

The Trappist monk and green theology

by Mgr Basil Loftus

This weekend the Catholic world celebrates the centenary of the birth of one of its most forward-looking theologians – the Trappist monk, Thomas Merton. My own interest in him springs largely from the fact that I concelebrated Mass and then had lunch with him in Bangkok in 1968, the day before he died. He had introduced himself to me the night before as Fr Louis, his monastic name. Only during later conversation the following day did I discover who he was.

He was concluding an extended tour of South-East Asia, studying the common-ground of mysticism in different religions, in particular in Christianity and Buddhism, and intended shortly to publish his reflections. He was quite reconciled to the furore this would cause. “The Holy Office has already condemned me and the book before I’ve even written it,” he told me.

Long after his death, even with the book unwritten, this question of shared prayer - even mystical prayer - remained one to perplex even the highest authority in the Church. In 1986 Pope John Paul II happily prayed with representatives of all religions and none whom he had called to Assisi. but his principal theological adviser, the then Cardinal Ratzinger remained in the Holy Office on the day of the pilgrimage, refusing on principle to go with him. Later, as Pope Benedict XVI he had little choice but to go to Assisi in 2011 to mark the 25th anniversary of that remarkable event but pointedly refused to pray with non-Christians. Yet today, Pope Francis happily prays with anybody and everybody. Thomas Merton must be chuckling in his Kentucky grave.

However, on this very special day it is not mysticism, nor even the mixing of different religious elements, known as syncretism, which comes to mind as I recall those privileged few hours in Merton’s company. Nor were these the subjects we principally discussed. Rather, it was another matter, in which he was equally prescient and before his time, and which today equally plagues and divides those in the Church. Ecology, or the study and care of the world around us, is derived from the Greek word for ‘home’. It has been elevated into eco-theology because we should be at home in a world which has been Redeemed by Christ.

Holy Father Francis is about to write a long-heralded encyclical letter on the subject, and already the ecclesiastical equivalent of America’s fundamentalist Republican ‘Tea Party’ is preparing to attack him on this subject, just as they do on his approach to world economics and to poverty of spirit in general. All of them are inseparably inter-connected. History is repeating itself – condemnation before the book has been written. Eco-theology is seen by some to threaten not only Christianity but the very Bible itself with its imaginative accounts of Creation.

Long before Merton, another theologian, the Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin, had got into trouble with the Holy Office for his views on the world about us, and our relationship to it in Christ. Now successive Popes – John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis – have all sung Chardin’s praises, and the Holy Office’s views on him have been discarded as surely as the Inquisition’s views on Galileo.

And to advise him on the forthcoming encyclical, Francis has brought out of retirement another once-condemned Liberation theology rebel. Leonardo Boff is contributing to the Pope's thoughts on eco-theology.

Happily, under Holy Father Francis, even such insignificant writers as Vatican Counsel can now contribute their own two-pennyworth to theological debates without fear of the Holy Office banging on the door. At least I hope so – here goes.

'Anthropocentric' is not the easiest of words, but it expresses nicely the idea that the whole of Creation is 'centred on humankind'. It is quite simply wrong – as wrong as the idea once supported by the Church that our cosmos is centred on the earth, 'geo-centric', with the Sun going round it. While the latter idea came unstuck with Galileo, and today finds favour only with the same lunatic fringe that probably believes the earth is flat, the idea of humankind ruling Creation rather than serving it still lingers on. But Redemption, or Salvation, which is really all that matters, is not centred on humankind but on the whole of Creation.

Eco-theology is not about Creation as such, it is about Salvation, which is a Cosmic Redemption. It was Teilhard de Chardin, to the chagrin of the Holy Office, who linked the process of evolution not only with God the Creator, but with the work of Christ our Redeemer, thus leading Pope Benedict XVI to describe the Resurrection of Christ as "the greatest initiative, absolutely the most crucial leap, into a totally new dimension that there has ever been in the long history of life and development", (Easter Homily 2006).

Of course ultra-fundamentalist Scripture scholars, some of whom amazingly were still teaching in our British seminaries a very few years ago, and who believe in the literal sense of every last word of the Genesis account of Creation, do not accept even rudimentary evolution – so how can they accept Redemption and Christ's Resurrection as the latest step in an evolution which will be completed when Christ returns in Glory? How can they understand the evolutionary sense of the words of the Mass of Christ the King, which tells us that "as King he claims dominion over all creation, that he may present to you, his Almighty Father, an eternal and universal kingdom"? That same Preface reminds us of the "indivisible relationship between God, human beings, and the whole of creation".

In 1999 the Jesuit, Jef van Gerwen, called in *Pro Mundi Vita* for "a spirituality of ongoing creation, of which God's spirit is the unifying and guiding force, and in which we are all called to participate". But our liturgies do not allow us to participate. They are marked, van Gerwen observed, "by a theology of the history of salvation which limits God's intervention to human history". Only the *Exultet* at Easter, and the Fourth Eucharistic Prayer, go any way to remedying this deficiency.

What Marten realised, and what Teilhard de Chardin had spotted earlier, is that while truly man is made in the image of God, the whole world is charged with the grandeur of God. Chardin was exiled in Mongolia for his statement that "the universalised heart of Christ coincides with the heart of matter transformed by love". "Such ambiguities and indeed even serious errors . . . offend Catholic doctrine," roared Cardinal Ottviani and his Jesuit adviser Sebastian Tromp from the battlements of the Holy Office, where they had sought sanctuary to lick their wounds after failing to prevent Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on Revelation – *Dei Verbum*.

So Chardin sent them a postcard from Mongolia: “Once again . . . I have neither bread nor wine nor altar. I will raise myself beyond these symbols, up to the pure majesty of the real itself. I your priest will make the whole earth my altar and on it I will offer all the labours and sufferings of the world.” Pope Benedict XVI then developed this thought during Vespers at Aosta Cathedral on 24th June 2009 –“the role of the priesthood is to consecrate the world so that it may become a living host, a liturgy . . . in the end we shall achieve a cosmic liturgy, where the cosmos becomes a living host. This is also the great vision of Teilhard de Chardin”.

It was also the great vision of Thomas Merton. He brought together eco-theology, concern for the poor and evangelical simplicity of life in a way which Pope Francis has now made his own, in a way I am sure we shall find articulated again in the forthcoming encyclical letter.

In 1968, shortly before setting out on the tour which ended with his death, Merton wrote in the *American Catholic Worker*: “The ecological conscience is centred in an awareness of man’s true place as a dependent member of the biotic community. Man must become fully aware of his dependence on a balance which he is not only free to destroy but which he has already begun to destroy. He must recognise his obligations toward the other members of that vital community. And incidentally, since he tends to destroy nature in his frantic efforts to exterminate other members of his own species, it would not hurt if he had a little more respect for human life too. The respect for life, the affirmation of all life, is basic to the ecological conscience.”

As we spoke together during and after lunch I referred to a recent visit I had made to the troubled war- zone of the Plain of Jars, in Laos, and of my narrow escape from the fringe effects of the war in neighbouring Vietnam. His article in the *Catholic Worker*, still fresh in his mind and clearly earmarked for inclusion in what would have been the book written after his tour had finished, was very relevant: “The ecological conscience is also essentially a peace-making conscience. A country (America) that seems to be more and more oriented to permanent hot or cold war-making does not give much promise of developing either one. But perhaps the very character of the war in Vietnam – with crop poisoning, the defoliation of forest trees, the incineration of villages and their inhabitants with napalm – presents enough of a stark and critical example to remind us of this most urgent moral need. Catholic theology ought to take note of the ecological conscience and do it fast.”

Francis is taking note, and doing it fast.