

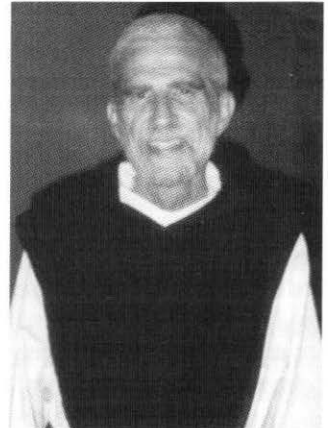
Thomas Merton and Henri Nouwen: Living with God in Modern America

By John Eudes Bamberger, OCSO

“There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun. . . . [W]hen I am alone, they are not ‘they’ but my own self. There are no strangers!” This passage from Father Thomas Merton’s *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*¹ offers an appropriate starting place for a conference that is to treat of the inner life as it is presented by Merton and Father Henri Nouwen. Since these are two of the most widely read writers on the spiritual life in this country in recent times, reflections on their teachings concerning inner experience and prayer will presumably throw some light on the topic of spirituality in our modern society that all of us might profit from. I have chosen this text because it refers to an experience that had large consequences for Merton’s own inner life as well as for his subsequent writings. This burst of interior illumination contributed appreciably to resolving the tensions that increasingly had built up in Merton’s life as a solitary who had a strong sense of responsibility for his society and the people of his time. How to reconcile the attraction for silence and solitude with awareness of the vast social and spiritual needs of the world?

A second reason for choosing this passage is that Father Henri Nouwen was deeply impressed by this experience of Merton. He cites it in *Genesee Diary*² where he observes that it helped him to recognize and appreciate a new development in his own search for integration between the inner life and his very active pastoral ministry.

There is still a third reason I have in mind for selecting this passage: it represents an insight on Merton’s part into the fact that every one is intended by God for life in the spirit. In the years immediately following his conversion and then his entry into the monastery, Merton was inclined to speak rather absolutely about the obstacles to a contemplative life placed by society in the way of people living in the world. Surely that had been his own experience. He had become keenly sensitive to the allurements, temptations and distractions that had led him astray. He was less aware of the many benefits to be derived from living in the midst of society with its personal and professional involvements. Deprived of his mother as a child and of his father as a teenager, Merton had experienced family life itself to be as much a source of frustration and pain as of loving support. But, as he suddenly came to see in this illumination, if average people going about their business in the heart of a busy city are seen to reflect something of the transcendent glory of



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God, then their life too is full of meaning; they too have the potential for contemplative prayer and a life of intimate union with God.

Fr. Louis Merton was a complex man in that he had opted for a cloistered life of separation from the world and yet became an author who was very conscious of relating to a wide and growing public. He can aptly be described as a gregarious lover of solitude. If that phrase strikes you as being an oxymoron you have got my point. Both of these attractions were very strong in him. He had a special gift for contacting many different types of people with whom he felt a deep empathy. Moreover, he also had a compelling desire for contact with people and suffered when, over a longer period, these encounters were sparse. At the same time his need for silence and solitude was hardly less imperative. Some have questioned whether he had a true appreciation of the solitary life. In my judgment such a view misses a major element in his personality, and the whole meaning of his life after he entered the monastery at the age of twenty six. He profited immensely from his experiences of solitude in community that is a characteristic of Cistercian life. He experienced profound peace through hours of solitary prayer in which he knew he had been favored by special spiritual gifts. He never lost his taste for such hours of recollection and, even when journeying in the East at the end of his life, maintained in his schedule leisure hours for such prayer.

One of the chief sources of Merton's repeated return of restlessness after he made final vows as a monk, and particularly in the hermitage period, was precisely the conflict between his enduring appreciation of the value of solitude for his spiritual health and growth, on the one hand, and, on the other, his deeply felt need for communication with others. Indeed, as his experience of God grew so did his sense of responsibility for the good and salvation of others and of society as a whole. He had in this connection the same reaction to contemplative prayer as did St. Gertrude the Great, the thirteenth-century contemplative nun:

She used to say that the graces which she (unworthy and ungrateful) received from the Lord in his excessive bounty were, because of her own vileness, as if hidden under dung as long as she kept them to herself, but when she revealed them to others, these treasures became like gems set in gold. . . . She thought herself to be so entirely unworthy of all God's gifts that she could not believe that they were meant for her alone, but thought, rather, that they were for the salvation of others.³

While writing was an instinct for Merton, it represented more than the desire to fulfill his psychological urge for communication with people; it was a true mission and vocation that grew out of his experience of God. His facility in relating to many different types of people and the natural gregariousness that was so marked a feature of his temperament certainly found considerable play in carrying out this aspect of his vocation. He was a prolific letter writer for one thing, and an accomplished one. The five published volumes of his letters, as well as the correspondence with James Laughlin, are only a portion of those preserved. Many of them are remarkable for their literary quality as well as their content. His liking for people, his capacity for friendship, his reaching out to others, give a warmth and personal tone to these documents that render them consistently humane as well as informative. Nonetheless, writing proved not to be an adequate satisfaction of this attraction to others; he needed to share in person with a variety of people he found sympathetic because of their character, their gifts of mind and spirit or their acquired skills. He was strongly, even urgently drawn to personal contact with people with whom he could exchange ideas and experiences in an atmosphere of friendly respect.

The tension between these two attractions is the context in which Merton had the experience in the middle of a Louisville shopping center which occasioned the statement cited at the beginning of this conference. His account describes the happening in vivid language:

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness (*CGB* 140).

He went on to account for this phenomenon in which he realized a truth concerning people that could change their lives were they to see it as he did, but which he understood was incommunicable. He ascribed his consciousness of this reality, hidden to others yet apparent to him, to his having lived for years in solitude: "it is in fact the function of solitude to make one realize such things with a clarity that would be impossible to anyone completely immersed in the other cares, the other illusions, and all the automatisms of a tightly collective existence. My solitude, however, is not my own, for I see now how much it belongs to them – and that I have a responsibility for it in their regard, not just in my own" (*CGB* 141-42).

It is, of course, no accident that Merton speaks of coming to a realization that he loved people in connection with seeing them as shining with a divine splendence evident to him but hidden to them. Love allows us to see the concealed worth and dignity of another that is not recognized by those who do not possess this pure love. Phoebe Carey, a nineteenth-century poet, tells in a brief poem of this effect of love:

I think true love is never blind,
But rather brings an added light,
An inner vision quick to find
The beauties hid from common sight.⁴

This realization revealed to Merton that there is, in principle, no intrinsic opposition between solitude and affection for people. As his subsequent history and writings would demonstrate, however, this awareness, while reducing the tensions that had been buffeting him during his early years in the monastery, did not resolve these conflicts. Nor could it be expected to, for the problems posed by these two contrasting tendencies are such that their solution has to be recreated regularly as life proceeds. When Merton entered upon the hermit life with its more intense solitude the issue of how to balance the expression of these two polarities became more compelling. He did not always manage to find the appropriate measure, as he himself noted in his Journals. He encouraged personal contacts, multiplied outings with friends and even entered upon an adventurous relationship with a student nurse that was incompatible with his vocation. Later, when he managed to regain perspective, he himself repudiated his disordered reactions and set about re-establishing a wholesome balance that would respect the legitimate claims of these two polarities of his vocation.

Father Henri had an experience of a similar kind, one that represented a new stage of integration of the inner life with his pastoral ministry. Though clearly not as overwhelming and bordering on the mystical as was Merton's sudden revelation, it represented an experience that he could move in the direction of a more integrated life, where prayer and service reinforced one another. His problem was in a certain sense the opposite of Merton's. Whereas Merton sought to relate his contemplative

lifestyle to the needs of society and of people in the world, Nouwen needed to discover how someone so intensely involved with counseling, preaching, teaching and ministering to people could cultivate a more developed interior life of prayer. His encounter took place rather quietly, in the course of a conversation with a florist when on a trip into Rochester, NY after a couple of months in the Abbey of the Genesee. This new awareness was a highly significant development for him at the time for, in the silence and solitude of the Abbey, he had become sharply conscious of the numerous sources of tension in his life. In the course of his commentary on the encounter with a florist as he bought some flowers in town he cites Merton's words, thus indicating that he related his new insight to that described by the Trappist.

I felt open, free, and relaxed and really enjoyed the little conversation we had. . . .

I am becoming more and more aware that solitude indeed makes you more sensitive to the good in people and even enables you to bring it to the foreground. No, "there is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun" but God's glory in you can bring out God's glory in the other when you have become more conscious of this shared gift (*GD* 88).

This passage in Henri's diary provides a revealing glimpse into the way that Thomas Merton acted as a spiritual guide and beacon for the Dutch priest. The two met in person only briefly on one occasion and Merton died before Fr. Nouwen began publishing his works on the spiritual life that were to have such a wide audience, so the influence was all in one direction. This development in Henri's consciousness is certainly related to the fact that he had, a few weeks before, focused on the issue of love in addition to spending some time in solitude. "I would like to think a little more about love. This monastery definitely exudes a real atmosphere of love. You can indeed say, 'The monks love each other.' I even dare to say they show a real love to me. I think that this is a very important experience because they not only make me feel love but also help me to understand love better" (*GD* 66).

The connection between love and the ability to see people in their hidden worth and dignity that Merton and Nouwen both speak of has an important lesson for all of us. Henry Thoreau observed in his *Journal* that love can enable a person to see another as possessing the glory of a god, though to other eyes they have nothing to distinguish them from the generality of people. He asks: "Which of the two sees truly?"

If I have chosen to focus a bit on these texts for this talk it is not only because this new way of seeing people was significant for both Merton and Nouwen, and because they demonstrate in a particular instance how Nouwen had been influenced by the Trappist precisely in understanding this alteration of his way of relating to people. It is also because these two experiences touch on issues that remain important for all of us today. Each of us as Christians has the same challenge of developing an inner life of prayer that results in a profound union of mind and heart with the Lord and, at the same time, we have the duty to cultivate loving relations with others that involves going out to them in efficacious service. To progress in the spiritual life at different periods we must emphasize one of these poles at the expense of the other. Neither pure prayer nor contemplation is possible for most people without a measure of silence and solitude as well as of asceticism and discipline. Merton puts it more strongly, seeing it as essential: "Solitude is to be preserved, not as a luxury but as a necessity: not for 'perfection' so much as for simple 'survival' in the life God has given you" (*CGB* 83).

The art of keeping solitude and contemplative prayer functioning in a Christian context requires that we relate them to the good of other persons as well as to God. The discovery that contemplation is precisely a way of loving our fellow humans is one of the assurances that we are on the right track when we devote our self to the pursuits that favor a lively interior life. Merton was keenly aware that the purpose of solitude and silence was to intensify participation in the process of transformation that represents the workings of the grace of the Spirit on our very being, remaking us into children of God in Christ. For a monk these practices of separation from the distracting occupations and relationships that interfere with a whole-hearted involvement in this creative work of achieving the identity of a child of God are fundamental. This process of transformation entails a dialectical exchange between the transcendent self and the Spirit of God who communicates with us at this deepest center of our being. Merton remained convinced that monastic life with its solitude, silence, meditation, holy reading and study, manual work and community life existed for the sake of this reformation of the inner person. As he gained more experience he came to understand this to be the ultimate purpose of every person's life on earth; monks have a particular way of working at that purpose, a way that offers multiple and continual helps to realize it, but they have no monopoly on any of the elements essential to this radically human task. Every true vocation has its proper means to pursue this aim. The degree to which a particular society or an individual lifestyle provides support to this great purpose measures its value and health.

Accordingly, this is the implicit norm by which Fr. Louis judged the worth of individuals and cultures and societies. He applied this norm to his own performance and condition time and again, even when he does not explicitly employ the technical vocabulary associated with transformation. For instance, he comments as follows on his experience of a bright sunny day at Gethsemani:

So this brilliant day, too, is another link in the chain that was begun then [when he first entered the monastery], and began in fact long before then. Yet it is slowly, through these possibilities and realizations, that I work my life into another dimension in which these things count less and less, and there is a growing liberty from the succession of events and experiences. It seems to me that they become less and less *my* experiences. They are more and more woven into the great pattern of the whole experience of man, and even something quite beyond all experience. I am less and less aware of myself as this individual who is a monk and a writer . . . It is my task to see and speak for many, even when I seem to be speaking only for myself (*CGB* 223-24).

This description of an evolving sense of personal, transcendent identity, of an openness to others that transcends the concerns and limits of his individual self points to this more profound level of personality that is emerging and altering perception and consciousness. His sensitivity to this more profound transaction between his self, the world and God makes itself everywhere felt in his writings and accounts for much of his appeal to such a variety of persons from many different cultures. The transcendent self communicates with all those who are themselves in some way in touch with this center of their own being. Merton was persuaded that communicating at this level characterized the best of his contributions to his times. This was the heart of his message to monks and to the world at large.

This transcendent Christian humanism represents the culmination of the aspirations of all that is best in the spirit of our race. Because he was immersed in it and grew to vibrate to its rhythms and

melodies, he was extraordinarily capable of entering into relation with persons of various traditions, religions and cultures. He was aware that this particular gift of grace that engaged him with *the divine spark of the spirit* (*scintilla animae*, as the mystics called it), *the true self*, as it is also called, colored his style as an author and bestowed on many of his writings a power for awakening the same spiritual longing in the hearts of his readers. He drew attention to this subtle feature of his work in an essay, in the form of a Preface, published shortly before his death, in 1966, directed to the readers of the Japanese translation of *Thoughts in Solitude*. This book is perhaps one of his most durable writings. It is certainly one which gave him the most satisfaction, dealing as it does with the actualization of the true self as it treats of the themes closest to his heart.

There is a deeper silence: the silence in which the hearer is a No-Hearer.

These pages do not attempt to convey any special information, or to answer deep philosophical questions about life. . . . [T]hey certainly do not pretend to do the reader's thinking for him. On the contrary, they invite him to listen for himself. They do not merely speak to him, they remind him he is a Hearer. . . . The true solitary does not seek himself, but loses himself. . . . He does not listen to the ground of being, but he identifies himself with that ground in which all being hears and knows itself. . . . What is this ground, this unity? It is love.⁵

When Merton speaks of the No-Hearer, he has in view the proper activity of this transcendent center, this virginal fine point of the soul (*la pointe vièrge*). Here alone is actuated that kind of liberation which is worthy of our humanity: the freedom to choose the absolute good and the love to adhere to it. He says as much in another brief introductory essay, written for a Japanese readership, twenty years after the publication of his life's story:

The only true liberty is in the service of that which is beyond all limits, beyond all definitions, beyond all human appreciation: that which is All, and which therefore is no limited or individual thing: the All is no-thing, for if it were to be a single thing separated from all others things, it would not be All. . . . In Christian terms this is to live "in Christ" and "by the Spirit of Christ" for the Spirit is like the wind, blowing where He pleases, and He is the Spirit of Truth, and "The Truth shall make you free" (*HR* 64).

One of the characteristics of a contemplative is the unity and the consistency of the deep vision underlying life and thought. Merton did not trouble himself about being inconsistent at the level of literary analysis, and even of his moods and likes. He was given to hyperbole in his expressions; he readily manifested enthusiasm for some particular matter or person, only shortly after to express sharp criticism of the same person or cause. His journals reveal countless instances of such apparent inconsistency. I believe his attitude was that if he expressed what he really felt at the time about any given subject in the end the truth would be apparent to someone who knew how to discern it. He stated in *Conjectures* that consistency is a concern only of lesser minds and spirits; men of talent and genius do not feel concern about their inconsistencies (cf. *CGB* 189-90). But when it came to the question of the meaning and purpose of his life, and the true values that are worthy of all persons, he consistently remained highly committed to his transcendent vision. It was prominent, even dominant from the time he entered the monastery until his death. His inconsistencies and even the contradictions that arose often enough were in the area of means of realizing this ultimate aim of union with the transcendent, living God. His consciousness of this purpose, whether explicit or implicit, is never

far from his thought and permeates all manner of his judgments and evaluations of persons and events. That such remained his guiding vision to the end is illustrated by numerous passages in various works of his. Writing in the last year of his life, for instance, he makes the following observations that are obviously based upon his own concept of how a monk should live:

The monk is a man who, in one way or another, pushes to the very frontiers of human experience and strives to go beyond to find out what transcends the ordinary level of existence. Aware that man is somehow sustained by a deep mystery of silence, of incomprehensibility – of God’s will and God’s love – the monk feels that he is personally called to live in more intimate communication with that mystery. He also feels that if he does not respond to this summons, he cannot be happy because he cannot be fully honest with himself.⁶

Fr. Henri Nouwen met Merton only once in a brief meeting and so had no opportunity to come under the immediate influence of his personality. But that meeting made a profound impact on him, as did Merton’s books. As he read and reflected on these writings, Henri came increasingly to assimilate Merton’s thought and spirit. He felt a deep affinity with the Trappist’s approach to the spiritual life and the way he applied his insights to the problems of pastoral ministry and social problems, both of which areas were Nouwen’s daily concerns. When he spoke with me about Merton it was evident he also had a strong admiration for him as a person and thinker. Thus it was no surprise to me that some four years after Merton’s death, he published a book called *Pray to Live*, which in a subsequent printing he gave the title *Thomas Merton: Contemplative Critic*. In the Introduction he makes it plain that he felt he owed a great deal to the man who was the subject of this book. It is evident from its contents that he had read Merton studiously and widely: “his person and work had such an impact on me, that his sudden death stirred me as if it were the death of one of my closest friends. It therefore seems natural for me to write for others about the man who has inspired me most in recent years.”⁷

In order to appreciate what Fr. Henri owed to the Trappist author we can hardly do better than to peruse some of these texts that he chose to comment on or to recommend for meditation to his readers. The extended comments he makes upon those works which were devoted to the current political and social issues of the day such as the race question and the Vietnam War reveal his own personal involvement with these questions at the time of his writing. In addition it is instructive to see that throughout his book he often focuses on the passages that treat of prayer and the contemplative life and Father Merton’s spiritual growth and interests. He gives a particular importance to the influence of Zen on his way of presenting the inner life.

An especially significant passage treats of Merton’s insight into the intrinsic relation of the monastic vocation, which includes a withdrawal from civil society, and concern for the good of people. Merton himself, after many years in the monastery, came to a more profound and concrete experience of the mystery of human solidarity. What he says here applies to contemplative prayer in general and to the hidden life of all believers who invest what is best of themselves in their relationship to God. “My monastery is not a home. It is not a place where I am rooted and established on the earth. It is not an environment in which I become aware of myself as an individual, but rather a place in which I disappear from the world as an object of interest in order to be everywhere in it by hiddenness and compassion” (*HR* 11; *PL* 68). Merton illustrates with this brief statement his extraordinary gift to give expression to traditional values and points of view in a language that is at once concrete, clear,

and personal. The theological truth behind this statement is a profound one that is fundamental for the monastic life. By prayer the contemplative is united with God in a loving union that is concerned for all those who are God's children. He translates this rather abstract idea by means of an image that is concrete and familiar to all of us: that of a home. The monastery, in its deeper significance, is not so much a home as it is a place for solitude and hiddenness in view of cultivating a life that transcends the ephemeral things of this world. But, as he repeatedly affirmed, not only monks but all persons as such are created in view of a transcendent life that is accessible only to faith and appropriated consciously in contemplative prayer. So that this point of his might be brought out with all desirable clarity he explicitly affirms that this is the chief content of his writings:

I believe the major message in these pages is that the contemplative life applies wherever there is life. Wherever man and society exist; where there are hopes, ideals, aspirations for a better future; where there is love – and where there is mingled pain and happiness – there the contemplative life has a place, because life, happiness, pain, ideals, aspirations, work, art and other things have significance. . . . The independent significance of each must converge in some way into a central and universal significance which comes from a hidden reality (*HR 39*; originally printed in the Preface to the Latin American Edition of his *Collected Works*).

This comment on the fundamental message of all his writings as he understood it leads to the question as to the originality of Merton's teaching. What was it that he put forward that made him such an influential figure in his time? His most significant contribution to monastic spirituality and to contemplative prayer in general was not the creation of a new system of thought but the communication of spiritual experience in a language that revitalized traditional ideas and practices. He felt strongly that spiritual renewal meant a refurbishing of words. Michael Higgins states the matter well when he observes that Merton sought to contribute to the healing of "the dissociation of language from its transcendent source. . . . The senses were imprisoned; they must be liberated. Merton saw the scar of the Fall in language and he came to understand the poet's role as nothing less than the restitution of the word: the restoration of its sacredness, and its liberation from the uses of deception, slick rhetoric, and ideological manipulation to become once more the quiet servant of truth."⁸

Though in his teaching and in his written works he was carefully organized and regularly presented his material in a well-constructed manner, yet his classes and his most effective books have little of the didactic character of academe. Merton had been a teacher, but his more theoretical and didactic works, such as *The Ascent to Truth*, are his least successful, as he himself well appreciated. His more influential writings are the fruit of his artistic sense. His poetic talent coupled with his contemplative gift leads to a more elevated, intuitive literary style that seeks to convey his message more by intuition than by systematic and ordered presentation. He is in his proper element and finds his distinctive voice when he speaks as a poet, even as a prophet. He was guided by a higher light than that of reason. Higgins describes well what this involves: "The logic of the monk, like that of the poet, is not arbitrary nor indeed is it immediately comprehensible, for it is the logic of vision, provocative and yet faithful to its own inner law. The logic of vision is strikingly and unalterably individual – eclectic, amorphous, esoteric, temerarious – it is elusive, and abundant with conviction" (Higgins 133).

Prior to entering the monastery Merton had given a good deal of thought to this fundamental issue of style. In *The Secular Journal* he distinguishes the logic of mathematics from the logic of

language. He writes that

the logic of mathematics achieves necessity at the expense of living truth, it is less real than the other, although more certain. It achieves certainty by the flight from the concrete into abstraction. . . . The logic of the poet – that is the logic of language or the experience itself – develops the way a living organism grows: it spreads out towards what it loves, and is heliotropic, like a plant. A tree grows out into a free form, an organic form. It is never ideal, only free; never typical, always individual.⁹

This distinctively poetic and literary feature of his writings stands out the more prominently when we compare, for example, the opening of Merton's *Seven Storey Mountain* with the more didactic approach taken by Fr. Henri as he introduces his book on *The Wounded Healer*.¹⁰ Here Fr. Henri states in outline the four sections of his work, giving a brief description of each in advance so as to orient the reader and define rather sharply the manner of treatment. He follows up on this plan consistently and with ordered detail and analysis carries through the project he sketched out in advance. Though he speaks from experience and is deeply engaged with his topic, yet nothing could be presented in a more orderly, reasoned fashion. The result is a clear, logical and persuasive discussion of his theme, presented with personal warmth and conviction that, along with the arguments and reasoning, persuades the reader. Fr. Henri is a good teacher, full of enthusiasm, speaking to the heart as well as the intellect. Inevitably, perhaps, the imagination and aesthetic sense play a minor role in this didactic style.

Merton, in marked contrast, immediately carries the reader with him into the theme of his life's story by describing the place and circumstances of his birth in imaginative detail that allows the reader to share somehow in the interesting, but basically unhappy world into which he rather abruptly appears. The beauty of the landscape, the gifted parents, expatriate artists living in the somewhat exotic setting of the French Midi with the Pyrenees in the background, the senseless and cruel slaughter of the Great War raging just beyond the northern horizon – all this setting engages the imagination. These details introduce us into a world full of the struggle between life and death, beauty and ugliness ("Men dying like dogs in ditches"), grace and sin that we sense is, in a real way, our situation as well as that of the protagonists. His subtle art is also evident in the way he illustrates the character of his early home life by means of the carefully sketched portrait of his parents. With an economy of words he effectively presents them as living figures, with their aspirations for a higher life, yet destined to experience the limits of art as an answer to life's meaning. His allusion to the world as a prison and the inadequacy of human gifts to deliver into freedom hints at the major theme of this story, the workings of grace in his own life. "My father and mother were captives in that world, knowing they did not belong with it or in it, and yet unable to get away from it. They were in the world and not of it – not because they were saints, but in a different way: because they were artists. The integrity of an artist lifts a man above the level of the world without delivering him from it."¹¹ Merton presented his teaching and experiences under the form of images that served to imply more than they explicitly described, as we see in this instance. In the brief compass of a few paragraphs he creates a convincing vignette of each of his parents. By his aptly selected traits and by means of judicious comments he evokes the world in which his family lived, in a manner that anticipates the kind of spiritual struggle and the frustrations that were to characterize their life and that of their son. His portrayal engages us at a personal level. All of us who aspire to inner liberty know what it is to

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feel imprisoned by this world, lacking the spiritual resources required for transcending its limits and contradictions, loving the beauty it contains yet aware of the danger and death never far away. Thus Merton introduces such theological issues as sin, grace, freedom, happiness, suffering and death with such seeming ease and naturalness that the art remains unobtrusive, unnoticed even by the casual reader, who is taken up with the narrative. Nothing ponderous or pedantic obtrudes itself on our attention. He was to employ this poetic, intuitive approach throughout this autobiography, and often in his more carefully crafted writings. His manner of sharing his faith and experience represents the fusion of a high art and an intuitive vision that is enlivened by his contemplative gifts. The style as well as the story accounts for his popularity with those who are seeking a higher meaning in life. For the author subtly speaks to the heart and imagination even while the story line and the reasoned explanations of stages of spiritual growth address the mind and appeal to the intelligence of the reader.

Merton developed a style of writing that gave a fresh luster to realities that had come to seem worn and devoid of significance to the modern world. He made access to the more profound levels of the spirit seem possible through his expressive and moving descriptions of religious practices and realities. He was quite conscious of this quality of his best writings. He gave a fine expression to this awareness in his Preface to the Japanese edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain*: "Therefore, most honorable reader, it is not as an author that I would speak to you, not as a story-teller, not as a philosopher, not as a friend only; I seek to speak to you, in some way, as your own self. Who can tell what this may mean? I myself do not know. But if you listen, things will be said that are perhaps not written in this book. And this will be due, not to me, but to One who lives and speaks in both" (HR 67).

I remember Fr. Louis telling us, his students, that we should all become theologians, that is to say, capable of speaking of God and of God's ways with humankind. He himself made no pretension to being academically trained in theology, though he was well read in that study. His best works are not systematic presentations of divine truths, but rather a communication of a variety of spiritual experiences that assist readers to discover their own potential for a loving knowledge of God. He was a theologian in the patristic manner, that is to say, one who could speak of God because he has experienced Him. Evagrius had put it very succinctly: "A theologian is a person who truly prays; the one who truly prays is a theologian." True prayer here refers to pure, contemplative prayer, which is what Merton sought after throughout his monastic life and strove to propagate through his writings. He considered such prayer to be the heart of monastic life and witnessing to it the chief contribution of monks to the modern world in which it was threatened. Shortly before he died he reaffirms this view explicitly in the concluding remarks of an address in Calcutta. "It is the peculiar office of the monk in the modern world to keep alive the contemplative experience and to keep the way open for modern technological man to recover the integrity of his own inner depths."¹²

In my opinion it was his long experience of contemplative prayer joined with his singular ability to give effective expression to fundamental truths concerning God and man while establishing with his readers a climate of spiritual intimacy that distinguishes Merton's work from other spiritual writers and theologians: "I seek to speak to you, in some way, as your own self. Who can tell what this may mean?" Many as they read him experience thoughts rising in their hearts that confront them with the mysterious ways of the living God. They experience the issues he treats of as affecting them, as being important for their spiritual life. I submit that this power of spiritual communication, serv-

ing as a channel of the Holy Spirit, is one of Merton's chief contributions to spirituality.

Father Henri Nouwen sought to convey a message that was in good part similar to that which Merton taught. He made it quite clear that he had a warm admiration for Merton and felt a strong attraction to his spirituality. But, as he engaged in his pastoral ministry he discovered that his own needs and gifts required a different approach to living out the challenge of the Gospel. Silence and solitude held an attraction for him up to a point but proved to be helpful only when balanced with a considerable pastoral ministry. Fr. Henri, during his stay at the Abbey of the Genesee, gave serious consideration to entering the monastery. However, when it was pointed out to him that he was suited rather to a ministry that included a large involvement in teaching, preaching and spiritual direction, and that he required the stimulus of ongoing contacts with a variety of people, he soon perceived the truth of this view. Even so, he continued to cultivate a form of prayer that gave prominence to the monastic practices of silence and solitude, as we see in his work, based on a seminar given at Yale, entitled *The Way of the Heart*. The sub-title is revealing in this respect: "Desert Spirituality and Contemporary Ministry." So are the three main chapter titles: "Solitude," "Silence," "Prayer." Here is his summation of his thought in that work, published in 1981: "Solitude, silence, and unceasing prayer form the core concepts of the spirituality of the desert. I consider them to be of great value for us who are ministers as we approach the end of the second millennium."¹³

As Sr. Sue Mosteller points out, Fr. Henri labored to transform loneliness into a solitude that was a form of communion with God.¹⁴ While he felt the necessity of maintaining a serious interior life of prayer, at the same time he turned his very considerable energy to the full requirements of his vocation as a priest living among the people he served. The considerable time he daily gave over to prayer and study together with his writing assured that he would pass a good deal of his time in solitude and reflection even while extending his pastoral reach to an ever widening audience. He made a point of insisting on this view as he sought to contribute to the formation of ministers. "I think that what is asked of the Christian leader of the future is that he be a contemplative critic. . . . What I have in mind is a very active, engaged form of contemplation of an evocative nature" (*WHM* 43). Earlier in this same work he mentions another requirement of the active service of the Gospel, namely the necessity for the minister today to have a deep understanding of his own inner wound and failings. Thus, though in a different context and with a distinct immediate aim, Fr. Henri, like Merton, worked and spoke from inner experience quite deliberately. "Whether he tries to enter into a dislocated world, relate to a convulsive generation, or speak to a dying man, his service will not be perceived as authentic unless it comes from a heart wounded by the suffering about which he speaks. Thus nothing can be written about ministry without a deeper understanding of the ways in which the minister can make his own wounds available as a source of healing" (*WHM* xiv). Though he does not state the fact here, to confront one's inner weaknesses and conflicts in the course of working with others, to speak and act from experience, is also a healing process for the minister. It results in a broader and more sensitive appreciation of the influence of the emotions on prayer and the relation to God. Such self-understanding is the fruit not only of a painstaking analysis of the affections and passions but also of a considerable experience of prayer that engages the more hidden places of the heart. Closely tied in with his dedication to contemplative prayer, then, was Nouwen's considerable emphasis on personal relations and the issue of intimacy. For he conceives of intimacy not primarily in terms of directly human relatedness but as centered on God through experience of the divine. He sums his views up in these words:

We came to see intimacy as a divine gift allowing us to transcend fearful distance as well as fearful closeness, and to experience a love before and beyond all human acceptance and rebellion. This divine intimacy is neither possessive nor exclusive but opens our eyes to all people as brothers and sisters and frees our hands to work in solidarity with all of humanity, especially with those who are suffering. . . . Hopefully these reflections have shown that prayer and action are *both* expressions of an intimate relationship with God, and through God with all of humanity.¹⁵

While Fr. Henri was appreciative of the place of silence and solitude which Merton, along with the whole monastic tradition, cultivated, yet with time his spirituality increasingly followed in the traces of such mystics and thinkers as St. Ignatius and Karl Rahner. Not that Nouwen was directly influenced by their teaching, for his approach was quite different than that of either of these thinkers and mystics. But he had the same appreciation of the place of deep, personal prayer in the activities of ministry. Contemplation in action was St. Ignatius' view of the appropriate prayer for the man committed to ministry. Rahner was more successful than any other writer I know of in demonstrating the presence of mystical experience embedded in the ordinary events of the daily life of persons fully committed in faith to serve God in the world.

There was a further development in Nouwen's spiritual life and teaching after he left academia and joined the community of l'Arche where he worked as chaplain and assisted in the care of the handicapped with whom he lived. In 1988 he published a talk given at Harvard which consisted largely of a moving account of his experience of God as mediated through Adam, a severely handicapped resident whom he cared for. It is a kind of extended meditation and reveals the integration he had been able to achieve between active service and interior prayer. The impression given by this text is that in this setting Fr. Henri found a more firmly rooted peace of soul than in any other of his earlier ministries. Here is the description he provides of his experience after the first months of this service: "Adam says to us [by his condition, not in words], 'Peace is first of all the art of being.' I know he is right because after four months of being with Adam I am discovering within myself a beginning of an inner at-homeness that I didn't know before. I even feel the unusual desire to do a lot less and be a lot more, preferably with Adam."¹⁶

This active engagement with the powerless and disadvantaged proved to be a source of on-going healing for Henri. He integrated his work for these severely limited persons and the community life he shared in the same dwelling with them with his writing and preaching. For he remained the teacher and author as well as a pastoral minister to the end. In his later years, he also became more articulate in treating of prayer. Life in community and fidelity to prayer contributed to changing solitude into communion. He learned with increasing conviction the truth of his words concerning the too active mind and this isolation that was its cause: "Let's break out of our isolation and realize that Someone who dwells in the center of our being wants to listen with love to all that occupies and preoccupies our minds" (*ONT* 164).

When he died Fr. Nouwen was on his way to St. Petersburg, Russia, to make a video of Rembrandt's painting, *The Return of the Prodigal*, at the Hermitage Gallery. Surely one of his most moving books was his meditation on that magnificent and evocative painting.¹⁷ His final labors and his last trip were fittingly in the service of spreading knowledge of the merciful love of God the Father as revealed by Jesus as he went about preaching the good news of the kingdom and doing good to all. His life and his work, like that of Thomas Merton, remain as a witness to the truth of Jesus' words: *seek and you shall find*.

- 1 Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 141-42; subsequent references will be cited as “CGB” parenthetically in the text.
- 2 Henri Nouwen, *Genesee Diary: Report from a Trappist Monastery* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976) 87; subsequent references will be cited as “GD” parenthetically in the text.
- 3 Gertrude of Helfta, *The Herald of Divine Love*, Margaret Winkworth, ed. and trans. (New York: Paulist, 1993) 16.
- 4 John Bartlett, ed., *Familiar Quotations*, 13th ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1955) 630.
- 5 Thomas Merton, *Honorable Reader: Reflections on My Work*, Robert E. Daggy, ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1991) 111-12; subsequent references will be cited as “HR” parenthetically in the text.
- 6 Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) 100-101.
- 7 Henri Nouwen, *Pray to Live: Thomas Merton Contemplative Critic* (Notre Dame, IN: Fides, 1972); subsequent references will be cited as “PL” parenthetically in the text.
- 8 Michael Higgins, *Heretic Blood: The Spiritual Journey of Thomas Merton* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1998) 133; subsequent references will be cited as “Higgins” parenthetically in the text.
- 9 Thomas Merton, *The Secular Journal* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1959) 24.
- 10 Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972); subsequent references will be cited as “WHM” parenthetically in the text.
- 11 Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 3.
- 12 Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal* (New York: New Directions, 1973) 317; subsequent references will be cited as “AJ” parenthetically in the text.
- 13 Henri Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart: Desert Spirituality and Contemporary Ministry* (New York: Seabury, 1981) 91.
- 14 Preface to Henri Nouwen, *The Only Necessary Thing: Writings on Prayer*, Wendy Greer, ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1999) 12; subsequent references will be cited as “ONT” parenthetically in the text.
- 15 Henri Nouwen, *Lifesigns: Intimacy, Fecundity and Ecstasy in Christian Perspective* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1986) 52.
- 16 In Henri Nouwen, *Seeds of Hope: A Henri Nouwen Reader*, Robert Durback, ed. (New York: Bantam, 1989) 197.
- 17 Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1992).