

## A Vision of Hope and Joy – Patricia Higgins

*Report on the Reflective Day for Advent led by Fr Dan Horan OFM, held in London in conjunction with the WCCM, on Saturday 2 December 2017*

For me the defining element of the day was the words of Merton, quoted by Dan at the start: 'Our task is to seek and find Christ in our world as it is, not as it might be. Our Advent is the celebration of this hope.' His talk was a powerful reminder of the need for hope and trust in this period of waiting and anticipation.

The room was full to capacity. There was a palpable sense of excitement and interest. It was noted by regular members of the meditation centre that there were many more men than usual in the audience, both young and old. It is usually only regular speakers who attract this number of people. It felt very encouraging that an unknown speaker talking about Thomas Merton had generated this level of interest.

As is the practice at the centre the day started with a period of meditation before the presentation began. Then Fr Dan brought Merton alive in a way that highlighted his humanity, the combination of his generosity and selfishness, his humility and arrogance, the saint and the sinner, his rootedness in the earth with his recognition that we all share in an original unity. He quoted from Merton's 'Fourth and Walnut Epiphany': 'I suddenly realised I loved all of these people and none of them were or ever could be totally alien to me.'

Fr Dan stressed that each of us is created by God to be who we are, and honouring that call is the journey of a lifetime. It requires dedication, commitment, patience and attention. This journey is not easy but one which yields rewards in ways beyond our imagination.

He pointed out how God's love and mercy played a central role in Merton's Cosmic Christology, that original sin, put another way, is but original forgetfulness – we constantly forget who we are and whose we are.

In the Q & A session some of the questions expressed some anxiety, a need to be reassured that what Merton was saying was firmly grounded in the Scriptures. Fr Dan was able each time to demonstrate that this was the case. The way in which he replied to the questions was most impressive.

The lunch was a bring and share. There was some anxiety that the food would not be sufficient, but indeed it was, generous and plentiful in the spirit of Merton and monastic hospitality.

In the afternoon session Fr. Dan addressed Merton's move towards social and political action. He reminded us that many of his followers were scandalised by this. His response to the issues of racism and civil rights, war and violence, poverty and injustice are as relevant today as they were then. He used the present situation in the USA to highlight the persistent issues of racism and injustice, citing amongst recent events the 'Black Lives Matter' movement as clear evidence that the issues have not gone away.

It was a wonderful day sharing food, fellowship, ideas, and Thomas Merton's powerful vision of hope and joy for Advent. All thanks to everyone involved and to Father Dan for delivering this vision in such a lively, inspirational way.

### Note:

The quotes in the first paragraph are from Merton's essay, 'Advent: Hope or Delusion?', written in 1963. It is included in *Seasons of Celebration*.

**Patricia Higgins** is a retired teacher who lives in London. She has served on the TMS committee since 2014. She has become increasingly interested in the nature of the relationship between mysticism and resistance. She is a member of the W.C.C.M. (World Community of Christian Meditation) and is actively involved in issues around the cause of the Palestinians and that of the environment.

*from Merton's journal entry for Easter Day, 1968:*

The last three days of Holy Week were beautiful, brilliant days. The finest of all the spring. My redbuds are in bloom and the apple trees are in full bloom down by the monastery beehives. It was wonderful today walking under their great dim clouds full of blooming bees.

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As I was coming back to the hermitage from the monastery after dinner, a deer, a big doe, flew down the field in the bottoms, heads up, white-flag of a tail erect, passing in front of me barely fifty yards away.

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It is a delight to be in the Easter Office again – almost unbelievable, the first day or two, each year. It is *Easter!* The Alleluias are back, the short lesson from Hosea, etc.