

Prologue

Celebrating

Thomas

Merton

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President of the Society

As I come to this first General Meeting of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland, I find that I come with great expectations. In part this must be because of my experience of three of the major Conferences of the International Thomas Merton Society in the USA which I have attended in recent years. A Merton conference is always, in my experience, a celebration. It is not so much an occasion for talking about Merton as if he were an object of detached scientific observation and research; indeed it is absurd to think of him in that way. Rather it is an occasion when we find that we are talking with Merton and he with us. Though our attitude towards him may at times be critical, it is unlikely to be detached or distant. I think we shall find that in our meeting he is not at all absent, not at all inactive or inert.

One of the things which we are doing at this particular gathering is bringing Merton home, home to the England in which he went to school, home to a part of England which he knew well in his adolescence. We are bringing Merton back not only to England, but to the Britain which he knew to be a vital part of his inheritance. At the end of his life he was keen to come back to this country and to visit Wales where he was more and more conscious that some of his family roots lay. His last words to me, on a card written in Delhi in November 1968, were "I am now trying to get permission to return via England in May. Can we do Wales then?" Well, we didn't do Wales then, but in some sense I've been doing Wales ever since.

But we are also, I hope, in this meeting just beginning to bring Merton back to the Europe which he so greatly valued, that Europe of which Britain is an integral part, geographically, historically, culturally, spiritually, let us hope also politically. I hope that one result of our initiative may be the strengthening of ties with Merton enthusiasts on the continent particularly with the association in the Low Countries. I look also for a new quickening of interest in France the country of his birth, and also in Spain a country whose language he so much appreciated.

But I also look further to the East. In the current *Merton Seasonal*, Bob Daggy speaks of Merton publications in Prague, Krakow, Warsaw, Opole. Merton begins to be known in Poland and the Czech Republic. Soon I hope there will be publications in Moscow and St Petersburg. Merton is greatly needed in Russia, a country with which he felt a very special relationship, as one can see in his correspondence with Pasternak.

Of course, since Merton's home was in God, since God's heart was his hermitage, he was at home everywhere on this planet, everywhere in God's creation. But as the cover of our programme reminds us, with its juxtaposition of words and images, God's heart could be his hermitage precisely because there was a hermitage, an unpretentious cinder-block building up there in the Kentucky woods, ten minutes walk from the monastery of Gethsemani. The hermitage could be everywhere precisely because it was somewhere, the universal was rooted in the particular.

In that particular paradoxical coming together of particular and universal, we may see the basis of another fruitful conjunction, underlined in the subtitle of our meeting, *Solitude and Community*. As he himself wrote, "Our whole life must be a dialectic between community and solitude."

Thus our meeting here will have, I believe, the character of celebration, because it will remember him in a gathering of people who have been brought together by the fact that he has spoken to each one of us, has been present to each one of us, doubtless in a way which is different for each one. To remember him in such gathering must be to remember him in an atmosphere of thanksgiving, in a context where we shall find our awareness of him and our consciousness and understanding of him greatly deepened and enlarged. We shall, I believe, gain a new awareness not only of what he was and what he did but of what he is and what he does now.

Just over forty years ago, when Tom was beginning his time as Novice Master at Gethsemani, a very crucial moment in his development as a monk, I was given a scholarship by the Church of England, to go to Greece and the Middle East in order to enter a bit more deeply into the study of Eastern Orthodoxy. One of the subjects to which I gave special attention in the nine months which I spent there was the question of how saints are recognised, canonised in the Orthodox Churches of the east.

As I looked at the question I discovered that while the canonical procedures differed from one Church to another, as between Greece, Russia and Romania, for instance, in the view of the Greek theologians whom I was reading there were always three vital elements in the process of the recognition of a saint, and all the theologians I read insisted on that word recognition, *anagnoresis*. The Western word canonisation is commonly translated into modern Greek by a word which means saint-making, *hagiopoiesis*, and that word, needless to say, the theologians fervently rejected. It is God's part to make saints; it is the Church's part to recognise and celebrate what God has done.

In the process, as understood by these writers, the recognition of the fact of sanctity is the primary thing. Second there is the celebration of the fact and third its proclamation, its official public declaration by the Church through its hierarchy. This last element of the process is a normal and integral part of the whole, but it is not absolutely necessary. In Greece during the centuries of the Turkish occupation it was simply not possible to make any official, public recognition of those who had given their life for their faith, *the new martyrs*. Their recognition by the people of God was nonetheless real.

The whole process, which in the view of the Orthodox Church, is conducted under the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit, is basically popular. It is through the spontaneous action of the people of God, recognising and celebrating God's gift to his world, in and through this particular person, that the public, official recognition of the saint, can in time take place. In that final action a man or a woman is numbered among the saints, enrolled in the Church's calendar, celebrated in the Church's worship on a particular day each year.

Now in the West our thoughts on this matter are inevitably shaped, and to some extent overshadowed, by the massive and somewhat juridical procedures with which the Church of Rome carries out this process. As one who is not in full canonical communion with Rome, I make no criticism of that process. I find one must regard it with a certain awe and admiration, though perhaps with an anxiety that in its desire for thoroughness it has become a bit cumbersome and that in its elaboration the official and bureaucratic element seems at times to have taken precedence over the popular and spontaneous element.

It is perhaps for that very reason that we see in our own times, new, spontaneous, unofficial or at least less official forms of recognition, canonisation, opening up around us. One of the clearest examples of this, here in England, is the case of Julian of Norwich, and Tom himself, with his outspoken recognition of her as one of England's greatest theologians made his contribution to this process. When, in 1973, we were celebrating the six hundredth anniversary of her Showings in Norwich, a distinguished theologian from Rome, who was taking part in the event, Father Paul Molinari, remarked "We are here engaged in a new kind of canonisation." His remark was all the more interesting in that he was a man who worked in the department of the *curia* directly concerned with canonisations. He saw in our festival in Norwich a new kind of recognition going on, irregular perhaps, ecumenical certainly, spontaneous and largely unplanned.

More recently Pope John Paul himself in his remarkable Encyclical, *Ut Unum Sint*, has recognised that something of the kind is taking place in the twentieth century in relation to the martyrs of our time, an Oscar Romero, a Maria Skobtsva, a Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Martin Luther King. The Pope speaks in his letter of a universal recognition of the martyrs of our own time as constituting one of the deepest and most powerful signs of the unity which binds Christians together despite their divisions. "In a theocentric vision, we Christians already have a common martyrology." He speaks explicitly of these new martyrs and saints as coming "from all the churches and ecclesial communities which gave them access into the communion of salvation." I want to insist on that point because it seems important to recognise that Pope John Paul is a more complex person than many think. There can be no question about his commitment to ecumenism.

As regards the informal recognition of saints, it is evident that something like this seems to be happening with and for Tom. The fact is that at least among Anglicans he has got into the small print of the calendar, as we see in the widely used and semi-official Office Book called *Celebrating Common Prayer*. There we see him at the beginning of December in company with "Charles de Foucauld, Hermit, Servant of the Poor" (Dec. 1), "Clement of Alexandria, Theologian." (Dec.4) and "Jane Frances de Chantal, Founder of the Order of the Visitation." (Dec.12), then two days later, in the major part of the calendar, comes "John of The Cross, Mystic, Teacher." (Dec. 14). By this back door method, at least, he seems to be beginning to edge towards the category of Venerable !

Now I know that there are some for whom this whole notion of recognising a woman or a man as holy seems fraught with peril. Are we not making an *idol* or worse still an *ideal* out of them? Are we not killing them off by attaching this label to them? I can only say in response, that the very notion of Christian sanctity is that of a person who becomes transparent, open to receive and to communicate to others a radiance, a healing power, a transcendent peace which is not their own. Such people have so died to the false self that Christ truly lives in them. Such people are loved, revered and celebrated for that reason alone.

Thus to recognise this mysterious fact of holiness is not to idolise or idealise the person concerned. The reverse is the case. It is to recognise God's strength and beauty made perfect in human weakness and disarray. In this sense, the martyrs in their brokenness are paradigms of all Christian sanctity. When, as in the case of Tom, with his innumerable letters, with his detailed and painstaking diaries, he has left us such a full account of his complexities, his doubts, his uncertainties, his faults, his sense of weakness and inadequacy - when everything that he is speaks to us of such an ironic, un-pompous, self-critical, outrageously humorous and paradoxical human being, I do not think we are in much danger of making him into either an idol or ideal. He simply won't let us.

So much by way of a lengthy introduction. I apologise if I have spent too long on this first point - this piece of intra-Christian housekeeping and clarification. I come now, more briefly, to the main point of what I have to say, which is of course that Merton opens our eyes to God's presence not only in one another, in Christian terms, but in the whole world that God has made and in the whole of the human family, made in God's image and likeness, made with the calling to respond to the initiatives of the divine love. But I would like to insist once again that here too the universal flows out from the particular. The two ecumenical movements, one towards Christian unity, the other towards the larger and more mysterious unity of women and men of all faiths are not unrelated to one another. Indeed the second is prepared by the first.

The Merton who ends by seeing the presence of God in all the religious traditions of humankind began very close to home. Already in the nineteen fifties, some years before the Council, he was welcoming Protestant seminarians from Louisville and Lexington to days of meeting and reflection at Gethsemani. It was in that context that the hermitage got itself built. In the early sixties he could write, "I do think it terribly important for Roman Catholics now plunging into the vernacular to have some sense of the Anglican tradition." Perhaps I might add that in the nineties it seems important for Anglicans too to be aware of that tradition.

In the same years he was noting in his journal, "If I can unite in myself the thought and devotion of Eastern and Western Christendom, the Greek and the Latin Fathers, the Russian with the Spanish mystics, I can prepare in myself the union of divided Christians."

It was his deep rootedness in the wholeness of the Christian tradition which enabled him to become open and welcoming to all. As a Hindu friend put it, Amiya Chakravarty, "The absolute rootedness of your faith makes you free to understand other faiths." Or as John Wu wrote from a Chinese perspective, "You are so deeply Christian that you cannot help touching the vital springs of other religions."

It was this which the Dalai Lama saw and which made possible those three remarkable and truly epoch making conversations which took place between them, conversations which are continuing to bear their fruit in the development of Buddhist-Christian dialogue. Let us look at Merton for a moment through the Dalai Lama's eyes, and weigh well the words of this great spiritual leader. "Merton was a well-built man of medium height with even less hair than me, but this was not because his head was shaved as mine is. He had big boots and wore a thick leather belt around the middle of his heavy white cassock. But more striking than his outward appearance which was memorable in itself, was the inner life which he manifested. I could see that he was a truly humble and deeply spiritual man. This was the first time I had been struck by such a feeling of spirituality by anyone who professed Christianity."

For Merton, there seemed a call always to be going further and exploring new ways of responding to the mystery of God. There was his passionate love for Judaism, which transformed his approach to the Old Testament scriptures. "I have sat on the porch of the hermitage and sung chapters and chapters of the prophets in Latin out over the valley, and it is a hair-raising experience is all I can say." Later there was his involvement with Islam which gave rise to the wonderful correspondence with Abdul Aziz in Karachi. But beyond and before these there was the fascination with Zen and the first contacts with Hinduism; it was these which were to flourish in such a way as to make possible the many encounters which took place on his Asian journey. "The horizons of the world are no longer confined to Europe and America. We have to gain new perspectives, and on this our spiritual and even our physical survival may well depend."

When we look at the environmental crisis which we are building up around us, when we look at the massive injustices which characterise the relations between rich and poor within our own nation, let alone between the rich and poor nations of our planet, when in particular we consider the intolerable burden of debt carried by the countries of the third world, we can see that to gain this new vision of the wholeness and solidarity of humankind and this new awareness of the inner resources of humanity, given through such a variety of traditions, is indeed a matter of life and death, a matter on which our physical as well as our spiritual survival depends.

To move to that new vision, that new understanding, is certainly not either easy or painless. It may indeed be infinitely costly. When, two months ago, I was speaking with one of the close collaborators of Father Alexander Men, that remarkable Russian priest and prophet who was murdered in September 1990, and asked him what in his view was the real, underlying cause of Father Alexander's death, he replied without hesitation, "He proclaimed an entirely fearless, open Christianity, a Christian

faith ready and eager for dialogue with everyone." It was that which his murderers evidently could not suffer.

By referring to Father Alexander Men's death I am not in anyway suggesting a conspiracy theory of Merton's own death in Bangkok in 1968. I have no reason to question the truth of the accepted view that his death, humanly speaking, was an accident caused by a piece of faulty electric wiring. But it is clear to anyone who reads Merton carefully; that the witness he gave to the faith which sustained him, that faith which opened out to embrace the whole of God's creation, was not given without cost and struggle, a struggle with the darkness and despair which has hung over our tormented century, a struggle sometimes even unto death.

In that perspective, of a life and death struggle, in which God's power is victorious in human weakness, God's love made known through human disarray, I want to quote from a letter written in 1958 to the Polish poet and writer Czeslaw Milosz, part of one of the most challenging but I believe one of the most important of all Merton's correspondences.

Milosz, life is on our side. The silence and the cross of which we know are forces which cannot be defeated. In silence and suffering, in the heart-breaking effort to be honest in the midst of dishonesty, (most of all our own dishonesty), in all these is victory. It is Christ in us who drives us through darkness to a light of which we have no conception, which can only be found by passing through apparent despair. Everything has to be tested. All relationships have to be tried. All loyalties have to pass through the fire. Much has to be lost. Much in us has to be killed, even much that is best in us. But victory is certain. The resurrection is the only light, and with that light there is no error.

By that faith in the light of Christ, triumphant over death through death, Merton lived. Through him that healing light, full of Christ's truth and peace, shone out. It shines out now in our midst as we meet in memory of his name.