To Pray Contemplatively is to Work Mysteriously toward the Center

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I

Prayer deals with a variety of experience which science can never easily touch, for science always deals with some type of reductionism which allows it to communicate with itself on its own terms. Mature prayer and ultimately contemplative prayer confronts the knowledge of unknowability and in a surrender to the mystery of the gift of a universe given in myriads of changing ways celebrates this in wonder and awe. Yet we must come to learn this almost intuitively. This is a Truth which the prophets of old, the Church in its wisdom, and our best poets (and I would include Thomas Merton) sense and reveal over and over. As E. Glenn Hinson makes clear in his article, included in this book, the contemplative tradition makes us ready for prayer.

In a way praying might best be compared to the slow perfection of the marriage relationship. In prayer, especially as younger persons, we begin with simple requests and desires. As we mature we learn that the possibilities for praying will change as our needs, desires, hopes, frustrations, ambitions, disappointments, strengths, and challenges change. Our "longing for God" remains always at the core while the actions in which we are involved differ. Nonetheless everything done by any seeker toward unification with God is done because of a fundamental, unshakeable and universal search for wholeness.

As we approach the topic of prayer and its centrality within the thinking and living of Thomas Merton, a somewhat surprising link comes to mind and takes my thought back to many years of teaching World Literature, especially to sophomores in required classes. In those classes we would begin with familiar readings from the Old Testament and then go on to Homer's *The Odyssey*. What followed then was a study of myriads of examples of epic and lyric expressions about wanderers, aware perhaps of their calls from God, while frequently these literary figures were only able to hear a call from gods, or God, somewhat vaguely. For my stu-

dents, however, the love of life and place always seemed to take on special meaning.

Homer's Odysseus never doubts his enduring love for his Penélopê and the structure of this epic story, circle-by-circle moving back to Ithaka, brings the hero home. His sense of quest and honor, his seeking of home and household (a symbol, I am sure, of Western man's wandering away from wholeness) is at the center of this ur-story and this motif remains fundamental for so much of our Western literature. In Wendell Berry's essay "The Body and the Earth," he stresses that our present individualistic disruption and separation from what *only* will make us whole has roots in our cultural disrespect for the land and thus suggests our need for place, and above all need for home. In moving testimony to the faithfulness of Odysseus, Berry demonstrates how the notion of Homer's narrative inevitably brings that wandering husband home:

> ... Odysseus's journey from the cave of Kalypso to the bed of Penélopê, has revealed a structure that is at once geographical and moral. This structure may be graphed as a series of diminishing circles centered on one of the posts of the marriage bed. Odysseus makes his way from the periphery toward that center. ...Odysseus makes his way across a succession of boundaries, enclosed and enclosing, with the concentricity of a blossom around its pistil, a human pattern resembling a pattern of nature. He comes to his island, to his own lands, to his town, to this household and house, to his bedroom, to his bed. As he moves toward this center he moves also through a series of recognitions, tests of identity and devotion. By these, his homecoming becomes at the same time a restoration of order.[1]

Berry's insights can, I think, be used analogously to approach what Merton, systematically, yet inevitably and intuitively, figured out and pondered about humankind's need for wilderness, and simultaneously, our longing for order and for honest prayer which again and again slowly reunites us with our Creator.

Berry's point about Odysseus is that in the renewal of the marriage of Ulysses and Penélopê the restoration of order in Odysseus' kingdom is also advanced. Odysseus's marriage, therefore, was not just some legal arrangement. Rather it is the very confirmation of the essential bond between husband and wife, their imme-

diate community and also all the resources of life which made them one with their culture and indeed their hidden Creator. In this return of Odysseus we see, says Berry, "a complete marriage and a complex fidelity" (p. 122). That seeking of wholeness, I now see, is similar to what all must seek in prayer.

Something similar to this type of total dedication and conviction must also inform the breast of all persons who truly seek God by means of prayer. There is a center, a wholeness, a place where unity is sought, and which must be honored. Thus, when Terrence Kardong goes back, within the essay included here, to examine Benedict's *Rule* and the section in the *Rule* about the Oratory, we see that place, the most sacred place reserved for the action of monks with God (alone and in community) was crucial fifteen-hundred years ago and by implication this must still be so today.

II

All the articles included in the section of commissioned essays about prayer stress the fact of humankind's longing for union with God. Some of the scholars who have been asked to address this issue deal with aspects of this quest by using Merton's life, meditations, poetry, and friendships to examine the fundamental reality of the continuing need for prayer of all persons—something which, especially in this complex "scientific age" of which we are part, can so easily be forgotten or, if not forgotten, can be processed into abstractions.

The article, included here, by Richard Hauser reveals both his love of his Ignatian training as a Jesuit and the mystery of how Hauser came to appreciate prayer because of his study of modern psychology and Thomas Merton, an appreciation to which he came by quite another route than the Ignatian Exercises. Concretized, brought *home* to the particulars of his own life, Hauser says—after years of searching—he prayed and then he was able to understand Ignatius far better too.

Merton ultimately saw his fundamental monastic job as prayer. In a set of related 1960 journal entries he comments on the two elements St. Benedict held as most integral to the successful fulfillment of the monastic vocation, balancing a concern with self and another equally important concern with community in the widest sense:

December 13, ...

Work. To be a solitary and not an individualist. Not concerned with mere perfecting of my own life. This, as Marxists see, is an indecent luxury (because there is so much illusion in it). My solitude belongs to society and to God. Are these just works? Solitude for its special work, deepening of thought and awareness. The struggle against alienation. The danger of a solitude that is the worst alienation. *Not* a matter of holding the community at arm's length. Important that I continue to be Novice Master for the time being (and he [the Abbot] wants me to anyway). But I think at night of St. Mary of Carmel [the new retreat-conference building]. I go to sleep thinking of the quiet hermitage and wishing I were there in bed (there is no bed) in the silent woods where the owl cries. "Self-love" they would say.

It is simply time that I must pray intently for the needs of the whole world and not be concerned with other, seemingly "more effective" forms of action. For me prayer comes first, the other forms of action follow, if they have their place. And they no doubt do to some extent. Prayer (yesterday Mass) for Latin America, for all of America, for this Hemisphere—sorrow for the dolts, for the idiot civilization that is going down to ruin and dragging everything with it.[2]

This dual entry clarifies with its seriousness, yet with a humor also, the absolute centrality of prayer and the sense of home in Merton's spiritual life. He both longed for extreme solitude, and realized he had to have more connections with the whole world. Merton's solitude is, therefore, not selfishness, but was to be sought in the hope that because of prayerful solitude the special work of his life would be fulfilled. Merton might then, paradoxically, be delivered from both alienation and separation.

In solitude, properly cultivated, Merton realized he might be given a deepening of understanding. For this to come about and for this not to be a selfish act, he immediately notes, he must pray intently not for himself, but for the "needs of the whole world." Such a constant juggling act, perhaps the central process of prayer, it seems to me, is like the process of individuation in Jung's terms.

That process of "individuation" has to be a life-long journey. It is to some degree conscious (but usually less so), a quest which allows any motivated person to move toward a fuller, more "complex" understanding of the way conscious and unconscious fac-

tors, emotional and rational actions and reactions, may be being integrated and thus allowing that person to function (or not) at various stages of life while doing so within a "complexity" of self which is that unique person's inheritance and home. Prayer must also work this way. It is not a formula for a solitary or a way to stress individualism. It is a way of finding one's home.

All persons develop qualities which remain special *only* to that individual. Those qualities, both conscious and unconscious awareness of tendencies toward *anima* and *animus*, and all the tensions generated by their presence are apparently constantly blending with still other developing psychic characteristics which often at earlier stages of life remain submerged, or even hidden. In addition, the power of the "Collective Unconscious" (in which *all* persons also share) is as well a factor which can help or hinder any individual's drive toward clearer manifestations of his or her personal "individuation." Understanding the interaction of these many forces can assist an individual to account for, and to adjust to the rhythm of life's stages.

Is such a process of "individuation," then, as William Johnston describes in his recent autobiography *Mystical Journey*, the need to embrace the nothingness (which is all) which St. John of the Cross describes? Is this what we must learn to do in prayer? Is this what is revealed in the larger rhythm of Merton's learning to pray? Is it necessary for the developing individual to become more aware of the *all* (and the archetypal patterns of birth into death for all) by "letting go" of dwelling upon a consciousness of self which is always what can only be experienced on the surface of our understanding of ourselves?

Johnston argues that when the awareness of self and its singular needs is surrendered, then flashes our insight into the "Coincidence of Opposites." Perhaps then it becomes possible that the *all* becomes part of the self and the self becomes (precisely by not worrying about the external self) part of the *all* in which all persons are united and then one feels at home.

In the first "night of the senses," as William Johnston explains how he understands the sense of the personal unconscious,[3] he elaborates that it is through an emptying of personal fears and anxieties that each person moves toward a healing of self and paradoxically becomes more "individuated" and more able to pray. It would then be the normal hoped for pattern that the "second night," which we can come to know of the senses, is the still wider

need to assist in the purification of the "collective unconscious of the world"—all the sins we face as persons who are linked together, manifested in all the dark actions of murder, greed and selfishness constantly happening throughout the entire world. I think if this is so it helps us to understand the process which allows us to pray and the deepening process which is radiated by Merton's life and writings, seeking the true self which remains united at its core with the Creator.

Many of the other essays which make up the section of this book focused upon prayer develop ideas which often have to do with prayer's specificity and immediacy. Both Kathy Hoffman and Cynthia Bourgeault demonstrate this. Bonnie Thurston's examination of Merton's insights gives us a clear view of the mature Merton pondering this fact. The article by Keith Egan, somewhat critical of Merton's early reading of St. John of the Cross, is valuable *both* as an academic evaluation and as an indicator of where Merton's analytical ability rested during the earliest part of his career when he wrote *The Ascent to Truth*. Indirectly, Egan also shows why Merton was skeptical about undertaking more extended formal theological study. For him prayer became more a matter of living in a focused manner yet always within the context of a world never abandoned. Thus, David Belcastro and Phillip Thompson remind us of Merton's prayerful engagement with the world.

III

The three interviews included in this volume also may assist us to triangulate on the importance of Merton's insights into the nature of living prayerfully. Both the interviews of Fr. Kilian McDonnell and Fr. Ray Pedrizetti provide first-hand insights about Merton, yet, perhaps more importantly, they are valuable as evidence of the importance of focused dedication to the kind of vowed religious life which Merton chose. Clearly, fidelity over an extended period brings proof of the mystery of our longing for God. In my own case as I have learned more about the mystery of Christian belief, this also has proven to be true.

In addition to the group of articles about prayer included here, we have two additional studies which demonstrate how the "mystic" side of Merton remained clearly related to the "prophetic" side of Merton as critic and poet. The article by Gosia Poks makes it clear that prayer cannot be withdrawal. The study by Professor

Davis about *Cables to the Ace* amplifies this point by demonstrating how playfulness can bring insights lost in a culture of formulas and actions.

Teilhard de Chardin, Merton, Karl Rahner, Hans Urs von Balthasaar, Hans Küng are, to my mind, most likely, the most significant Catholic theologians who lived the prophetic responsibility of a twentieth-century vision as projected prayerfully for our present century. They each did this because in separate instances—for Teilhard, pondering "future of man"; for Merton, seeking the "new man"; for Rahner, celebrating the importance of mysticism; for Balthasaar, constructing a theology of aesthetics; and, for Küng, finally, the absolute necessity of ecumenism—these five men all witness to the presence of God in our (sometimes unlikely) midst. We find God in all kinds of ways, yet clearly Merton and each of these other famous theologians would insist the discipline of prayer comes first.

Two recent publications, both tracing their origins straight back to Thomas Merton, can serve to establish a broader stage upon which we can observe some of the other players who engage in the examination of "theo-dramas" which also are reflected in this gathering of scholarly articles. No doubt prayer was always at the heart of Merton's life, but it was never just for himself. Six recently published study booklets or pamphlets, four of which I have seen, published as "Bridges to Contemplative Living with Thomas Merton"[4] by Jonathan Montaldo and Robert G. Toth, along with Augustine Roberts's revised edition of *Centered on Christ: A Guide to Monastic Profession,* demonstrate the significance of Merton's prophetic stance and his encouragement in the life of prayer for all persons who live in our contemporary culture. These two works, designed for two totally different audiences, are therefore excellent reminders of the continuing importance of Merton's thought for all serious Christians.

The pamphlets which Jonathan Montaldo and Robert Toth have jointly produced for use by discussion groups to develop "Contemplative Living" are a clear indication of the continuing wide appeal of Merton's thought for "ordinary" people. Clearly Merton has such continuing influence. (I must confess I did recently hear at a parish discussion, in Atlanta, that a Director of Religious Education was using *two* sessions per meeting to speed up the appreciation of the contemplative process!) Above all, through these

study guides, we are reminded to find ways to make contemplative spaces, and to, thereby, feel at home.

The new edition of Augustine Roberts's *Centered on Christ*,[5] which began as a book based on Merton's own notes for novices, is now completely revised. This honed text is now used by many Cistercian Houses as a basic work which assists in monastic formation. Roberts's reworked and expanded text reflects Merton's careful thinking about preparation of novices as well as the test of time within this Benedictine-Cistercian framework of community. Because it is a revision of decades of continuing work by Roberts, it proves Merton's own systematic thinking remains of value.

In *Pax Intrantibus*,[6] a recent book of poetic meditations, which ruminate about Merton's quest as monk-poet, Fredrick Smock signals his readers about the enigmatic mystery of silence and humankind's often booming sound. Our being at home is disturbed in all kinds of ways. Smock writes about the mysteries of making poems amidst the impermanence of all that we love and see and breathe. What Merton does in his poems is a celebration often close to prayer. Merton's poetic temperament nurtured his talent which allowed him to enter into moments of intuitive seeing—whether this was to reflect some tiny thread of nature—which suggests wholeness and our desire for coming home, or the drifting of whole civilizations as they clash, dissolving still other cultures. Only in the now of focused poetry or prayer, Smock intimates, are we able to begin to find God.

This collection of essays and reviews includes several contributions which have a rather special meaning to me as editor which many readers most likely would not be able to notice the same way. Several of the writers are more than just scholars or authorities. Many of these contributors are scholars and authorities yet also they are true companion seekers. For example, Emile Farge has become a friend during the past several years. As a former priest he radiates a love of the Church. Emile's presence as a participant in the local Merton Reading Group for these years has been a gift. Bonnie Thurston's contribution reflects a different kind of growing relationship. She now lives quietly by herself, yet reaches out in many, including poetic, ways.

Among the reviewers here several have special relationships. The production manager, Glenn Crider, provides a review-essay of Br. (Ernest) Daniel Carrere's book, *Creating a Human World: A New Psychological and Religious Anthropology in Dialogue with Freud*,

Heidegger, and Kierkegaard. Brother Daniel himself, whom I first met in 1982, graciously edited the transcript of Merton included here. Glenn began his association with *The Merton Annual* in 2000 and his now seven years of Merton study has ranged from technical work to helping plan conferences; then editing, interviewing and more. I am pleased that he has been a steadfast presence, and especially as volumes 17 through 20 have been prepared.

Catherine Crosby's review-essay also deserves some brief comment. She and I were classmates (2004-2006) in the Spiritual Direction Program of Spring Hill College and her essay grew from what could have been just an objective review. Other reviews here have been written by persons, such as Martha Gross, now who have also become colleagues in the area of Spiritual Direction here in Atlanta.

In so many quiet and often indirect ways Merton has served as a catalyst in many of the developing relationships to which I allude. I am, of course, grateful for all the contributors who have made this book possible. Indeed, in closing, I must say this of all the contributors for the last twenty years.

Notes

1. Wendell Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry,* in "The Body and the Earth," ed. Norman Wirzba (Washington D.C.: Counterpoint, 2002), p. 120.

2. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years,* ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), p. 74.

3. William Johnston, *Mystical Journey: An Autobiography* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2006) p. 142 and pp. 157-58.

4. Jonathan Montaldo and Robert G. Toth, *Bridges to Contemplative Living* [4 pamphlets], Vol. One, *Entering the School of Your Experience;* Two, *Becoming Who You Already Are;* Three, *Living Your Deepest Desires;* Four, *Discovering the Hidden Ground of Love* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 2006). ISBN-10: 1-59471-089-9, (Vols. 1-4), $5.95, 63 pp. [Projected in this series: Vol. Five, *Traveling Your Road to Joy;* Six, *Writing Yourself into the Book of Life;* Seven, *Adjusting Your Life's Vision;* Eight, *Seeing that Paradise Begins Now.*]

5. Augustine Roberts, *Centered on Christ: A Guide to Monastic Profession* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2005), pp. 323 with Index. ISBN-10: 087907-074-9. $16.29 (paperback).

6. Frederick Smock, *Pax Intrantibus: A Meditation on the Poetry of Thomas Merton* (Frankfurt: KY, Broadstone, 2007), pp. 91.