

It might seem strange that a man who spent some twenty-seven years within an enclosed order and, three of those years as a hermit, could identify so closely with his fellow man but, this he surely did. In fact he saw it as a responsibility of his particular vocation to speak out against violations of the unity which he perceived existed, through the grace of God, between all men and, out of this conviction was born, Merton the social critic; the peace activist; the racial equality campaigner; etc.¹⁴

Again this has been used to try and illustrate a lack of integrity in Merton's spirit but this again, is to totally misunderstand Merton: Jean Leclercq, an old friend of Merton and himself a monk, writing in the introduction to the book, 'Contemplation in a world of action,' says, "There were in him, not two men - for few personalities have been so well integrated as his - but two spheres of activity." George Woodcock in his critical study of Thomas Merton puts this even stronger than Leclercq when he says, "In the mature Merton we can perhaps see three beings existing, different but without conflict: Father Louis, who carried on the monastic and priestly duties; the nameless hermit who had gone like the ancient eremitic fathers into the desert of contemplation; and the creative writer who for convenience retained the

secular name of the past self, and whom the wider world knew. These three Mertons lived in harmony because they sustained each other and were in fact the aspects of a single whole, a human if distant reflection of the Trinity."¹⁵ The problem seems to have been that the world has only seen one aspect of these three Mertons and this partial view has led people into thinking that there was a great conflict raging between the man and the monk; this led people to question whether his sense of vocation had died, and there was much speculation about where he was and what he was doing. Such speculation was something Merton addressed in the preface to the Japanese edition of 'The Seven Storey Mountain',

Many rumours have been disseminated about me since I came to the monastery, most of them have assured people that I have left the monastery, that I had returned to New York, that I was in Europe, that I was in South America or Asia, that I had become a hermit, that I was married, that I had become a drunk, that I was dead."¹⁶

Whether this had the effect hoped for is by no means clear but, perhaps it made Merton feel easier.

I want now to try and illustrate something of the 'integrated personality' which Jean Leclercq

spoke of, as I mentioned above. To do this I propose to look at two particular areas of activity: those of Monk and of Writer. It is not however, my intention to show these two areas of activity as being opposed to one another but quite the reverse since they in no way constitute any kind of dichotomy in Merton's life or thought.

I have already quoted Lawrence Cunningham as saying that Merton was a Catholic thinker, let me explain, again quoting Cunningham; he says, "he [Merton that is] was one of those exemplary figures who shows us what it means to be a Christian believer - in profundis - while, at the same time, being unflinchingly open, to everything that might enlarge, give texture to, and deepen the existential choice of being a Christian."¹⁷ Merton's whole life was to experience the presence of God, not only during his times of meditation but all the time, as indeed is the aim of all Cistercian monks.

Thomas Merton was, I believe, prepared and perhaps even anxious, to use whatever means were at his disposal to deepen this 'existential' experience of the presence of God. This resulted in his study of a great many different traditions and religions, not because he was in any way disillusioned with the Christian Faith, but because he had managed to

shake off the prejudices which lie most of us to looking within our tradition for a method of development that deeper relationship with God! Merton we have a man who was able to teach us that it is possible to be truly religious without being formally religious. He has been able to prove to us that it is possible to find contemplation in the midst of restlessness and that, not only is it permissible to be fully human but that contemplation can actually help bring one to this 'fully human' state. He expresses in his work something which wants to live in each of us; his "Monkhood" can be seen as representing a search for the centre where, Merton would say, God is to be found. In as much as we all try to unify our lives around the centre all of us have something of the monk in us.¹⁸ The centre, as I've already pointed out, is in fact where God dwells in each individual!

To live as a monk, to enter an enclosed order, is to live a specific type of life. It is a type of life which has been described as living removed from 'the world' indeed, it was a term which Merton himself used. I have already quoted him as saying when talking about the role of the monk that, "He is called out of the world". However, this can be a misleading phrase since to say that the monk is to live apart from the world can imply the existence of some

kind of life which is separated from the world and which is somehow closer to God and therefore is of more value. This is not, I venture to say, what Merton had in mind when he spoke of a life apart from the world.

Merton addresses this particular issue in a collection of essays which are published under the title, 'Redeeming the Time'¹⁹ and in which he considers the relevance of the Second Vatican Council and what it had to say to the rest of the world; some of the insights he offers are a help to understanding his view of the 'Church' and its relationship to the world.²⁰

Merton recalls an occasion in New York when the Pope (John vi) addressed the united nations. The Pope spoke of mans urgent need for peace and justice and called to the nations of the world to collaborate in abolishing war and eliminating poverty. The war in Vietnam continued and Merton refers to a comment made by a U.S. Air Force general who said that America should bomb the North Vietnamese back into the stone age. The contrast between these two statements highlights the gulf which exists between the Church and the World: this prompts Merton to recall the classic Augustinian antithesis between the two cities, the City of God, of peace and love, the City of man and hate. But this is the remarkable thing: Merton finds in the

actual constitution of the Vatican Council something which is a reflection of his own personality! Far from wanting to draw attention to the great gulf, which no one could deny existed, between the Church and the World, Merton felt that there was a readiness, on the part of the Church to accept something of the responsibility for the state of affairs as they had developed and existed at that time.

The opening words of the Vatican Council Constitution runs thus, "The joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ." The Church then, was not seen as set apart from the world to sit in moral judgement and to rescue individual souls as it could. The Church was not the place where one went to escape the fallen world with its wars and its ambiguities: the Church is the world, the people of God in the midst of their suffering. The Church tries to affirm that in the world which is good, she identifies herself with the world by love and compassion.

This world denying view of the Church, which is perhaps still quite attractive to the modern Christian,²¹ was a product of the Middle Ages; which saw the world as inherently evil and secular life was, at best, a

poor risk compared to the 'unworldly life' of the monk, nun or priest. With this kind of 'World View' secular man finds himself divided between an 'outer' world with its frenzied activity and business and an 'interior' world to which he retires to recover something of his senses, to re-charge his batteries, as it were, in order to enter again the bitter struggle. There is almost a sense that man is expected to 'join in' the ruthless conflict and only periodically use the Church to purge or purify himself; he has one eye on the world and the other on the eternal reward.

This is I believe, a view of the Church which Merton could see existing and which he felt compelled to speak out about. Merton as a monk and a writer was concerned, not only with himself and his own environment but, with the hopes and aspirations of all men for a better world and for material well-being, he didn't see these as deserving of reproach: nor did he see these things as being alien to his existence as a monk. Though he was not physically involved in the struggle for survival in the sphere of what is often called secular life, he was intimately involved. He saw the monastery as a power house of prayer, it worked like a dynamo, generating power which, through the grace of God, was discharged into the wider world to

enable mankind, in some small way live as fully human a life possible.

We have already heard of what might call the 'Desert Perspective' and perhaps we have understood to mean a separation from the world as I've already noted, Merton prone to use this traditional turn of phrase; perhaps we might also have admit that the young Merton we have meant something quite different to the mature Merton when he used such terms as 'Flight from World'.²² It is not the sense of flight which is alien to Merton's thought, any flight must be seen in the light of what it is one is fleeing from, in this present case the 'world'. It is I believe essential to our understanding of Merton, to have a right understanding of what he meant by 'the world'. Talking in 'The Silent Life' Merton explains that 'the world' in this expression, 'Flight from the world' is the society of those who live for themselves. The first step if one is to leave the world is to leave oneself! This is done so that the person can live for those whom he loves. In point of fact this is what has always been the Christian ideal to Leave the Self Behind, to make the ultimate sacrifice.

Contemplation was the means by which Merton was able to make the ultimate sacrifice. The perfectly balanced

life which enabled him the search for God within himself and thereby move towards becoming a truly whole person or, to put it another way, a 'fully integrated personality'. This Merton might have said was learning to live with paradox; he explains it in the following way.

A man cannot enter into the deepest centre of himself and pass through that centre into God, unless he is able to pass entirely out of himself and empty himself and give himself to other people in the purity of selfless love." 23

The moment a person ceases to value himself more than any thing or anyone else, then he has left the world and is able to truly pray: not with the intellect, not with the lips or the imagination but pray in the very depth of his being. He becomes whole, what might be called, a 'oneness with God', to actually experience the very presence of God. This is the aim of the contemplative, this was the aim of Merton, an aim which I believe he came very close to fulfilling though he would never have admitted that.

So it was, through his profound relationship with God, Merton was prompted to speak out about the many injustices he saw man inflict upon his fellow man. Thomas Merton would have been the first to admit, I'm sure, that to enter into

contemplation for contemplation's sake would be to worship an idol just as surely as it would be to crave power or wealth. Without an expression of love for ones fellow man, in whom God dwells, contemplation is worthless. Merton explains in an unpublished work 'The Inner Experience' 24 that we don't renounce our attachment to things in order to attach ourselves to God, our renunciation of things is to leave us free to see and use all things in and for God.

Merton's writing then can be seen in the light of this last statement. It is something from which he has, in fact, become detached. He doesn't write to gain any satisfaction for himself, but rather to express the love he has for God and for his fellow man. It is God at the centre of his being which prompts Merton into action; this is not contrary to the life of the contemplative or, for that matter, the hermit. As I've already pointed out, for man to fulfil the will of God he must become fully human and to do this he must live in communion with his fellow man, even the hermit must do this but, as we have already heard, this does not depend on physical contact, but is achieved through our finding God at our centre, in finding God, there we find also our fellow man in Christ Jesus.

To conclude we might say then that,

"Merton was a man who sought to detach himself from the world; that is to say he stripped himself of his **False Self** and in doing so found an inner life of union with God and with

his fellow man. In his desire express his love, both for God his fellow man he entered into writing. In doing this he became and more united to God and his fellow man."

Stephen J. Hotchen.

Textual Notes

14. The Hidden Ground of Love; Ed. William H. Shannon, Farrar-Straus-Giroux, 1985. See the preface for an indication as to the variety of Merton's interests and correspondents.
15. Thomas Merton: Monk and Poet; George Woodcock, Canongate Publishing Ltd, 1978.
16. Ibid. George Woodcock draws attention to the distress which Merton felt at being misunderstood. See the introduction, particularly pages 2/3.
17. Toward an Integrated Humanity. Ed. M. Basil Pennington; an article by Lawrence S. Cunningham, 'Crossing Over in the Late Writings of Thomas Merton'.
18. Ibid. This concept is given expression in the appendix; 'Center Prayer', related by the editor.
19. 'Redeeming the Time'; Burns and Oates, 1966.
20. It should be noted that I do not here propose to comment on the documents of the Second Vatican Council, it is my sole intention to illustrate something of Merton's "world view" using his response to 'Vatican II'.
21. I am thinking here of the intermittent debate regarding the Church's involvement in politics; a debate which is continually fuelled by remarks from both churchmen and statesmen.
22. Merton certainly felt that he had escaped from the world when he fled to the desert. However, he soon came to realise that being contemplative actually involved him intimately in the very thing he thought he was running from. It was this realisation, in part, which helped to bring Merton to maturity.
23. 'New Seeds of Contemplation'; chapter 9, 'We are One Man'.
24. Reference to this manuscript can be found in 'Thomas Merton's Dark Path', by William H. Shannon.