

An Ironic Success Story

Review of
Catholics and American Culture:
Fulton Sheen, Dorothy Day, and the Notre Dame Football Team

By Mark S. Massa, SJ
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The history of the Catholic Church in America after the Second World War is a history of ironies, paradoxes, and contradictions. In his pithy and intelligent book *Catholics and American Culture*, Mark Massa throws light on many of these paradoxes through a series of essays on such prominent Catholic figures as Fulton Sheen, Dorothy Day, Joseph McCarthy and Thomas Merton. Massa's overarching thesis is that the Catholic Church gained cultural influence in post-war America at the cost of much of its theological uniqueness. He demonstrates this by juxtaposing the ideas of various social scientists against the work of corresponding Catholic innovators. For example, he uses Victor Turner's idea of "the liminal" or "threshold experience" to explain the role Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement played in the Church's coming of age at mid-century. Day's struggle to transform the Church from a cultural outsider to a full-fledged political participant marked the Church's adolescent rebellion against American cultural values.

Massa uses the anthropologist Mary Douglas's ideas about cultural symbolism to explain the fevered rhetoric of the Boston Feeneyites as a response to "shifting social boundaries." And he uses categories from H. Richard Niebuhr's book *Christ and Culture* to describe Fulton Sheen's television show as representing a shift from the immigrant Church's "Christ above Culture" theology to a more Protestant-like "Christ of Culture" accommodation (87). Professor Massa even suggests that the Notre Dame football team went for a tie in the 1966 national championship game against Michigan State because the coaching staff preferred to sacrifice its idealism in order to "do what had to be done" to maintain the team's hard-earned social status.

In his chapter on Thomas Merton, Massa uses ideas from Erik Erikson's *Young Man Luther* to explain the popularity of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Like Luther, Merton became a world historical figure whose personal identity crisis generated an ideological shift within the Church as a whole. Massa tells us that "Merton's populist, perfectionist vision of American Catholicism, reflecting the gains of his own intellectual conversion, offered a model of post-immigrant, post-working-class spirituality to newly arrived middle-class Catholics looking for role models in the strange landscape

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of the suburbs” (55). Merton’s influence extended well beyond the subculture of the Catholic Church because he offered an answer to “the anomie and sense of lostness in which many suburban Americans found themselves” after the war (54).

“Merton’s brand of spiritual autobiography,” Massa tells us, “harkened back to a genre at least as old as *Walden*, if not older, casting his story in a reassuringly ‘American’ light, despite the European nature and history of monasticism. At the same time, however, Merton blazed a new path in this genre – a path that welded modern therapeutic concerns with serious (or at least ancient and revered) theological insights to create a new kind of ‘popular’ spiritual literature, a literature with an intellectual legitimacy and seriousness lacking in the best-sellers of [Joshua] Liebman, [Fulton] Sheen, and [Norman Vincent] Peale” (54).

Massa finds multiple ironies in Merton’s literary success: 1) the newly arrived Catholic middle-class found a resolution to its identity crisis in the figure of a Trappist monk who had renounced the world; 2) immigrant Catholicism, having rejected intellectual issues for over a century in favor of ritual, symbol, and authority, would turn to a “graduate-student-turned-monk” for spiritual direction; 3) the solution Merton offered the new Catholic middle class was not to be found in any sacramental or hierarchical reforms but in “the essentially democratic and perfectionist preserve of spirituality”; and 4) the single greatest Christian figure in twentieth-century American culture may turn out to be someone who embraced solitude and shunned power.

But the greatest, and most troubling, irony of all, Massa argues, is that *The Seven Storey Mountain* – which ought to have served as a corrective to the thin “therapeutic” spiritualities of its day – got transformed into a religious commodity by a middle class incapable of meeting the rigorous spiritual demands Merton advocated. “The great majority of Merton’s readers,” Massa points out, “did not seek out the monastic life, or indeed organize contemplative groups in their parishes. In this final ironic sense, Merton ‘legitimized’ the possibility of a sophisticated, accessible Catholic spirituality for a middle-class suburban constituency *without really ‘converting’ them to the radical implications of Cistercian or Benedictine spirituality*. The ‘busyness’ and activism of Catholic parish life, the measurement of success by numbers and building programs – what has been termed ‘brick and mortar Catholicism’ – these continued unabated, and even became more noticeable during the fifties and early sixties. One wonders what Brother Louis thought of all those parish reading groups plowing their way through his book before tackling [Liebman’s] *Peace of Mind*” (55-56) (italics mine).

Of course, those who have read the later Merton know the answer to that question. It appalled him. And he set out to correct the misapprehension in his books on solitude published in the fifties and early sixties. *No Man is an Island* (1955), *Thoughts in Solitude* (1958), *New Seeds of Contemplation* (1962), and *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966) – all offered telling criticism of the individualistic forms of piety that Merton saw infecting both the Catholic Church and American culture in general. These books were calls for reflection upon the purity of our intentions and the true focus of our aims. In essence, they announced the need for a more dialogic philosophical anthropology than anything being currently offered.

Massa acknowledges that Merton later criticized the theology in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, but he doesn’t go much further than that in examining Merton’s later writings. The only irony from Merton’s later life that Massa does note – that Merton died in a bathtub – is of course inaccurate, and reveals a certain lack of empathy. By not taking Merton’s later work seriously, Massa blinds himself to the possibility that Fulton Sheen’s popularity may have blunted the impact of Merton’s more

strenuous Catholicism and to the possibility that Dorothy Day's activism affected Merton's own evolving views of monasticism.

But the larger problem, and I think this points both to the strength and to the limitation of Massa's approach, is that by using irony as his master trope, Massa does a wonderful job describing the paradoxes and contradictions of this history when the whole point is to transcend them. His litany of ironies works as a form of negative dialectics – keeping oppositions in play without resolving them into facile syntheses. This allows him to stay clear of ideological extremes and doctrinal absolutes. But as a commentary on prophetic figures of the stature of Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton, who sought out the conclusions of history, such a strategy sort of begs the question.

To his credit Massa ends his book with the observation that “The One who sits in Heaven laughs, but blessed are they who put their faith in God” (232). This is his way of tipping his hat to the incalculable spiritual contributions of these figures while at the same time holding on to his view of intellectual history as an unfolding series of paradoxes. None of these figures – however heroic – ever accomplished what they intended to accomplish; each was in the grip of forces larger than they themselves could conceive, forces only historians can describe with the benefit of hindsight.

And yet as valuable as this approach may be in keeping one's critical awareness intact and allowing one to see the big picture, in the case of Thomas Merton, it leads Massa to highlight the absurdities of his life at the expense of its pending possibilities. Had Massa included the later Merton in his book, he would have discovered Merton's own ambivalence toward the role mainstream Catholicism was playing in post-war American culture; moreover, he would have found that Merton had already factored into his essays an awareness of the marginality of his own cultural critique and the ironies Massa himself points out that emerged after the success of *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

In a letter to Jim Forest in 1966 Merton wrote: “All the good that you will do will come not from you but from the fact that you have allowed yourself, in the obedience of faith, to be used by God's love. Think of this more and gradually you will be free from the need to prove yourself, and you can be more open to the power that will work through you without your knowing it” (*The Hidden Ground of Love*, 296). This was Merton's contemplative response to the ironies of history – a response which made him side with activists such as Dorothy Day and the Berrigans, Martin Luther King and Gandhi, over the Niebuhrian Christian realists who supported the War in Vietnam.

Massa's treatment of Merton's historical significance is, thus, severely limited; there is no mention of Merton's mature social vision nor anything about his views on nonviolence, the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement (Merton predicted it would be betrayed by liberals and result in a new round of ethnic nationalisms), nor anything about his radical skepticism toward the emerging technological society.

Merton's vision of a counter-cultural Church – purified by a renewed monastic presence – may have been temporarily waylaid by an accommodationist mentality that settled for “reflecting the political/social divisions of American society itself” (127). But that does not mean that Merton's views will not ultimately arrive “not on the fringe but at the Church's center” (126); or that his “downward path,” like Dorothy Day's, will not ultimately triumph over the suburban consumerism that has temporarily displaced it.

Thomas Merton's contribution to American culture is still evolving; over time the full significance of his defense of prayer and personhood may yet emerge as something more than just the exception that proves the rule of theological compromise.

Massa concludes his book by observing that contemporary American Catholicism isn't sure of its direction. Catholics now know that mainstream American society does not reflect their values, and they are seeking a new identity in a rediscovered sense of their own "otherness." This, I think, is a profound and accurate observation.

As to the future, Massa remarks, "Historians, to judge from the record of previous practitioners of the field, make lousy prognosticators of the future. And yet if I were a betting person, I would put my money on the rich category of 'ethnicity' as described by Andrew Greeley and discerned by Theodore Hesburgh as providing the most promising identity for American Catholics navigating the treacherous rapids of a new century in an even more pluralistic land" (231).

Students of Merton might argue that Merton's "populist, perfectionist spirituality" – matured through a rigorous dialogue with other faiths and secular social critics – expresses a far deeper and more significant model for the future of Catholicism than anything offered by Greeley or Hesburgh. To such readers, Massa's truncated account of Merton's work might limit their sense of the reach of his vision and shadow the authority of his claims. And yet, one must not forget that this is not a book about Thomas Merton, but about American Catholicism in general. And Merton's early life – it cannot be argued – does reflect the ironies Massa so deftly points out.

Catholics and American Culture is an historical overview written with wit and style. Maybe it doesn't do justice to the full sweep of Merton's accomplishment, but then it doesn't try to. Massa does something different, yet something as important: he offers us a mosaic of the many ironies and contradictions of the post-war American Catholic Church. And the patterns he discerns in the many figures he examines are instructive, both as insights into their particular lives and as elements in the larger story of the Church's growing cultural influence at the expense of its character. This is not a prophetic book, but it is profound – sobering, telling, and intelligent.