Thomas Merton's Approach to St. John of the Cross

Keith J. Egan

> Julian [of Norwich] is without doubt one of the most wonderful of all Christian voices. She gets greater and greater in my eyes as I grow older, and whereas in the old days I used to be crazy about St. John of the Cross, I would not exchange him now for Julian if you gave me the world and the Indies and all the Spanish mystics rolled up in one bundle.

Thomas Merton made the above comment in a 1962 letter to Sister Madeleva Wolff, CSC, president of Saint Mary's College, Notre Dame, Indiana. Madeleva had chided Merton for omitting Julian of Norwich and other fourteenth-century English mystics from his notes "An Introduction to Christian Mysticism."[1] As is well known, Merton often expressed his enthusiasms extravagantly, some of which extravagances need to be taken with the proverbial grain of salt. Although Julian of Norwich would eventually capture his fancy, Merton turned early in his spiritual journey to John of the Cross. As Michael Mott wrote: "No writer and no religious authority meant more to Merton in the 1940s than St John of the Cross...."[2] In 1939, searching "to become a saint," Merton turned in earnest to John of the Cross:

> So at great cost I bought the first volume of the Works of St. John of the Cross and sat in the room on Perry Street and turned over the first pages, underlining places here and there with a pencil. But it turned out that it would take more than that to make me a saint: because these words I underlined, although they amazed and dazzled me with their import, were all too simple for me to understand. They were too naked, too stripped of all duplicity and compromise for my complexity, perverted by many appetites. However, I am glad that I was at least able to recognize them, obscurely, as worthy of the greatest respect.[3]

Despite the above somewhat invidious comparison with Julian of Norwich, Thomas Merton's early attraction to the Spanish poet and mystic lasted throughout his lifetime.[4] In *Contemplative Prayer,* published posthumously in 1969, which Douglas Steere called Merton's "last testament," John of the Cross remains a significant voice and resource.[5] My essay in no way pretends to be a full-scale study of the influence of John of the Cross on Thomas Merton. That task would require a much longer inquiry than is possible for this brief undertaking. Rather I shall confine myself to a consideration of Merton's approach to John of the Cross in his two *ex professo* studies of the Carmelite poet and mystic: *The Ascent to Truth* and the essay "Light in Darkness: The Ascetic Doctrine of St. John of the Cross."

Thomas Merton was an important, perhaps the most important, North American voice in the revival of Christian spirituality that began in the mid-twentieth century and which continues to this day. David Tracy is convinced that Merton was "...one of the most influential proponents of the spiritual life in the twentieth century."[6] His early and on-going intense interest in John of the Cross, saint and doctor of the Church, was an important element in the renewed interest in the Spanish mystic that took place in the decades following Merton's death in 1968. Without Thomas Merton the retrieval of interest in mysticism and in a mystic's mystic like John of the Cross would certainly have been a quite different story. Merton's attraction to contemplation and mysticism inevitably led for many to the "turn" to the classics of Christian mysticism. Merton who devoured the classics of Christian mysticism became a prophetic voice that was heard by many and that sent these searchers to explore the spiritual riches of Christian classics from the gospels to Merton's own texts, some of which are already numbered among the classics.

The Ascent to Truth

Any inquiry into Thomas Merton's relationship with John of the Cross must take into account the Cistercian's book, *The Ascent to Truth,* published in September 1951, only three years after the appearance of *The Seven Storey Mountain,* two years after the publication of *Seeds of Contemplation,* eleven years before the opening of the Second Vatican Council. Merton dedicated his *Ascent to Truth* to Our Lady of Mount Carmel, and he said that this book was "...chiefly concerned with the doctrine of the Carmelite theolo-

gian, Saint John of the Cross."[7] Obviously the *Ascent* in the title of the book was inspired by John of the Cross' *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* which is the most cited of John's works in Merton's *Ascent to Truth;* in fact, in some ways, Merton found it difficult to get beyond John's *Ascent.*

In 1964 Merton referred to *The Ascent to Truth* as "my wordiest and in some ways emptiest book. ... it is a book about which I have doubts. I think the material in it may be fairly good, but it is not my kind of book, and in writing it, I was not fully myself."[8] With *The Ascent to Truth,* Merton had attempted a book of theological justification, clearly not his métier. In 1967 the monk author evaluated his *Ascent* as "less good" among the books he had published up till that date; indeed, Merton was a demanding critic of his own writing. He awarded none of his books his highest rating of "best."[9] In the preface to the 1958 French edition of *The Ascent to Truth,* which Merton considered the definitive version of this work, he wrote: "This book was written seven years ago. If I were to attack the same subject at the present day (and I very probably would not), I might approach it very differently."[10] The manuscript of this book had several trial titles. On February 9, 1949, Merton referred to it as *The Cloud and The Fire,*[11] while in 1951 within less than a month he called the manuscript by two different names: *Fire Cloud and Darkness,* then *The Ascent to Light.* He mentioned these last two titles to Sister Thérèse Lentfoehr, SDS, on February 10, and March 1, 1951. On the former date he wrote to Sister Thérèse, about what he called "at least the first draft," and added that "it was your St. John of the Cross relic that did the trick! The book is practically all about his doctrine. ... but only on the lower reaches of Mount Carmel."[12] Sister Thérèse, who died in 1981, shared with the writer of this essay that Merton regularly sent her a relic or some manuscript and the like for what he mistakenly thought was her birthday, July 16th, the feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. His friend, Sister Thérèse, did nothing to set Merton straight on the correct date of her birthday, which was July 18th.

At Gethsemani, in preparation for the priesthood Merton received a narrowly neo-scholastic theological education which was at the time deemed adequate for those who would be monastic priests; in fact, Lawrence Cunningham contends that these studies were "terribly unsatisfactory."[13] This neo-scholastic theology inherited a sharp division between what were called ascetical and mystical theology, two differing courses that the curriculum in

seminaries could not easily fit in their schedules. Catholic theological training at the time paid too little attention to scripture and to the writings of the Fathers of the Church as well as to the spiritual classics. By 1957 Merton acknowledged that these deficiencies had an effect upon his *The Ascent to Truth*, and he added that "scholasticism...is not the true intellectual climate for a monk."[14] Merton later laid out his vision for the formation and theological training of monks in an essay entitled "The Need for a New Education," in which he called for a sapiential theology for monks that would be broad and open. Merton understood from his own less than satisfactory theological training that there was a need for well-formed monks who could understand their monastic existence and the world beyond the monastery theologically.[15]

Goal of the Spiritual Life: Ascetical or Mystical?

A key to understanding Merton's approach to John of the Cross was this division into ascetical and mystical theology, a division that if applied too rigidly has unfortunate results. Bernard McGinn has shown that the texts of Giovanni Battista Scaramelli, S.J., 1687-1752, "were probably the most influential proponents in designating 'asceticism' and 'mysticism,' or ascetical and mystical theology." This terminology was in vogue at the time Merton composed *The Ascent to Truth*, and it certainly influenced his reading of the writings of John of the Cross. A book used in monastic formation and in seminaries when Merton was preparing for religious life and the priesthood was the ubiquitous manual of Adolphe Tanquerey entitled *The Spiritual Life: A Treatise on Ascetical and Mystical Theology*,[16] a study with which Merton was certainly acquainted. An anti-mystical era lasted in the Western Christian Church from the late seventeenth century until the middle of the twentieth century. The presumption of that era was that Christians were to be satisfied with an ascetical life since the contemplative or mystical life was usually beyond their reach, reserved for a few enclosed nuns. Within this milieu Merton became an interpreter of the teachings of John of the Cross. Eventually his interests in contemplation and mysticism would undo such a restrictive attitude, if not in his study of John, at least in his broader spiritual outlook.

John of the Cross never used the Spanish word *el ascetismo*, nor does this word appear in a Spanish dictionary that was published in 1611, a dictionary closest to the time of John of the Cross.[17]

The Ascent to Truth's citation from *Dark Night* 1.6.2 of undue physical mortification as nothing more than the "penance of beasts," is in the Spanish "la penitencia de bestias" To indicate what he meant by asceticism John of the Cross used words that in English translation appear as detachment, self-denial, mortification, annihilation, and purification. Moreover, John also used symbolic language to illustrate that one needs to be free of disordered attachments so that God may fill the empty space with God's love, expressions like emptiness, darkness, nakedness and poverty of spirit.

Thomas Merton, like most new students of John of the Cross, began by reading John's *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*. Among John's commentaries the *Ascent* appears first in collections of his writings. However, it is better to begin to read John of the Cross in a different order. Of John's four commentaries, *Ascent, Dark Night, The Spiritual Canticle* and *The Living Flame of Love*, the *Ascent* is the least well-crafted. John had not yet found his rhythm in this earliest of his commentaries. Moreover, in the *Ascent* John was dealing with one of the most difficult phases in the contemplative journey, where one must struggle to become free of what blocks one from being fully open to God's love. There is something in us humans that resists genuine spiritual freedom. John described this phase of the spiritual life in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* as the time of the active nights of the sense and spirit. These active nights comprise what Merton and his time would refer to as the ascetical life. One needs to keep in mind that Merton belonged to the "Trappist" Order which, when he entered, put great stress on the penitential or ascetical character of the spiritual life. That had been so since the time of Armand de Rancé, who died in 1700, and the Trappists at that time gave much less attention to mystical prayer. Merton's gift to the Cistercian Order was to remind it of its contemplative heritage that had thrived so fully in the twelfth century when the Cistercian spirit was shaped by the likes of Bernard of Clairvaux and William of St. Thierry.

How much richer would Merton's understanding of John of the Cross have been if he had first found his way to the Spanish mystic by way of John's poetry, letters, and *Sayings of Light and Love*, then worked his way back to the *Ascent*, but only after first having studied John's *Living Flame of Love, The Spiritual Canticle* and *The Dark Night*? Read in this sequence one comes to *Ascent of Mount Carmel* knowing why the ascetical purification/liberation of the *Ascent* is crucial to anyone who seeks to be transformed in

God through love. That transformation is what the contemplative life is all about for John of the Cross. To limit one's vision to the ascetical life is to deny that one was created for the love that God pours into the liberated heart.[18]

For John of the Cross, the journey of *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* is but a prelude to the love that blooms in a heart that God has freed. Genuine freedom comes not through one's own efforts—the active nights. For John of the Cross, liberation from disordered attachments comes fully and finally through the purifying contemplative dark nights—the passive nights—that follow on what is described in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel.* Thomas Merton, though he knew better, seemed stuck in the active nights of the *Ascent* at least in his writing. However, as we have seen, Merton began his study of John with the first volume of the mystic's writings where he found the *Ascen*t waiting for his own avid exploration.

John of the Cross: Thomist?

A serious detriment to an understanding of the doctrine of John of the Cross in *The Ascent to Truth* is Merton's presumption that John of the Cross was a thoroughgoing Thomist: "Here as everywhere Saint John of the Cross is a true Thomist."[19] In his *Ascent* Merton consistently argues that John's teaching was a doctrine that focused on reason and intellect. Steven Payne, OCD, who has studied this matter carefully, has this to say:

> ... even those familiar with scholasticism have often erred by assuming too readily that John was fundamentally a Thomist. More recent studies have shown that John disagreed with Aquinas on a number of substantive issues. And although his basic intellectual framework was undeniably scholastic, John was an original thinker who was not afraid to modify received views in order to deal with the spiritual life more clearly and accurately.[20]

In his claim that John was thoroughly a Thomist, Merton was following an opinion common at the time, and one that has prevailed among some until now.[21] In this regard Merton was especially influenced by Jacques Maritain's thomistic reading of John of the Cross.[22] My estimate is that John of the Cross was labeled as a Thomist because a Dominican like Reginald Garrigou-LaGrange (1877-1964), had linked "...the mystical wisdom of St. John of the Cross to the speculative wisdom of St. Thomas."[23] Jacques Maritain

was influenced by Garrigou-Lagrange in his interpretation of John of the Cross. True, John of the Cross followed Thomas Aquinas in some ways, e.g., in his cognitional theory, but John is not a thorough-going Thomist by any means.

Basically John of the Cross is in the Augustinian tradition and a Platonist. One example of John's Augustinian affiliation is his use of the three faculties of the soul, intellect, will and memory rather than the thomist rendition of intellect and will as the soul's spiritual faculties. There is much else besides in John that identifies him with the platonic spiritual tradition of the middle ages, not the least of which was John's thorough adoption of the imagery and theology of the Song of Songs and the quite platonic *nachleben* or afterlife of The Song. John of the Cross, therefore, owed much to the Platonism, some would say the Neo-Platonism, of the Song of Songs tradition that began with Origen's middle Platonism. Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross introduced the Song of Songs tradition to Carmelite Spirituality and their example has had a lasting impact on Christian spirituality since then. To make John of the Cross a thoroughgoing Thomist puts his teaching in a context not faithful to his vision of the contemplative life. John was much more at home in the Platonic tradition.[24]

Thomas Merton characterized *The Ascent to Truth* as "...chiefly concerned with the doctrine of the Carmelite theologian, Saint John of the Cross."[25] The fact is John of the Cross was not a professional theologian. The Carmelite friar studied arts and philosophy for three years at the University of Salamanca and theology for only one year. John of the Cross' principal ministry was spiritual guidance, not theology. Whatever theological commentary appears in John's commentaries, and there is quite a bit especially in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, it was meant solely to ground his spiritual guidance. His writings, all of them, constitute a treasury of spiritual guidance, not theological commentary. John of the Cross dedicated *The Spiritual Canticle* to his dear friend Ana de Jesús, then prioress at Granada. In his prologue to this commentary he said to Mother Ana:

> ...although some scholastic theology is used here in reference to the soul's interior converse with God, it will not prove vain to speak in such a manner to the pure of spirit. Even though Your Reverence lacks training in scholastic theology, through which the divine truths are understood, you are not wanting

> in mystical theology, which is known through love and by which these truths are not only known but at the same time enjoyed.[26]

Merton eventually became aware that his *Ascent* made too little use of scripture and the Fathers in his interpretation of John of the Cross. Had he done otherwise, he would have noticed that John regularly illustrated his teaching with a spiritual interpretation of texts: e. g, citing Job 7:2-4, John says that Job is speaking spiritually.[27] In speaking of prophecies about Christ, John wrote: "These prophecies about Christ should have been understood in their spiritual sense, in which they were most true."[28] John knew the literal sense of scripture but was much more interested in the spiritual or accommodated sense of scripture: "Guiding themselves, then, by the literal sense it was impossible for them to avoid deception."[29] John's studies at the University of Salamanca occurred during lively debates between traditionalists and those like Luis de León and Gaspar de Grajal who advocated the literal sense of scripture and the use of the vernacular.[30] John of the Cross followed professors like these in his use of the vernacular but not in a reliance on the literal sense of scripture.[31] John in one place even speaks of the baseness of the letter.[32] Elsewhere I have described John as having a biblical imagination,[33] an imagination shaped by his immersion in the bible.[34] Had Thomas Merton had a better and more extensive training in scripture, he would surely have appreciated the biblical grounding of the teachings of Saint John of the Cross and the necessity to attend to the way John's use of scripture affected the meaning of his spiritual doctrine.

A Tale of Two Poets

It is more than a little surprising that Thomas Merton the poet did not make more of the poetry of John of the Cross in *The Ascent to Truth*. Even when Merton quotes a stanza of the world-acclaimed "Spiritual Canticle,"[35] his emphasis is on the poem's commentary not on the poem as a poem.[36] What I think is at stake here, and elsewhere in Merton, was the prevailing chasm in Christianity between nature and grace. This separation of nature and grace left Merton unaware that one can theologize from poetry as well as from prose. An example of this wariness can be seen in the essay that Merton wrote for *Commonweal* on "Poetry and Contemplation" in 1947.[37] This essay shows Merton, like the Christian cul-

ture of this time, without an appreciation for the inner connection between the gift of poetry and the gift of grace, between poetry and prayer, between nature and grace and even the connection of nature and grace with glory. Merton did come in time to see that the sharp divisions between nature and grace carry a heavy price if one wants to lead a more integrated spiritual life. I think a more integrated view of nature and grace is evident in Merton's *Asian Journal*.[38] What a different book *The Ascent to Truth* would have been had Thomas Merton been able to tap into John of Cross' primary experience as imagined in his poetry. John wrote in his prologue to *The Spiritual Canticle* that the poem on which he was commenting was "...composed with a certain burning love of God"; that his poem contained "...expressions of love arising from mystical understanding...," and "...were composed in a love flowing from abundant mystical understanding."[39] It is regrettable that Thomas Merton did not feel free to use the poetry of John of the Cross as a *locus theologicus*, a place from which to explore and to express the compelling beauty of God. John's poems gave Merton every opportunity to find joy in the beauty of John's poetry and in the beauty of God.

> Let us rejoice, Beloved,
> And let us got forth to behold ourselves in your beauty
> To the mountain and to the hill,
> To where the pure water flows,
> And further, deep into the thicket.[40]

John of the Cross Apophatic?

It has been common, almost universal, to classify John of the Cross as an apophatic mystic. In *The Ascent to Truth*[41] Merton joined the chorus and referred to John of the Cross' theology as apophatic. A more nuanced way of understanding mysticism as apophatic or kataphatic was still a long way off in Merton's day. Yet, earlier in *The Ascent to Truth*[42] the Trappist author saw that "some of the greatest mystics—Ruysbroeck, Saint Teresa of Ávila, and Saint John of the Cross himself—describe both aspects of contemplation, 'light' and 'darkness.'" Merton, I think, had an inkling that it was too simplistic to designate any true mystic as simply apophatic or only kataphatic. What we now know is that the difference between the two designations is one of emphasis more than one of absolute division. The apophatic and the kataphatic are the other side of

each other. An apophatic experience, in fact, depends on there being kataphatic experience.[43] Authors, however, have consistently labeled John of the Cross as apophatic without noting how much of John's poetry and other writings are filled with light and graphic imagery, especially imagery from the Song of Songs. Perhaps the ascetical character of John of the Cross' *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* and the darkness associated with John's *Dark Night* have been emphasized over the light, life and love for which the dark nights exist.[44] One should also keep in mind such characterizations of the Holy Spirit as the Living Flame of Love.[45] Indeed, John of the Cross clearly knows that experience of God is an experience of unknowing, an experience of mystery; yet, that profound mystery can be manifested in symbols of life, light and love.

Light in Darkness

In less than a decade after the publication of *The Ascent to Truth* Thomas Merton published a collection of essays entitled *Disputed Questions*.[46] This latter book, which Merton dedicated to Boris Pasternak, continues Merton's interest in the Carmelite tradition to which he devotes two of the studies in this book, including "Light in Darkness; The Ascetic Doctrine of St. John of the Cross."[47] Though the book's essays seem loosely connected, the author claimed that "...one theme, one question above all, which runs through the whole book...: [is] the relation of the *person* to the *social organization*.... [or] ...solitude vs. community."[48] That statement is important for the study of the Carmelite tradition; in fact, I contend that the basic motif of Carmelite spirituality is the creative tension between solitude and community.[49] This theme, which was so important in Merton's personal struggle over the relationship of eremitic life to cenobitic monasticism, may account in part for Merton's fascination with the Carmelite tradition.

In this essay "Light in Darkness: The Ascetic Doctrine of St. John of the Cross," Merton may have been responding indirectly to his own critique of *The Ascent to Truth*. As a matter of fact, Merton's essay "Light in Darkness" is a short, inadequate response to what Merton saw as the perception of John's harshness or, as Merton says, an asceticism that could be perceived as "...mechanical, cold, soulless and inhuman: a kind of mathematical exclusion of all spontaneity in favor of dreary and rigid self-punishment."[50] Merton, like John of the Cross, was an impatient writer with a yen to get on with what was next on his mind.

In this defense of John of the Cross Merton affirmed the biblical foundations of John's holiness and teachings. The Trappist monk was convinced that John's life and doctrine were derived from "...the New Testament, the Sermon on the Mount, the profound discourses in the Gospel of St. John, and particularly the mystery of the Passion and the Resurrection of the Son of God."[51] For Merton, John of the Cross' hard sayings were like the hard sayings in the Gospels. He argued that John's demands offered as an alternative to self-gratification "...love and the will of God." John, Merton explained, taught that one must prefer one to the other; one must make a choice.[52] Merton acknowledged that John of the Cross' asceticism "...may seem drastic, but it can lead one to the interior detachment and tranquility without which a fully contemplative life is impossible."[53] Merton was very much on target when he saw in John's asceticism a call to radical freedom, the freedom to love God and others as God intended creation and others to be loved. The Gethsemani monk wrote:

> If we read the saint carefully, and take care to weigh every word, we will see that he is preaching a doctrine of pure liberty which is the very heart of the New Testament. He wants us to be free. He wants to liberate us not only from the captivity of passion and egoism, but even from the more subtle tyranny of spiritual ambition, and preoccupation with methods of prayer and systems for making progress.[54]

I find that Merton's perception of John as advocating freedom fits exactly a careful reading of the Spanish Carmelite whose bottom line in the spiritual life is, I think, a call to freedom and love.

Merton in his "Light in Darkness" essay was still trying to apologize and explain what he saw as John of the Cross' asceticism; yet Merton felt the need to dispel John's reputation for severity. In this essay he shows a glimmer of going beyond the asceticism to John's mysticism. He cites John's *Living Flame of Love* where the soul walks "...in loving awareness of God...possessing this pure, simple and loving awareness, as one that opens his eyes with an awareness of love."[55] John of the Cross' contemplative goal is "loving attentiveness," *advertencia amorosa*, to the God of love.[56] The struggle for freedom in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* is justified by the gift of loving attention to the God who is love.

At the conclusion of "Light in Darkness," Merton came close to, but still short of seeing the theological significance of John's

poetry. He said that John's poems "...happily complete the aphorisms and cautions, and incite the reader to go on to the saint's great mystical treatises which are nothing but commentaries on his poems. The remarkable beauty of his poems shows that his asceticism, far from destroying his creative genius, had liberated and transformed it by dedicating it to God."[57] Nature and grace were still separated in Merton's mind. Would that the Trappist poet had been able to appreciate the primacy of John of the Cross' poetry and, in at least three of his poems, to see that these poems arose from John's mystical experience. Merton would then have been able to recommend to his readers the usefulness of John's poems as prayers in themselves and as a texts that can teach one how to pray. John of the Cross' poems are genuine resources for contemplative prayer; they open up the imagination to new horizons of belief in a merciful and loving God.

While "Light in Darkness" made some significant progress in his presentation of John of the Cross' teaching, Merton seems in the context of this essay to be eager to get on to other projects, which were many in 1960. I think the progress that Merton made in his understanding of John of the Cross there was the result of his position as master of scholastics at Gethsemani, 1951-1955 and his role as master of novices, 1955-1965. In these positions Merton was a guide to younger monks for whom he articulated what it meant to be a monk and, for him, especially what it meant to be a contemplative monk. Merton's interest in and admiration for John of the Cross helped him to guide young men into lives of contemplative prayer for which the Carmelite from Spain would have applauded the Trappist born in the Pyrennees.

An Afterword

I want to begin these concluding words with an act of contrition. I feel not a little uneasy critiquing somebody whose writings were, as far back as college days, and remain still, a powerful and abiding inspiration. Thomas Merton was, without a doubt, the architect of the North American retrieval of Christianity's spiritual heritage during the twentieth century. He brought the spiritual classics alive and shared his gift of a spiritual imagination that could see new possibilities for a joyful following of Jesus of Nazareth. I must count Thomas Merton as an important mentor in the spiritual life. So I am abashed at my impudence and seeming ingratitude in pointing out some shortcomings in his approach to Saint

John of the Cross. I take comfort in the realization that Thomas Merton had to be a man of his time and his culture, including the theological and monastic culture of his day that fostered much holiness, but like all cultures had its own drawbacks. I have pointed out some of these drawbacks that made it difficult for Merton to give a fuller picture of the spirituality of the Spanish mystic who so inspired the monk from Gethsemani. I do so with a sense of gratitude for his leading many of us to the writings of John of the Cross.

On the other hand, Thomas Merton was a prophetic and groundbreaking author who opened new vistas for God-seekers. What Thomas Merton did, besides much else, was to alert Christians to the significance of John of the Cross in an age that was beginning to show an interest in spirituality and contemplation. I believe that much of what Merton learned from John of the Cross was shared not only explicitly but implicitly in all of his writings. John of the Cross lies just below the surface of nearly all that Merton wrote. Merton democratized contemplation and made accessible what had seemed reserved to the few. The monk from Gethsemani who has been read by countless Christians would now want Christians to know that, as John of the Cross taught, the grace of contemplation is the very same grace that was poured into one's heart at baptism.[58] Merton also shared a vision of holiness that appreciates God's creatures everywhere, and a love of God and neighbor that cannot tolerate injustice. Merton's writings have and will continue to send his readers to Christian classics that reveal in new ways the wisdom of the gospels. Merton struggled with the demands that John of the Cross made in the quest for freedom and love. If one lets Merton lead one to the wisdom of John of the Cross, one will acquire a liberated heart that loves as God intended all of us to love. Thus did John of the Cross write:

> ...even though this happy night darkens the spirit, it does so only to impart light concerning all things; even though it humbles individuals and reveals their miseries, it does so only to exalt them; and even though it impoverishes and empties them of all possessions and natural affection, it does so only that they may reach out divinely to the enjoyment of all earth and heavenly things, with a general freedom of spirit in them all.[59]

There was no more ardent spiritual seeker in the twentieth century than Father Louis Thomas Merton who surely was deeply consoled at John of the Cross' conviction: "...if anyone is seeking God, the Beloved is seeking that person much more."[60]

Notes

1. Keith J. Egan, "Harvesting Seeds of Contemplation," *The Merton Annual* Vol. 16 (2003), pp. 53-54; this letter appears in Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964), pp. 274-275; and in William Shannon, ed. *Witness to Freedom: The Letters of Thomas Merton in Times of* Crisis (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994), pp. 43-44. See Thomas Merton, *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition*, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2007).

2. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), p. 78.

3. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948), pp. 238-39.

4. See references to John of the Cross in a book by Merton that consisted of "notes [that] add up to a personal version of the world in the 1960s." (p. 5): Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1968). References to John of the Cross: pp. 137, 271, 297, 320, 347.

5. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969); the Steere phrase is in the foreword, p. 14. This book was also published under the title *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* (Spencer, MA: Cistercian Publications, 1969).

6. David Tracy, "Recent Catholic Spirituality: Unity amid Diversity," Louis Dupré and Don Saliers, eds., *Christian Spirituality: Post-Reformation and Modern*, Vol. 18 of *World Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), p. 160.

7. Thomas Merton, *The Ascent to Truth* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951), p. ix.

8. Thomas Merton, *A Vow of Conversation: Journals 1964-1965*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988), p. 56.

9. Thomas Merton, *Honorable Reader: Reflections on My Work*, ed. Robert Daggy (New York: Crossroad, 1989), Appendix 2. For comments on this graph see Lawrence Cunningham, *Thomas Merton and the Monastic Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 221-223.

10. Merton, *Honorable Reader*, p. 28.

11. Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo, "The Journals of Thomas Merton, v. 2," (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), p. 278.

12. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989), p. 206.

13. Cunningham, *Thomas Merton and the Monastic Vision*, p. 34.

14. Merton, *Honorable Reader*, p. 28.

15. Thomas Merton, "The Need for a New Education," *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998, originally Doubleday, 1971), pp. 193-199.

16. Tournai: Desclée, 1930. See McGinn, "Asceticism and Mysticism in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages," pp. 58-74 in Vincent Wimbush and Richard Valantasis, *Asceticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

17. Sebastián de Covarrubias Horoxco, *Tesoro de la Lengua Castellana o Española* (Navarra: Vervuert, 2006; originally Madrid, 1611).

18. See *The Living Flame of Love* 1.1; 1.3; and *The Spiritual Canticle* B, 29.3 in *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, rev. ed., eds. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriquez (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1991).

19. Merton, *Ascent to Truth*, p 283; p. 132.

20. Steven Payne, *John of the Cross and the Cognitive Value of Mysticism: An Analysis of Sanjuanist Teaching and its Philosophical Implications for Contemporary Discussions of Mystical Experience* (Boston: Kluwer, 1990), p. 17.

21. David Perrin, "Asceticism: The Enigma of Corporal Joy in Paul Ricoeur and John of the Cross," *Pastoral Sciences* 16 (1997) pp. 153, note 83: "John's anthropology is essentially based on the writings of Thomas Aquinas (and therefore based on Aristotle....)"

22. Jacques Maritain, *Distinguish to Unite or The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. from 4th French edition under supervision of Gerald Phelan (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959), chapters 8 and 9. The fourth French edition appeared in 1946.

23. See Gerald McCool, "Garrigou-Lagrange," *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Theologians*, eds. Patrick Carey and Joseph Lienhard (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000) p. 206.

24. Payne, *John of the Cross*, p. 17.

25. Merton, *The Ascent to Truth*, p. ix.

26. *The Spiritual Canticle* B, Prologue 3.

27. *Dark Night* 2.11.6, *hablando spiritualmente.*

28. *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 2.19.7.

29. *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* 2.19.7, *el sentido literal, Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, p. 216.

30. On scripture as formative of John's spirituality, see Iain Matthew, 'The Knowledge and Consciousness of Christ in the Light of the

Writings of St. John of the Cross," D. Phil. Thesis, Oxford University, 1991, pp. 81ff. On John and biblical studies at the University of Salamanca, see Melquiades Andrés Martím, "La teología en Salamanca durante los estudios de San Juan de la Cruz (1560-1570)," *Juan de la Cruz, Espirítu de Llama*, ed. Otger Steggink (Rome and Kampen: Institutum Carmelitanum, Kok Pharos, 1991) pp. 213-230.

31. John of the Cross' poetry and prose were in the vernacular; for his change from Latin quotations to vernacular quotations of the Bible, see *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* 2.27.6, n.2 and *The Spiritual Canticle, Prologue* 4, n. 2, in *Works of Saint John of the Cross*.

32. *Ascent of Mount Carmel* 2.19.8.

33. Keith J. Egan, "The Biblical Imagination of John of the Cross in *The Living Flame of Love*," *Juan de la Cruz, Espirítu*, pp. 507-521; see in the same collection John Welch, "The Imagination of St John of the Cross," pp. 847-862.

34. Jean Vilnet, *Bible et Mystique chez Saint Jean de la Croix*, "Études Carmélitaines," (Bruges: Desclée de Brouwer, 1949).

35. I cite John's poetry in quotation marks and his commentaries in italics.

36. Merton, *Ascent to Truth*, p. 313.

37. *Commonweal* 46 (July 4 1947), pp. 280-286.

38. See Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, eds. Naomi Burton, Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973).

39. Prologue, *The Spiritual Canticle*, 1-2.

40. *The Spiritual Canticle*, B, Stanza 36.

41. Merton, *Ascent to Truth*, p. 243.

42. Merton, *Ascent to Truth*, pp. 25-26.

43. For discussions of the apophatic and the kataphatic, see Oliver Davies and Denys Turner, *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

44. See *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Prologue 1.

45. *The Living Flame of Love*, 1, 1.

46. Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960).

47. This essay has appeared in editions of *Counsels of Light and Love*, 1960, 1978, 2007 and in *The Power and Meaning of Love*, 1976. The other Carmelite essay is entitled "The Primitive Carmelite Ideal," *Disputed Questions*, pp. 218-263.

48. Merton, *Disputed Questions*, p. viii.

49. Keith J. Egan, "The Solitude of Carmelite Prayer," *Carmelite Prayer: A Tradition for the 21st Century*, ed. Keith J. Egan (New York: Paulist Press, 2003), pp. 38-62.

50. "Light in Darkness," p. 209.
51. "Light in Darkness," p. 208.
52. "Light in Darkness," p. 209
53. "Light in Darkness," p. 211.
54. "Light in Darkness," p. 214.
55. "Light in Darkness," p. 215, quoting *The Living Flame of Love*, 3.32.
56. *Living Flame of Love*, 3. 65.
57. "Light in Darkness," pp. 216-217.
58. *The Spiritual Canticle* B, 23.6.
59. *The Dark Night*, 2.9.1.
60. *The Living Flame of Love*, 3.28.