Celtic Monasticism: A New Lens for Viewing *Day of a Stranger*

By **Monica Weis, SSJ**

Thomas Merton's brief essay *Day of a Stranger*,[1] written in May 1965 as a response to a request from a South American friend, is a literary gem that provides a window onto Merton's attitudes and living experiences as he moves more completely into his life as a hermit. Scholars have presented valuable insights into the circumstances and significance of this essay. Christine Bochen has provided us with the framework of journal entries about Merton's activities, reading and letter-writing during this time.[2] The late Robert Daggy, in his introduction to *Day of a Stranger*, offers us a veritable road map of the manuscript's evolution from its terse initial rendition to its more developed third version (*DS* 7-26). Patrick O'Connell reminds us that the essay's form comprises two parts: "an overview of [Merton's] new way of life" and a chronology of his day beginning with the "chanting of psalms 'at two-fifteen in the morning, when the night is darkest and most silent.'"[3] Lawrence Cunningham focuses on the fusion of Merton's "liturgical, artistic, and contemplative interests" in this essay, as well as the importance of the appellation "stranger" (*peregrinus* in the Latin).[4] Michael Plekon considers the sacredness of the ordinary in Merton's account of his daily pattern of life at the hermitage.[5] Donald Grayston suggests that the whole essay moves toward a final integration symbolized by the word *consonantia*.[6]

What has not been so well-known is Merton's concurrent fascination – indeed, one might say preoccupation – with Celtic culture and monasticism in the last four years of his life.[7] By the time he writes *Day of a Stranger*, Merton has already immersed himself in serious reading about fifth- and sixth-century Celtic Christianity, and in particular the Irish hermits. His fascination with this early period provides a fertile backdrop for writing *Day of a Stranger* and reinforces our understanding of Merton's desire for life as a hermit. Indeed, I would suggest that Merton's new-found knowledge of Celtic monasticism – its roots in desert monasticism, its saints and abbots, and its Irish hermits who wrote poetry about nature and union with God – affirmed Merton's discernment of his vocation to the eremitic life. The witness of the early Celts enabled Merton to realize he was not creating something new, but discovering the rich beauty of an ancient and valid way of life.

In addition to his interests in Zen and in the Russian sophiologists during the 1950s and 1960s, and a reawakened interest in his Welsh ancestry, Merton began a correspondence in 1964 with noted Celtic historian Nora K. Chadwick.[8] While there is only one indexed reference to Professor Chadwick in Merton's journals,[9] she was a major influence on Merton's reading

Monica Weis, SSJ

Monica Weis, SSJ, a Sister of St. Joseph of Rochester and emerita professor of English at Nazareth College, has taught rhetoric, American nature writers and Romantic literature, and has been a Fulbright Visiting Professor of American Studies at the University of Pannonia in Vesprém, Hungary (Fall 2011). A long-time member of the International Thomas Merton Society and former ITMS Vice President, she is a frequent presenter at national and international conferences, having written and published on composition theory, William Wordsworth, Mary Austin and Thomas Merton. She is the author of *Thomas Merton's Gethsemani: Landscapes of Paradise* (2005), *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton* (2011) and *Thomas Merton and the Celts* (2016).

and research in Celtic monasticism. This is verified by their four-year correspondence and the wealth of references to Celtic monasteries, monks, rules, ecclesial history and legends in Merton's Working Notebooks between 1964 and 1968. Under Chadwick's "tutelage," Merton read and took extensive notes not only on her seminal work, *The Age of Saints in the Early Celtic Church*, but also on books of history, culture, literature and art by well-known experts in the field such as Dom Louis Gougaud (Celtic Christianity), Robin Flower (Celtic hermits and bards), Charles Plummer (Irish saints), J. G. O'Keeffe (ancient Irish texts), John Ryan (Irish monasticism), Françoise Henry (Celtic art), Kenneth Jackson and Kuno Meyer (Celtic and Irish hermit poetry). Merton's Working Notebook #14 for June 1964, for example, lists multiple authors he intends to "hunt down" and contains pages and pages of notes on Irish hermit poetry, the Rule of Tallaght (an eighth-century Irish monastery), the importance of birdsong calendars to Celtic hermits, a holographic version of his poem "Merlin and the Deer," and multiple glosses on "The Voyage of St. Brendan" (*Navigatio Sancti Brendani*). Looking at all this material – in addition to several other notebooks devoted to Celtic history and monasticism and more than 180 pages of holographic notes made between 1964 and 1968 – one could imagine that Merton had little time for anything else. But, of course, we know this is not true. Merton's agile mind was capable of juggling many interests simultaneously, and of writing letters, essays and whole books on topics not necessarily related to his "curiosity of the moment."

What I find fascinating about *Day of a Stranger* are the resonances between Merton's new-found knowledge of Celtic monasticism and his description of a day in the hermitage, resonances that provide a rewarding lens for reading his stunning little essay. Four particular characteristics of Celtic Christianity are pertinent: worldview, monastic time and place, kinship and hospitality and Irish asceticism.

The Celtic Worldview

The most startling characteristic of the early Celts, acknowledged by all historians and critics of Celtic culture, is their imagination and distinctive way of seeing. For the Celt, there is no distinction between the sacred and the profane, between the spiritual and the material. There are not two worlds, but one integrated life. This Celtic worldview, Merton's friend A. M. (Donald) Allchin has argued, is grounded in the two doctrines of creation/redemption and the Trinity.[10] Central to Celtic thinking is the place of Christ, the creative Word of God who reconciles the entire cosmos that is forever being created (Col. 1:15-20). The Trinity, the second doctrine, is the mystery of *relationship* among Persons. Thus the Celts honor the Father *through* the Son and *in* the Holy Ghost – one Being ceaselessly creating, saving and sanctifying humans and non-humans alike. The Divine is both here and there, both immanent and transcendent. As Michael Morewood phrases it, God is not an "elsewhere" God, but an "everywhere" God.[11] Everything is infused, saturated with Divine Presence, so all creation is to be reverenced. Lakes, trees, rocks, mountains are "faces" of the Divine and come into being as an outpouring of Creative Love. Historically, Celtic spirituality can be traced to the *theoria physike* practiced by the Egyptian desert fathers and mothers, the theology of Pelagius, John Scotus Eriugena, the Greek Fathers and Maximus the Confessor,[12] who see creation as a theophany of God. To cite the English poet and mystic William Blake, whom Merton loved: "Everything that is, is holy."[13]

When Merton describes in *Day of a Stranger* his waking at "two-fifteen in the morning, when the night is darkest and most silent" (*DS* 43), he is attesting to the Celtic belief in the interpenetration of the natural and the spiritual worlds. So too when he writes that "psalms grow up silently by themselves without effort like plants in this light which is favorable to them" (*DS* 43). This is not

mere poetry or the nimble pen of a writer, but an expression of reality: the historically holy words of the psalms find new life in the nurturing atmosphere of Merton's hermitage. Here, the single light, the ikon and the psalms, which "hold themselves up on stems which have a single consistency, that of mercy, or rather great mercy" (*DS* 43), have the power to cleanse both the day and the lone hermit in his cell, bringing him to an experience of the *axis mundi* and the cross. Creation and Incarnation/ Redemption merge in the silence to become "the most rare of all the trees in the garden" (*DS* 49).

This way of seeing all creation as sacred and coherent was not reserved solely for Celtic monks. For surely both early eremitic and cenobitic monks followed a *horarium* that celebrated creation several times a day in singing the Divine Office, but fifth- and sixth-century Celtic secular civilization, being primarily rural, was largely shaped by the numerous monastic foundations scattered throughout Cornwall, Wales, northern England and Ireland.[14] The monks' way of reverencing creation, grounded in the centrality of the Incarnation/Redemption and the Trinity, spilled over to ordinary people who worked the land or managed a household.

A Celtic mother, for example, would rise early, splash her face with water three times in honor of the Trinity, make her bed in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, and stir the embers in the hearth to life, celebrating the new flame with a prayer of renewal. Every action of her day, from churning butter to grinding corn to preparing dinner, would be a prayer of blessing in union with Christ and in the name of the Trinity. Likewise, her husband would bless his travels to the fields, asking for protection as he walked with God and worked the soil. When Merton offers, somewhat flippantly, his own trinity of comments, "What I do is live. What I wear is pants. How I pray is breathe" (*DS* 41), he is expressing this same sense of an "everywhere" God. He experiences a reality in which the secular and the sacred are interlaced. Hence, Merton's simple rituals of washing out the coffee pot, checking the outhouse for the king snake, spraying the bedroom for bugs, fetching water and positioning the windows for optimum coolness (see *DS* 53) are not distractions from his contemplative solitude, but sacred activities of an integrated way of seeing and being.

Monastic Time and Place

All of nature, alive with a fierce dynamic Presence, was sacred to the Celts, yet certain landscapes – rocks, hills, mountains, springs and forests – were considered special because there the Divine Presence was more palpable. Such places often took on the status of shrines and became the destination of pilgrimages. In recent times, we refer to such natural configurations where the Otherworld is more accessible as "thin places," although that term was not used by the ancient Celts.[15] The monastic view of time, too, is significantly different from our western penchant for clocks and timetables. For the monk, there is no mere "now" without a concomitant dimension of the eternal. The "present" always involves the promised but-not-yet everlasting life.

Merton reflects a monastic understanding of time and place on multiple pages of his essay. Every passing of the SAC plane is a blatant interjection of modern life into his monastic rhythm (see *DS* 29). Every plane carrying people to a "somewhere" contrasts with his decision to be "nowhere" and to "live in the woods as a reminder that I am free not to be a number" (*DS* 31). Merton chooses to live not "like anybody" or "unlike anybody," but to be himself in the woods in harmony with the trees and birds. Knowing the "precise pairs of birds," he is free to "form an ecological balance" with them and allow this harmony, so he writes, to give "the idea of 'place' a new configuration" (*DS* 33). In the woods Merton senses his real vocation to solitude, a call to "marry the silence of the forest"

(*DS* 49). Here he can "receive from the Eastern woods, the tall oaks, the one word 'DAY,' which is never the same" (*DS* 51) – an experience that transcends human calculation.

Merton dubs the hermit life "cool" (*DS* 37) because it allows him to be more like the ancient Celtic hermits of whom it is said each was "very much a God-intoxicated man whose life was embraced on all sides by the Divine Being."[16] Hermit life is "cool" because it invites the monk – to borrow Cynthia Bourgeault's phrase – to live out of "a transfigured centre"[17] – a focus that transcends the temporal and the spatial. Certainly, Merton's literary crescendo in *Day of a Stranger* – his "obligation to preserve the stillness, the silence, the poverty, the virginal point of pure nothingness which is at the center of all other loves" (*DS* 49) – bespeaks this monastic movement beyond time and space toward *consonantia*, that inner and outer harmony Merton describes as having "one central tonic note" (*DS* 61) resounding through everything. Indeed, Merton's "day" is not a human construct of twenty-four hours in a particular woodland spot, but a monastic experience of fusion between the temporal and the eternal.

Kinship and Hospitality

The early Celtic monks predated St. Francis of Assisi with their acceptance of and companionship with animals.[18] Celtic lore is rife with stories of saints and hermits who, in their bee-hive cells, may have satisfied their desire for community through their friendship with animals. The hermit Mochua, for example, kept a cock, a mouse and a fly in his cell – the cock to wake him in time to say Vigils, the first hour of the Divine Office, the mouse to nibble at his ear if he dozed over his reading, and the fly to keep his place by walking the lines of the psalter. St. Kevin is said to have prayed with outstretched arms so long that a blackbird laid eggs in his nest-like palm. Not wanting to disturb the hatchlings, Kevin continued to support them in his outstretch hand until they fledged.[19] For our delight Celtic stories form a veritable Franciscan bestiary, not that foreign to Merton's interaction with the wildlife near the hermitage. Note how precisely he mentions the pairs of birds in the woods yet the difficulty he has with the obstreperous crows (see *DS* 33). Notice, too, the humor with which he mentions the king snake that likes to curl up in his outhouse. "Are you in there, you bastard?" (*DS* 53) is an affectionate greeting as well as fair warning to the reptile that Merton is approaching. There is a clear recognition of the legitimacy of these animals to share place with Merton, and an acknowledgement of their *haecceitas*.[20] In his sermon to the birds (see *DS* 51) – which they respond is one too many – he acknowledges the necessity of each creature *to be*, to bask in its *thisness* and not to be lumped together as so many objects to be preached to.

While Merton, in *Day of a Stranger*, does not mention the deer he sees frequently in the meadow outside his hermitage, I am reminded of a journal passage for September 1965 in which Merton acknowledges he apprehends something of the "deerness" that "reveals to me something essential in myself!" For Merton this "is an awe-inspiring thing – the *Mantu* or 'spirit' shown in the running of the deer. . . . A contemplative intuition!" Merton concludes this passage with the poignant: "I could sense the softness of their coat and longed to touch them" (*DWL* 291). Contemporary nature writer Gretel Ehrlich offers an insight that is appropriate here: when we discover a certain interdependence with animals, we encounter "intimacy with what is animal in me." The animal and I are "comrades who save each other's lives." We form an odd partnership, "stripped-down compassion, one that is made of frankness and respect and rigorously excludes sentimentality."[21]

Merton's kinship and hospitality, however, is not restricted exclusively to birds and animals.

He admits to a mental ecology in his hermitage – a list of writers from North and South, East and West who represent not just his wide reading interests, but his openness to those sometimes labeled as "Other." For Merton, there is no "Other" to be regarded as object. Indeed, in his essay "From Pilgrimage to Crusade," written by August 1964 and published in November of that year, Merton challenges us to find the same humanity, the same divine image, "in the aborigine who most differs from ourselves . . . the stranger who is Christ our fellow-pilgrim and our brother"[22] – a clear call to kinship.

There is an interesting additional Celtic resonance in Merton's mental ecology: mention of W. H. Auden as one of his literary friends to accompany him in his solitude. Merton had recently come across Auden's *The Enchafèd Flood*,[23] a series of lectures about the sea that Merton considered valuable background for the Celtic tale of St. Brendan's Voyage – all of which brings me to the fourth characteristic of Celtic Christianity that provides a backdrop for *Day of a Stranger*: monastic asceticism and sense of exile.

Asceticism and Exile

Celtic monasticism – and particularly Irish monasticism – differs from the desert spirituality of fourth-century Egypt primarily in its propensity for pilgrimage or *peregrinatio*. In lieu of actual martyrdom ("red martyrdom") the Irish monk desired to emulate Abraham in leaving his own country for the place which God would show him. Many Celtic monks sought their sanctity by setting off on the sea in a small boat (*currach*) drifting toward what they believed would be the "place of one's resurrection" where each would remain in exile and achieve union with God ("white martyrdom"). In July 1964, Merton acquired a copy of the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*, the most famous of these sea tales. Brendan's voyage not only fascinated Merton as a piece of literature, but as a tale about monks written by monks for monks. Finding one's "desert in the ocean," with all the risk that involved, held special interest for Merton, as did stories of other early monks who sought their union with God as "exiles" or hermits in the woods. Many of these hermits, occupied with transcribing manuscripts, wrote poetry about their kinship with nature, oftentimes scribbled as marginalia on their manuscripts. Merton himself, in September 1964, created his own "Anthology of Irish Poetry," selecting poems that highlighted the asceticism of eremitism. Judging from his notes, Merton was quite taken with Celtic linguist Kenneth Jackson's comment that "bird and hermit are joining in an act of worship" and his snapshot picture of the hermit life: "The solitary hermitage in the wilderness, the life of ascetic purity and humble piety, the spare diet of herbs and water, and the companionship of wild creatures, are the distinguishing marks of the Irish hermit poetry."[24] Jackson captures it all – and isn't it amply illustrated in *Day of a Stranger*? Merton chooses to be alone, married to the forest, living simply, in harmony with the trees and birds. He sees himself as "both a prisoner and an escaped prisoner" (*DS* 33), an exile, a pilgrim, a stranger, a modern *peregrinus* – free to focus on the inner pilgrimage that leads to *consonantia*, that is, harmony and communion with God and all creation around him.

While there are other connections that could be made and developed more fully between *Day of a Stranger* and early Celtic monastic spirituality, I hope this brief gesture of suggesting linkages offers the reader a fruitful lens through which to re-read this classic essay. I hope my observations have helped the reader understand that Merton's desire to live as a hermit was not an eccentric whim or spiritual anomaly, but a considered decision, rooted in the graced beauty and fertile imagination

of the early Celts. Finally, I hope that the act of immersing oneself in Merton's thought and writing is always a rich experience full of surprises.

1. Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1981); subsequent references will be cited as "*DS*" parenthetically in the text.
2. Christine M. Bochen, "Radiant Darkness: The Dawning into Reality," in Paul M. Pearson, Danny Sullivan and Ian Thomson, eds., *Thomas Merton: A Mind Awake in the Dark* (Abergavenny, Wales: Three Peaks Press, 2002) 28-42.
3. Patrick F. O'Connell, "*Day of a Stranger*," in William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O'Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002) 104-105.
4. Lawrence S. Cunningham, "Thomas Merton and the Stranger," *Thomas Merton: A Mind Awake in the Dark* 17-27.
5. Michael Plekon, "'What I Wear Is Pants. What I Do Is Live. How I Pray Is Breathe': Merton and the Spiritual Life in the Twenty-First Century," *The Merton Annual* 29 (2016) 145-58.
6. Donald Grayston, "*Consonantia* in Thomas Merton: Harmony Personal, Social and Cosmic," *The Merton Annual* 28 (2015) 97-111.
7. See Monica Weis, SSJ, *Thomas Merton and the Celts: A New World Opening Up* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016).
8. The Thomas Merton Center [TMC] at Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY has ten letters exchanged by Chadwick and Merton, written between May 26, 1964 and October 1968. Five of these letters appear in Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: Letters on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990) 217-18, 228-29, 282-83, 308, 326.
9. See Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 138: "Another nice letter from Nora K. Chadwick yesterday"; Merton remarks that he is finishing two books recommended by Chadwick, one on the Abbey of St. Gall and another on the Celtic Church in Scotland – a perfect place for "small eremitical communities!" [entry for August 21, 1964]; subsequent references will be cited as "*DWL*" parenthetically in the text.
10. A. M. Allchin, *God's Presence Makes the World: The Celtic Vision through the Centuries in Wales* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1997) xi-xii.
11. See Michael Morewood, *Praying a New Story* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004) 7.
12. See Thomas Merton, *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* 3, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2008) 121-36.
13. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1949) 20; Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 21. Blake's original words (modified by Merton as a chapter title for *Seeds* and its revision) are "For every thing that lives is Holy" (*Visions of the Daughters of Albion* 8.10, in William Blake, *Complete Writings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes [London: Oxford University Press, 1966] 195).
14. According to Chadwick, by the sixth century there were well-established monasteries at Bangor, Derry, Durrow, Kildare, Clonfert, Lismore and Kells (Nora K. Chadwick, *The Age of Saints in the Early Celtic Church* [London: Oxford University Press, 1961] 61-118).
15. Esther de Waal identifies Evelyn Underhill as the originator of this phrase in 1937: see "A Fresh Look at the Synod of Whitby: A Mark of Unity and Reconciliation," in *I Have Called You Friends: Reflections on Reconciliation in Honor of Frank T. Griswold* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2008) 29-43.
16. John Macquarrie, *Paths in Spirituality* (New York: Morehouse, 1993) 7.
17. Cynthia Bourgeault, "The Monastic Archetype in the Navigation of St. Brendan," *Monastic Studies* 14 (1983) 120; quoted by Paul M. Pearson in "Celtic Monasticism as a Metaphor for Thomas Merton's Journey," *Merton Center Occasional Papers* 2 (www.thomasmertonsociety.org/celtic.htr).
18. In Working Notebook #48 [TMC], Merton quotes Robin Flower, *The Irish Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1947) 125: "I think it may be claimed that the Irish were natural Franciscans, Franciscan before St. Francis." For the Franciscan theology of creation see Daniel P. Horan, OFM, *The Franciscan Heart of Thomas Merton* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2014) 131-55.
19. See Helen Waddell, *Beasts and Saints* (London: Constable, 1934) and Esther de Waal, *The Celtic Way of Prayer: The Recovery of the Religious Imagination* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1997).
20. Duns Scotus' term for the unique individual form or "thisness" present in every created being.

21. Gretel Ehrlich, *The Solace of Open Spaces* (New York: Viking, 1985) 64.
22. Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967) 91-112.
23. W. H. Auden, *The Enchafèd Flood: Or The Romantic Iconography of the Sea* (New York: Random House, 1950); see Merton's August 9, 1964 journal entry: "The other day in Louisville picked up Auden's 'Enchafed Flood' at the library. It is good background for Brendan" (*DWL* 133); see also *DWL* 175 (December 5, 1964 journal entry).
24. Kenneth Jackson, *Studies in Early Celtic Nature Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935) 103, 108-109.

The Editors of *The Merton Annual* invite submissions to a special volume commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Thomas Merton.

While all submissions will be considered for publication, priority will be given to essays that focus on some aspect of the final year of Merton's life, including his Asian journey and his death; his preceding trips to the west coast, the southwest and Alaska; his talks in Calcutta, Thailand, Alaska and elsewhere, during his journeys as well as at Gethsemani; his responses to the political and social crises of what he referred to as "a beast of a year," as recorded in his journal, correspondence and elsewhere; his writings, in prose or verse, composed and/or published during 1968; and other relevant topics.

Completed essays should be sent by September 1, 2018 to: mertonannual@gmail.com.
Submission guidelines can be found at: http://merton.org/ITMS/annualsub.aspx.