

Thomas Merton and the Body of Christ

Closing Homily – ITMS Tenth General Meeting
Christian Brothers University, Memphis, Tennessee
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By **James Conner, OCSO**

The theme for these days has been “Wide Open to Heaven and Earth: Contemplation, Community, Culture.” I find the perfect fulfillment of this precisely in the feast that we celebrate today – Corpus Christi – The Body of Christ. It is the Body of Christ which is wide open to heaven and earth. And I find the three readings for today’s liturgy expressing the three elements. The first reading (Gen. 14:18-20) speaks of Melchizedek, king of Salem. He contains something of the theme of Culture. The second reading from Paul (I Cor. 11:23-26) shows us the height of Contemplation: “This is My Body; This is My Blood.” And the Gospel (Luke 9:11b-17) shows us true Community, sharing in abundance in love and unity.

This was a feast which was a favorite of Merton’s. He had a great devotion to the Holy Eucharist and loved to pray before it, usually hidden behind one of the large pillars that surrounded the old sanctuary. In the 1950s he wrote a book entitled *The Living Bread*¹ which centers on the mystery of the Eucharist. It is not a popular book, but it does express the heart of what this conference has tried to bring forth.

Jesus said in St. John that “Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you will not have life in you” (Jn.6:53). This scandalized many of the Jews of his time and many of them no longer walked with him. But when the disciples were asked: “Will you also go away?” Peter answered: “Lord, where shall we go? You alone have the words of eternal life!” (Jn. 6:67-68).

Jesus Christ not only has the words of eternal life, He IS the Word of eternal life. And in the Eucharist we find that very Word and realize that we also now have the words of eternal life. We also are “open to heaven and earth.” But it remains for us to discover in that Word true Contemplation, true Community and true Culture.

Merton has defined Contemplation as a simple awareness of the presence of God. The Eucharist is the preeminent place where we encounter the presence of God. As Merton says: “This Sacrament is not given to us merely in order that we do something, but that we may *be* someone: that we may be Christ. That we may be perfectly identified with Him” (LB 119). He then quotes St Thomas as saying: “The Eucharist . . . increases and perfects our spiritual life itself, in order that we may be perfected in our own being, our own personality, by *our union with God*” (LB 119). In other words, Merton says, by



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our union with Christ in the Eucharist we find our true selves. The false self, the “old man” is burned away by the fervor of charity generated by Christ’s intimate presence within our soul. And the “new man” comes into full possession of himself as we “live, now not I, but Christ lives in me.”

Merton says that this

explains why it is sometimes difficult or even impossible for some truly fervent souls to converse with Christ within themselves after communion by words or “acts” as if He were a separate person. Their union with Him is in fact deeper than that, and much closer. So close is He to them that they can no longer distinguish Him clearly through concepts. But so close is He that they no longer remain aware of themselves. In the words of Pope Pius XII, . . . they would do better to “lose themselves in [Christ’s] holy Soul.” They would do better to let the Spirit carry them away, so that they lose all sense of the distinction between themselves and Him and are momentarily absorbed in the tremendous reality of His presence which defies analysis and of which there is no adequate description (*LB* 119-20).

Merton points out, however, that “this transformation . . . is by no means perfect. The Sacrament brings us graces which we must use in order to increase our charity and gain eternal life. . . . [T]he Eucharist cleanses us from sin and leads us to the heavenly kingdom and strengthens us so that ‘from day to day it may gradually elevate our conduct to a level with the life of heaven’” (*LB* 121-22). As with Jesus in the Gospels, “power goes out from Him and heals all.”

But the Eucharist leads us not only into contemplation, but into community. For the Body of Christ in the Eucharist is a single whole with the full Mystical Body of Christ which is the Church. Here we are brought into the lesson of today’s Gospel. Merton quotes St. John Chrysostom who says: “Do you wish to honor the Body of Christ? Then do not disdain Him when you see Him in rags. After having honored Him in Church with silken vestments do not leave Him to die of cold outside for lack of clothing. For it is the same Jesus who says, ‘This is my Body’ and Who says, ‘You saw me hungry and did not give me to eat’ – What you have refused to the least of these my little ones, you have refused it to me” (*LB* 136). St. Augustine says that “the faithful know the Body of Christ if they do not neglect to *be* the body of Christ” (*LB* 106). So Merton says that “As long as our love for Jesus in the Sacrament of his love is a love only for the Head, without sincere and warm affection for our brothers [and sisters], without interest in the spiritual or physical needs of His members, our spiritual life will remain stunted and incomplete” (*LB* 139).

What we bring to the Eucharist is our own awareness of our poverty apart from Him and apart from His Body the Church. Just prior to his own ordination to the priesthood, Merton wrote in his journal: “My joy is the great power of Christ. And for that, above all, I am glad of my deep moral poverty which is always before me these days, but which does not obsess or upset me because it is all lost in His Mercy. . . . My infidelity to Christ, instead of making me shudder, drives me on to throw myself all the more blindly on His mercy . . . because of the special mercy of Christ to those who have nothing of their own to offer, nothing except weakness and misery and sin.”²²

Hence we see how this feast truly opens us “Wide open to heaven and earth” and gives us the power to live in contemplation of that life which we share in Christ, of that community by which we are formed into the Body of Christ and of that culture which brings us to what Merton called the “Final Integration.” He said: the person “who has attained final integration is no longer limited by the culture in which he has grown up. ‘He has embraced *all of life*. . . . He has experienced quali-

ties of every type of life': ordinary human existence, intellectual life, artistic creation, human love, religious life. He passes beyond all these limiting forms, while retaining all that is best and most universal in them, 'finally giving birth to a fully comprehensive self.'"³

This is the full body of Christ – this is the fulfillment of the prayer of Jesus to the Father “that they may be one, as we are one, that they may be perfectly one in love” (Jn. 17:22-23).

1. Thomas Merton, *The Living Bread* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1956); subsequent references will be cited as “LB” parenthetically in the text.
2. Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer. Journals, vol. 2: 1941-1952*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 316-17.
3. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) 212.