

Merton's Ordination — Stephen Dunhill

In the spring of 1940 Merton made a trip to Cuba, recorded by him in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, and which he described as 'one of those medieval pilgrimages that was nine-tenths vacation and one-tenth pilgrimage'. He told himself that the reason he had come to Cuba was to 'make a pilgrimage to Our Lady of Cobre', a Marian shrine near Santiago de Cuba.

Travelling by bus he caught his first sight of the basilica across a jungle-clad valley:

There you are, Caridad del Cobre! It is you that I have come to see; you will ask Christ to make me His priest, and I will give you my heart, Lady: and if you will obtain for me this priesthood, I will remember you at my first Mass in such a way that the Mass will be for you and offered through your hands in gratitude to the Holy Trinity, Who has used your love to win me this great grace.

This visit inspired the poem 'Song for Our Lady of Cobre' which is included in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Merton considered it 'something new, and the first real poem I had ever written, or anyway I liked best.'

Merton was ordained on Thursday May 26, 1949. Two days earlier he had recorded in his journal that, 'To be a priest means, in my particular case, to have nothing, desire nothing, and be nothing but to belong to Christ.' The following day he recorded the doubts he had: 'My life is a great mess and a tangle of half-conscious subterfuges to evade grace and duty. I have done all things badly. ... How could I dare to go to the altar and say Mass after the way I have treated my other obligations, at least interiorly, in the past two or three years?'

But all doubts were laid aside. For Merton his ordination was such an overwhelming experience that he was unable to write about it until three days later, describing his ordination and saying Mass, shared with his community and the many friends who visited for the occasion, as an *Agape*, a love banquet:

A sense of the absolutely tremendous work that has been done in me and through me in the last three days, each day bringing its own growth. Ordination, anointing, ordination mass — then the first low mass and what followed, finally the Solemn Mass yesterday and the talking in the afternoon out under the trees of the avenue. I am left with the feeling not

only that I have been transformed, but that a new world has somehow been brought into being through the labour and happiness of these three most exhausting days, full of sublimity and of things that none of us will understand for a year or two to come.

The day following his ordination, in a church full of sun and surrounded by his friends at the side altar dedicated to St Anne, he fulfilled the vow he had made in Cuba: 'I said that Mass I had promised to our Lady of Cobre.' He gave communion to his friends, including Nanny, Dan Walsh, Bob Lax, Ed Rice, and Bob Giroux. Afterwards, 'I had plenty of time to make a good thanksgiving by myself at Our Lady of Victories altar and after that I went out and talked, or rather Someone talked through me.'

The next day, Saturday May 28, Merton celebrated his first High Mass at the abbey's high altar. Summing up the three days, he recorded: 'In a way the experience of these three days has been a reversal and contradiction of everything I was thinking about solitude on retreat: or is it a fulfilment that I do not understand.'

The heightened emotional state brought about by his ordination lasted for a few weeks. The following Saturday, June 4, he recorded:

The Mass is the most wonderful thing that has ever entered into my life. When I am at the altar, I feel that I am at last the person that God has truly intended. About the lucidity and peace of this perfect sacrifice I have nothing coherent to say. ... The greatest personal gift that can come to anyone is to share in the infinite act by which God's love is poured out upon all men.

For the rest of his life Merton was devoted to saying Mass daily. Indeed his final journal entry on December 8, 1968, in Bangkok records: 'Today is the feast of the Immaculate Conception. In a little while I leave the hotel. I'm going to say Mass at St. Louis Church, have lunch at the Apostolic Delegation, and then on to the Red Cross place this afternoon.'

Notes

The details of Merton's visit to Cuba can be found in the chapter 'Magnetic North', part iii, of *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

The journal entries can all be found by date in *Entering the Silence: The Journals of Thomas Merton*, Volume 2.

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