

Knowing God from Experience: Thomas Merton and the Book of Job

By Erlinda G. Paguio

The homily of Pope Francis on September 30, 2014, based on Job's cursing the day he was born because he lost everything that was dear to him, evoked memories of Thomas Merton's own reflections on the Book of Job. Pope Francis noted that Job had lost all patience and he was saying some ugly things, but he emphasized that Job was always accustomed to speak the truth and this was the truth that he felt at that moment. Pope Francis advised his audience to continue to pray just like Job and just like Jesus did on the cross, asking God: "Why have you forsaken me?" Prayer means being truthful before God, said Pope Francis: "We should all 'pray with reality'" because "true prayer comes from the heart, out of the moments one is living."¹

Thomas Merton wrote on September 1, 1949 that reading the Book of Job moved him deeply.² He reflected that Job demanded the *divine* answer not to the problem of suffering in general but to his own personal suffering. In 1968 Merton referred to the Book of Job again in one of his Alaskan conferences. He reminded his audience that the Book of Job had much to say about prayer. Job underwent great evil and his four friends tried to explain the evil logically and they told Job why he was wrong and why he had to suffer. Merton observed that we "talk about the patience of Job, but Job is not patient at all. In fact he is mad at God and he is arguing with God and he is protesting against God and saying you are not right, you are wrong, you shouldn't be doing this to me."³ Job wanted the answer to his suffering and discovered that God Himself was the answer.

Merton explained the theological meaning of the Book of Job in terms of our personal relationship with God. If something happens in your life, you speak to God about it: "You speak . . . to Him and tell Him what you want Him to know and then He tells you what He wants you to know, and this puts it on a completely person-to-person basis. You don't get to God through a system. You speak from your heart. That is the basic idea, and that is what the Book of Job is saying. That is what prayer is and that is what we have to do" (*TMA* 118).

In his book, *Thoughts in Solitude*, Merton writes about gratitude: "To be grateful is to recognize the Love of God in everything He has given us – and He has given us everything. . . . Gratitude therefore takes nothing for granted, is never unresponsive, is constantly awakening to new wonder and to praise of the goodness of God. For the grateful man knows that God is good, not by hearsay but by experience."⁴ Although Merton does not cite his source for the last sentence of this reflection, he surely has learned Job's final answer to God:

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Erlinda G. Paguio

I know that you are all powerful:
 What you conceive, you can perform.
 I am the man who obscured your designs
 With my empty-headed words.
 I have been holding forth on matters I cannot understand,
 On marvels beyond me and my knowledge.
 (Listen, I have more to say,
 Now it is my turn to ask questions and yours to inform me.)
 I knew you then only by hearsay;
 But now, having seen you with my own eyes,
 I retract all I have said,
 And in dust and ashes I repent. (Job 42:2-6)

1. Carol Glatz, "Pope: Drop the Melodrama, Pray for Those Truly in Pain," *The Record* 136.39 (October 2, 2014) 2.
2. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953) 233.
3. Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton in Alaska: The Alaskan Conferences, Journals, and Letters*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: New Directions, 1989) 117; subsequent references will be cited as "TMA" parenthetically in the text.
4. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1958) 42.

A Voice for Racial Justice

By Paul M. Pearson

Eldridge Cleaver wrote in *Soul on Ice* that no white person wrote so feelingly of the teeming vitality of black Harlem as Thomas Merton,¹ and in "Aubade—Harlem," Merton writes of Christ having been nailed "to the walls of Harlem."² From within the cloister walls Merton would return to the subject of racism in the sixties with an insight that Martin Marty would describe in 1967 as accurately prophetic writing of Merton's book *Seeds of Destruction*, saying: "it seems to me you were 'telling it as it is' and maybe 'as it will be.'"³ Yet, at the time and in subsequent years, Merton's writings on racism are all too frequently skirted over if not completely ignored. I have been as guilty of this oversight as the next person. However my own move from cosmopolitan London to a Louisville that remains largely segregated – almost all-white neighborhoods, churches, schools, etc. – brought this aspect of Merton's writing starkly to the fore, and fourteen years of living in the United States have just served to reinforce that perception as time after time the racism bubbling beneath the surface explodes onto the national and international stage.



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