

The Universal Call to Contemplation: Cloisters beyond the Monastery

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Have you seen Him Whom my heart loves?

(Song 3.3)

Nestled among the mangoes, coconut palms, and eucalyptus trees on the banks of the Kavery River in South India is a small Christian ashram that has become the crossroads of a thousand private lives. For some 30 years a thin English monk lived out what he called 'the most blessed years of my life' in the Shantivanam Ashram, drawing like a magnet seekers from all over the world. Fr Bede Griffiths was welcoming, open and wise, and with a listening heart dispelled doubts and fears in those who longed to be rooted in truth and reality. Besides his own gentle words to newcomers, he recommended Thomas Merton's *Seeds of Contemplation* and *New Seeds of Contemplation*¹ without hesitation. Fr Bede deeply admired the monk from Gethsemani and his in-depth writings on contemplative prayer. In fact, Merton had written to arrange a visit with Fr Bede at Shantivanam on his return from Bangkok in 1968.

1. Spirituality and Lay Contemplatives

Whether one is within or beyond the monastery, spirituality is the awakening of mind and heart to the grasp of the Spirit. The Spirit that brooded over the waters at the beginning of time and overshadowed the Virgin Mary in Nazareth is the same Spirit inspiring in every heart at this very moment, whether known or unknown, the universal search for reality, for ultimate meaning and authentic life. The Upanishads speak of

1. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1949); *idem*, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961).

that Spirit that envelops, permeates everything.² St Paul describes the same unbelievable truth as 'the fullness of Him Who fills everything in every way' (Eph. 1.23; JB).

God is love and does not leave us groping in our search. God's call to contemplation, inner awareness of, and union with the Source, is universal. Contemplation is the response to the awakening to the presence of God in the human heart and in the universe around us. It is knowledge by love. This universal call of God is to and for all, lay or religious, male or female, red or yellow, brown or white, rich or poor. The reason God's call is not effective, Bede Griffiths insisted, is because people are not receptive.

Thomas Merton entitled one of his earliest works on contemplation, *Seeds of Contemplation*, with this in mind. He described unnumbered seeds that God planted and is planting in us. At every moment and in every event of our lives, something is planted in our souls. If we were 'awake' and looking for God, then every event and every moment would sow in our wills grains of God's life that would spring up one day in an overwhelming harvest. If these seeds would take root in our liberty and God's will would grow from our inner freedom, we would become the love that God is, and our harvest would be God's glory and our own joy. But, Merton lamented, most of these unnumbered seeds perish and are lost, because we are not prepared to receive them.³ Receptivity is both a grace and an art, and the fruit of diligently disciplined work.

Receptivity to the Spirit

Desiring the gift and grace of receptivity, we cry out with the psalmist: 'My heart is ready, O God, my heart is ready' (Ps. 57.7). Jesus labored three years to bring his apostles to receptivity and yet only after the 'coming' of the Spirit were they truly ready. It is the Spirit grasping us who alerts us and moves us to those teachings and practices that will prepare us to be receptive to the divine call to contemplation. Disciplined practice brings us to the threshold of contemplation.

Traditional practices

From the beyond-the-walls Desert Mothers and Fathers, early monastics drew up lists of effective contemplative practices that have become part of our inherited tradition both for those within and those without the monastery. Even within monasteries some of the sacred practices such as *lectio divina* (sacred reading), daily meditation, solitude, times of silence,

2. Cf. Isa Upanishad, 1.5.

3. Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 2.

and sacramentalizing work, are having to be revisited. The list usually includes renunciation of the self, and non-violence, simplicity, poverty, hospitality, adoration, reconciliation, stability, and the like.

Holy Reading (Lectio Divina)

Sacred reading from earliest times has been a decisive source of spiritual inspiration in the lives of Christians. It is a re-learning of how to read the scriptures, meditating and praying with the psalms and the Gospels, savoring a word or phrase until one enters the mystical silence where true wisdom resides. In the desert the Word was cherished and carried in the heart. In the early monasteries it was copied and illuminated, sung and memorized, ruminated and honored.

Daily Meditation

Contemplative meditation involved no discursive thinking, but was a letting go of all reasoning and imaging for the purpose of reaching that deep inner silence where the Spirit was grasping one. The breath is of vital importance, letting the energy, the divine breath, flow through the body, both an ancient yet a contemporary insight and practice.

Solitude and Times of Silence

Solitude was a chosen stance, a cultivated attitude of vigilance to the Presence within; it was essential, together with the much needed discipline of times of silence built into the agenda of the day, to acknowledge the Spirit grasping, enabling one to listen with the inner ear to the voice calling.

Sacred Work

Work was considered sacred when finding the holy in whatever the work of the day was to be, sacramentalizing it by discovering the Spirit in it and through it, treating all things as 'sacred vessels of the altar'.⁴ Another way of hearing this was through the prophet Isaiah: 'All we have done, you have done in us' (Isa. 26.12).

Renunciation

Christ's words were taken seriously by the earliest of God-seekers.' Anyone who loves his life loses it; anyone who hates his life in this world will keep it for the eternal life' (Jn 12.25). The most important thing on the inner journey is the renunciation or surrender of the self, Bede

4. *Rule of Benedict in English* (ed. Timothy Fry, OSB; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1982), sections 31, 10.

Griffiths wrote in his early autobiography, *The Golden String*.⁵ Toward the end of his life, he claimed that the most difficult thing on the inner journey is the surrender of the self. It is a lifetime task. After the persecutions ceased and martyrdom was no longer an option, many of the early Christians chose to go to the desert so that the grain of wheat could truly 'fall into the ground and die', bringing forth much fruit (Jn 12.24)

Non-Violence

Ahimsa, or love, as Gandhi translated it, was an essential and very difficult practice on the spiritual path, deeply interconnected with *forgiveness* and *reconciliation*. Long before Gandhi, Christ's followers on the path tried to keep his words and example alive in their hearts: 'Do not resist an evil person... Love your enemies; and pray for those who persecute you' (Mt. 5.39, 44). And 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do' (Lk. 23.34).

Simplicity

From earliest times simplicity has been seen and lived as a way of honoring minimal needs and reverencing God's creation. It is considered essential to a contemplative lifestyle, within or without the monastery.

Poverty

The total acceptance of our human condition has always seemed like an impossible practice. St Benedict called it, 'Being content with the last and the least'.⁶ Again, the practice comes right out of the desert tradition from those looking for martyrdom or its substitute. Jesus advised: 'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth ... Where your treasure is there your heart will be' (Mt. 6.19).

Hospitality

Welcoming the Divine in the other is an ancient practice in both East and West. St Benedict insisted that the guest be 'received as Christ'.⁷ Sensei Blanche Hartman claims the most potent transformative aspect of monastic practice is 'with total respect, to see the Buddha in everyone' (Gethsemani Encounter II). And for the Christian? We are all one in Christ (Gal. 3.28)

5. Bede Griffiths, *The Golden String* (Springfield, IL: Templegate, 1980 [1954]).

6. *Rule of Benedict in English*, section 7.

7. *Rule of Benedict in English*, section 53.

Adoration

Since Christ hallowed our earth with his life, death and resurrection, adoration for Christians has meant surrendering in love, with, through and in Christ to the Father, the divine Presence. In many other religions, too, this surrender to the Great Other has been essential. The very word Muslim means the surrendered one.

Stability

Contemplation was considered a matter of faith, rooted in a place made sacred by the divine Presence and one's own, by prayer, and a listening heart. St Benedict abhorred wandering monks with no spiritual focus.⁸ Europe was plagued with such in his day. Therefore he made stability a formal commitment for monks.

2. Merton's Relationship to Contemporary Contemplative Practice

Contemporary contemplative practice has opened many new vistas for the lay contemplative today. Already in his day Thomas Merton was a great promoter and catalyst, even an instigator of many of what seem like new possibilities today, such as inter-religious dialogue, eco-spirituality, ashram spirituality, small contemplative prayer groups, Zen sitting, peace and justice involvements, monastic oblates, and pilgrimages.

Merton had his own contemporary way of understanding and living the traditional contemplative practices. Though written more than a half century ago, Merton's contemplative message is still vibrantly contemporary, and he assured us again and again that he was writing not just for those in the monastery but for any and all. In the introduction to his *Seeds of Contemplation*, he wrote: 'There is too much passion and too much physical violence for men to want to reflect much on the interior life and its meaning'.⁹ These words were penned long before 11 September 2001 and halfway into the bloodiest century the world has ever known. Yet, he continued, 'since the interior life and contemplation are the things we most of all need... contemplation that springs from the love of God – the kind of considerations written in these pages ought to be something for which everybody, and not only monks, would have a great hunger in our time'.¹⁰

He hoped in his writings to express the preoccupations that are in the minds of all contemplatives – allowing for differences of temperament

8. *Rule of Benedict in English*, section 1.

9. Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, p. xiv.

10. Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, p. xiv.

and personality. Therefore, he said, everything that he was writing in this volume could be applied to 'anyone, not only in the monastery but also in the world'.¹¹

Faith: The Source of All Contemplation

Revamping the book ten years later, Merton added among his 100 additional pages two chapters on Christ, in which he insists that faith in Christ, and in the mysteries of his life and death, is the foundation of the Christian life and the source of all contemplation.¹² He reinforced his teaching again and again regarding the importance of faith in connection with contemplation. In *Seeds of Contemplation* he wrote that 'the beginning of contemplation is faith... If there is something essentially sick about your conception of faith you will never be a contemplative'.¹³ Then, in *New Seeds of Contemplation*: 'It is faith and not imagination that gives us supernatural life, faith that justifies, faith that leads us to contemplation'.¹⁴ True contemplation, he insisted, is the work of a love that transcends all satisfaction and all experience to rest in the night of pure and naked faith. But this faith brings us so close to God that it seems to touch and grasp him as he is, although in darkness. Merton had penetrated deeply into the contemplative path and was graced with the words to share these experiences with others.

Contemplation Described

Merton tried with his poetic, prophetic words to describe contemplation for all, calling it the highest expression of our intellectual and spiritual life. In fact, he claimed that contemplation is that life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. He called contemplation spiritual wonder and spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. For Merton, contemplation was, already in this early stage of his monastic life, a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant Source. Contemplation was, above all, awareness of the reality of that Source. Little wonder he later valued so highly the practice of mindfulness as taught by Thich Nhat Hanh: 'we have to practice in our daily life so that we will be able to touch the ultimate'.¹⁵

11. Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, p. xvi.

12. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 152.

13. Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 63.

14. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 154.

15. Thich Nhat Hahn, *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1999), p. 9.

Merton saw contemplation as a kind of spiritual vision to which both reason and faith aspire by their very nature, but he insisted it is a more profound depth of faith, a knowledge too deep to be grasped in images, in words, or even in clear concepts. He described contemplation as the response to a call from the one who has no voice, and yet

Who speaks in everything that is, and Who, most of all, speaks in the depths of our own being; for we ourselves are words of His...Contemplation is this echo. It is a deep resonance in the inmost center of our spirit in which our very life loses its separate voice and re-sounds with the majesty and the mercy of the Hidden and Living One. He answers himself in us. We ourselves become His echo and His answer.¹⁶

God's call to contemplation, though universal, is God's gift to each one – never the fruit of our own efforts. In his mercy, God completes the hidden and mysterious work of his creation in us by enlightening our minds and hearts, by awakening us to the awareness of that divine indwelling Spirit. And it is through this awareness that he informs us that we are words spoken in his one word – he in us and we in him.¹⁷

Merton describes a great anguish suffered by the contemplative who eventually finds ignorance in regard to what God is, because in reality God is not a 'what' or a 'thing'. And this is itself one of the essential characteristics of the contemplative experience: there is no 'what' that can be called God. Merton loved Cassian's exposition of the four renunciations: leaving the wealth and goods of this world; rejecting the fashions and vices and former affections of soul and flesh; keeping our mind from all present and visible things while contemplating only things to come; and desiring only what is invisible. He especially cherished the third and fourth renunciations, where even our idea of the things that are above and unseen must be renounced in order to allow God to truly be God (Conference III on Abbot Paphnutius).

Finding One's True Self

Merton was adamant that one goes to the monastery to become himself or herself – one's true self. And that would apply equally to the 'monk' beyond the monastery who 'goes in search of the one thing necessary'. With great wisdom and skill Merton describes the process this becoming involves – body, soul and spirit. The secret of our full identity is hidden in the love and mercy of God who alone can make us who we really are. And unless we desire this identity and work to find it with him and in him, the work will never be done. We can learn the secret of how to do

16. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 3.

17. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, pp. 4-5.

this only from him in faith, finding it with him and in him. But contemplation, an even greater gift than faith, is what enables us to perceive and recognize the work that he wants done: 'Our Contemplation of Him is a participation of His contemplation of Himself. We become contemplatives when God discovers himself in us'.¹⁸

Mindful that we must also find our identity by loving others, Merton reinforces his belief that we first identify ourselves with the One who called us and loved us and is continuing to love us into life:

Ultimately the only way I can be myself is to become identified with Him in Whom is hidden the reason and fulfillment of my existence. Therefore, there is only one problem on which all my existence and happiness depend: to discover myself in discovering God. If I find Him I will find myself and if I find my true self I will find Him... The only One Who can teach me to find God is God, Himself, Alone.¹⁹

Merton's 'How to' In Regard to Seeking God Perfectly

Thomas Merton discerned profoundly for himself, and for all on the contemplative path, what it means to seek God perfectly. It is to withdraw from illusion and pleasure, from worldly anxieties and desires, from the works that God does not want, and from a glory that is only human display. It is to keep one's mind free from confusion, so that personal liberty may always be at the disposal of the divine will. It is to entertain silence in one's heart in order to listen to and for the voice of God. It is to encourage an intellectual freedom from concepts and the images of all created things in order to receive in faith God's 'secret contact'. It is to love all as oneself and then, in peace, emptiness and oblivion of all things, to wait.

The Holy Spirit

Merton laid bare for us his own experience of the divine Spirit assuring us that the problem of forming Christ in us is not to be solved merely by our own efforts. 'My children, I must go through the pain of giving birth to you all over again, until Christ is formed in you' (Gal. 4.19). Rather, 'it is the Spirit of God that must teach us and transform us into other Christs', for there are not many Christs, only one. And for us to become Christ is to enter into the life of the whole Christ, the Mystical Body made up of the Head and the members, Christ and all who are incorporated in him by his holy Spirit. So the Holy Spirit who is the very life of this one Body dwells in the whole Body and in each of the

18. Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, pp. 13, 16.

19. Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, pp. 13, 14.

members so that the whole Christ is Christ and each individual is Christ.²⁰ The Holy Spirit is sent from moment to moment into our souls, Merton wrote,

by Christ and the Father dwelling within us, the same way the blood of life is sent out into all parts of our bodies from our hearts. This Spirit then draws us back into Christ and binds us to the Father in Him, so that our life is hidden with Christ in God. And still we travel out from the Father in His Spirit, to do His work and fulfill His will among men. Then when the time comes according to His will, the Father draws us back again into Himself.²¹

Solitude

This practice was not just to help one love God. The only justification for a life of deliberate solitude, Merton believed, is the conviction that it will help us to love not only God but also other people. For 'there is no solitude except interior solitude and interior solitude is not possible for anyone who does not accept his true place in relation to other men'.²²

Adamant that this effort was tangled with selfishness he insisted that we can be entirely out of the world while remaining in the midst of it, if we let God set us free from our own selfishness and if we live for love alone. For 'the flight from the world is nothing else but the flight from selfishness'.²³ In 1968 Merton felt no loss of solitude in his Asian sojourn outside the walls of his Kentucky monastery, but rather met his Lord in his inner monastery – his own shrine of the divine, the cave of his heart, the divine home within in Bangkok.

Sacred Work

Work must not be a matter of rewards. 'One of the last barricades of egoism, and one which many saints have refused to give up entirely, is this insistence on doing the work and getting the results and enjoying them ourselves'.²⁴ Merton, the monk, was a great devotee of the Eastern scriptures and in the Bhagavad Gita he cherished the insistence on not desiring the reward of one's work. He believed that the activity of a contemplative must be born of his or her contemplation and must resemble it. Everything done outside of contemplation ought to reflect the 'luminous tranquility of one's interior life'.²⁵ To this end persons will

20. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, pp. 156-57.

21. Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 82.

22. Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 26.

23. Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 42.

24. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 273.

25. Merton, *The Mystic Life* (Audio Tape No. 4; Kansas City, MO: Credence Cassettes).

have to search for the same thing in activity as they find in their contemplation—contact and union with God. Far from being essentially opposed to each other, ‘interior contemplation and external activity are two aspects of the same love of God’.²⁶

The only way to find solitude is by hunger and thirst and sorrow and poverty and desire, and the one who has found solitude is empty, as if he had been emptied by death... It is in this loneliness that the deepest activities begin. Here you discover act without motion, labor that is profound repose, vision in obscurity and beyond all desire, a fulfillment whose limits extend to infinity.²⁷

Renunciation

The desire of contemplation can be impure, Merton noted, when we forget that true contemplation means the complete destruction of all selfishness and the most pure poverty and cleanness of heart. Many years into his monastic life within the walls of his monastery, while teaching the junior monks at Gethsemani, he became very enthused over Cassian’s fourth renunciation: the self.

The only true joy on earth is to escape from the prison of our own selfhood, and enter by love into union with the Life Who dwells and sings within the essence of every creature in the core of our own souls’. And thus, as we go about the world, everything we meet, hear and touch will purify us and plant in us something more of contemplation and of heaven.²⁸

Merton insisted that one of the greatest paradoxes of the mystical life is that a person cannot enter into the deepest center of self and pass through that center into God unless such a one is able to pass entirely out of self, empty oneself, and give that self to other people in the purity of a selfless love.²⁹ For contemplation, he believed, is not ultimately complete unless it is shared. We need only to keep our gaze on Jesus whose eyes are constantly upon us.

Non-Violence and Peace and Justice

Violence, injustice and war plagued Thomas Merton throughout his monastic life and even before entrance into the monastery. He entitled one of his later works: *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, and called one of the chapters of *Seeds of Contemplation* ‘The Root of War is Fear’. In it he

26. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 192.

27. Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 44.

28. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 25.

29. Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, p.31.

wrote that 'If we teach people to love and trust God, then they will be able to love people whom they cannot trust, and will dare to make peace with them, not trusting in them but in God'.³⁰ Christ himself prayed: 'Father forgive them for they know not what they do'.

In preparation for his chapter on Hell as hatred Merton wrote: 'Instead of loving what you think is peace, love other men and love God above all. And instead of hating the people you think are warmakers, hate the appetites and the disorder in your own soul, which are the causes of war'.³¹ He once said that when he prayed for peace, he prayed not only that the enemies of our own country may cease to want war, but above all that our own country will cease to do the things that make war inevitable.

Stability

Today's monk has been known to carry his stability in his suitcase when necessary. Merton too firmly believed that 'Contemplation is found in faith, not of geography: you dig for it in Scripture, but cannot find it by crossing the seas'.³² He cherished the sacredness of the monastery and his hermitage to serve the need to be rooted for deep inner union and harmony with the divine and with others; however, he also received and bestowed great blessings through his Asian journey that eventually brought his life to the Other Shore.

Poverty and Simplicity

While Thomas Merton had much to say about how to live monastic poverty and simplicity in community with others, he loved the Sufi teachings and often shared them with the young monks at Gethsemani. 'Where poverty is complete, there is God', was one such teaching. In explaining this Sufi saying, he said that in such a state of poverty there is absolutely nothing left in between the person and God. The Sufi is not looking for anything within himself. There is nothing within to distract one from God, so God sends great trials to one who does not have the means to bear them. But then God gives the needed assistance to handle them; thereby the person is lifted to a higher level in the spiritual life.

In describing '*le point vierge*' in his *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Merton speaks of a point of nothingness and of absolute poverty, un-

30. Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 58.

31. Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 59.

32. Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and a Writer* (ed. Jonathan Montaldo; Journals, II, 1941-52; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p. 350; See entry of 8 August 1949.

touched by sin and illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God. This little point of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us.³³

Inter-religious Dialogue

No one can ever deny Thomas Merton's love for the dialogue among persons of other religions. He literally died in dialogue. He had called it 'communication that becomes communion' in that final lap of his spiritual journey. Body, soul and spirit, his Asian Journey took him to the Further Shore. Multitudinous are his words and translations, for example, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*.³⁴ His sharings with the Dalai Lama were a deep mutual joy in that final journey, so much so that the Dalai Lama requested several follow-up East-West conferences at Thomas Merton's Gethsemani after his death. And it was from Merton's sharings in Bangkok within that same journey that the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue Board in the USA, and the Dialogue Interreleguex Monastique in Europe, were finally brought forth and are flourishing to this day. The initial channels for these boards came directly from the Second Vatican Council with the Secretariat established for the Roman Catholic Church's relations with other religions.

Christian Zen

Merton's interest in Zen Buddhism was nourished by his longstanding correspondence with the eminent Zen scholar Daisetz T. Suzuki, who wrote a preface to Merton's collection of the sayings of the Desert Fathers (*Wisdom of the Desert*).³⁵ Merton, along with Dom Aelred Graham, believed that Zen provides us with a deadly weapon against pious illusions, because Zen makes a point of exploding all forms of spiritual self-importance. And so too do our Christian Gospels. But Merton warned that the average Christian needs to take Zen in prudent doses, measured out by someone who savors, not only Hui Neng, but also St. Thomas Aquinas and the Catholic Fathers.

Dzogchen

The Tibetan meditation called Dzogchen fascinated Merton as he visited various lamas and monasteries in the East. He said that he found the

33. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), p. 158.

34. Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (Boston: Shambala, 1992). Merton completed this on Pentecost, 1965.

35. Thomas Merton, *Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings from the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century* (New York: New Directions, 1972).

Tibetan practitioners the most highly developed meditators. He learned that Dzogchen was the most direct path leading to enlightenment, and he inquired of His Holiness the Dalai Lama who might be the best teacher when he returned to the USA.

Hermits

While hermits were an ancient phenomenon, in Thomas Merton's Gethsemani they were unknown. He prayed and did what he could to obtain the necessary blessing of his Abbot and finally was given permission to begin living as a hermit. He highly endorsed it for those who were so called, though he knew it would be a rare vocation within his own Cistercian community.

3. Contemporary Contemplative Practice: Other Voices, Other Practices

Even beyond life in the monastery there is a deepening hunger today for spiritual experience and presence. Is it because we stand at a great divide with humankind pressed to choose disaster or peace, hate or love? Or is this deeper hunger another sign of the Spirit leading us on to the 'full stature in Christ'? Everyone, lay or monastic, married or single, Jew or Greek, is created by God, is special and precious in God's sight, is his, is called by name and totally loved (Isa. 43.1-5). As has been said above, the call to contemplation, deep inner union with the Divine, is universal. Each must discern where and how best to respond to this call. Everyone is called, everyone is chosen, few choose to respond. Whether we are aware or not, each of us is 'grasped by the Divine Spirit' and the call is to awaken to reality. The frequently heard quote about a hidden monk in every person echoes the truth of that timeless movement of primordial monasticism that has come down to us through every age. Merton himself referred to this in the opening words of the paper he prepared to give in Calcutta before the organizers of the meetings changed the title of his talk.

As Brother David Steindl-Rast puts it so well for our times, 'monasticism of the heart is the heart of monasticism'.³⁶ Though hidden, this monastic dimension must be realized in everyone's life since it is an essential part of being human. It is that religious impulse inscribed in every human being. Whether the monk be in the monastery or beyond

36. Brother David Steindl-Rast, 'Monastic Parenthood', in James Sommerfeldt (ed.), *Abba: Guides to Wholeness and Holiness East and West* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1982), p. 369.

its walls, monkhood today is being described as the mystical capacity of the human, the contemplative roots of life, the realm of deep subjectivity, the domain of the heart, where the person can make contact with the Ultimate Mystery. One of the most authentic and recent descriptions of this can be found in Wayne Teasdale's *A Monk in the World*: 'Declaring oneself a monk, or mystic, in the world is a way to make the journey easier. By committing to a way of life, or even simply to a name on which we can hang our attention, we formalize our commitment to treating our actions in the world as important'.³⁷

Each living person is special to the One who called us into life, body, soul and spirit. We are here in love to enter into that divine relationship of interpersonal love with God and with each other. In our spirit we have received the capacity for self-transcendence, enabling us to go beyond our ego and enter into the mystical dimension of life – and that indeed is the hidden monk in every heart. Monastics are those who take seriously this inner monk and this is simply to focus one's life on the entertainment of God. There are indications today that Christianity is moving into an era of mysticism, so we need teachers like Merton and those who are thus gifted in sharing and describing the Way:

Monasticism in all its forms exists to nurture the development, fruition, and gifts of the inner mystic or inner monk. We all have this mystic consciousness that desires to be born, grow, and give itself out freely. The contemplative journeys to this goal on which he or she has heart and mind concentrated in all effort.³⁸

With heart and mind concentrated in all earnestness on the goal many are setting out today to find the monastery beyond the buildings and time-worn structures. And yet, much of this is not new for 'nothing under the sun' is really new (Eccl. 1.9). Some are choosing the hermit life; for others, the Indian renunciate called the *sannyasi*; a few gather in very small relational groups; some choose ashram life, but all are seeking the 'heart of monasticism', with and/or without the help of the traditional monastery. The lay contemplative is on the move, searching, testing, seeking, loving and longing for the Lord, using everyday life as spiritual exercise. The monk beyond the monastery is striving, like the monastic within the hallowed walls and halls, to be a channel of the Divine Presence, and to enable the Divine to manifest through herself or himself, and to awaken all to the grasp of the Spirit. Once we are awake to the Spirit, we want to be attuned and responsive.

37. Wayne Teasdale, *A Monk in the World* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2002), p. xxii.

38. Teasdale, *A Monk in the World*, p. xxv.

Attention to the Holy Spirit is vital for each on the path. 'If we live by the Spirit let us also be guided by the Spirit' (Gal. 5.25) manifesting authentic fruits of the Spirit: 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control' (Gal. 5.23). Attention is crucial. When asked the meaning of religious practice and what would be the best way, St Seraphim of Sarov said 'acquiring the Holy Spirit' is the only purpose for all religious practice, as practice is never an end in itself.³⁹

Whether one is in or beyond the monastery, there are challenges to the monastic of this new millennium. Separation or *apartness* is one element in monasticism that has been constant down through the ages and inherent in monastic life. Whatever form it takes today, separation to some defined degree is both a necessity and a challenge for finding one's very identity. Jesus himself went apart at certain times and in certain places. The monastic is truly in the world but not of it. The very gift of apartness enables the monastic to be in communion with others present or absent. Freely taking a distance from the 'crowd', whether in the city or the desert, monastics challenge the individualism of much of our modern cultural world. The very separation affirms that relationships are always more important than our revolutionary communication boom that actually keeps most people from true communion and communication.

Seeking God

Truly seeking God is the primary area of challenge for the modern monastic. Jesus tells us to pray always! Today people seem to be coming back to prayer. However, there is an over abundance of materials on 'how to, when to pray', and 'come and pray with us' conferences being advertised. While many good and wholesome offerings are available, much of what is offered is pagan and inward self-seeking rather than that God seeking which is the very heart of the monastic life. In *The Golden Epistle*,⁴⁰ William of St Thierry spoke of seeking the face of God, seeking to know God, aspiring to this face-to-face, as Jacob saw him — always seeking God's face, continually in this life by keeping one's hands unstained and heart clean. This, he said, is the piety that is the worship of God.

Contemplative meditation

Cynthia Bourgeault, in her small, provocative volume called *Mystical Hope*, is among many voices today saying that 'The reclaiming of medita-

39. Seraphim Sigrist, 'The Opposite of Gravity', in *Parabola* 27.3 (Fall, 2002).

40. William of St Thierry, *The Golden Epistle*, IV (trans. Theodore Berkeley, OCSO; Spencer, MA, Cistercian Publications, 1971), No. 26, Intro. viii.

tion as a core discipline of the Christian path is one of the most significant spiritual developments of our times'.⁴¹ As one advances on the spiritual path and 'faith grows stronger', time to be alone with the Alone is vital.⁴² Regular daily times of basking in the Presence beyond thought, words and images are needed as one is brought to that transcendent breakthrough to the mystical dimension, a glimpse as it were into a new world. In the process, together with other efforts in this way of life, the ego is more and more surrendered in love to the Holy Other. Contemplative prayer beyond words and images is boring in that there is nothing to show for it: nothing to see, hear, taste, touch or smell. It brings one to a humility, a poverty of spirit and an emptiness that is the very basis of the mystical life.

Sacred Reading

Lectio divina is a sine qua non for the monastic within or without the monastery. The sacred Word, holy Scripture, is a profound gift given to the human family but is so little appreciated for all that it is. Reflectively reading the sacred scriptures opens us to the contemplative experience of God, beyond the words, beyond the images and at times even beyond thought. It is listening to the Word of God with rapt attention. It can bring us to see as God sees, the world and people and situations; it is a way to know God intimately and with direct awareness beyond what can be known by our rational minds conceptually. This reading is needed to balance non-conceptual prayer.

In the ancient tradition being reclaimed today the monastic method was called *lectio divina* – holy reading with the heart. First the text is read (*lectio*); then the text is reflected upon or pondered (*meditatio*); then the pondering invites affectivity toward the divine (*oratio*) and finally the process climaxes in resting silently in the Presence (*contemplatio*). While these are not necessarily steps following one another, each often leads one to the next. Or it may happen that one is called directly into contemplation at the reading of the text or remembrance of a passage from the Scriptures. Commentaries on the Scriptures and mystical treatises can also be basic texts for *lectio*.

Eucharist

Communion with Christ in his surrender to the Father everlastingly memorialized in and made present to us in the eucharistic celebration

41. Cynthia Bourgeault, *Mystical Hope: Trusting in the Mercy of God* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 2001), p. 53.

42. *Rule of Benedict in English*, Prologue.

called 'the Mass' is a gift beyond telling. While frequent participation is not always possible because of local conditions, when present at the eucharistic celebration one is enabled to literally 'put on the mind of Christ' in adoration, praise, thanksgiving and reconciliation. St Paul calls us to be 'ambassadors of reconciliation', offering our own lives on the altar with Christ, one with him in this, his passion, death and resurrection once and for all yet here now. Aware of our oneness with the whole human family we implore blessings and peace, and beg for healing for ourselves and for all the needs of our brothers and sisters everywhere. Father Aloysius Pieris, SJ in Sri Lanka, teaches and prepares Christians for a 'transformational' liturgy based on his experience of the Zen Buddhist practice of attentiveness and selflessness.⁴³

The Divine Office

Praying the official prayer of the Church, alone or in a group, is a part of the renewed effort by many non-religious to observe fixed times for prayer. The Divine Office has been prayed or sung in monasteries for centuries. But today there is a growing number of Christians reclaiming the ancient practice. Christian fixed-hour prayer has its roots in Jewish tradition and Roman rule. There are manuals available for participating in this official prayer of the Church with its psalms and readings and orations, fixed according to the feasts and seasons of the year.

Spiritual Guides or Mentors

The lay seeker needs some regular spiritual direction more so than those, who with the 'help of many', live within the monastic walls. In describing the different kinds of monks, Benedict referred to hermits as

those who have come through the test of living in a monastery for a long time, and have passed beyond the first fervor of monastic life. Thanks to the help and guidance of many, they are now trained to fight against the devil. They have built up their strength and go from the battle line in the ranks of their brothers (or sisters) to the single combat of the desert. Self-reliant now, without the support of another, they are ready with God's help to grapple single-handed with the vices of body and mind.⁴⁴

Family life can often supply for what Benedict describes as that help and guidance of many which is the training needed to fight single-handedly the combat of the desert, referring to the inner demons of self-love, self-pity and the like.

There are also today many filling the role of soul-friend or *anamcara*,

43. Robert Kennedy, *Zen Gifts to Christians* (New York: Continuum, 2000), p. 53.

44. *Rule of Benedict in English*, section 1.

true gifts when one discovers such in his or her life. Many cherish such gifts, such persons in their lives in times of sorrow, grief, joy and tragedy, without ever realizing a title for the gift.

Peace and Non-Violence

Today cyberspace is jammed with calls for signatures and phone numbers to register one's insistence on peace for our country and world, and to oppose war or its facsimiles. But Merton insisted, almost a half-century ago, that we need to look within and root out some of the causes of non-peace, hatred and violence. He spoke even of our violent schedules. To allow one's self to be carried away by multitudinous conflicting concerns, to surrender to more demands than we can handle, to commit ourselves to too many projects, to want to help everyone in every way is to succumb to violence. Frenzy destroys our inner capacity for peace together with the fruitfulness of our work because it destroys the very root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful. Jesus died to be our peace and the bond of peace between us.

Hermits

'Ordinary people hate solitude but the Master makes use of it, embracing his aloneness, realizing he is one with the whole universe'.⁴⁵

While some monasteries like Merton's own Gethsemani and the New Camaldolese Hermitage at Big Sur allow for monks belonging to a monastic community to be in hermitage, many persons today are seeking to become hermits apart from and beyond the monastery. Such was the recently deceased Dom Jacques Winandy, OSB. Merton wrote that monasticism requires more than a reshaping in a contemporary mode. The diaspora referred to by Fr Karl Rahner may well call for the small, poor, isolated and unknown monastery instead of the illustrious 'plants' of our great American communities. In praise of Dom Winandy, Rahner wrote that perhaps the newly founded brotherhood of hermits, under Dom J. Winandy, OSB, in the diocese of San Angelo, Texas, is symptomatic in this regard. But in any case, the monk will have an important place in that diaspora, not as a pious organization man but as a true servant of God. And indeed, Fr Winandy was just that.

One of the hermits who migrated with Fr Winandy in the tiny band of hermits to Victoria on Vancouver Island was Fr Charles Brandt, who now has canonical status as a Catholic hermit. He occasionally gives retreats and supports himself by his excellent bookbinding talents and

45. Lao tzu, *Tao Te Ching* (trans. Stephen Mitchell; New York: Harper & Row, 1999 (1988), p. 42.

fishing for his supper in the nearby Oyster River. There are women hermits in Ava, Missouri, nearby, but outside the walls of Assumption Abbey near Springfield. These vibrant contemplatives have been praying there in the Ozark hills for more than 25 years in spite of an occasional black bear on their roof.

The Fourth Way

Another eremitical form being lived in our era is called 'The Fourth Way' in the Vedic system: the Way of Knowledge, the Way of Devotion, the Way of Action, and the combination of these three, the fourth way or the Way of the Householder. Those following this path in the USA attend two week-long intensive retreats annually under the auspices of the Philosophy School, living as a monk during the retreat—rising before the sun, singing, praying, meditating, reflecting and practicing service to the Lord in everyone they meet. And then they attend numerous week-end retreats throughout the year, trying to live a life of monastic discipline in the midst of the world.

The Sannyasi

While this is a Sanskrit word and an ancient Hindu practice, many monastic men and women throughout the world are practicing this life of the renunciate with some form of training and initiation according to the ancient rite. Abhishiktananda, one of the three Founders of Shantivanam Ashram in South India where Fr Bede Griffiths lived and died, described the sannyasi seeking God as one who has 'unswerving attention to the Presence'. Many volumes are available from the writings of Abhishiktananda on this Way of Life so dear to his heart.⁴⁶ Thomas Merton had made written arrangements, as was mentioned earlier, to visit Fr Bede Griffiths, a Christian sannyasi at his Shantivanam Ashram in South India, after the Bangkok Conference.

Pilgrimages

In Benedict's day, with hoards of marauders roaming through Europe, roaming monks with no discipline or 'mind of Christ' were a real problem for the monasteries. Therefore St Benedict regulated for stability

46. Among others, *The Secret of Arunachala* (Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1997); *The Further Shore* (Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1997); *Swami Abhishiktananda: His Life Told through his Letters* (ed. James Stuart; Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2000); and *Ascent to the Depth of the Heart* (Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1998), which is his journal.

in his Rule. Today the landscape is different: in 1979 Fr Bede Griffiths wrote in favor of the monastic pilgrimage to other countries and traditions other than one's own. 'Could we not conceive of a Benedictine monk who should be given this freedom to wander, to go to India, it may be, to Sri Lanka, to Thailand, to Japan, visiting Hindu ashrams and Buddhist monasteries, not as an escape from the restrictions of community life or as a vacation, but as an integral part of his monastic vocation? Did not Thomas Merton point to something like this both in his life and in the manner of his death?'⁴⁷

Christian pilgrims have been on the move since Jesus ascended to our Father. Some of the earliest went to the deserts, others began to form or join communities and eventually the built-in stability rooted one to the place. But the Indian sannyasi from of old cherished the sacred rite of holy pilgrimage; going forth with only a begging bowl and no backpack, usually returning overflowing with great bliss from prayer in other temples and on the banks of India's sacred rivers.

Ashramites

An ashramite, another Sanskrit word, is one who lives in or frequents an ashram in order to pray and/or to be instructed in ashram spirituality. Ashrams are places of contemplative atmosphere conducive to intense spiritual pursuits, a relentless quest for the Divine and an all-embracing simplicity of lifestyle, a genuine hospitality toward all of whatever religion, and a vibrant harmony with nature expressed in a culture of non-violence. It is predicted to be one of the places where the mystical dimension is awakened in one's own heart. It is a place where people can go for prayer, interiority, and encounter with God, with the support of other God-seekers. It is even more so a way of life through which God is sought and experienced in One's heart of hearts. It is a place where one realizes the Self by experiencing the divine depth dimension of Reality. The very center of ashram life is contemplation. Fr Bede Griffiths often referred to contemplation as the two pillars at the beginning and end of the day on which all else rests in ashram life. Therefore, the aim of an ashramite is to realize the Self by experiencing the divine depth dimension of reality through contemplative meditation. The word is derived from *a-srama* which means total pursuit, full dedication, tireless striving, stretching one's arms toward perfection.

Ashrams are eco-sensitive and friendly centers. Ashram spirituality enables one to perceive the divine presence in nature. The ashram is an

47. Bede Griffiths, 'The Monastic Order and the Ashram', *American Benedictine Review* 30.2 (June 1979), p. 142.

anti-consumerism model amid its environment of solitude and silence. The ashram is by nature a trans-religious community, and hence a multi-religious community. Saccidananda Ashram, Shantivanam, in South India, is an excellent example of a Christian monastic ashram. The many who frequent this ashram come from all religious traditions. Ashramites welcome the divine in each who comes, welcoming one another as fellow pilgrims on the spiritual journey in which there is accompaniment toward the transcendent goal – the divine Other.

Inter-religious Dialogue

A new spirituality is evolving globally. The dialogue between religions has been a lived experience for several centuries in Ashrams. It has been called a 'culture' that invites one not only to proclaim the Good News but also to listen to the Good News of other traditions. Fr William Johnston believes that in the distant future the answer, the only answer to moving us from hate to love since 9/11, lies in dialogue and friendship, love and good zeal, between the religions. He even contends that 'we need Eastern mysticism to help us penetrate more deeply into the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The gift of Asia to the world is meditation leading to mysticism'.⁴⁸ He believes that 'Asian ways of meditation are making a greater and greater impact on Christianity'.⁴⁹ While visiting an American monastery, Fr Johnston said we used to think that inter-religious dialogue was important for the peace of the world; now we know it is essential for its very survival.

Community

Contemplatives outside the monastery walls often find the need of a support group. Religious or spiritual communities are available outside the monastery and can be found for the seeking. With family support being less and less at hand, many are finding needed companionship along the way on the spiritual journey.

Oblates

Benedictine Oblates and Third Order Franciscan or Carmelite lay folks are surfacing more and more today. While these groups have existed for centuries, there is a new rationale in the hunger for oblation these days, a desire to share the spiritual life and the spiritual aspirations of the monks or religious of one's affiliation. Noreen Vest, Obl. OSB says that

48. William Johnston, *Arise my Love: Mysticism for a New Era* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), p. 229.

49. William Johnston, 'We Need a Revolution', *The Tablet* (1 June 2000), p. 12.

'Oblates are no longer willing to let the monks live the spiritual life on our behalf: Oblates now want to share the ongoing dynamics of the spiritual life ourselves'.⁵⁰ She believes the values of the spiritual life, of Benedictines, Franciscans, or Carmelites need to be articulated and shared.

Meditation Groups

According to Merton, contemplative prayer would be incomplete if it were not shared. Many meditation groups are available for seekers everywhere: Zen, Centering Prayer, the World Christian Community, Vipassana, are a few of the options. Fr Robert Kennedy, SJ, a Christian Zen teacher, believes that 'Zen practice, zazen (sitting meditation), and Zen guided meditation will have an extraordinary appeal for contemporary men and women seeking this kind of personal spiritual experience'.⁵¹ Kennedy suggests that the gift of practice, of being totally attentive, would help us to participate more fully in the liturgy and recall the death and resurrection of Christ more vividly. It is important that one seek out good advice before approaching such groups.

Scripture Sharing Groups

Groups that share Scripture regularly are another facet of support groups. Good input from a scholar or a shared commentary within a group is cherished today by many.

These lay groups meet regularly with a religious guide and find great support in the process and from one another.

Internet

For some the computer offers many possibilities in cyberspace for accessing a community-like experience. Last year a group called spiritualityhealth.com offered a course 'Practicing Spirituality with Jesus'. It was so popular that they are now offering 'Practicing Spirituality with Buddhists' and they plan to offer subsequent courses practicing with Anglicans, Rumi and Jews; even others in 2003.⁵² While this may not seem like a community possibility, it can serve as a basis for sharing and there are other contacts on the web where friends can meet and communicate regularly as desired.

50. Norvene Vest, 'Monastics and Oblates: Mutual Blessings', paper originally presented at the Order of St Benedict North American Oblate Directors' Meeting, Collegeville, MN, July 1999.

51. Kennedy, *Zen Gifts to Christians*, p. 2.

52. Spirituality and Health: Spiritual Practices for Human Being, at <http://www.spiritualityhealth.com>.

Beads, Malas, Mantras

The use of prayer beads has been in vogue throughout the world almost from the beginning. Malas for reciting mantras, the holy rosary for meditation on the mysteries of Christ's life, death and resurrection are found in prayerfully folded hands across the globe, not only in churches and temples but also in the marketplace, in waiting lines, even while driving. The Christian is commanded to 'pray always'! Instilled in the heart of every human is the desire to connect, to commune with the Divine Other. Beads, malas and rosaries are a helpful way to insure one for the long haul, making holy the present moment, practicing the Presence with 'unswerving attention'.

In Strasbourg a few months ago, a Japanese Shinshu Buddhist master was invited to speak to the Christian Churches in Europe regarding their own Christian spiritual heritage. Jerome Ducor, a Swiss Vice-Director of the Shingyoji Temple in Geneva, said that the greater part of these people do not know their Christian heritage. This is not only among young people, but also among adults.

Christian spirituality is not known in depth. I think that people are searching profoundly... Christian churches need to restore a 'cultural foundation' to the Christian message, and to make the 'spiritual treasure of Christianity' known... People need a spiritual life, or even better, they need a lived spirituality... Christianity has a great treasure. I am thinking of the Church Fathers and their wonderful texts, of prayer and the monastic legacy.⁵³

All those who have awakened to the 'grasp of the Spirit' and are consciously into their spiritual journey, keep attuned and attentive to the still small voice within and without as they continue on the path one heart with the Divine Other and with all others. Disciplined practice brings them to the threshold. Fidelity in taking and making time for contemplative practice and mindfulness is essential. Everything, including ourselves, is enveloped and permeated with the Divine. Hopefully, some of what has been shared in this article will be found helpful. There are many other important facets of the Way not touched on here.

For each and all of us Merton climaxed his description of the contemplative heart in perfect love, pure renunciation. He described it as that realm where contemplation becomes what it really is meant to be. It is no longer something infused by God into a created subject but rather God living in God and identifying our created life with His own life so that there is absolutely nothing left of any significance but God living in God:

53. Published by the Italian Episcopal Conference's Press Service.

Therefore it is something that all ...who desire to please God ought to desire not for a minute, nor for half an hour, but forever. It is in these souls that peace is established in the world.⁵⁴

A few suggested resources for lay seekers outside the monastery walls:

The Bible

Breviary

Virginia Manns and Mary Frohlich (eds.), *The Lay Contemplative: Testimonies, Perspectives, Resources*.

Deborah Gephardt, *The Contemplative Way: A Visual Companion to the Lay Contemplative* (video)

William Johnston, *Arise My Love..Mysticism for a New Era* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000)

Wayne Teasdale, *A Monk in the World, Cultivating a Spiritual Life* (Novato, CA: New World Library).

Roland Rolheiser, *The Shattered Lantern, Rediscovering a Felt Presence of God* (New York: Crossroads, 2001)

Joan Chittister, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily, Living the Rule of Benedict Today* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990)

The Teacher Within, Laurence Freeman OSB

Tapes

James Finley, *Thomas Merton's Path to the Palace of Nowhere* (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2002)

54. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 288.