsemani Abbey in 1941. In a diary entry dated April 7, Merton declared: "I feel like a thief and a murderer who has been put in jail and condemned for stealing and murdering all my life, murdering God's grace in myself and in others, murdering Him in His image. I have broken out of the jail in which I lay justly condemned and have rushed even into the place of the King Whose Son I murdered, and I implore the mercy of the Queen who sits here enthroned."⁶

2

In telling the story of his life, Merton lamented that it took him ten years to untangle the truth of his need for God, the Church and the sacraments. Viewing his former behavior from the perspective of a Trappist monastery, he wrote: "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 brought you from Prades to Bermuda to St. Antonin to Oakham to London to Cambridge to Rome to New York to Columbia to Corpus Christi to St. Bonaventure to the Cistercian Abbey of the poor men who labor in Gethsemani. That you may become the brother of God and learn to know the Christ of the burnt men." And then Merton added these closing lines to his autobiography: "*Sit finis libri, non finis quarendi.*"⁷ The search for Christ had not ended. It had just begun.

3

The young monk quickly learned that the monastic cloister did not shut out egoism, lust, desire for fame, honor and power. The desire for the truth of himself forced Merton continuously to shed easy practices and comfortable ideas. This made him a more compassionate man. In *The Waters of Siloe*, Merton wrote of the nature of monastic charity in words which describe his own life: "Indeed, that love is the very life of the monastery, as it is the life of the whole Church. It has brought the monks into this place before they were capable of realizing or understanding what it was that was drawing them. '*Congregavit nos in unam Christi amor.*' ('The love of Christ has brought us together.') God himself, the Holy Spirit."⁸

4

In "The White Pebble," Merton described supernatural life as a talent which is given to us to develop. Linking the sacraments with a person's interior disposition, he wrote: "Here, then, are our principles: We are baptized into the whole Christ. Baptism implies a responsibility to *develop* one's supernatural life, to nourish it by love of God, to reproduce and spread it by love for other men. All this is ordered to the final perfection of a plan that extends far beyond our own individual salvation: a plan for God's glory which lies at the very heart of the universe. This mystery we must believe and seek to understand if we should make anything of conversion and vocation."⁹

5. Monica Furlong, *Merton: A Biography* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1980), pp. 76-77.

6. Thomas Merton, *The Secular Journal* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1959), p. 184.

7. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1948), pp. 422-423.

8. Thomas Merton, *The Water of Siloe* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1949), pp. 366-337.

9. Thomas Merton, "The White Pebble." In *Where I Found Christ*, ed. by John A. O'Brien (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1950), pp. 239-240.

5

In 1960, Merton gave a series of lectures to the novices on the monastic vow of conversion of manners. Merton presented the vow as a total and integral response to Christ: "There can be no doubt that one of the most important aspects of *conversatio morum* is the persevering determination to bear with patience and courage all the trials one may meet in the monastic life, carrying one's cross and following Christ... It is in a sense precisely to these trials that one has been called by grace, so that fidelity to grace demands this acceptance. Evasion and rebellion would be a failure of monastic conversatio, and might lead to loss of one's vocation."¹⁰

6

The THOMAS MERTON STUDIES CENTER at Bellarmine College was inaugurated on November 10, 1963. In a statement read for him by Dan Walsh, Merton remarked: "Whatever I may have written, I think it all can be reduced in the end to this one root truth: God calls human persons to union with Himself and with one another in Christ, in the Church which is His Mystical Body."¹¹

7

In a journal entry dated December 22, 1964, included in *A Vow of Conversation*, Merton stated: "Here in the hermitage, returning necessarily to the beginnings, I know where my beginning was: hearing the name of God and Christ preached in Corpus Christi Church in New York. I heard and I believed. And I believe that He has called me freely, out of pure mercy, to His love and salvation. That at the end, to which all is directed by His will, I shall see Him after I have put off my body in death and have risen together with Him to take up my body again. That at that Last Day all flesh shall see the salvation of God."¹²

8

In "Prayer, Tradition, and Experience," a conference delivered in Alaska on his way to Asia in 1968, Merton described the monastery as a context for the development of a different kind of consciousness: "Not that the outside is bad, but I mean you specialize in a certain kind of awareness of the mystery of Christ... I think we have to be deeper people in a certain way. Not just deeper in the sense that we are much wiser than everybody else, but there has to be a deeper experience of life. Our education should lead to that deeper experience."¹³

Conclusion

Repetitious without being redundant, these texts mirror one reality from many perspectives. They show us "the WORD" among Merton's words. They are a testimony to human development within the vibrant tradition of monastic life. Christ is the light which flashed from the darkness when Merton peered into the mirror of his own consciousness.

10. Thomas Merton, "Conversion of Life." In *The Monastic Journey*; ed. Brother Patrick Hart (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1978), p. 149.

11. Thomas Merton, "Concerning the Collection in Bellarmine College Library." In *The Thomas Merton Studies Center* (Santa Barbara: Unicorn Press, 1971), p. 14.

12. Thomas Merton, *A Vow of Conversation: Journals 1964-1965*; ed. Naomi Burton Stone (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1988), p. 116.

13. Thomas Merton, "Prayer, Tradition, and Experience." In *Thomas Merton in Alaska: Prelude to the Asian Journal*; by Robert E. Daggy (New York: New Directions, 1989), pp. 126-127.