

The Eight Conversions of Thomas Merton

By Anthony T. Padovano

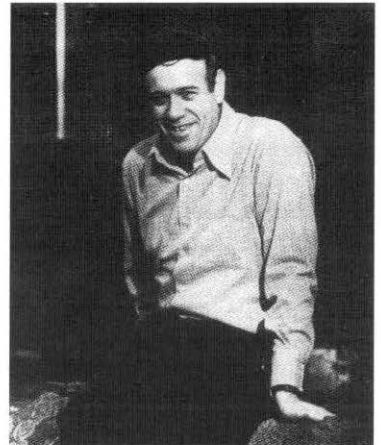
John Henry Newman once observed that a faith which is ready to believe whatever it is told is a faith of no substance. Faith and grace are more demanding and more serious than that. On the occasion of Thomas Merton's sixtieth anniversary of baptism (November 16, 1938) and in this very church of Corpus Christi where his baptism was celebrated, we might explore our connection with that event and with his life. His struggle and achievement may provide insight into our own lives and journeys. I would like to comment on what I see as the eight conversion experiences of Thomas Merton.

Spirituality

Not long after his father's death, Merton, an orphan and in his late teens, travels to Rome. He is searching for meaning and stability after the trauma of losing both parents. He has been victimized in ways he finds confusing by his mother's coldness and his father's indifferent parenting. One night, in his room, he believes he senses his father's presence. It seems to summon him from a life of secularism and self-indulgence to a life of deeper meanings and mystical connections. The experience is shattering. Writing about it years later, he can still feel how "vivid" and "real" it was,¹ how intense and urgent was the summons to a change of heart and spirit. He prays and weeps and reaches out for all that he has lost and for all he yearns to gain. A conversion need not be complete for it to be permanent. Merton did not live an exemplary life after this but he was substantially changed by it. The origins of his baptism, some five years later, can be traced to this experience. It is instructive to note that his initial call to God happens without much reference to the institutional Church and its sacramental system. His later conversions, in the last decade of his life, will repeat this pattern.

Baptism

During the next five years, Merton experiences further dislocation. He loses the support of those like Dr. Thomas Bennett, who had become his guardian. He drifts into alcoholic binges and sexual excess. He leaves his studies in Cambridge University fleeing to the United States in a rather dishonorable effort to avoid a paternity suit. There are no abiding friendships and



Anthony T. Padovano

Anthony T. Padovano is a founding member of the International Thomas Merton Society and the author of twenty-six books, including *The Human Journey: Thomas Merton – Symbol of a Century*. He holds professorships in theology and literature at Ramapo State College in New Jersey, and has been visiting professor at twenty-five colleges and universities. A version of this article was presented as the keynote address of the conference commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of Thomas Merton's baptism, held November 14, 1998 at Corpus Christi Church in Manhattan.

not much personal responsibility and maturity. The conversion to spirituality seems to have been an aberration, an illusion, one more step in a journey of disenchantment and betrayal.

In February of 1935, Merton enrolls in Columbia University and meets regularly with one of its great professors, Mark Van Doren. He finds a circle of friends and associates (Lax, Giroux, Rice, Freedgood, Reinhardt) who become life-long companions and colleagues. The spiritual search goes beyond a mystical experience in isolation to include friendship, human sharing and community. He finds hope in a Church ready to accept him since there is no hope when he is left to his own devices. Catholicism rescues him from pessimism and wandering. There are other deaths in the family, the beginning of his career in writing, and encounters with Hindu and Christian authors. The texture of his life deepens and he feels called to spirituality again but this time in a communal and traditional context. He turns to Catholicism and finds at Corpus Christi a faith life which nurtures him.

He describes in his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, the anxiety and exigency which lead him to ask for baptism: "'What are you waiting for?' . . . 'Why do you still hesitate?' . . . 'It's absurd.' Suddenly, I could bear it no longer. I put down the book, and got into my raincoat, and . . . went out into the street. . . . I had nine blocks to walk." Merton goes to Corpus Christi and informs Rev. George Ford, "I want to become a Catholic" (*SSM* 215-16). Baptism for him means entering the Catholic Church, canceling out "twenty-three black years of sin," ending his "slavery to death," bringing him, if not to Paradise, to at least the "seven-circled mountain of . . . Purgatory" (*SSM* 221).

Monasticism

Three years after his baptism, Merton enters the Abbey of Gethsemani as a monk. The three years have led him into doctoral work in literature and into teaching English at St. Bonaventure College in upstate New York. He writes unpublished novels, begins to work at Friendship House in Harlem and experiences the painful rejection of his application to become a Franciscan. The desire in Merton's heart is to become a priest. The spirituality conversion led to baptism. The baptismal conversion leads to monasticism. The connections are not anticipated but they fit. In Havana, Cuba, Merton receives a positive answer to his tormented questions about whether he would be acceptable to God as a monk or a priest. He is struck at a Sunday liturgy by an experience as intense as the encounter with his deceased father which started it all a short seven years before. This time it is "God's presence" and "Heaven . . . right here in front of me" which he experiences. He is left with "a breathless joy and a clean peace and happiness" that he never forgot (*SSM* 284-85). He is renewed with confidence in his calling and with a sense that he is on the right road. He returns to the United States a changed man. In December of 1941, he sends most of his clothes to Friendship House for the poor, burns the novels he has written, and boards an evening train for the journey to Kentucky and Gethsemani where he will remain for the next twenty-seven years of his life.

World

This is a long-delayed and perilous conversion. It is a turning to the world and its values. It is the indispensable means to the remaining conversions of Merton's life. One might date this conversion to the late 1950s, a decade and a half or so after his entrance into Gethsemani. He is a celebrated writer, the author of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, a spiritual master, a priest and a poet. Merton had

been so bruised and betrayed by the secular world that, initially, he wanted no part of it. Indeed, he wanted the whole world to cease being the world and to become a monastery. He saw the world as an unsafe zone, a hostile environment where goodness happened against the odds.

The monastic life prepared Merton, paradoxically, to accept the world by taking him from it and by allowing him to see that his problems were not caused by the world but by his own heart. There is a pattern in Merton's life. Before major decisions, he undergoes a profound mystical experience which assures him that he is not wrong and that God is with him. Thus, he turns to the spiritual life when he encounters a vision of his deceased father; he becomes a monk after a sense of God's presence at a liturgy in Havana; he accepts his calling to be engaged with the world and to struggle for social justice in it after an experience in Louisville. On a crowded street corner he is thrown into waves of emotional turmoil and tranquillity as he sees the crowds of people around him as good and valuable in their own humanity, in their own right, without reference to Church or monastery. In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, he describes the moment in which he cries out in his own soul: "Thank God, thank God that I *am* like other men." He sees separation from the world as an illusion and is convinced that people are filled with light, "shining like the sun."²²

Merton is too discriminating a thinker to endorse everything human as graced. He comes to see, however, late in his monastic life, that being human is a sacramental experience and that people can be validated in their own humanity if they do not distort it. It is not baptism or Church or monastery which is the source of human goodness but something much deeper. It is the fact that we are made in God's image. This justifies even when we are not part of the Church and even if we are against some of its policies. There is peril, of course, in basing decisions on subjective, non-rational, mystical experiences. How can one be responsible if one builds a life on an encounter with a deceased parent, an exuberant moment in a liturgy, an emotional reaction on a crowded street corner? The peril is lessened if these experiences are balanced by subsequent, critical thinking and validated in community life. Merton, after all, cannot become a monk without the review of others. He does not become a prophet for social justice without reference to the bracing realism of Scripture and Church Tradition.

This conversion to the world is the most radical of Merton's conversions and the least expected. Conversions to spirituality, baptism and monastery are more easily explained in conventional categories. The conversion to the world, however, is less customary. Such a conversion may appear to reverse the previous conversions and to be self-indulgent. Merton had once been in the world without the benefit of conversion and he had found chaos and darkness. Ironically, the conversion to the world makes even more imperative his clinging to spirituality, baptism, and monastery.

People of God

While all this is going on, the Catholic Church at large is undergoing a conversion we call the Second Vatican Council. The Council puts Merton's previous conversions in a different context. There is a new interpretation of spirituality, bringing into play the values of conscience, the centrality of Scripture and the notion that there is a universal call to holiness that goes far beyond formal religious communities. Baptism is presented as a summons to a discipleship of equals and to a mystery which is more fundamental than the Church's hierarchical and clerical structures. Indeed, even the concept of monasticism is changed as the Council calls upon religious communities to re-

think their mission, their way of life, their charter and their rules. The world itself is celebrated in a major document on the Church in the modern world.

If Merton had been led in these directions by intuition, mystical yearnings and his own experience, he suddenly finds all this endorsed by his Church on the highest level of its teaching in an Ecumenical Council. Merton proclaims a new spirituality, one less obediential and pious, less traditional and ecclesiastical. He addresses with favor humanists who do not believe in God and believers who believe differently from the way Christians do. He feels called not only by the Church but by the civil rights movement, not only by the hierarchy endorsing just wars but by prophets calling for non-violence, not only by the Vatican Council but also by the Vietnam protest.

Merton sees the Church as God's People and sees all people as God's family, not in some abstract and rhetorical fashion but as a living, concrete reality. Merton becomes more like that Christ who was not a temple priest and who was not endorsed by the official religion of his own time. He becomes more like that Jesus whose baptism began his ministry without fully defining and institutionalizing it. Jesus is not a Jewish monk, although such existed in the Dead Sea communities of his own day. He is a monk in the world, so to speak, who found his consecration in healing others, indeed in healing the very religion of Judaism. Jesus is a monk in the world who prays in the mountains rather than in a monastery and who defines his ministry in his conscience and in the deeper traditions of Jewish spirituality. For Merton, contemplation was for everyone and mysticism was a universal calling. No one was excluded from the People of God, even those who formally rejected paths to God approved by the Church.

Religions of the Human Family

The Vatican II conversion which enables Merton to be committed to the Church in a radically new way leads to the even more rarefied conversion of discovering holiness and grace and God in the other religions of the human family. Indeed not only are these values present there but they are sometimes more abundantly there. Christianity, therefore, does not teach the other religions without learning from them. Christianity is not a religious system with complete and comprehensive insight into God and holiness but a partner with other religions in affirming a God who is beyond all of them. We are now some thirty years after Merton's baptism and he is in a place he could not have foreseen. In 1938, Merton would have rejected vehemently the central affirmations of his life in 1968.

Merton does not endorse the other religions without controversy. He loses readers and gains critics, forfeits friends and attracts censors. Nonetheless, he explores the outer limits of what the incarnation entails. The incarnation tells us that God became comprehensively human, not exclusively Jewish. Merton finds it difficult to exclude anything human from God's incarnational embrace, especially the world religions by which people find and celebrate the God they have experienced. Once again, Merton finds certitude through a mystical experience. Standing before statues of Buddha, during a journey to Asia to pray with contemplatives from other religions, Merton cries out, in a moment of revelation, that he has discovered "what I was obscurely looking for." He writes in his journal just days before his death that he has finally "got beyond the shadow and disguise" of life.³ It is Buddhism which helps him reach this plateau.

The Feminine

This is the most formidable of all the conversions to assess, perhaps because there is something so personally unique and baffling about it. Merton falls romantically in love with a young nurse in 1966, twenty-five years into his monastic life and two years before his death. How does one account for a relationship that seems so disruptive, coming as it does late in Merton's life and challenging the authenticity of many of the previous conversions? There are those who see this as the undoing of the conversion to spirituality and as a return to self-indulgence and immaturity. The critics should not be dismissed summarily. The love relationship raises the right questions for us even if we may not approve of it. God is the author of romantic love and sexuality and yet many people are deeply suspicious of both when they do not occur in categories approved by Church teaching. It is easier for many to allow Merton to challenge Church doctrine or policy in other areas than these.

I believe that Merton's experience of romantic love has its roots in two issues. One of these is a conversion to feminine values in his personal and religious life. Merton turns more and more frequently to mysticism, to pacifism, to Buddhism, to harmony and tranquillity. To this, one must add an affection, erotic and spiritual all at once, for a nurse named Margaret. The more feminine Catholicism Merton accepts is less militant and aggressive, less exclusive and judgmental. It has fewer boundaries. It is heavily invested in collegiality and dialogue, in relationships and personalism. There is danger in this new approach but the former ways of proceeding were not without problems. The second of these two issues is the resolution of the erotic and the spiritual. Merton moved in his earlier life toward the erotic and away from the spiritual. There may have been elements of rage and desperation in this. The rage may have derived from his anger with his inadequate parents and also from their early deaths; the desperation may have been an effort to achieve an intimacy he never knew by substituting eroticism for relationship.

There are genuine dimensions of both eroticism and spirituality but Merton cannot find the balance in his early life. He begins to identify all eroticism as darkness as he feels called to holiness. He buries eroticism in a piety which seeks to eliminate not only the excesses to which eroticism can lead but also its values and its graces. He represses rather than resolves his conflicts.

He tells us in *The Seven Storey Mountain* that he resisted "any kind of a possessive affection on the part of any other human being" and that he had a "profound instinct to keep clear, to keep free" (*SSM* 57). Such an attitude can easily become evasion and escape. Rage and desperation are the other side of fear. Fear keeps one running away. In *The Sign of Jonas* Merton is even more blunt. He tells us he "cannot possess created things" or even "touch them."⁴ Merton renounces his sexuality in order to become spiritual because he knew how powerful and destructive his sexual instincts were. Some of this seems to have been going on during his preparation for baptism in 1938. He tells us in his autobiography that he was reading widely the poetry of Richard Crashaw (1613-1649) (*SSM* 212). Crashaw's poetry is charged with sexual and spiritual energy. I suspect that Merton finds in Crashaw a healthy resolution of the tension he himself was not handling well. Crashaw's poem on Teresa of Avila, "The Flaming Heart," is one of the most erotic and mystical poems I have ever read. Does Merton see here his own dilemma and his own incapacity to settle it effectively?

In any case, the unfinished agenda with eroticism returns when he falls in love with Margaret. This is the first time in his life a human and erotic relationship is worthy of poetry, a lot of poetry, some of it the best he ever wrote. I know of no other poems of Merton to someone he loved roman-

tically during the twenty-six years before he became a monk. With Margaret, the erotic has become a love experience and a spiritual one. In an earlier journal, *Vow of Conversation*, in a passage on the eve of his fiftieth birthday, about a year before he met Margaret, he writes with disappointment about how badly his relationships with women and sexual experience had gone and of how much he yearned for the roads he had not traveled.⁵ Merton finds with Margaret a woman he loved more completely than any other woman he had known before her. The erotic and mystical are not polar opposites in the world Merton discovers with her.

The Margaret experience may be viewed in different ways. I do not pretend to have the conclusive answer. Margaret may have been a mistake, a lapse, something which should not have happened, a moment of weakness, a source of regret and even shame. I am suggesting, however, that Margaret was an experience of conversion, a call to a deeper holiness, a reconciliation of opposites in his spiritual life. The key question posed by Margaret is how important relationships are in the spiritual journey. Catholic spirituality has sometimes judged them as less worthy. Indeed, if they are erotic, they are often seen as corrupting. The platonic and celibate relationship is proposed as the ideal for holiness. There were times in its history when the Catholic Church counseled celibate marriages as the way to perfection for Christians who were not monks. Merton writes compelling poetry, as we have said, about Margaret and himself. It is not poetry which rejects the erotic as evil, even though he may have felt this in his early religious life and, perhaps, until he met her. He once feared physical contact as a danger to spiritual development. Now, however, he is in a different place. Margaret is a danger but also a grace. In this case, the grace cannot be given without the danger. Merton finds in Margaret something beautiful, valuable, irreplaceable. He finds himself and God in a new way through this experience. There is less terror and greater peace and a more expansive openness to all that is human. There are moments of folly, of course, but all folly is not foolish. I once asked Abbot Flavian Burns, Merton's confessor, about Margaret and the mystical life of Merton. He was convinced that Merton was the greatest mystic he had ever encountered. The Margaret experience did not change his evaluation.

Richard Crashaw, the poet Merton read as he prepared for baptism, wrote of Teresa of Avila in sexual and mystical language. Merton, at the end of his life, uses the same language in his poetry about Margaret. The end, at times, can be so much like the beginning. I believe Margaret represented a conversion for Merton. A conversion need not be perfect or complete for it to be right and good. A conversion is not just an event; it is also a process. The process lingers long after the event has passed. It may go on as a love experience even when the other person has left the scene. Indeed the influence of someone we love can be greater in that person's absence. Margaret may have taught Merton to trust his mysticism more than his monasticism, his conscience more than convention, his intrinsic responsibility more than the approved rules. She led him beyond the continence and abstinence of his life to a world of passion which had its own authenticity.

Death

Death could not be proud in the ending of Merton's life. It is not death which prevails but the conversion of Merton through and beyond it into a symbol where opposites converge, where East meets West (he dies in Asia), where Buddhism encounters Christianity (he dies at a conference of contemplatives from both traditions), where the world and monasticism reach harmony (the talk he

delivers on the day of his death deals with Marxism as monasticism). Had Merton lived longer he might have become less. It is difficult to imagine how he might have become more. Death has a way of finishing the unfinished business of our lives, of endowing the lives it terminates with more life than they may have achieved on their own. Death converts Merton into a universal symbol of extraordinary proportions.

Conclusion

It was a hero's journey, this life of Merton, undertaken with enormous risk and completed successfully not only for himself but for all of us. We are different, better, more confident because of his life. On November 16, 1938 the journey began with an earnestness it never lost. It took surprising directions and scaled unanticipated heights. On the day he was baptized in this church he could still recall that night in Rome when he sensed his father's presence. The monastery was a faint hope in his mind. He could not then, however, embrace the world which bruised him so much and which he abused. The Church he was baptized into was not a Church for all God's People as he would later understand it. Neither Buddha nor women in general nor Margaret in particular could be seen on the distinct horizon of his future. He expected to die a Catholic, perhaps a monk. That was believable in 1938. Instead he died with the world at his side and all God's People mourning the loss of a prophet and spiritual guide who made life bearable and hopeful. He died after having learned to find Christ in Buddha and after he had fallen in love with a woman he could never forget, a woman whose heart was shattered by the news of his death.

Had the journey gone foreword conventionally we would have lost so much, he would have grown so little. In 1938, Merton became a son of the Church, so to speak. God made him after this a monk, a prophet to the world, a Church reformer, a Christian Buddhist and a lover of Margaret. If any of these steps were left out, Merton's life would have been incomplete. Because he took all these steps after his baptism, he became not only a son of the Church but a brother to all of us.

-
- 1 Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 111; subsequent references will be cited as "SSM" parenthetically in the text.
 - 2 Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 141.
 - 3 Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal* (New York: New Directions, 1973) 236.
 - 4 Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953) 237.
 - 5 Thomas Merton, *A Vow of Conversation: Journals, 1964-1965* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1988) 140.