

“THE HERESY OF INDIVIDUALISM”

I.T.M.S. Presidential Address

Conference Theme: “Already One: Becoming What We Are”

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I must begin with a somewhat shocking public confession. I am not very interested in Thomas Merton.

What I mean by this is that I am not very interested in the phenomenon that was Thomas Merton, Fr. Louis, the individual. In the long run I think that the man and his biography will prove to be less important than the legacy of his ideas. Another way to say this is to say that Thomas Merton is less important than that to which he points. Like the proverbial finger pointing at the moon, the moon is more important than the finger.

If each of us would think carefully for a moment about our own attraction to Merton, and the reasons why we have continued to be interested in him, I suspect we would discover it is something to which he points that is the basis of our attraction and continued loyalty. Perhaps he points us to a vision of social justice or to an aesthetic vision or to monastic renewal or to a certain literary facility or to ecumenical understanding, or perhaps it is to the Godhead, itself. But Merton consistently points beyond himself.

That being the case, to be too attached to the man would be to engage in a heresy which he, himself, disapproved of and warned against. In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* he called it the “heresy of individualism.”

The heresy of individualism: thinking oneself a completely self-sufficient unit and asserting this imaginary “unit” against all others. The affirmation of the self as simply “not the other.” But when you seek to affirm your unity by denying that you have anything to do with anyone else, by negating everyone else in the universe what is there left to affirm? Even if there were something to affirm, you would have no breath left with which to affirm it.

The true way is just the opposite: the more I am able to affirm others, to say “yes” to them in myself, by discovering them in myself in them, the more real I am. I am fully real if my own heart says yes to everyone (CGB, 143-144)

To strive to “find” only ourselves, to promote only that narrow self, to understand it as a distinct unit set apart from others, is precisely the heresy that Merton so magnificently repudiated in his own life. His ability to move so freely and easily in so many circles, to have profound friendships with so many “sorts and conditions” of people is precisely the mark of the lack of individualism in Merton.

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Now the word “heresy” is, itself, a strong word. Merton wrote that “in the climate of the Second Vatican Council, of ecumenism, of openness, the word ‘heretic’ has become not only unpopular but unspeakable.” (CGB, 335) However, I am bold to speak the word because it is precisely the right word for the idea we are entertaining. The English word comes from a Greek root, *aireiv* or *apelsthai*, and means literally to take for oneself or to choose. Etymologically, a heretic is one who maintains a position apart from the one commonly held. A heretic is one who defines herself apart from others.

This method of self-definition is roundly condemned by Merton in his writings and was rejected by him in his own life. In *New Seeds of Contemplation* he commented

People who know nothing of God and whose lives are centered on themselves, imagine that they can only find themselves by asserting their own desires and ambitions and appetites in a struggle with the rest of the world . . .

They can only conceive one way of becoming real: cutting themselves off from other people and building a barrier of contrast and distinction between themselves and other(s) . . . (NSC 47)

One of Merton’s greatest existential and theological insights is that it is impossible to be an authentic self apart from others. Probably the clearest articulation of that awareness came in connection with the famous “4th and Walnut” episode when, in the center of Louisville’s shopping district, Merton had a vision of his loving connectedness to other people. He describes the effect of the experience this way

This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud. And I suppose my happiness could have taken form in the words: “Thank God, thank God that I am like other men, that I am only a man among others . . . It is a glorious destiny to be a member of the human race, though it is a race dedicated to many absurdities and one which makes many terrible mistakes: yet, with all that, God Himself gloried in becoming a member of the human race. A member of the human race! To think that such a commonplace realization should suddenly seem like news that one holds the winning ticket in a cosmic sweepstakes. ((CGB, 157)

Merton says the same thing more simply and directly in *New Seeds of Contemplation*: “I must look for my identity . . . not only in God but in other men. I will never be able to find myself if I isolate myself from the rest of mankind as if I were a different kind of being.” (NSC, 51) The lesson of the hermitage for Merton was that of his essential connectedness to the world and to those in it. “One thing the hermitage is making me see is that the universe is my home and I am nothing if not part of it. Destruction of the self that seems to stand outside the universe. Get free from the illusion of solipsism.” (From *Vow of Conversation*, quoted in Cunningham (ed) *T.M.: Spiritual Master*, 195)

In rejoicing in his connectedness to others Merton is articulating a profoundly Christian and too often neglected doctrine, that of our unity, a unity that already exists in our identification with Jesus the Christ. “Identity” means essentially the quality or condition of being the same (from Latin *idem*). St. Paul, the first great Christian theologian, expressed this idea by repeatedly using the image of a body with different parts making up a whole. (I Cor. 12:12ff; Rom. 12:4-5) Paul explains that Christians are united to Christ and to each other through Christ’s death which Christians symbolically share in baptism. (I Cor. 12:13; Rom. 6:3-5; Col. 2:11-12) He writes that, although Christians are many, they are one body because they all share the one bread, the Body of Christ. (I Cor. 10:17) The two crucial Christian sacraments, baptism and Eucharist, speak to Paul of an already existing, if imperfect, oneness. Because we identify with Christ, we Christians, whether we

recognize it or not, are essentially, profoundly, and eternally bound to one another. "In Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others." (Rom. 12:5)

It is Paul's communal vision of the Christian life that Merton is lifting up to us when he rejects the "heresy of individualism." This is a particularly difficult message for Westerners, and especially Americans, to accept weaned as we were on the myth of "rugged individualism," man against the continent, making it "on our own," being self-sufficient. This myth of individualism is patent nonsense. And Merton goes so far as to say it is the basic sin of Christianity, "rejecting others in order to choose oneself, deciding against others and deciding for oneself." (CBG, quoted in Cunningham (ed) p. 160) It is a myth or a sin that has proven to be dangerous and destructive in our life together as a nation. And theologically it has led to a serious diminishing of the very essence of the Christian gospel.

Spiritually the heresy works like this, I become more concerned about the state of my own soul before God than about my neighbors, her soul or her body. Whether, to use the language of evangelicals, I am "saved" is important, but not more important than the salvation of my brother or sister with whom mine is ultimately linked. In the parable Jesus teaches that what we do for or neglect to do for others we do for or neglect to do for Him. (Matt. 25: 31-46) Specifically, the exclusive development of spiritual inwardness, a rich and personal "inner life" to the exclusion of those in the world with us who are suffering, oppressed, homeless, hungry, discriminated against, tortured, exterminated, is nothing less than sin.

The finger of Thomas Merton does not point us toward individualism, self-centered feeling or selfish conduct as that basic life orientation which so quickly degenerates into an empty and ugly egotism. It is not individualism but its transcendence to which Merton points us.

The Christian mystics of all ages sought and found not only unification of their own being, not only union with God, but union with one another in the Spirit of God. To seek a union with God that would imply complete separation, in spirit as well as in body from all the rest of mankind, would be to a Christian saint not only absurd but the very opposite of sanctity. Isolation in the self, inability to go out of oneself to others, would mean incapacity for any form of self transcendence. To be thus the prisoner of one's own selfhood is, in fact, to be in hell . . . (*Wisdom of the Desert*; quoted in Cunningham (ed) p. 274-275)

Merton would not argue that in our uniqueness as creatures of God we are unimportant, but that our ultimate value, our identity in the sense of identification, comes from a common humanity. We are made of humus, dirt, earth; the same basic stuff is the human lowest common denominator. By virtue of our creatureliness we are already one. We, together, are the people whom God created, whose flesh he took on and for whose sins He died. Whether we are male or female, rich or poor, black or white, straight or gay, we are already one in the God Who created us and the Christ Who redeemed us and the Holy Spirit Who maintains us in Being. Together we mirror in multitudinous ways the God Who in some small way we are. St. Bonaventure says life reflects God in its origin, magnitude, multitude, beauty, fullness, activity and order, and, Merton teaches us to add, in our oneness, our unity, our common life.

Here is how Merton described the process in his own life. Notice that, once again, the process moves toward and finds its fulfillment in Christ.

If I can unite in myself the thought and the devotion of Eastern and Western Christendom, the Greek and the Latin Fathers, the Russians and the Spanish mystics, I can prepare in myself the reunion of divided Christians. From that secret and unspoken unity in myself can eventually come a visible and manifest unity of all Christians. If we want to bring

together what is divided, we can not do so by imposing one division upon the other or absorbing one division into the other. But if we do this, the union is not Christian. It is political, and doomed to further conflict. We must contain all divided worlds in ourselves and transcend them in Christ. (CGB, 21)

“We must contain all divided worlds in ourselves and transcend them in Christ.” A tall order, and one that speaks not just of the Christian family, but to “all worlds.” Our unity in Christ extends in some mysterious way to our unity with others of the great religious traditions (and to those of different sexes, cultures, races, and sexual orientations). This is the sense in which we must come to think of ecumenism, not just in terms of relations with fellow Christians, with whom, as I hope these remarks have suggested, Merton thought we were already one, but of our relations with the whole religious world and with all humanity.

Merton made one of the most important and seminal contributions to what we might term “universal ecumenism” because with Chuang-Tzu he realized, “Great knowledge sees all in one.” As William Thompson noted in an article on Merton’s contribution to “transcultural consciousness,” “. . . to celebrate and confess faith in the risen Christ is to commit oneself to that passage from absorption to universality, from particularity to final transcultural integration, which the Easter faith proclaims.”

Merton realized that as, in Christ, we are given the grace to relinquish a narrow, hermetically sealed, and solipsistic understanding of the self, we would be drawn closer not only to Christ, but to all others, that we would come not only to know, but to live out our oneness. And this relates us personally to the central event of Christianity which, paradoxically, was a personal life “the image of which, as it impressed itself on his followers, shows no break in his relation to God and no claim for himself in his particularity. What is particular in him is that he crucified the particular in himself for the sake of the universal.”

In *New Seeds of Contemplation* Merton said it this way: “In order to become myself I must cease to be what I always thought I wanted to be, and in order to find myself I must go out of myself, and in order to live I have to die.” (NSC, 47)

Because we are already one we must each resist with every fiber of our being the “heresy of individualism” which leads inevitably to the narrowness of tribalism and the sins of egotism and nationalism. The “old saws” do often have a way of cutting the wood most cleanly. We do, indeed, have to learn to see life as others see it, to walk the path in their moccasins, because they are we. It is true that unless the kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies it remains only one small, wizened, dead seed. (John 12:24) But if it opens itself to unity with the soil and the water and the sun it becomes what it was created to be and produces fruit that produces fruit.

“. . . in order to find myself I must go out of myself, and in order to live I have to die.” Friends, Thomas Merton is right, we are already one. And so I challenge you, let us live out our lives in that knowledge; let us act on it; let us go out to die.