

THOMAS MERTON:

Prayer as Breath, Or the Beyond within Solitude & Society

by **Fernando Beltrán Llavador**

Even today, when all the “information” about Thomas Merton is in the process of being published and there seems to be no outward secrets, his friends continue wondering: “Who is Thomas Merton?” The answer comes faster than lightning, a mirrorlike twinkling of a reflective eye transforming all rational landscapes into an utterly simple innerscape: “Who are you?” This acts as a springboard boosting us all into wonderland, shared ground, the remembrance of a childhood superseding every infancy. Thomas Merton is not playing an unfair game by showing us an empty hand which, besides, points to a palace of nowhere. If no man is an island, in asking us who we are Merton is rather revealing the answer of his entire self. For that question was the center of his most intimate search, a search for what lies beyond the “who,” the minor “is” and the “Merton” disguise. “Who-is-Thomas-Merton?” That was his first most inspiring connection with the *riûah*, “the breath of God”: the *inspiration* of his religious orientation and the *aspiration* to marry his existence with Being, “aseitas.” The journey towards his identity homeland was a pioneering exploration through unknown frontiers, from a monastic setting under a medieval guise, in the heart of the country of the first moon landings until the catholic reaches of him who was to be considered a monk among the professed, and American citizen in America, a poet by other poets, and a “natural Buddha” in Asia. Being immersed in the waters of Siloe, Merton would experience conversion as a never ending process which, far from leading to a pathological form of idealism, consisted precisely in overcoming alienation by simply “becoming what we truly are.”

In his ascent to Truth Merton embraced everything which pointed to the ultimate aim of contemplation, and he was not only a bystander by a genuine living example of a new ecumenical attitude, perhaps unprecedented yet rooted in the Christian news. His Catholicism increasingly expanded out of a maturing and dynamic integration of openness and faithfulness, heart and reason, action and contemplation, word and silence, meekness and protest, unity and diversity, teaching and learning. Theology and experience, the secular and the sacred, the cloister and the world, tradition and revolution, life and art and, underlying them all, solitude and society. For Merton, following the radical direction of the Christian tradition of the Gospel, the essence of religious practice still meant trying to be faithful to the true “I AM,” while avoiding being colonized by the claims of the “false self,” even when these are displayed under equivocal “religious” or “spiritual” pretences.



Fernando Beltrán comes from Spain. He has been a primary teacher and is currently working as a teacher trainer in Avila, where the enormous influence of St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa is still alive. He visited both the Thomas Merton Studies Center and the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky in the summer of 1990 which allowed him to complete his doctoral thesis on “Solitude and Society in Thomas Merton: The New Adam and the American Identity” in 1991. He is going to introduce two short doctoral courses on Thomas Merton at the University of Salamanca. He would also like to “bring him home” to one of his spiritual roots in Avila through its “Centro Internacional de Estudios Místicos” and looks forward to enriching the tradition of his Spanish background with new perspectives from Merton’s many international friends.

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While it remains true that Merton's "pilgrim progress" finds many correspondences in universal forms of literary expression, they can all be reduced to the archetypal narrative of the prodigal son, be it in its Biblical version, or in the poetical variations of Blake's lost and found boy or in Hakuin's "Song of Zazen." If we follow the life of his works and the work of his life, the path described is one which starts with an experience of solitude (as alienation) in society (as collectivity) in his youth and ends with another of society (as communion) in solitude (as non-duality) which culminated in his Asian journey.

Under the symmetrical design of first solitude in society and then society in solitude in Merton's narrative of flight and return, the monastic *structure* first offered the newborn monk an enclosed environment ideal for self-discovery which would be eventually transcended and hence transformed into a dynamic religious *process*. Likewise, a necessary period of *silence* was soon to be accompanied by the need to announce the good *news* found in the heart of contemplation. The *day*, a state of whole, creative and committed presence could only unfold after the darkness of the spiritual *night*, in which the "individual" or *false self* passes away thus allowing the "personal" *true self* to emerge with Christ. Merton's growth illustrates how *enlightenment* and *compassion* go hand in hand in the descending path of "undoing" Adam's fall. Near the end of his personal time on earth, Merton's last transcultural stance regarded of the utmost importance a dialogue leading to a truly final integration of solitude and society through openness to a new spiritual consciousness.

However, we could not approach his engaged contemplation outside a context of transformation, "metanoia," or, within the monastic setting, "conversio morum." This "conversio" was indeed a conversation between his inner centre and the depths of the world. Throughout the dialogue Merton reads the Genesis as the existential tale of man's loss of his true identity. Human life, according to Merton, offers us the unique opportunity to make the journey back to self-discovery, hence back to God-discovery. In his own words: "If I find Him I will find myself and if I find myself and if I find myself I will find Him." For Merton this illuminative encounter, a zero point where nothingness and wholeness meet, is accompanied by a feeling, much deeper than just the emotional level, of communion with all creation and concern for his fellow human beings. Under the breath of God, being alone with Him and together with His creation are reconciled in one world. This is why the true solitary, instead of building a psychological ivory tower around himself, continually breaks the barriers between himself and himself, between himself and God, and between himself and others. Compassion, therefore, necessarily involves self-emptiness, spiritual poverty, and the rejection of all alienating images which are the fabric of the false self. "What the solitary renounces—Merton affirms—is not his union with other men, but rather the deceptive fictions and inadequate symbols which tend to take the place of genuine social unity."

Merton's confession that what he does is live and the way he prays is breathe has the simplicity of the children but also the wisdom of the aged. Prayer-as-breath-as-life-as-deeds can be equated to an exacting but merciful curriculum which offers everything and demands everything. What is more, it gives what it asks for: a sacred wholeness which goes far beyond the geographies and histories of our world and yet is to be found within them; a wholehearted commitment to every single and existential here and now while a complete detachment from them; a liturgical unity of purpose beyond the possibility of self-doubts even admitting that doubt constitutes the psychological stuff we are made of; and an unconditional trust in the middle of our frightful fabrications. In other works, an existence which is attuned, each time we breath in and out, to Spirit, the Breath of the Creator, as to unite in prayer with Isaiah:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he had anointed me to preach good news to the poor.
He sent me to proclaim release to the captives,
and the recovery of sight to the blind.
To set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. (Lk. 4: 18-19)*