

The *Kenotic* Convict: A *Divertissement* on Contemporary Contemplative Spirituality in its Social Context

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I

Jerome K. would not know contemplation from constipation, perhaps because the only four-syllable word in his vocabulary is 'motherf-----'. Yesterday morning he decided to demonstrate his proficiency in the use of this term to Sergeant Charles B., the acting unit manager of Delta-Building, Brunswick Correctional Center, Lawrenceville, Virginia.

'You can't tell me where to sleep, motherf-----', Jerome informed the sergeant. 'I been sleeping on the floor for three whole weeks, and nobody never said nothin' till you came on duty. You're just messin' with me 'cause I'm the only white motherf----- on the wing'.

'No, I'm messin' with you 'cause Nurse L. said your knee is all healed up and you can climb up on your top bunk again', said Sergeant B., who happens to be an African-American. 'Ain't no reason for you to be sleepin' on the floor no more, so like Jesus said to the lame man: pick up your mattress and go!'

'Nurse L. is a freemason just like you, motherf-----er. All y'all are in it together, you *and* your black freemason buddies. I *ain't* gettin' up on that top bunk!'

And that, my dear reader, is what is known as a '201', disobeying an order, a disciplinary offense under Departmental Operating Procedure 861. Having ascertained that a rules infraction had indeed occurred,

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Sergeant B. called for assistance on his two-way radio and had Jerome K. removed in handcuffs to the prison's segregation or punishment unit in Bravo-Building basement. One of the escorting correctional officers was another African-American with a freemason's ring on his finger, a circumstance that induced Jerome to resist physically and object verbally in a fairly spectacular manner. All his delusions of persecution appeared to be confirmed.

I visited Jerome at the door of his segregation cell later that day in my capacity as inmate advisor. When one of my fellow prisoners breaks a rule, I attempt to defend him at our in-house kangaroo court, known in true Orwellian fashion as the Adjustment Committee. Jerome was curled up in the corner, crying quietly. At first he did not want to talk at all, but then he grew loud and angry again, so I left. My immediate plans for his defense are to ensure that my boss, the Adjustment Committee 'judge', removes his mason's ring during the disciplinary hearing and refers Jerome to the prison psychiatrist for examination. Medicating my client into a state of relative tranquility is probably the best option here, though the drug-induced mental haze will make him easier prey for other convicts.

Meanwhile, Jerome is doing his very best to disrupt the first and longest of my three daily sessions of contemplative prayer. Every morning at 4.50 I get up, do my stomach-crunches, brush my teeth and spend 40 minutes doing what St John of the Cross did during his time in prison: chipping away at the chains of self that keep the soul from union with its Source. (What, you were unaware that St John was a jailbird, too? Oh, the failures of modern education...) St John would have known, just as I do, that the pre-dawn hours are the best for prayer, because our fellow convicts are finally all asleep.

Except for Jerome, of course, who has chosen 'my' contemplation time to shout out his paranoid fantasies through the window of his cell two floors beneath mine. Staying centered on the breath, the *pneuma* – my favorite concentrative focal point – is not exactly easy when I keep being told further details of the grand conspiracy of African-American freemasons. Sometimes life can really be a...well, you know Jerome K.'s favorite word by now!

So this is contemporary contemplative spirituality in its social context, at least in the only form that I know it. Certainly I know nothing of monasteries and hermits' huts in the woods; in fact, I have not been able to touch a tree for over 17 years. But I do know a little about silence and suffering and where those twin teachers have led me: to the belief that true contemplation cannot take place without a social context, that this apparently most solitary of (non-)activities demands a communal dimen-

sion and expression. True, we need some degree of outer silence in order to enter the prayer of quiet, but the idea that we must seclude ourselves from the world while seeking inner union with the I AM WHAT I AM is entirely mistaken.

In this essay, I will argue that the contemplative process of 'being transformed into [Christ's] likeness with ever-increasing glory' requires us to reach out, as Jesus did, to the downcast and despised in particular (2 Corin. 3.18; NIV). Communion with the great Silence, with the 'God [who] is love', leads us to...Jerome K. (1 Jn 4.16).

II

To understand why I claim that the esoteric practice of contemplative prayer, if performed correctly, must express itself in direct, pragmatic acts of charity, it may help you to learn by what road I arrived at this somewhat counter-intuitive conclusion. Later I will cite historical and scriptural support for my thesis, but as a prison inmate I cannot hope to persuade readers like those of *The Merton Annual* merely on the strength of my amateur academic research. The truth is that my essay is little more than comic relief from the learned gravity of the other contributions to such an august journal. However, if you find my first-hand experience to be an intriguing case study, then my subsequent exegesis of some classic contemplative texts and New Testament passages may fall on more receptive ears. So, let us examine briefly my *Sitz im Leben* to see whether this soil can support worthwhile spiritual growth and fruit, or whether I have merely produced contemplative kudzu.

My start in life was much like Thomas Merton's and not dissimilar to yours, I imagine: I grew up in various countries around the world among good, solid, upper-middle-class folk who barely knew that people like Jerome K. or Sergeant Charles B. even existed. At age 18, in 1984, I entered one of the top ten universities in the USA on a full academic (merit) scholarship, fully expecting to become as utterly respectable and successful as, say, *you*. But one and a half years later I was arrested for double murder and have not seen daylight since.

Although my case and trial played an enormous role in my spiritual development, this is not the place to examine those issues; anyone interested can read up on the subject elsewhere. What I want to do here is to give you some hint of how my experiences during the intervening 17 years of incarceration led me to the practice of contemplative prayer and onward to my thesis on the necessity of tangible charitable fruits of contemplation.

Every moment and every event of every man's life on earth plants something in his soul. For just as the wind carries thousands of winged seeds, so each moment brings with it germs of spiritual vitality that come to rest imperceptibly in the minds and wills of men.¹

Thomas Merton wrote this, and so it was with me.

While I did not recognize it at the time, the seeds that the events of my prison life planted in my soul were of a *kenotic* nature. Day by day, these often very painful experiences were gradually emptying me of self – an unconscious form of the same process which I now continue through the conscious practice of contemplation. But there we are getting ahead of ourselves; during most of the first decade and a half of my incarceration, I was completely unaware that my suffering might be working positive spiritual changes in me. Instead, I felt much as the metaphorical rock Jean-Pierre de Caussade described:

It is the same with a lump of stone. Each blow from the hammering of the sculptor's chisel makes it feel – if it could – as if it were being destroyed. As blow after blow descends, the stone knows nothing of how the sculptor is shaping it. All it feels is a chisel chopping away at it, cutting it and mutilating it.²

Eventually we may develop enough trust in divine providence to 'welcome each blow of... [God's] chisel as the best thing that could happen to me', but *at the time*, 'to be truthful, I feel that every one of these blows is ruining me, destroying me, and disfiguring me', de Caussade wrote. And so, again, it was with me.

What were the chisel blows that shaped me? Only the briefest of summaries is possible here, but before I give even that, I must tell you that my purpose in recounting this part of my past is neither to complain, nor to solicit sympathy, nor to suggest that I have not also been granted many mercies in the midst of my troubles. I know (better than do you) that my sins *had* to have consequences, and that many others in here have suffered far more for far less. My only motive here is to illustrate that my experiences were in fact sufficiently painful to have the *kenotic* effect I suggested above. Had I remained the scholarship-winning A-student I was at 18, I would never have been emptied of self by the occasional failure to make the dean's list. It took the threat of a death sentence, and much else besides, to begin to open me up and free me.

So, let me parade a few of the highlights of my prison career past you:

1. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1962), p. 14.
2. Jean-Pierre De Caussade, *Abandonment to Divine Providence*, I, 3 (trans. J. Beevers; New York: Doubleday, 1975).

- From 1986 until 1989, I lived in the firm belief – based on my lawyers' clearly expressed opinion – that my execution in the electric chair was absolutely certain. (This would not be the last time my attorneys would be mistaken.)
- Until 1990, I was housed in a jail without toilets or running water in the cells, without a library or TVs, without work, educational opportunities or sufficient exercise, and with only once-weekly showers and changes of clothes. Other inmates broke my thumb (1986) and my wrist (1989).
- In 1990, on the day of my verdict, I made an admittedly half-hearted attempt at suicide. Justice, I felt, had not been done.
- In 1991, another inmate attempted to rape me.
- In 1993, my trial attorney stole several thousand dollars from me, an act that eventually resulted in the suspension of his license.³
- From 1994 until 1999, I was housed in a prison without a library, work, educational opportunities or sufficient exercise; all we had were endless gray days of mind-numbing boredom.
- In 1996, the prison department changed its policy and henceforth forbade me any access to mail-ordered books or newspapers in my native tongue. (As you may have guessed from my name, I am a German citizen; English is only my second language, and not my preferred one. This ban continues, incidentally.)
- In 1997, my mother drank herself to death – mostly because of the heartache I had caused her.
- In 1999, I was transferred to the worse of this state's two 'super-max' prisons, where (in 2000) I would eventually be hit by a ricochet rubber bullet while officers were shooting at another inmate.
- In 2001, the US Supreme Court refused to hear my appellate attorney's petition for writ of habeas corpus, thus effectively ending all hopes for my vindication and release.

Again, I make no complaint here about any of the above, nor do I deny that I was blessed in many ways throughout these years, much less am I asking you for pity. My point is simply that, whether deserved or not, I have indeed led the 'dying life' of which St Thomas a Kempis wrote. 'And the more completely a man dies to self' – even when he is not fully aware that this is what he is doing – 'the more he begins to live to God', at least if he has the Holy Spirit's secret assistance.⁴

3. Ian Zack, 'Soering's Ex-lawyer Suspended', *Daily Progress*, Charlottesville, VA, 28 June 1996.

4. St Thomas a Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, II, 12 (trans. L. Sherley-Price; New York: Penguin Books, 1952).

There came a point in January of 2000 when I reached the end of my self, when I ran out of all the resources that had sustained me until then. Although it seems funny now, the final blow may have been the sudden realization – prompted by the faintness of my appellate lawyer’s praise – that my Christian poetry really was fairly awful. I could have turned my back on God then and finally accepted my apparently inevitable role as a mere *convict*: giving in to the punks who wanted to fellate me, smoking dope and brewing my own mash, acquiring a tattoo or two and gambling away my belongings at the card tables. All these fine things were laid upon my table, but instead I decided to make a formal discipline out of self-relinquishment by beginning to practice Centering Prayer. *Letting go* was the essence of contemplation, so I had been told, and at that point I was definitely in a ‘letting go’ kind of mood.

So it was by a kind of providential coincidence that I happened to find for myself that deep spiritual link between pain and contemplative prayer to which I alluded earlier: rightly experienced, suffering can empty the soul of self just as effectively as can silent meditation on the Spirit in whom we live and move and have our being. Centering Prayer began to teach me to find meaning and even joy in *relinquishing* all those things which prison had hitherto *torn* from my reluctant grasp. Rather than experiencing the end of my nascent career as a penitentiary poet as a defeat, for instance, I could now recognize this passing of a false hope as the loss of another chain which had tied me to the outer world. Nor was this changed point of view simply a mind-game to help me cope better with the inevitable blows of a cruel fate; those who practice contemplation know that its gifts are very real indeed.

As my journey into the inner world progressed, I began studying classic Christian contemplative texts as well as Buddhist *vipassana* instruction, and there I found confirmation for my intuitions about the *kenotic* dynamic underlying both pain and prayer. What is more, I discovered in those writings, and especially in the biographies of the great mystics, the first hints of support for my thesis about the connection between contemplation and social action. *Something* drove Thomas Merton out of the monastery and into the world, to protest against the Vietnam and Cold Wars, and as a thrice-daily practitioner of the same kind of prayer he performed – though obviously at a much different level – I think I know what this ‘something’ is. So join me, please, for a quick review of the goal and technique of contemplation.

III

The ultimate aim of the contemplative is, of course, the same as that of any other Christian: 'to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires...and to put on the new self, created to be like God' (Eph. 4.22, 24). If anything distinguishes the practitioners of the prayer of quiet, it is the clear recognition of the difficulty of this transformation, the understanding that the *wish* or *will* 'to put off your old self' is in fact a *function* of the self. Thus *exercising* the human will—even for an apparently Godly purpose—in fact subtly *strengthens* the will's master, the self. The self is still running the show, doing noble things, feeling good about itself—until another 'deceitful desire' comes along which, for the moment, the self finds more attractive. That is why so many sincere believers falter in spite of their best resolutions: their faith is self-willed, not based on genuine surrender.

Yet the self is not an enemy whom we seek to destroy in prayer, according to the modern German contemplative Father Williges Jäger, a Benedictine monk who is also a licensed instructor of the Sanbo-Kyodan school of Zen Buddhism:

[The practitioner of silent inner prayer] simply wishes to restrain the self within its proper bounds and to give it the weight it really deserves. For this reason [the contemplative process] aims to recognize the self for what it really is: an organizational center for the personality structures of each individual person...a conglomeration of conditioning factors...a collection of behavior patterns... The experience of mysticism leads the person to the point where he no longer identifies with this superficial self and thereby becomes free for a reality in which the self no longer dominates... The wave of self ebbs away, and in its place the ocean experiences itself as a wave... Everything is both wave and ocean.⁵

To know themselves as both individual *and* universal, contemplatives practice the same two-step method taught by every mystical or meditative tradition: First, they develop quiescence through a concentrative method like that described here by the fourteenth-century Orthodox Hesychast Nicephorus the Solitary:

[B]reathing is the natural way to the heart[, for] the lungs lie round the heart... And so, having collected your mind within you, lead it into the channel of breathing through which air reaches the heart and, together with this inhaled air, force your mind to descend into the heart and remain there. Accustom it not to come out of the heart too soon, for at first it feels

5. Williges Jäger, *Die Welle ist das Meer*, I, A, 5, 6, 21 (excerpt trans. J. Söring; Freiburg: Herder, 2000).

very lonely in that inner seclusion and imprisonment... [W]hen your mind becomes firmly established in the heart, it must not remain idle, but it should constantly repeat the Jesus prayer, 'Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me!' and never cease.⁶

Then contemplatives practice what Buddhist *vipassana* meditators call 'choiceless awareness', a dispassionate, non-judgmental, pure observation of the self's endless twists and turns which the sixth-century Syrian abbot John Climacus explained as follows:

The spirit of despondency is your companion. Watch him every hour. Note his stirrings and his movements, his inclinations and his changes of face. Note their character and the direction they take. Someone with the gift of calm from the Holy Spirit understands well what I have in view.⁷

What Climacus 'ha[s] in view' here is that paying such minute attention to the self's physical, emotional and intellectual/conceptual manifestations reveals them to be...*empty*. All our lusts and wants and clever opinions, which seem so important and so real in our everyday way of being, 'are a mist that appears for a while and then vanishes' when examined individually during contemplation (Jas 4.14). And without these 'personality structures...conditioning factors...[and] behavior patterns',⁸ the self is found to be equally empty – just a few gallons of ocean water which temporarily swelled up into a wave.

The Desert Fathers called this process *apothesis*, 'shedding' or 'laying aside' the self, and if practiced dilligently over many years, it can indeed lead to an unmediated encounter with the I AM WHAT I AM, as the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* tells us in his *Book of Privy Counseling*:

If you begin to analyze thoroughly any or all of man's refined faculties and exalted qualities [NB: choiceless awareness]...you will come at length to the farthest reaches and ultimate frontiers of thought, only to find yourself face to face with naked Being itself.⁹

This description raises the question of what precisely the Christian contemplative tradition means by 'find[ing] yourself face to face with naked Being itself'. One ancient school of thought – perhaps the dominant one throughout our history – understands the apex of silent inner

6. Nicephorus the Solitary, 'How Best to Say the Jesus Prayer', in E. Kadloubosky and G.E.H. Palmer, *Writings from the Philokalia on the Prayer of the Heart* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990).

7. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, XXVII (trans. C. Luibheid; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982).

8. Jäger, *Die Welle ist das Meer*.

9. Anon, *The Cloud of Unknowing and The Book of Privy Counseling* (trans. W. Johnston; New York: Doubleday, 1996).

prayer to be the *unio mystica* described so well by Pseudo-Dionysius in the fourth century:

[T]he most divine knowledge of God, that which comes through unknowing, is achieved in a union far beyond the mind, when mind turns away from all things, even from itself, and when it is made one with the dazzling rays, being then and there enlightened by the inscrutable depth of wisdom.¹⁰

St Teresa of Avila certainly experienced such mystical graces herself, but she held a different view of the ultimate purpose of contemplation. Her sixteenth-century nuns were firmly instructed that

this is the reason for prayer, my daughters, the purpose of this spiritual marriage [between the individual human soul and God]: the birth always of good works, good works... Martha and Mary must join together to show hospitality to the Lord and have him always present.¹¹

A hundred years before Teresa, Meister Eckhart was even more emphatic on this point:

'Mary sat at the feet of the Lord and listened to his words', and learned... But afterwards, when she had learned...then she really for the first time began to serve. Then she crossed the sea, preached, taught and became the servant and washerwoman of the disciples [according to medieval folklore]. Thus do the saints become saints; not until then do they really begin to practice virtue.¹²

'[W]hen she had learned', Eckhart writes of Mary, 'then she really for the first time began to serve'. Why should this be so? What did Mary learn when she came 'face to face with naked Being itself' (*Book of Privy Counseling*) that made her want to 'bec[o]me [a] servant and washerwoman?' Thomas Merton gives us the answer to these questions in one of the truest, most beautiful expressions of contemplative spirituality that I have ever encountered:

Life is this simple
We are living in a world that is absolutely transparent
and God is shining through it all the time.
This is not just a fable or a nice story
It is true.
If we abandon ourselves to God
and forget ourselves,

10. Pseudo-Dionysius, 'The Divine Names', in *idem, The Complete Works*, VII, 3 (trans. C. Luibheid and P. Roemer; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987).

11. St Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, VII, IV, 6, 12 (trans. K. Kavanaugh and O. Rodriguez; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1979).

12. Meister Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher, Sermon 88* (ed. B. McGinn; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1988).

we see it sometimes
 and we see it maybe frequently.
 God shows Godself everywhere,
 In everything,
 In people and in things and in nature and in events.
 It becomes very obvious that God is everywhere and
 in everything and we cannot be without God
 It is impossible.
 The only thing is that we don't see it.¹³

But when we *do* learn to see God 'shining through' all of creation, we recognize along with Merton that 'No Man is an Island'. 'A purely individualistic inner life, unconcerned for the suffering of others, is unreal',¹⁴ because it is in a sense *God's* pain that we see in the faces of the poor, the sick and, yes, the imprisoned. Merton described this insight as being

...suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I was theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking up from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation.¹⁵

But the connection between *kenosis* and service runs far deeper than a mere recognition of the divine spark in our broken, anguished brothers and sisters: taken to its ultimate conclusion, self-emptying must logically lead to self-sacrifice, to the relinquishment or *apotheosis* even of our most precious 'possession' — our life. That is why Teresa of Avila literally worked herself to death in her efforts to reform the Carmelite Order, and why Henri Nouwen — another practitioner of silent inner prayer, as revealed in *Life of the Beloved* — left Yale University for the L'Arche communities to live with the handicapped. In fact, the biographies of many, perhaps most of the great contemplatives reveal this willingness to forsake 'his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters — yes, even his own life' (Lk. 14.26).

However, we need not merely accept the testimony of our spiritual forefathers' and -mothers' lives and deaths as evidence of the nexus between *kenotic* prayer and radically self-giving service. Instead, we can go straight to the source of our tradition: not Thomas Merton nor even St. Bernard of Clairvaux, but...Jesus.

13. Quoted without attribution in Esther de Waal, 'Attentiveness', *Weavings: A Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life*, 17:4 (July/August, 2002).

14. Thomas Merton, *Honorable Reader: Reflections on my Work*, Preface to the Vietnamese edition of *No Man Is an Island* (ed. R.E. Daggy; New York: Crossroad, 1989), p. 124.

15. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), p. 156.

IV

Admit it: the mention of Christ in this essay makes you nervous. Modern biblical scholarship is a science, or so it is claimed, an objective study of ancient texts employing the resources of sister sciences like archaeology and linguistics. I, on the other hand, am suggesting here that the Bible may contain information that is useful to the actual *practice* of contemplation, that this ancient book may be relevant today. And that is simply not *au fait*, is it?

In fact, the near-total absence of Scripture from the writings of many modern contemplatives is one of my greatest pet peeves. Elsewhere I have attempted to begin to remedy this deficiency, but most of the exegetical work in this area remains undone. It is a mystery to me why we assume that the New Testament's documents were written for a simple, unsophisticated peasant population, why we insist on imputing exaggerated artlessness to first-century theology and spirituality! After all, this was the era of the Essenes, who can hardly be dismissed as contemplative amateurs and certainly devoted a far greater percentage of their time to the actual practice of silent prayer than most of us do. If the apostles did indeed see it as their duty to 'become all things to all men so that by all possible means...[they] save some', then they would hardly have neglected to weave into their writings a layer of meaning which would appeal specifically to these desert ascetics in their own metaphorical back yard (1 Cor. 9.22).

In fact, the second episode in the life of the adult Messiah recounted in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke can be read as a thinly veiled description of the prayer of quiet and its three classic hazards. As any *practicing* contemplative would immediately recognize, Christ's temptations by the devil—in the desert, where so many Middle Eastern mystics sought God—reflect *our own* struggles with physical, emotional and intellectual/conceptual mental phenomena during silent prayer. *Every one* of the great Christian mystics whom I studied for tips on the technique of contemplation described the same triadic sequence of what Evagrius termed the 'contemplative vices': gluttony, avarice and vainglory. With Jesus these took the form of

Hunger: '[T]ell this stone to become bread'; *desire*: for 'all the kingdoms of the world, ...all their authority and splendor'; and *pride*: demonstrating his divine powers by leaping from 'the highest point of the temple' without suffering harm (Lk. 4.3, 5-7).

In the fourth century, St Anthony of Egypt, the first of the Desert Fathers, suffered similarly from memories of wealth and sensual

pleasures; from greed for money and the power it gives; and from fantasies of fame as a revered holy man. In the sixteenth century, St John of the Cross wrote of the *physical* 'spirit of fornication', the *afflictive emotional* 'spirit of blasphemy' and anger, and the *intellectual/conceptual* 'spirit of dizziness'. And in the twentieth century, Father Thomas Keating discussed 'ordinary wanderings of the imagination and memory' (usually triggered by some physical sense-contact), of 'thoughts that give rise to attractions or aversions', and of 'insights and psychological "breakthroughs"'.¹⁶ Now, *either* these are 2000 years worth of coincidences, *or* the authors of Matthew's and Luke's Gospels quite intentionally and accurately described their beloved leader performing a form of prayer immediately recognizable to fellow practitioners of contemplation.

Nor is the New Testament entirely silent on the subject of techniques for stilling the self in silent inner prayer. To cite but one example, Christ's desert battle with the devil provides us with a very useful, extreme-slow-motion description of 'choiceless awareness': Jesus dispassionately observed each mental phenomenon arise, recognizing the temptation to 'tell these stones to become bread' as a disturbance of his inner calm; he did not attach to the physical sensation of hunger but instead noted the temptation's basic insubstantiality ('Man does not live on bread alone...'); and he immediately returned to his contemplative focal point, his Father ('...but on every word that comes from the mouth of God') (Mt. 4.3, 4).

Other New Testament passages that lend themselves to contemplative interpretations on the subject of technique are the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in Lk. 18.9-14 (which directly inspired the Hesychast Jesus-prayer discussed by Nicephorus the Solitary, above), the Lord's Prayer (with the familiar triad: *physical* – 'give us...bread'; *afflictive emotional* – 'forgive us...as we forgive'; and *intellectual/conceptual* – 'deliver us from the evil one', if indeed evil works through the self) and the Parables of the Kingdom.

Practicing the technique of 'choiceless awareness', as demonstrated here by Jesus, can lead us from the prayer of quiet to the prayer of union, described without much folkloristic disguise in another instance of clearly mystical subject matter in the Synoptic Gospels: Christ's transfiguration '[a]s he was praying' (!) with Peter, John and James (Lk. 9.29). In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus himself calls this episode a 'vision', and we can easily distinguish the three phases of contemplation in Luke's account (Mt. 17.9; AV).

16. Thomas Keating, *The Method of Centering Prayer* (Butler, NJ: Contemplative Outreach, 1995).

Relaxation. As they began, the three disciples were 'very sleepy' in our inadequate English translation (Lk. 9.32). In fact, Luke used *hupnos* here, a Greek word which gives English its root for 'hypnosis' and even in his time connoted spiritual torpor or deep relaxation. By contrast, he chose forms of *katheudo* to describe the disciples' true, unspiritual sleepiness in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Concentration. Next, Peter, John and James 'became fully awake... [and] saw [Jesus']...glory and the two men standing with him', much as all of us experience lights and visions when first attempting to Center in prayer (Lk. 9.32). Once we become focused, we then undergo the same process as the three disciples: 'a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud' (Lk. 9.34). Matthew, Mark and Luke all use the term *episkiazo* for 'envelop' here, meaning 'to surround in a haze of brilliance' — a clear reference to the 'Christ-eye' in our tradition or the equivalent 'sign of meditation' in *vipassana* practice.

Expansion. Lastly, we read that a 'voice came from the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him"' (Lk. 9.35). Thus on the Mount of Transfiguration Peter, John and James apparently experienced only a revelation of Christ's divine sonship and not yet their own by adoption, perhaps because '[u]p to that time, the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified' (Jn 7.39). But after Christ's death and resurrection, this phase of contemplation reveals to us that God means *us* when he says, 'This is my Child, whom I have chosen', as Meister Eckhart described so beautifully:

God gives birth to himself into me fully, so that I may never lose him... God takes all his pleasure in this birth, and he gives birth to his Son in us so that we have all our pleasure in it... God hastens to make it all ours just as it is his. Here in this fullness God has delight and joy. Such a person stands in God's knowing and in God's love and becomes nothing other than what God is himself.¹⁷

Or, as Jesus put it, 'I and the Father are one', a grace he wished to extend to all of us when he prayed in the upper room 'that all of [his followers] may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us' (Jn 10.30, 17.21).

But the *unio mystica* which Christ and the inner circle of his disciples experienced on the Mount of Transfiguration was not the climax of his or their spiritual journey, of course. When Peter suggested that they should remain on this literal and metaphorical peak and 'put up three shelters', the evangelist explicitly informs us that the chief apostle 'did not know what he was saying' (Lk. 9.33). Jesus' true destiny required him to

17. Meister Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher, Sermons* 59 and 12.

'c[o]me down from the mountain' and heal the 'large crowd [which] met him' in the valley below, in the messy, seemingly unspiritual world of sickness and sin (Lk. 9.37).

We see this same apparently counter-intuitive movement from a mystical peak directly to an active teaching and healing ministry at the very beginning of Christ's public career. Immediately after confronting the devil in the desert, 'Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, ... taught in their synagogues' and began to drive out 'evil spirits' (Lk. 4.14, 15, 36). He could presumably have stayed in the wilderness to enjoy silent union with his Father in prayer, much as John the Baptist remained 'in the Desert of Judea' and had '[p]eople...[come] out to him' (Mt. 3.1, 5). But instead Christ went *to* the people to heal them physically and, through his death, spiritually as well. Why should this be?

The easy and at least partially correct answer is that Jesus was the first and only begotten Son of God, on a unique salvific mission. However, he also taught that '[w]hoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant will also be' (Jn 12.26). Christ's journey from desert prayer, by way of medical miracles, to death on the cross must, therefore, have some direct meaning for our own spiritual progress as well.

It is Paul who makes clear the underlying dynamic that led Jesus from 'deny[ing] himself' in prayer to 'tak[ing] up his cross' in service: the process of *kenosis* (Lk. 9.23). In his letter to the Philippians Paul wrote:

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:
 Who, being in the very nature God,
 did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
 but made himself nothing [or: emptied himself, NAB; Greek *kenoo*],
 taking the very nature of a servant...
 and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!
 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place... (Phil. 2.5-9).

Paul's own life and eventual death in Rome reflected his belief that Christ's followers 'should be the same as' their leader when it came to *kenotic*, suffering service to their potential brothers and sisters in faith:

That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weakness, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties [endured to win over others to Jesus].
 For when I am weak [i.e. when the self's spurious power is diminished], then I am strong [because in a self-emptied soul] Christ's power may rest in me (2 Cor. 2.10, 9).

Paul understood that 'the author of our salvation...[was made] perfect through suffering' and even dying for our sake, because it is only when he 'lay[s] down his life for his friends' that any child of God can truly embody the selflessly loving nature of our Father in its fullest form (Heb.

2.10; Jn 15.13). As profound as the *unio mystica* on the Mount of Transfiguration may have been, its only beneficiaries were those directly present, so a faint hint of selfishness remained. The *kenotic* innovation Jesus introduced on the cross, on the other hand, was to give himself away *completely*, to the point of death, and for the sake of *our* spiritual rebirth, not his own. 'Greater love has no one than this' act of self-sacrifice, so Christ's death was the perfect incarnation of the 'God [who] is love' (Jn 15.13, 1 Jn 4.16).

It was for this new form of divine union that Jesus left the desert and the Mount of Transfiguration, and through his repeated calls for us to take up our crosses and follow him, he made clear his wish that all of us must join 'the fellowship of sharing in Christ's sufferings, becoming like him in death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection of the dead' (Phil. 3.10, 11). 'To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his footsteps, ...bear[ing] up under the pain of unjust suffering because...[you are] conscious of God' – that is, as a testimony of faith to encourage other believers (1 Pet. 2.21, 19). True love – God-like love – is marked by self-abandonment and the willing acceptance of pain to serve our fellow man.

All this has direct consequences for those contemplatives who metaphorically join Christ in prayer in the desert and on the Mount, as Thomas Merton realized:

No man who ignores the rights and needs of others can hope to walk in the light of contemplation, because his way has turned aside from truth, from compassion, and therefore from God... The obstacle is in our 'self', that is to say in the tenacious need to maintain our separate, external, egocentric will.¹⁸

Overcoming the obstacle of self in prayer inevitably entails a burning, active and self-giving concern for 'the rights and needs of others', a concern that manifested itself in Merton through his anti-war protests. What I would like to suggest in the next section of this essay is that there may be a specific scriptural way of serving 'the rights and needs of others' which correlates to our 'walk in the light of contemplation' in a particularly meaningful way. And, even better, it will return us to poor Jerome K., from whom we have not heard a thing for many pages!

V

The New Testament's primary metaphor for Christ's mission to humanity is that of healing. Jesus cured believers not only of their physical

18. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, pp. 18-21.

but also of their spiritual blindness, he opened their ears to let them hear nature's sounds as well as the Word, and he cast out evil spirits caused by both schizophrenia and Satan. But the evangelists do not speak of Christ *only* as a 'doctor...who c[a]me to call...the sick' (Lk. 5.31, 32).

In his very first proclamation of his ministry during a synagogue service immediately after leaving the desert, Christ mentioned four groups to whom he had been sent:

The Spirit of the Lord...has anointed me
to preach good news *to the poor*.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom *for the prisoners*
and recovery of sight *for the blind*,
to release *the oppressed*,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (Lk. 4.18, 19).

As with 'the blind' or otherwise infirm, the New Testament also frequently shows Jesus interacting with 'the poor', though perhaps less so with 'the oppressed' (unless one counts Samaritans in the latter category). What is commonly overlooked, however, is Christ's interest in prisoners.

Many of us are prisoners of one sort or another, of course: whether our chains consist of 'real' stone-and-steel penitentiaries or a permanent medical disability or an unhappy marriage or unfulfilled professional hopes hardly matters to those of us who feel trapped, locked in, unfree. When we read in John that 'the Son sets you free, [and] you will be free indeed', or in Paul that 'the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death', we cannot help but hope and believe that these passages have some special meaning for us (Jn 8.36, Rom. 8.2). Especially if we feel imprisoned by an awareness of our own past failings, we long to hear Christ tell us too, 'Go now and leave your life of sin', as he told the woman caught in adultery (Jn 8.11).

But Jesus' concern for prisoners was not merely for those metaphorically incarcerated. The woman caught in adultery, for instance, was clearly guilty of what her society considered to be a capital crime – yet Christ intervened directly to stop her lawful (though unjust) execution. Fairly early in his public ministry, Jesus also released the Gerasene Dementiac, who 'had often been chained hand and foot', from his makeshift jail in the tombs outside town; he strikes me as the twin brother of all the Jerome K.s, the 20% (!) of America's two million prison inmates who are officially acknowledged to be mentally ill (Mk 5.3). And, lest we forget, Christ chose to spend his last hours on earth conversing with '[t]wo men, both criminals', saving at least one of them (Lk. 23.32).

Even Jesus' sermons show an immediate interest in and even identification with prisoners: in the famous parable of the Sheep and the Goats,

Christ taught that 'I was hungry, ...thirsty...a stranger...[without] clothes...sick and *in prison*, and you did not look after me... [W]hatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me' (Mt. 25.42, 43, 45). The lesson here is that we are to learn to see Jesus' face in all of these suffering people, since – in Thomas Merton's words – 'God shows Godself *everywhere / In everything*'.

Even in common criminals? Why, yes, just as God shows Godself in the common poor and the common sick! None of the people Christ speaks of in this passage is identified as suffering *for their missionary activity*; the hungry are simply without food, the strangers are just lonely. We are to help them because they are in need, not because they 'earned' our charity through prior proselytizing. Limiting our *agape* for one of the six groups named by Jesus only to those who 'deserve' it – 'good', Christian convicts? – would run counter to the whole thrust of this parable.

Now, why do I bring up the subject of Jesus' attitude to prisoners in an essay on Thomas Merton and contemporary contemplative spirituality in its social context? Because I am both a convict of 17 years *and* a practicing contemplative. Unlike you, I cannot ignore the Gerasene Demoniac – pardon me, Jerome K. – while performing my prayers...*and I do not want to ignore him*. It is precisely for Jerome K. and my potential brothers and sisters in Christ that I practice silent prayer three times a day; I want to see Jesus' face in theirs ever more clearly! Thomas Merton glimpsed some of what I mean here when he wrote, '[I]t is because I am one with them that I owe it to them to be alone, and when I am alone, they are not "they" but my own self. There are no strangers!'¹⁹

But seeing 'God shining through' our fellow man is not enough! To return to the subject of the previous section: *true* self-emptying cannot end with *kenotic* prayer in the desert but must progress to self-sacrificial service on the cross. And *that* means we must *also* – at least occasionally – reach out to and actively help the most despised of America's various underclasses: the convict population.

It is here that we reach the very heart of Jesus' revolutionary message to the world:

Love your *enemies*... If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them... But love your enemies, ...and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked (Lk. 6.27, 32, 35).

'[W]hen we were God's enemies...while we were sinners, Christ died for us', and it is *this* quite literally unnatural love that sets Christian *agape*

apart (Rom. 5.10, 8). Fortunately, we have the gift of contemplative prayer to help us, to teach us to recognize even the men and women behind bars as potential sons and daughters of God.

The idea that the process of losing our inner, metaphorical chains in contemplation eventually compels us to help others lose their outer, literal chains is not some strange fancy produced by my own, rather unusual spiritual journey. Father Thomas Keating, the co-founder of the Centering Prayer movement, holds workshops in Folsom Penitentiary in California, and Father Richard Rohr – another well-known author and teacher in this field – is actively engaged in prison ministry as well. Even practitioners of Buddhist *vipassana* meditation are subject to this profound dynamic: the Venerable Robina Courtin, a retreat leader and subject of the award-winning documentary *Chasing Buddha*, has long been the director of the FPMT's Liberation Prison Project. Though my scriptural exegesis, above, may be dismissed as naïve, the evidence of their lives cannot be.

VI

So here is the suggestion the 'Kenotic Convict' (tongue firmly in cheek) offers you, the readers of *The Merton Annual*, at the conclusion of this essay: perhaps the best way to deepen your understanding of Thomas Merton's works is to read a little less and pray a little more. Merton himself would have approved of this:

The contemplative life should not be regarded as the exclusive prerogative of those who dwell in monastic walls. All men can seek and find this intimate awareness and awakening...²⁰

How true! Even a dumb convict like me has managed to travel down this path a ways, but doing so required that I stop *thinking* all the time and start *doing* at least once in a while.

The key distinction to be drawn here is between *studying* contemplation and *practicing* it. Before I learned how to perform Centering Prayer from Father Keating's works, I was convinced that the two were identical, that I gained just as much spiritually from reading books like Merton's than from actually performing contemplation. The truth is that the two could not be more different; they are as unlike as looking at a faded photo of a cup of water in the middle of the Sahara Desert, and actually diving into a cool, clear mountain lake. No, more than that,

20. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton* (ed. W.H. Shannon; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985), p. 159.

for actually *practicing* contemplation will gradually shift your entire approach to life – in fact, that is the whole point! – whereas *reading* about someone else's experiences during prayer will only give you the brief, pleasant illusion of an epiphany without changing the structures of the self one whit.

St John of the Cross is a contemplative for whom I have no use whatsoever – he paints the inner life much too darkly for my taste and provides almost no useful, practical teaching on method – but on this point he issues a warning that bears repeating here:

[Some] persons expend all their effort in seeking spiritual pleasure and consolation; they never tire, therefore, of *reading books*...in their pursuit of this pleasure...in the things of God.²¹

Pleasure is not the purpose of contemplation, and the pleasure derived from 'spiritual' reading can be a serious distraction from the necessity of doing the often difficult work of chipping away at the chains of self in silent prayer.

To learn the technique of performing contemplation, you will have to look outside the Merton *corpus* to less lyrical, more practical works like Father Keating's book – or my own, for that matter. But Merton can still be your starting point if you obtain Father Basil Pennington's *Centered Living: The Way of Centering Prayer*. One chapter of this volume contains some very interesting fragments of Merton's on contemplative method, excerpted from

'The Inner Experience'...an unfinished work which, according to the terms of Merton's legacy, cannot be published as a book. It has, however, been published serially in *Cistercian Studies* in 1983 and 1984.²²

These two volumes of *Cistercian Studies*, 18 and 19, are apparently out of print, but even these Mertonian crumbs – as explicated by Father Pennington – can be an excellent way to begin performing the kind of prayer which nourished Merton's soul and his art.

Moreover, only if you actually *practice* contemplation can you begin the process of self-emptying which will eventually lead you to truly self-giving service. Without performing Centering Prayer, you will never see 'God show[ing] Godself everywhere', even in your enemy – whether that 'enemy' is the Vietcong or the Soviets, as in Merton's case, or the inmates of your nearest penitentiary, as I suggest here. You must pray as

21. St John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, I, VI, 6 (trans. A.E. Peers; New York: Doubleday, 1990).

22. M. Basil Pennington, 'Thomas Merton and Centering Prayer', in *idem*, *Centered Living: The Way of Centered Prayer* (New York: Doubleday, 1988).

he prayed in order to feel for yourself, in the depths of your soul, that pure love for God's children that animates Merton's writings.

So make a start! Find out who Contemplative Outreach's area coordinator is in your town at www.centeringprayer.com – and, while you are at it, call your local jail to find out how to become a literacy volunteer one night a week. Jerome K. is still shouting about those black free-masons outside my window, and I would *really* appreciate it if you could show him just enough *agape* to make him shut up.