

Merton's Magic: Vocations Fused through Infused Grace

By John Rudolph

Thomas Merton took upon himself and accomplished magical tasks. Of course, for those whose orientation is grounded in belief in an omnipotent Creator, namely, God, Merton's achievements as a monk are not magical: they are expressive of grace. For those dazzled by his writing as literature, Merton's achievements appear the culmination of effort and training. That Merton was both a good monk and an extraordinary writer – that he combined in himself a rare vocation (cenobitic and eremitic, both tending toward private and reclusive) and a rare career (which tended toward public and popular) – makes some readers wonder how he accomplished the improbable. For suggestions, we look to his journals, his autobiography and his essays, remembering that in Merton's case Biblical dicta apply, such as “With God all things are possible.”

In writing, the issue of verisimilitude may be applicable to a wide range of genres, especially, say, when the topic is food or travel. Historians too may spend a lifetime preparing to provide appropriate details in their accounts of battles or treaties or social movements, so as to create in their readers a sense of “having been there.” Scientists, though, or mathematicians, or philosophers, may attend less to sensory details to convey their arguments, interested as they are in empiricism and logic. Theology, as a cousin of philosophy, may similarly not rely on descriptions of sensory detail to convey truths pertinent to its field. For me personally, among many appealing aspects of Thomas Merton's writing is the combination of his conveying his experiences in understanding God's grace in *his* life, along with a successful assurance to me personally, it seems, that such experiences of God's grace are part of *my* story, too. I think other readers of Merton have this feeling, as well, and I want to explore how Merton achieves it.

God's grace, of course, transcends physics; but how can a writer convey his story so truly that I feel myself in it? Is reading Merton actually part of an experience in grace that transcends not only genres but many other notions as well, including, perhaps, time? I say, YES. Merton prayed that it would be so. Toward the end of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton seems to be talking to his readers (among them, me . . . and you!) as well as to himself in saying: “there are many different ways of sharing the fruits of contemplation with others. You don't have to write books or make speeches. You don't have to have direct contact with souls in the confessional. Prayer can do the work wonderfully well, and indeed the fire of contemplation has a tendency to spread of itself throughout the Church and vivify all the members of Christ in secret without any conscious act on the part of the contemplative.”¹

This effect of Merton's prayer on his readers is a datum within the argument that Merton's achievements as monk and writer are explicable through the mechanism of grace. Relying on this datum, I find consolation in my bewilderment as to the intertwined efficacy of the two greatest Biblical commands – to love God and to love one's neighbor as oneself – and a life of complete solitude. I



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have pondered the eremitical orders, explored them as a possible vocation for myself, in consultation with spiritual directors over the years. In my own case, a health issue that did not get resolved until I was well past the age of 45 prevented me from making progress in any sort of religious life, though I tried mightily. I explored and pondered and prayed for a vocation to the Carthusians. In one of the Carthusian pamphlets are these sobering words:

God calls all men to seek Him above all creatures; but all men are not called in this life to seek God and God alone and to occupy themselves with nothing else but God. There are many very good, holy, and fruitful religious vocations that seek God above all and which find Him in a service rendered to man. But from the time that one enters his little Carthusian hermitage as a postulant, until one passes into eternal life, one is occupied with the things of God and lives all alone with God a life of divine charity. There is a little unbending and relaxation on the weekly walk, and in the recreation on Sundays and on some great feasts (Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost are days of retreat) with the other monks. But there are no vacations, no visits, no dining out. There is no preaching, nor assisting in parish work, no external work of any kind. There is only a strictly cloistered life in which there is nothing but the chant of the Divine Office “in the sight of God and His holy angels,” spiritual reading and communion with God in prayer.²

To be honest, I was surprised to learn that even the Carthusians engage in group activities such as the Sunday liturgy and walk. I had thought from reading Merton that the Carthusians were completely alone for the duration of their lives. Merton’s essay “Project for a Hermitage”³ affected me strongly when I was twenty-three years old and recently baptized. (Shortly after reading *The Monastic Journey*, I visited the Camaldolese in Big Sur for the first of many visits over the years. There is even a Blessed Rudolph cell in the old part of the interior area, near the laundry, to which I was happily re-assigned on subsequent visits.) In Merton’s plan, after describing the need and the layout of the hermitage, he explains the life of the hermits in the cells, including admission, meals, horarium and work. Two sentences captured my heart and galvanized my attention.

First, with respect to work, Merton writes: “It is conceivable that the work of the hermits and of those at the Skete might contribute something to their support. If one were a writer, he could continue to write books for publication, but at a reduced tempo (!) and of a more strictly spiritual nature” (*MJ* 140). What struck me about this sentence is the original exclamation point in parentheses; also that in Merton’s view, even a hermit, who I would presume would serve God most directly through prayer, would continue to write. The revelatory sense conveyed by Merton here is that *Merton’s writings are identical to and synonymous with prayer*. Prayer and writing are the same. (Whew! Yay!)

The other sentence in the plan for a hermitage that strikes my heart is the last sentence of the essay, on reclusion: “In special cases, after several years of fidelity to the promise, the possibility of complete reclusion might be considered at first for one year, then perhaps permanently” (*MJ* 143). I remember sitting stupefied for an hour or so after reading this essay in a sunny corner of a Honolulu apartment where I was house-sitting for a teacher who was on sabbatical. Outside my window were papaya trees above the neighbors’ laundry lines. I pondered intensely whether it was possible to serve God by living in a state of permanent aloneness. The question has been with me throughout my life, especially in my readings of Merton recently.

The impenetrable mystery has an answer (and I do not intend to be coy with my fonts). The way to understand how Merton approached the limits of language and prayer is to understand that not only for him but also for God, the two ~~were~~ are one. His writings ~~were~~ are effective because they ~~were~~ are prayers; and his prayers ~~were~~ are effective because he dedicated his life to writing (and prayer). Merton yet lives on. In Merton and the writers with whom Merton somewhat self-consciously produces his books as part of a divine continuum – off-hand, say, Gregory, Cassian, Teresa, John of the Cross and more – the reader encounters a genre defiant to Logic and Truth, as the Western mind traditionally utilizes these tools: and yet in unrelenting *pursuit* of both, too. Merton stretches the boundaries of both writing and spirituality – writing, because his art relies on a combination of “having been there” and delicate conveyance of sublime truths (perhaps beyond the limits of human understanding); and spirituality, because by his own admission (and the admission of others) the essence of what he sets out to describe may be invisible, even in some ways unknowable, even to the person who experiences such matters first-hand.

In “The Humanity of Christ in Monastic Prayer” (*MJ* 87-120), he writes: “The highest form of prayer is, then, a prayer ‘without forms,’ a pure prayer in which there are no longer any images or ideas, and in which the spirit does not take any initiative of its own, for all activity of the human mind and senses is here completely surpassed” (*MJ* 92). Later in the same essay Merton writes, “The contemplative, in highest form of prayer, the *oratio ignita* or prayer of fire, perceives in an ineffable and mystical fashion something of the light of divinity which has taken complete possession of the glorified humanity of Christ” (*MJ* 94).

Merton points the way. Perhaps that is what all writers do (in their unknowable *noumena*), but Merton lived the life. Merton points the way toward the risen Christ, and lived as though Christ were alive in all of us. We can “know” about his life through the testimony of his abbots and friends, as well as through his own writings. One can hardly imagine any but the most devout and sincere person writing a paragraph such as the following, with Merton’s original punctuation intact:

According to St Leo, when Christ told Mary Magdalen not to touch Him, on the morning of the resurrection, He was saying to the Church:

I do not want you to come to me in a bodily manner, or to know me with the senses of your flesh. I am making you wait for much higher realities and am preparing you for better things. WHEN I SHALL HAVE ASCENDED TO MY FATHER, THEN YOU WILL TOUCH ME IN A MUCH MORE PERFECT, MUCH MORE REAL MANNER, YOU WILL APPREHEND WHAT YOU CANNOT TOUCH AND YOU WILL BELIEVE WHAT YOU DO NOT SEE. (*MJ* 100)

Merton’s gloss on St. Leo’s understanding of Christ’s interaction with Mary Magdalen is his pointing his readers toward a more direct apprehension of the resurrected Christ, Who transcends traditional limits, including the boundaries of space and time. Laypeople call that “magic,” but we-in-the-know – we call it grace.

In “The Contemplative Life in the Modern World,”²⁴ Merton writes “that contemplation is not a deepening of experience only, but a radical change in one’s way of being and living, and the essence of this change is precisely a liberation from *dependence on external means to external ends*. . . . True contemplation delivers one from all such forms of dependence” (*FV* 217). Not only was Merton praying for his readers to experience God, he was also praying for the sublime gifts achievable through prayerful participation in the Mystical Body of Christ, i.e., the fruits of a contemplative life, the essence

of an eremitical vocation – that they be shared on earth here and now, and outside, if necessary, the ordinary external contingencies that make a reader dependent on physical space and time. The power in Merton’s writing is not only the pleasing combinations of nouns and verbs and references to mysticism and *arcana*; perhaps the power is *not* all that. The power in Merton’s writing is that in himself he is reconciling divisions, not just deep wounds extant since the Fall, but fashionable divisions, too, such as that the champion shot-putter cannot also be a gymnast, or that the uncanny wordsmith is a luminous lover of love, a font of love, a glowing and increasingly hot ember, unstoppably radiant throughout the world, throughout time:

Ancient and traditional societies . . . always specifically recognized “the way” of the wise . . . by which, whether in art, in philosophy, in religion, or in the monastic life, some men would attain to the inner meaning of being, they would experience this meaning for all their brothers, they would so to speak bring together in themselves the divisions or complications that confused the life of their fellows. By healing the divisions in themselves they would help heal the divisions of the whole world. (*FV* 218)

Merton recognizes that part of his “obedience” to a contemplative vocation is unceasing work. He writes in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, in his address to God at the end of the book:

You have contradicted everything. You have left me in no-man’s land. . . . You were asking me for obedience to superiors who will, I am morally certain, either make me write or teach philosophy or take charge of a dozen material responsibilities around the monastery I will always be on the run from two in the morning to seven at night. . . . *Martha, Martha, sollicita eris, et turbaberis erga plurima* But what was astounding was not my work, but the work You worked in me. . . . I hear You saying to me: . . . *So do not ask me, because I am not going to tell you. You will not know until you are in it.* (*SSM* 420-22)

Not just he, but we: we are in it with Merton. The ongoing gifts of Merton include not only that his story seems to incorporate us, as though the details of his life were somehow parallel to details in our own; but that his story *IS* ours: his participation in the Paschal Mystery becomes mine, too, and yours, through God’s grace in the Mystical Body of Christ, through the eschatological reality of Easter.

1. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 417-18; subsequent references will be cited as “*SSM*” parenthetically in the text.
2. *Carthusian Life and Its Inner Spirit: Reflections of a Former Retreatant* (Arlington, VT: Charterhouse of the Transfiguration, 2005).
3. Thomas Merton, *The Monastic Journey*, ed. Brother Patrick Hart (Kansas City: Sheed, Andrews & McMeel, 1977) 135-43; subsequent references will be cited as “*MJ*” parenthetically in the text.
4. Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 215-24; subsequent references will be cited as “*FV*” parenthetically in the text.