

The Marian Devotion of the Young Thomas Merton: *The Seven Storey Mountain and The Sign of Jonas*

By **Edward Looney**

Archbishop Fulton Sheen, Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton are all notable figures that many classify as heroes of twentieth-century American Catholicism. All three exhibited a great love for the Church, for the Eucharist and for Mary, each in his or her own unique way. The Marian devotion of Archbishop Sheen should not surprise many, as he considered Mary *The World's First Love* and each feria Saturday, Sheen offered a Mass in honor of Our Lady.¹ Perhaps to some, the classification of Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton with a unique Marian devotion may be surprising. Brother John Samaha, SM has written a succinct account of the role of Mary in the lives of Day and Merton, both converts to Catholicism.²

Thomas Merton is revered by many as a prolific author of spiritual classics including his autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Others may raise an eyebrow of speculation at the mention of Merton's name because of his dabbling in Eastern mysticism in his later years. To dismiss Merton for this reason would overlook his brilliant insights into Christian spirituality, meditation and contemplation. While Merton wrote extensively, unlike Sheen Merton did not compose a full-length treatise on the Virgin Mary. Instead, Merton interwove Mary within his writings; one will find occasional references to Mary including quick prayers and reflections. Besides his prose, Mary also found a place within his poetry, a topic on which some scholars have made studies.³ Within his prose writing, Merton revealed the significance of Mary in his own life. He presented Mary as a person to whom he could relate as a mother, intercessor and mediator. He hailed her under many titles, and gleaned tremendous insight from liturgical celebrations. This paper will examine the Marian permeation within two of Merton's early works, *The Seven Storey Mountain*⁴ and *The Sign of Jonas*.⁵ Using these two primary texts of Merton and the limited scholarship available on Mary and Merton,⁶ I will argue Merton's Marian devotion developed and was expressed in two ways: first by way of personal devotion and secondly by his monastic way of life, specifically within a liturgical framework. Moreover both aspects of his devotion exhibit a relational dimension toward the Virgin Mary.

Part I. Personal Devotion

Merton's writings give testimony to a unique, personal and relational Marian devotion. Br. John Samaha affirmed this observation, remarking,

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“Merton’s references to the Virgin Mary are personal and deep, a response to a mystical attraction” (Samaha 14). These references give way to a devotion that existed throughout Merton’s life. In a personal way, Merton made a pilgrimage to Marian Shrines, offering prayers and making promises to the Virgin. The Marian prayers of Merton were of two varieties, traditional prayers like the rosary or prayers to Mary under a specific title and prayers written by his own hand. It is in these prayers that Merton’s personal, deep and relational devotion is found, in which he discovered Mary to be his mother, intercessor and mediator.

Our Lady of Cobre

In 1939 Thomas Merton was introduced to the Franciscans and made plans to join their community in the following year. Prior to his entrance he decided to make a pilgrimage to Cuba, in part to visit the Shrine of Our Lady of Cobre. It was during this trip that he entrusted his future formation in the religious life and his aspirations toward priesthood to the Blessed Virgin. Upon seeing the Shrine, Merton prayed:

There you are, Caridad del Cobre! It is you that I have come to see; you will ask Christ to make me His priest, and I will give you my heart, Lady: and if you will obtain for me this priesthood, I will remember you at my first Mass in such a way that the Mass will be for you and offered through your hands in gratitude to the Holy Trinity, Who has used your love to win me this great grace. (*SSM* 282)

To a certain extent, Merton bargained with Our Lady. Confident in his conviction towards priesthood, Merton beseeched Mary to obtain for him the grace of priesthood, and in return he would offer his first Mass in Mary’s honor. Merton realized Mary’s hand in his conversion and vocation so he sought to offer Our Lady this token of his gratitude – to celebrate Holy Mass.

After visiting Cobre and consecrating his pending formation for priesthood to the Virgin Mary, doubt consumed Merton regarding the Franciscans. Ultimately, Merton did not enter the Franciscans but in a year’s time he entered the novitiate for the Cistercians of the Strict Observance (Trappists) at Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky. Throughout the years of his monastic formation, Merton prepared for ordination to major orders and was ordained a priest in 1949. Merton remained true to his promise of entrustment by celebrating his first Mass in honor of Our Lady. In the days leading up to his ordination, he wrote on May 23, 1949,

In three days, if I am alive and if the Archbishop does not fall down and break his leg, I should be a priest. I keep thinking: “I shall say Mass – I shall say Mass.” And I remember our Lady of Cobre, to whose basilica I went nine years ago this May. She has done well by me, and her love has followed me this far, and will take me to God. (*SJ* 190)

On May 27, 1949, Merton offered Mass to honor Our Lady of Cobre as he promised. Merton wrote: “I felt as if I had been saying Mass all my life, and the liturgical text of the Votive Mass of our dearest Lady in this season became immensely rich” (*SJ* 194). Merton’s vocational journey culminated in that moment of celebrating Holy Mass for Our Lady of Cobre because it acknowledged that both Mary and he fulfilled their promises.

Intercessor, Mediator, Grace

Merton turned to Mary countless times in order to seek her intercession. When one turns to Mary with a cry of petition, one acknowledges that Jesus answers prayers through the intercession of His mother; she is the mediator of grace. In asking Mary to pray for his needs, Merton implored the intercession of Mary under different titles. When Merton was stricken with appendicitis, he “made a lot of prayers to Our Lady of Lourdes” (*SSM* 275). He was apparently aware of Our Lady of Lourdes’ patronage over the sick. In the Church of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Merton “asked with great intensity of desire for the publication of the book, if it should be for God’s glory” (*SSM* 247). When he made that prayer he had “considerable confidence in God and in Our Lady, and I knew I would be answered” (*SSM* 247). By this he exhibited trust in the intercession of Our Lady regardless of how the prayer was answered. The publication endeavor never transpired but he still considered it an answered prayer as he saw the hand of God at work.

In his autobiography, before discussing his return to America, Merton penned a prayer in which he reflected on the role of Mary’s intercession in his life:

Lady, when on that night I left the Island that was once your England, your love went with me, although I could not know it, and could not make myself aware of it. And it was your love, your intercession for me, before God, that was preparing the seas before my ship, laying open the way for me to another country. . . . Glorious Mother of God, shall I ever again distrust you, or your God, before Whose throne you are irresistible in your intercession? (*SSM* 129-30)

It was at this critical moment in his life that Merton was able to recognize the role of Mary in his own life. In fact, as he offered this prayer to Mary, he prayed that she would bring all the lost of God back to His fold (*SSM* 130). Although Merton referred to Mary in his prayer as the Refuge of Sinners, ultimately he was beginning to see Mary as a mother figure, not only a mother to him, but to all of God’s children. Later in his autobiography, Merton acknowledged:

People do not realize the tremendous power of the Blessed Virgin. They do not know who she is: that it is through her hands all graces come because God has willed that she thus participate in His work for the salvation of men. . . . She is the Mother of Christ still, His Mother in our souls. She is the Mother of the supernatural life in us. Sanctity comes to us through her intercession. God has willed that there be no other way. (*SSM* 229-30)

Merton was beginning to understand the role of Mary in the Christian life. He believed her to be the one to whom Christ gives grace and as one who cooperates in the work of salvation. He desired for people to understand the powerful role of Mary. He realized this role of Mary specifically as the mother of the interior life. Through Mary’s intercession she would grant the grace of sanctity. Years later as a monk, Merton developed his understanding of Mary’s role in the interior life through total dependence on her prayers and distribution of grace:

I found out once more something of the joy there is in being nothing and in depending on Our Lady for everything. This is the key to the simplest and easiest way of the interior life: to have no greatness or holiness or distinction that one can

claim as one's own but to rely entirely on her love and her protection – knowing that she will obtain for us, at the right moment, grace to do the good thing that God wills us to do. From then on the whole spiritual life becomes nothing else but a question of looking to her in confidence and faithfully receiving everything that comes to us through her without clinging to it or keeping it as our own, and without reflecting on ourselves. (*SJ* 198-99)

Merton succinctly summarized the role of Mary in the mediation of graces, to be reliant upon her intercession knowing that she will obtain what one needs at the precise moment one needs it. In this way, one truly becomes a little child dependent upon his mother for everything. Merton experienced the death of his mother at a very young age (see *SSM* 13-16). It could be argued that because of his mother's early death, Merton began to form, unbeknownst to him, this theology of depending upon Mary, which surfaced later in his writings. Finding Mary to be his mother fulfilled for him the role a mother provides for her child, a role that he did not fully experience because of his mother's early and unfortunate death. We can definitively conclude that Merton viewed Mary as his intercessor and mediator of grace.

For Merton, Mary was not only his intercessor and mediator, but she herself was a grace. In the initial year after his conversion, Merton realized, "One of the big defects of my spiritual life in that first year was a lack of devotion to the Mother of God" (*SSM* 229). That defect was remedied by grace after Merton's ordination to the diaconate. Merton recognized:

Since the diaconate Our Lady has taken possession of my heart. Maybe, after all, *she* is the big grace of the diaconate. She was given to me with the book of the Gospels which, like her, gives Christ to the world. I wonder what I have been doing all my life not resting in her heart which is the heart of all simplicity. All life, outside her perfect union with God, is too complicated. Lady, I am your deacon, your own special and personal deacon. . . . Because you told me that if I gave you my soul, it would become your soul. . . . So if I give you a soul – my soul – it ceases to be mine and becomes *yours* and you are the one who uses it and moves it. And believe me, Lady, that is all I want. Because everything that is yours is perfectly united to God in pure simplicity. (*SJ* 171)

Our Lady gave Merton the grace at this point in his life to be able to acknowledge and recognize the ways she has worked in his life and he has now accepted her role as mother in a more powerful way by entrusting his entire diaconal ministry to her. Merton entrusted his entire soul to Mary knowing that she would unite him to God. She had been watching over Merton his entire life, interceding for him, and mediating grace, and now in this moment of surrender to Jesus through Mary, Merton revealed an intimate and relational dimension of his devotion to Mary. She has truly become his own personal mother; he has become her son and deacon.

*The Rosary*⁷

The Rosary is a common expression of Marian piety for Catholics of all walks of life, whether single, married, ordained or consecrated. St. Louis Grignon de Montfort popularized the cult of Mary

with his treatise on Marian devotion, *True Devotion to Mary*, and other writings such as *The Secret of the Rosary*. Dom Columba Marmion, in response to the writings of de Montfort, wrote in 1906:

For some souls who are drawn to it by grace this devotion is doubtless fruitful and sanctifying . . . For myself, I have tried it and found it a source of distraction and trouble to my soul. In fact I do not practice it myself. I go to God through Jesus. Our Lady helps me to know her Son and to approach Him.⁸

Marmion's insight on Marian devotion is not off the mark, because we seek Mary's intercession to grow closer to Jesus. This early opinion of Marmion developed over the course of his monastic life because in 1918 Marmion's work *Christ, The Life of the Soul* was published, in which he dedicated an entire chapter to Mary entitled "The Mother of the Incarnate Word."⁹ Marmion's initial opinion could be considered characteristic of the monastic life. Merton adequately described the role of devotions within the monastic life stating that they "are frowned on as 'unliturgical.' . . . They are not for us – except in private" (*SJ* 306). The first priority of the monk is the proper execution of the Church's public prayer, namely the liturgy of the hours and Holy Mass; second to this are the private devotions of the monks such as the rosary.

For Merton the rosary was a prominent devotion in his life as demonstrated by his writings. The rosary was a prayer Merton remained faithful to and relied on especially in dangerous situations. The rosary was present in Merton's life prior to entering the monastery because countless times, he referenced praying the rosary when he was a passenger. Traveling throughout Cuba on his "way to Matanzas and Camagüey and Santiago – riding in a wild bus through the olive-grey Cuban countryside . . . I said rosaries" (*SSM* 307). En route to Cobre, Merton believed "most of the journey" was made "at eighty miles an hour on two wheels, and several times I thought it was going to explode. I said rosaries all the way up to the shrine" (*SSM* 282). Even as a monk, his custom of praying the rosary while traveling continued. When he and his confreres were returning to the monastery from town, Merton described a driving incident in which the monks landed themselves in a ditch. Merton admitted, "I had been praying the rosary all the way from the station – praying that the truck wouldn't hit us, praying to get out of the ditch" (*SJ* 313). Merton also had a devotion to the rosary outside of traumatic travel conditions. In *The Sign of Jonas*, Merton implied he was praying the rosary when he described the outdoor scenery as picturesque for praying the rosary:

This evening, before Vespers, low gray clouds, very dark, all the woods and bottoms looked grim, but there was a brushfire along the road that skirts the ridge of Mount Olivet and you could see the jagged bloody wound of flame eating its way among the trees, with blue smoke pouring out over the road and the pasture. It was a strange and beautiful background for the Sorrowful Mysteries of the Rosary. (*SJ* 245)

The personal, private devotion of the monks, including Merton, found its recitation after a long day of work in the fields. Merton wrote:

And you take your rosary out of your pocket, and get in your place in the long file, and start swinging homeward along the road with your boots ringing on the asphalt and deep, deep peace in your heart! And on your lips, silently, over and

over again, the name of the Queen of Heaven, the Queen also of this valley: “Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with Thee. . . .” And the Name of her Son, for Whom all this was made in the first place, for Whom all this was planned and intended, for Whom the whole of creation was framed, to be His Kingdom. “Blessed is the fruit of Thy womb, Jesus!”

“Full of grace!” The very thought, over and over, fills our own hearts with more grace: and who knows what grace overflows into the world from that valley, from those rosaries, in the evenings when the monks are swinging home from work! (*SSM* 393)

In this description, Merton revealed two aspects of his Marian devotion. First, he showed how he integrated Mary within his daily work in the valley. He believed Mary to be Queen of the Valley, that is, the valley in which Gethsemani Abbey was located. Secondly, Merton provided insight into his reflection on the Hail Mary by describing the interior movement of his heart in relation to praying the Hail Mary. In his reflection he “not only says something about how the rosary should be said and meditated, but [he] also [spoke] of the great power and succor it can render and promote” (Voiles, “Importance” 225). He considered the graces that could be obtained by their prayers, not only for themselves but for the entire world, thus revealing his belief in the rosary as an efficacious prayer of grace.

Merton stated, “I would never do without the rosary” (*SJ* 306). Given this strong statement of 1950, it would appear that the rosary had a prominent role in his early monastic sojourn. He prayed it before entering the monastery and testified that he continued to pray it in the monastery, in so far as providing a glimpse into his own meditation on the angel’s words to Mary. In the many ways Merton encountered Mary and was devoted to her throughout his life, one can conclude that the rosary was a vital part of his devotional life.

Part II. Monastic Influence

Thomas Merton made a special pilgrimage to Cuba where he entrusted his vocational discernment to the intercession of Our Lady of Cobre. Within a year, he decided to enter Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. Merton’s vocation as a monk influenced every aspect of his life and assisted in forming within Merton a greater love for Mary. This influence on his Marian devotion can be seen through the liturgy, especially the praying of the liturgy of the hours and the antiphons contained within the Church’s liturgy. Secondly, his fondness for Mary as a monk was influenced by his desire to live in solitude, his continued persistent desire for perfection of charity, and lastly his seeking Mary’s intercession to grow virtues congruent with his monastic vocation. The monastic worldview of Merton penetrated into his devotion to the Virgin Mary.

Salve Regina

Fulton Sheen aptly described his experience at the Abbey of Gethsemani in his autobiography *Treasure in Clay*. Sheen focused specifically on a Marian element of his experience when he wrote:

A particularly striking scene at the abbey [of Gethsemani] was Compline, or the night prayers of the monks. Each of them had a small lamp above his choir seat which he would use if he needed to recall the words for reading. But as they

came to that part of the prayer which they knew, one by one the lights would go out. The long narrow chapel was then in total darkness, except for the great large window at the far extreme above the main altar, where there was a stained-glass window of the Blessed Mother surrounded by angels and saints. As the evening prayer progressed until finally they came to the hymn to Our Lady, *Salve Regina*, the illumination of the window gradually increased, until at the close of the song and the night prayer it was a veritable blaze of glory. Here were over two hundred strong men as full of passion as and perhaps more full than their fellow men in the world, who all were in love with the same Woman – without jealousy – and in whom they all trusted to make them more like her Son. (Sheen 227-28)

Since 1218 all Cistercian houses have marked the end of the day with chanting the *Salve Regina* (Vincent 89). This Marian devotion as present in Merton's own life and each day as Sheen suggested beckoned him to fall more deeply in love with Jesus with the help of Mary. One monastic writer, Augustine Roberts, OCSO, described the *Salve Regina* as a "moving love song" which has singlehandedly influenced all of Western monasticism.¹⁰

Merton's reflection on this element of Western monasticism was brief but can be summarized in three ways. First, the daily singing of the *Salve Regina* was a vehicle to further prayer and meditation. When he desired to give up writing poetry altogether and even had the permission of the abbot, it was while singing the *Salve Regina* that Merton told Mary, "Lady, if you want this dubious talent returned, I am happy to give it back" (*SJ* 72). One of two conclusions could be made concerning his prayer: either he was surrendering the gift and would no longer write poetry, or he would continue to use his gift and give it back to God through Mary's intercession.

Secondly, Merton showed the seriousness of the obligation to pray in common. His brief reflection can be seen as comical, yet still reverent. Merton described the experience of praying the *Salve Regina* during the summer months: "at night when we stand in our boiling tunnel and shout our *Salve* at the lighted window, you feel the whole basilica swing with the exultation of the monks and brothers who are dissolving in this humid furnace" (*SJ* 204). In this reflection of Merton we realize the same image of Sheen, namely the lighted window and how even in the midst of inclement conditions (heat) the monks are able to still be exultant as the day comes to an end.

Lastly, Merton's final brief reflection on the *Salve Regina* revealed his understanding of the prayer to be a prayer for pilgrimage. The recitation of compline marked the end of the day in which the monk prayed for a restful night and a peaceful death. He was aware of the possibility that he might be called home to be with God before tomorrow came. Reflecting this thought, Merton described the monks as being "packed in the belly of the great heat [the church], singing to the Mother of God like exiles sailing to their slavery, hoping for glory" (*SJ* 349). Their slavery to the Lord binds them to this prayer, as they continue to embark on their Christian journey, but their song is a song of hope for eternal glory. This understanding of the *Salve Regina* fits into Merton's Mariology quite well because, as Kenneth Voiles concluded, "without any doubt, Merton consistently looked to the Mother of God as the hope of the world."¹¹ In the singing of the *Salve* the monk hailed Mary as his life, sweetness and hope, thus proclaiming her to be the hope of the world and most especially for the monk, a guide for him as he journeyed toward the Heavenly Jerusalem.

Liturgical and Antiphonal

In addition to the singing of the *Salve Regina* at the close of compline, “Mary has always been an integral part of monastic life, liturgy, and doctrine” (Vincent 79). This is exemplified in the antiphons prescribed by the Church within the liturgy of the hours and Holy Mass, which present opportunities for reflection and meditation. The antiphons themselves are a means to developing a deeper appreciation, love and devotion toward Our Lady in the monastic life. As a monk and priest, Thomas Merton was surrounded by the liturgical antiphons and feasts of Our Lady, which lent themselves to prayer and reflection. For Merton, these antiphons, prevalent throughout his writings, remained with him as something he could mull over and meditate on throughout the day. One such occasion was the vigil of the Nativity of Mary. Merton reflected:

Nativitas est hodie sanctae Mariae Virginis. We have just come from first Vespers of Our Lady’s birthday. I am full of those happy antiphons, and glad because of the feast and because of what it means, for through her we come to heaven. *Coeli fenestra facta es.* I am glad that in our Order we still enter heaven through the window. I believe that line of the hymn was reformed in the Roman liturgy so that the rest of the Church goes in more decorously through the door. But we Cistercians still get in by the window. (SJ 62)

In writing his reflection on vespers, Merton detailed that the antiphons were happy, and how they brought him joy because of the feast. Two simple Latin phrases, translated “Today is the nativity of Saint Mary the Virgin” and “Thou art become the window of heaven” were a vehicle to further reflection and meditation on the feast of Mary’s nativity. The antiphons in fact led Merton into a prayer to Mary. As he closed the journal entry for that day, Merton wrote:

That is how everything stands, Mother of God, after the first Vespers of your Nativity in the year 1947. *Dona nobis pacem* Keep us in your heart until next year and the year after and until we all die in peace, disposed in the four corners of America in new foundations, and myself perhaps you know where, alone with you and with God. His will is my cell. His love is my solitude. *Dona nobis pacem.* (SJ 63)

In this one can find the Marian devotion that permeated from his continued reflection on Mary’s Nativity. Merton prayed, *dona nobis pacem*, give us peace. Although unwritten, Merton must have realized that the birth of Mary gives way for the birth of the King of Peace. Her birth allowed her to become the “window of heaven” in which we can find Christ. Perhaps too, it was peace in his own mind, heart and soul he was longing for, as he greatly desired to enter the Carthusians, in order to fully withdraw from the world. Perhaps this is what he meant when he writes, “and myself perhaps you know where, alone with you and with God.” Merton was still grappling with the question of how God was calling him, but he believed Mary knew where he would find his rest and peace. It would be found in a cell, where Jesus would become his solitude. In celebrating the Nativity of Mary, Merton discovered that Mary paved the way to His solitude, to Christ himself, to whom she would give birth.

Prior to the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council, many solemnities were followed by a celebration of eight days (an octave). The Church continued to celebrate the Octaves of Christmas

and Easter with other octaves for Saints Peter and Paul, the Assumption and the Immaculate Conception, to name only a few. The celebration of octaves was meant to continue the joy of a particular solemnity. During Christmas and Easter the Church continues to sing the Gloria and the solemn dismissal is used during the Easter octave. In his writing, Merton commented on the joy of the octave, thereby showing the effectiveness of continued celebration. At the close of the octave of the Immaculate Conception, on December 14, 1946, Merton wrote:

Tonight at Vespers we sang the *Conditor alme siderum* which has not been heard for a week on account of Our Lady's octave. But what an octave! I keep thinking of the words, *Posuit immaculatam viam meam*, and of the *Alleluia* of the Mass (*Tota pulchra es*). That is what Duns Scotus is singing in heaven. (*SJ* 18)¹²

Merton did not provide any context for what made it such a remarkable octave except the inclusion of the antiphons he remembered: *Posuit immaculatam viam meam* – He has made my way spotless; *Tota pulchra es* – Thou art all fair. The full text of the antiphon not quoted by Merton is, “Thou art all fair, Mary, and the original stain is not in thee.” The antiphon of the liturgy allowed Merton to continue contemplating the dogma of the Church. Augustine Roberts posited “[Mary] wishes to use living instruments: our brothers or sisters and the ordinary circumstances of monastic life, especially the Liturgy. In fact, she prefers to teach in this way, combining her message from outside with some grace from within or vice versa” (Roberts 13). Mary continued to teach and be a source of grace in Merton's prayer simply because of the liturgical antiphon. Similar to the earlier antiphon for Our Lady's nativity, Merton penned a prayer in response to the antiphon, in which one finds the message of Our Lady combined with grace. He prayed:

Lady, Queen of Heaven, pray me into solitude and silence and unity, that all my ways may be immaculate in God. Let me be content with whatever darkness surrounds me, finding Him always by me, in His mercy. Let me keep silence in this world, except in so far as God wills and in the way He wills it. Let me at least disappear into the writing I do. It should mean nothing special to me, nor harm my recollection. The work could be a prayer; its results should not concern me. (*SJ* 18)

The Immaculate Conception of Our Lady spurred Merton to pray that he himself could be immaculate; the antiphon helped him in his desire to imitate Our Lady in humility and meekness. Furthermore, Merton's prayer for solitude, silence and unity all represent key virtues within the monastic life. The ordinary circumstances of monasticism became for Merton something to strive toward in humble imitation of Our Lady.

Solitude, Silence and Virginit

Specific to the monastic vocation is a desire to seek union with God in solitude and silence in addition to the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity (or virginity) and obedience. The Blessed Virgin Mary should be considered a model of these monastic desires and Merton clearly saw the role of Mary in attaining solitude, silence and virginity. Merton's writings “tell us quite a lot about his view of Mary and also about her importance in the silence and solitude of his own spiritual development” (Voiles, “Importance” 218). As quoted already, in response to a Marian antiphon,

Merton beseeched Mary to pray him into solitude, silence and unity. All throughout his life, Merton cultivated a devotion to Our Lady of Soledad (Solitude) and he visited her shrine in Cuba during his pilgrimage. In reflecting on his visit, Merton declared that Our Lady of Solitude was one of his big devotions (see *SSM* 281), so much so that he stated: “Our Lady of Solitude sums up my interior life: if only I remember what solitude meant for her. It was not a luxurious solitude, full of comfort and relaxation. It was the solitude with which she was alone in the crowd, on Calvary” (*SJ* 64). In this summary of his interior life, Merton mixes his devotion with *lectio divina* on the scriptures, holding these moments and desires in his heart, just like Mary.

Merton desired solitude so much in his monastic life, to the point of considering the vocation of the Carthusians. As such, his devotion to Our Lady of Solitude was fitting and becoming to his life as a monk. Intimately connected to solitude is the monastic discipline of virginity. On one occasion, Merton asked “Our Lady for the grace of interior solitude and spiritual virginity” (*SJ* 242). On Christmas Eve in 1949, Merton reflected on Mary’s virginity, stating that it “contained the Word of God, the Virginity of God. She kept all His words in her heart which was therefore immaculate and was established in virginity by marriage to God. . . . Tomorrow I am born of a virgin in order to die of virginity and draw all things to Christ” (*SJ* 257-58). Merton’s monastic vocation was a summary of his reflection on Mary’s virginity, for he too kept the events of Christ’s life contained in the Word of God in his heart, reflecting on them in prayer. Moreover, because Merton’s monastic vocation was intimately connected to the Virgin Mary, he viewed his own monastic virginity in light of Mary, for he was to be born of the Virgin in order to die of virginity. His monastic life was born of Mary and now in return he offers his life back to Christ by the witness of his spiritual virginity. With this, it was apparent to Merton that Mary would assist him in living out the evangelical counsels.

Conclusion

Thomas Merton recognized the role of the Virgin Mary in his early life as expressed in his writings, *The Seven Storey Mountain* and *The Sign of Jonas*. Merton recognized Mary to be his mother, intercessor, advocate, mediator and the cause of his joy. He was able to relate to the Virgin Mary in a personal, relational and profound way as seen by the many prayers he penned to the Virgin Mary, seeking her intercession, guidance and mediation of grace. Furthermore, the liturgical rhythm of prayer and the monastic life itself proved to have an effect on how Merton approached Mary in prayer. Arguably the Marian devotion displayed by Thomas Merton revealed it to be an authentic form of spirituality as it is held in balance within his spiritual life. Merton does not praise Mary too much, nor does he exclude her from his life. Furthermore, the devotion of Merton is relatable to the readers of his writings. Many Christians will find a bit of their own spiritual journey, whether it was by way of pilgrimage, rosary, liturgical feasts or praying to Mary for special graces. Merton’s writings can help readers to understand how Mary is their mother, intercessor, mediator, source of joy and example of virtue, whether they are single, married, ordained or consecrated. Perhaps this is why Christians of all walks of life find Merton appealing, because in his writing, they find a bit of themselves and how they relate to God and His Virgin Mother, Mary.

1. Fulton Sheen, *Treasure in Clay* (New York: Image Books, 2008) 335; subsequent references will be cited as “Sheen” parenthetically in the text.
2. John M. Samaha, SM, “Our Lady in the Lives of Converts,” *Pastoral Life* 52.10 (Oct. 2003) 11-15; subsequent references will be cited as “Samaha” parenthetically in the text.
3. See Craig Helms, “Mary as the New Eve in Thomas Merton’s Poetry,” *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 31.4 (1996) 477-502; Suzanne Mayer, IHM, “Theo-Poetics, Merton, and Mary: The Center Holds,” *Spiritual Life* 57.1 (Spring 2011) 32-41; Patrick F. O’Connell, “The Presence of Mary in Thomas Merton’s *Thirty Poems*,” *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 47.2 (2012) 177-212.
4. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948); subsequent references will be cited as “SSM” parenthetically in the text.
5. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953); subsequent references will be cited as “SJ” parenthetically in the text.
6. For many of Merton’s references to Mary as found in other writings (e.g. *New Seeds of Contemplation*, etc.), see Kenneth M. Voiles, “The Importance of Mary in the Spirituality of Thomas Merton,” *Spiritual Life* 36.4 (Winter 1990) 217-28; subsequent references will be cited as “Voiles, ‘Importance’” parenthetically in the text. See also Patrick F. O’Connell, “Mary,” in William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O’Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002) 285-87.
7. See Lars Adolfson, “Mother of Jesus, Mother of Me: An Ecclesiological Study on the Marian Sermons of Thomas Merton” [Master’s Thesis] (Uppsala, Sweden: University of Uppsala, 2010) 69-70 [available at the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY, which kindly provided me with an electronic copy].
8. M. M. Philipon, *The Spiritual Doctrine of Dom Marmion* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1956) 211, quoted in Mary Clare Vincent, OSB, “Mary and Monasticism,” *Word and Spirit* 10 (1988) 91; subsequent references will be cited as “Vincent” parenthetically in the text.
9. See Columba Marmion, *Christ, The Life of the Soul*, trans. Alan Bancroft (Bethesda: Zaccheus Press, 2005) 467-91.
10. Augustine Roberts, OCSO, “Mary and the Monk,” *Word and Spirit* 10 (1988) 17; subsequent references will be cited as “Roberts” parenthetically in the text.
11. Kenneth M. Voiles, “The Mother of All the Living: The Role of the Virgin Mary in the Spirituality of Thomas Merton,” *The Merton Annual* 5 (1992) 307.
12. Merton refers to Duns Scotus singing the antiphon in Heaven. Scotus staunchly defended the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, providing the arguments for its future dogmatic proclamation in 1854.