"Free at Last, Free at Last": A Faith Journey with Thomas Merton

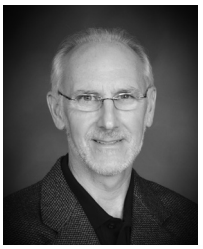
By **Christopher Mahon**

I returned to the Catholic Church in August of 2016 because I wanted to discover who I most truly and deeply was (or am), which, to me, is inevitably a spiritual exploration. The roots of my identity are in Catholicism. I was born and raised Catholic. I went to a Catholic elementary school, a Catholic high school and a Catholic university. My mother grew up next to a tiny village church in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania; her mother was the unofficial sacristan there, and I myself was baptized there. In the fifth grade, when I had to write a paper about "what I wanted to be when I grew up," I wrote that I wanted to be a priest. Throughout high school and into college, the Christian Brothers were interested in recruiting me into their religious order, and I considered it. But I rejected that vocation for the literary life, which morphed into a modest career in publishing, which morphed into a quite active career in education. But now I've retired after about twenty years in publishing and twenty more years in education, sixteen years of which were experienced as a high-school English teacher in the Los Angeles Unified School District. Now I am returning to my roots – to my Roman Catholic roots and, also, to my literary roots, which were formed in the quite active literary culture at the University of Notre Dame when I was a student there in the mid-1970s.

But mostly now, in the context of this essay, I'm interested in my Catholic roots, which I strayed quite far away from during the last decades, beginning, perhaps, when after college I moved from Michigan to California, far away from my past, my family and my faith. I retained psychological associations with my Catholic identity and friendships with some of my Catholic friends, but in time I drifted away from the Catholic coast into the open waters of my own spiritual explorations. But winds blew me back.

I found safe harbor for a critical period of time at the Mercy Center in Burlingame, California, where Thomas Hand, SJ led an East-West Meditation Group. It was from Father Hand that I began to get a glimpse of the power of meditation and, perhaps, Zen consciousness, its power for focused attention and awareness, let alone *prayer*, and that experience led me into meditative and spiritual practices grounded in the paths walked by Thich Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama and Paramahansa Yogananda. My own path, however, eventually led me back to the Catholic Church in 2016, after a year in which a number of debilitating and alarming panic attacks seemed to be calling to my true spiritual nature from the landscapes of my stressful, daily life.

Enter Thomas Merton. If I was to renew my Roman Catholic identity, who or what could be the bridge from my old life to the new? The bridge had to include meditation and, fortunately, the Roman Catholic parish that I



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chose to attend also included in its programs a small, informal meditation group. But I needed a sturdier bridge, one not only built out of the liturgical experiences I had had in my youth, which could continue in my new age, but made out of contemplation, if not meditation. Who represented contemplation in the modern Catholic Church? Well, of course: Father Louis. Fortunately again, the local chapter of the International Thomas Merton Society met monthly at a retreat center about ten minutes away from my home. I quickly became part of the group and felt completely at home in this spiritual community. We read books by Thomas Merton and discussed them, chapter by chapter, in our monthly meetings. *The Seven Storey Mountain* was covered just before I joined, but then the group moved into *New Seeds of Contemplation*, *Contemplation in a World of Action* and *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, and I moved with them.

I was trying to understand what it means to be a Roman Catholic, and I needed a guide to help me in that understanding. Merton became one of my guides. If I could understand who Thomas Merton was as a Catholic, then perhaps I could understand who *I* am as a Catholic. The answers to my questions began to crystallize when we as a group began to read and discuss *Conjectures*. It occurred to me, as I read through the book, that for Thomas Merton the life of a Catholic is rooted in freedom, in engagement with the world and in a loving relationship with nature.

But the most resonant of those words, for me, is *freedom*. A Catholic is free – and a Catholic finds his or her freedom, says Merton, in Christ. That may not be news to many Catholics or to many Merton scholars, but it was news to me in the same sense that literature was "news" to Ezra Pound. As Pound wrote in his book *ABC of Reading*, "literature is news that stays news."[1] How often do we forget "the news"? *Often*, I would say. But this notion of freedom and how it relates to the core of my identity and how it relates to Christ is not only "news" I do not want to forget, but it is news I want to continually investigate. It is Good News. It is the Gospel Truth. And Merton, again, in his book *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, provided valuable guidance in my investigation.

First of all, Merton joined the Trappists in order to *be* free. That is why he left "the world." He writes: "Certainly, in the concrete, 'the world' did not mean for me either riches (I was poor) or a life of luxury, certainly not the ambition to get somewhere in business or in anything else except writing. But it did mean a certain set of servitudes that I could no longer accept – servitudes to certain standards of value which to me were idiotic and repugnant and still are."[2]

He left the world of servitude to experience a greater freedom, a spiritual liberty, which, for him, is the highest form of liberty. He develops the idea of his new freedom a little later in the book: "Today, as a matter of fact, there is very little real freedom anywhere because everyone is willing to sacrifice his spiritual liberty for some lower kind. He will compromise his personal integrity (spiritual liberty) for the sake of security, or ambition, or pleasure, or just to be left in peace" (*CGB* 70). Of course, throughout the book, he describes and analyzes the limits on freedom the world imposes, whether by the demands of technology, the oppressive nature of a commercial society, or even the reaction against the purpose of religion:

> If technology really represented the rule of reason, there would be much less to regret about our present situation. Actually, technology represents the rule of *quantity*, not the rule of reason (quality=value=relation of means to authentic human ends). It is by means of technology that man the person, the subject of qualified and perfectible freedom, becomes *quantified*, that is, becomes part of a mass – mass man – whose only function is to enter anonymously into the process of production and consumption. (*CGB* 64)

Later he writes:

> The basic inner moral contradiction of our age is that, though we talk and dream about freedom (or say we dream of it, though I sometimes question that!), though we fight wars over it, our civilization is strictly *servile.* I do not use this term contemptuously, but in its original sense of "pragmatic," oriented exclusively to the useful, making use of means for material ends. The progress of technological culture has in fact been a progress in servility, that is in techniques of *using* material resources, mechanical inventions, etc., in order to get things done. (*CGB* 281)

He emphasizes the intrinsic connection between freedom and genuine religion:

> Freedom from domination, freedom to live one's own spiritual life, freedom to seek the highest truth, unabashed by any human pressure or any collective demand, the ability to say one's own "yes" and one's own "no" and not merely to echo the "yes" and the "no" of state, party, corporation, army, or system. This is inseparable from authentic religion. . . . It is because religion is a principle and source of the deepest freedom that all totalitarian systems, whether overt or implicit, must necessarily attack it. (*CGB* 77-78)

For Merton, one cannot truly be a person, cannot truly be an authentic individual, unless he or she is *free*: freedom, he writes, "is one of the deepest and most fundamental needs of man, perhaps the deepest and most crucial need of the human person as such: for without recognizing the challenge of this need no man can truly be a person, and therefore without it he cannot fully be a man either" (*CGB* 78); and he indicates what we need to be free from and implies where we can find our true freedom: "Obviously, the Christian is not 'free' from the world as nature, as creation, nor is he free from human society. But he is free, or should be, from the psychic determinisms and obsessions and myths of a mendacious, greedy, lustful, and murderous 'worldly' society. . . . What is important is to show those who *want to be free* where their freedom really lies!" (*CGB* 297).

Well, I want to be free. And it's clear to me, after reading *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, where, according to Merton, I can mostly deeply find my freedom: in the Divine, in Christ:

> I surrender to Christ all rights over me in the hope that by His Spirit, which is the Spirit and Life of His Church, He will live and act in me, and, having become one with Him, having found my true identity in Him, I will act only as a member of His Body and a faithful citizen of His Kingdom. The Church is the place in which this surrender of individual autonomy becomes real, guaranteed by the truth of the Spirit and by His love. (*CGB* 100-101)

In the Church, Merton surrenders a lesser "individual autonomy" for a greater spiritual freedom. He continues:

> The Gospel is the news that, if I will, I can respond now in perfect freedom to the redemptive love of God for man in Christ, that I can *now* rise above the forces of necessity and evil in order to say "yes" to the mysterious action of Spirit that is transforming the world even in the midst of the violence and confusion and

> destruction that seem to proclaim His absence and His "death." (*CGB* 113)

Scholar that Merton is, he continues to explore the notion of *freedom in Christ* by studying the works of St. Anselm: "Hence Anselm's *rectitudo* is not just the prize that is given the virtuous Christian in reward for making the right choice of a truly happy-making object: it is that which confers the final perfection of freedom on man's own free will, removing all obstacles to its perfect and authentic exercise" (*CGB* 299-300). He continues:

> In Anselm, the perfect exercise of freedom is measured (or unmeasured, liberated from measure) by the boundless freedom of God. . . . for Anselm, it is clear that God's will is not a force that presses down on man from the outside. It works on man from within himself and from within the ontological core of his own freedom. Made free, in the image of God, man's freedom contains in itself a demand for infinite freedom which can be met only by perfect union with the freedom of God, not only as an external norm, but *as the source of our own love.* Here philosophical notions of freedom necessarily break down and the perfect freedom of the Christian can be accounted for only by the indwelling Holy Spirit. (*CGB* 300)

So, freedom is not only a state of being we can enter into as Christians; it is something we can also *express* through our works and days. In the Spirit, Thomas Merton expressed his freedom through his writing, through his monastic practices, and through his love for nature and his fellow human beings. I am trying to follow in his footsteps, to express my own freedom through my writing, through my own liturgical and formal Christian practices, and through my own love of nature and my fellow human beings.

And yet, it is not all so easy as that, and it does not all happen so instantaneously. It has taken me years even to discover this. I returned to the Catholic Church because I wanted to discover who I truly was. Through Merton, I have more deeply learned that my true self can only exist in *freedom*. By reading *Conjectures*, I've come to understand that my very personhood *depends* upon freedom, and that I find my freedom in the life of the Spirit, in Christ. Yet, how does one move from the world of servitude to the world of freedom? Merton moved from *his* world of worldly servitude to the monastery. What are *we* to do? I imagine the path is different for each individual, and that becoming free is a lifelong task. The path may open up more clearly the older we get.

I am immensely grateful for my experiences teaching in the Los Angeles Unified School District and am, in fact, proud of the contributions I made to my school and my students, but I always knew that being a teacher of English at the secondary grade levels was not "the real me." It was close, but, still, it was not the real me. It was not myself as my most free, as my most liberated or authentic. I have come to understand that the real me – the freest me – is more related to my spiritual identity and to my life as a writer. And now, in retirement, perhaps, I get to express the real me more freely.

Yet, there is a rub. This opening up into freedom as I grow older is a double-edged sword. Now I am in good health, and I am excited to explore my new freedom. At this moment, the skies look sunny and clear. But given my age, I know that declining health and the inevitable meeting with my own mortality is in the foreseeable future. How will that affect my freedom as a Catholic? I think of Thomas Merton's famous words that describe that "spark" inside all of us, the spark that belongs to God, that is untouched by pain and suffering:

> At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and

> by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of *absolute poverty* is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak His name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our sonship. It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely. . . . I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere. (*CGB* 142)

I think now of Christ and His suffering on the cross, freely undertaken, how that suffering must have intersected with that point of divine light in the center of His being, that point "of *absolute poverty*" that was beyond "all the darkness and cruelty of life." I think of Thomas Merton, who was physically robust and spiritually free up until the very last moment. And I think of myself, and my own dying, and how my freedom may be expressed and experienced in those final hours and days. Perhaps even my own death can be experienced as a kind of freedom if, more and more, I contemplate and live from that absolutely free center of my being "from which God disposes of our lives," from that absolutely poor and absolutely free "point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God."

There is one more dimension relating to Merton's experience of freedom that is pertinent to my own faith journey. Recently, I began to read the 570-page biography of Merton by Michael Mott.[3] I've found it fascinating: the orphaned child; the wayward student at Cambridge; the nephew in Long Island; the young writer at Columbia, spending so many artistic and intellectual times in New York and at the Olean cottage with his friends Robert Lax and Ed Rice; the struggles to find the right portal into the religious life; his elation at finding freedom in the monastery; his struggles to find the perfect solitude. It has become obvious to me that Merton could never be constrained by the Catholic Church. As a young man, he wasn't molded by Catholicism. For long stretches of time, I have left the church, but I have always felt to be a Catholic psychologically. Merton was not raised with such a Catholic psychology. He was raised, at first, by the world. He could rebel so energetically against the constraints of monasticism and the church, in part, I think, because they never constrained him to begin with. He came to us from another world, a non-Catholic world, from the *outside*, with abundant intellectual energy, looking at everything from a unique angle formed by his previous, non-Catholic self. His discovery and experience of freedom in the church and in the monastery was able, due to his background, to transcend the limitations of the church and the monastery. It may be difficult for someone born and raised Catholic to rebel creatively against his or her own foundations because, in many ways, he or she is rebelling against himself or herself. It may be self-destructive, especially if one cannot succeed the rebellion with something as or more meaningful. For Merton, however, it was liberating, especially intellectually. That may be why he is such a challenging figure to Catholicism and to us.

1. Ezra Pound, *The ABC of Reading* (1934; New York: New Directions, 1960) 29.
2. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 36; subsequent references will be cited as "*CGB*" parenthetically in the text.
3. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984).