

Reaping Where Merton has Sown: A Retreat for the Merton Centenary¹

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I – THE FALSE SELF

I AM STILL not sure about the theological orthodoxy of the often-heard affirmation, “Deus é brasileiro.” Tomara que seja [I hope so]. What I can assert with certainty is that Thomas Merton, whose first centenary of birth we commemorate and celebrate in this retreat, is Brazilian. How does he come by his citizenship? By being an extraordinary adept of the Brazilian cultural phenomenon of “anthropophagy.”

This term, as used in the *Semana da Arte Moderna* (whose centenary is likewise fast approaching) refers to a creative and transformative artistic capacity: the ability to take into oneself the artistic inheritance of another culture, assimilate it, and then with the inherent riches of one’s own culture give birth to something genuinely new. Evidently, we are not speaking of plagiarism or even of popularization. Popularization is the gift of being able to present in widely accessible terms, and with a certain diminution of intellectual and aesthetic quality, the thought of a more original and more difficult artist or thinker.

Merton was *not* a popularizer but an anthropophagist. For a reader formed in the Western mystical tradition, it is impossible not to perceive the marked influence of Saint Augustine, the early Cistercians (especially Saint Bernard), and Saint John of the Cross. Some chapters of our basic

1. A retreat given to the Brazilian Thomas Merton Society in October 2014.

text, *New Seeds of Contemplation*,² are literal reflections of key passages of these writers, and often enough there appear word-for-word citations (without attribution, as was the case with Bernard himself). But Merton, through the power of his intellect, his intense and consuming interior life, and his great literary gifts (which cover the whole range of literary possibilities from mordant sarcasm to ecstatic meta-language) truly took into himself this tradition, ruminated it, masticated it (the very heart of *lectio divina*), and came out with something wonderfully new: a genuine twentieth-century voicing of Christian mysticism, which became more and more enriched as it included (re-included) aspects sometimes absent from mystical writings but not from the great patristic tradition: social criticism, the rights of the diversely marginalized, the morality of armed conflict, ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. (By the way, the conflation of Cistercian spirituality, John of the Cross, and modernity is also typical of our former abbot general, Bernardo Olivera.)

One of the most interesting aspects of Merton's writings—which grew with the passage of time—is the tension between *pietas* and rebellion, loyalty and self-authenticity. It was his *pietas*, I believe, which led him to immerse himself during his whole adult life in the sacred texts of Christianity. It was his penchant for critique that provided the impetus for new formulations of these texts and new understandings of the implications of these texts in the life of the monk, the monastic community, the Catholic Church, and contemporary society.

With your permission, in these conferences I would like to apply Merton's anthropophagy to Merton himself, even without his geniality, taking as a basis what appear to me to be five central focuses of *New Seeds*: a) the false self, b) the true self, c) contemplation: the journey to the true self, d) *communio humanorum*, the communion of all human beings, and e) the place of Christ, Our Lady, and the Church. Part of what gives me courage to attempt this is a certain kinship between Merton and me: formed in the same university, members of the same religious Order, deeply interested in the same spiritual writers, a mixture of *pietas* and independence. What gives me more courage is your presence and your participation. As I said in the blurb contained in the announcement/invi-

2. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961). References in the text are to this book.

tation to this retreat, many of you have a much longer, wider, and deeper experience of Merton than I (who have tended not to wander beyond the seventeenth century). I am depending on your input, your intuitions, your corrections. At the same time, what most encourages me is the idea with which the retreat was initially proposed to me: Merton: Living the Heritage. To live a heritage is not the work of a manuscript copyist; it is finding fellowship, inspiration, and orientation in the work of a spiritual master. Let us try to do this together this weekend.

The “false self,” which at first sight might appear fundamentally a psychological concept, is for Merton above all a theological-anthropological concept, or rather, a perennial threat that has become a tragic reality, on the level of both the individual and of the culture. The false self is the human being detached from relationship to God. The problem is that God does not represent one of many persons with whom one may or may not be in relationship without genuine consequences to one’s being and destiny. The human person’s relationship to God *is* his identity. We are only ourselves within the context of his dynamic receptive and responsive relationship with God. You cannot find the perforated line where you can cut and separate the human being from God and still end up with a human being. You *do*, of course, end up with a “something.” But this something is the false self.

The false self, as Merton denominates it, is the “ego,” the “individual.” Individual means undivided within itself, but for Merton the weight of the word should be understood as placed on our division from other persons. At the center of the false self is a gaping hole. This hole, positively understood, is the human being’s innate and creatural receptivity to the inflowing of divine life. However, when a person closes himself off (culpably or not) to this primordial life, the hole is simply a hole.

It is not, however, a comfortable, or tolerable, hole. It is our “nakedness”—the true nakedness of Adam, naked on the inside, *despojado* [stripped] of God. We cannot bear to be in this situation, nor bear to experience ourselves in this situation. We therefore attempt the impossible: to build an identity on our own around a vacuum. This is, most specifically, the false self: the auto-constructed self where the “clothing” exists to conceal and deny (especially to oneself) the void at the center. It is the very contrary, at least on the surface, of the fairy tale “The Emperor’s

New Clothes.” In the story, there was a real, life-size emperor, but he was wearing nothing. Here there are plenty of accoutrements but they are all tightly wrapped around a hollow. Merton speaks frequently and compassionately about the human being’s doomed attempts to create a center by means of the addition of outward layers. The clues the individual makes use of to build up this construct are taken from the ambient culture. Having no treasure within the self, the poor human person has no choice but to absorb the dominant values of his society, which, in its vast majority, lives the same spiritual lostness as the individual himself.

The result of this for Merton is a horrible distortion of one of his most prized values: communion. The false self seeks intimacy, nearness, relation with others, not to give himself (*auto-doação*) or to create a truly human society, but to comfort himself within the warmth of the huddled mass. Merton has very strong words about secular consumerist conformity as well as about the lure of totalitarianism. In both cases, the individual has succumbed in a kind of despairing way to his impotence as a person and has been magnetized by the offer of an identity deriving from being a success in acquiring a large share of what society deems desirable, or an identity that in fact consists in a renunciation of personal integrity and the submission to a totalitarian ideology and its “leader.”

Tragically (but potentially salvifically) the human being remains profoundly dissatisfied with his existential situation. This dissatisfaction manifests itself above all in fear and hatred. Merton is convinced that at its root this hatred is hatred of oneself in one’s inauthenticity. This, however, is the more challenging form of hatred: it demands a certain degree of self-knowledge (based on real spiritual truth) as well as a certain moral courage: the capacity to endure the weight of one’s poverty without seeking scapegoats to which one can unconsciously transfer the blame and the pain. Much more frequent is the phenomenon of self-hatred processed through hatred of the other. For most people, it is quite simply unbearable to carry the weight of their self-hatred, and so the hatred is applied automatically to others: that is, reasons meriting hatred in others continually and spontaneously present themselves.

This mutual hatred is constantly simmering and ready to blaze out at any number of provocations, the majority of them, for Merton, having to do with the division of people into “us” and “them.” The “them,” the

others, are the necessary recipients of the load of fear and hatred that the false self bears within himself.

The solidarity of the “us” derives in the last analysis from the antipathy to the “them.” Were it possible to completely exterminate the “them,” the “us” would inevitably subdivide so that there could be a new “them” on which to project one’s self-hatred. It is important to see that for Merton the worst and largest social evils—above all nuclear war, about which Merton had an acute prophetic consciousness—are born from this misalliance of the individual with the false self.

One superficially paradoxical aspect of this self-hatred is the relentless pursuit of excellence, of being “better than others” (Merton bases himself in this chapter entirely on Bernard’s treatise on *The Steps of Humility and Pride*).³ As both Bernard and Merton demonstrate, this pursuit of excellence is extraordinarily competitive, combative, and hostile. It is an attempt to adore oneself out of the suffering of self-hatred and is realized at the cost of progressive and despising self-distancing from others: one’s fellow men and women, those in authority, God himself. It is pain, however, that motivates the entire process, and the more successful one is, the lonelier and the more miserable. The classic and supreme case of such auto-exclusion is the devil. Merton writes tellingly on the “Moral Theology of the Devil” and makes it clear that the devil’s theology is an obsession with evil, the evil of others as an antidote to the awareness of one’s own. Pope Francis has some very apposite texts on the obsession with evil on the part of some Christians and in his usual straightforward manner goes so far as to say that these people are not Christians.

No one can rescue himself from being a false self. It is part of the delusion of the false self to think that this is possible. I hope that this presentation of some of the false self’s facets has stimulated a painful but holy desire to receive and experience one’s true self. There would be no sense in Merton, or anyone else, saying so much about the false self if that were the only existential possibility. It isn’t. And to come into one’s true self is salvation.

3. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Treatises II*, trans. Robert Walton, CF 13 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1974).

II – THE TRUE SELF

THE TRUE SELF is the person we really are, is a free and active assumption and living out of our genuine identity.

The source of this identity is God. Obviously, God is the source of every being, and the source not simply as a Maker who fabricates something outside of himself and then leaves it to its separate existence, but as the secret mystery of every being, who remains within it, perennially vivifying it.

Saint John of the Cross says that there are three modes of divine presence in creatures: a) his presence by his creative and providential power in every existent being, b) his presence by grace in every baptized Christian, c) his presence recognized and adhered to by the human person through knowledge and love. It is in this third mode of presence that there exists the possibility of a fullness of relationship between God and the human person; it is this received and reflected presence that is the core of the Mertonian true self.

The human being in his true self recognizes that God is his source. His dependence on God for his personal being is not experienced as oppressive submission or as radical uncertainty, but as the ontological basis of his communion with God and as an utterly “dependable dependence”: the supreme Source will never fail to flow into his creatures.

The true self perceives that he is one of an infinite number of created words that God has uttered, all of them uttered in the Son (*seminarium entium*). God himself is present in each of these words, saying himself, expressing himself, in each of them. What God says within the creature is what he always says, “I am.” This divine self-expressive presence is the basis of the human person’s own assertion, “I am.” These two “I am’s” are not in competition, nor are they completely distinct. The little “I am” is rooted in the great “I am” because, as Saint Bernard says, “God is the being of all beings,” and as Merton puts it, God is my “other self.”

As the secret self of my self, God is not an “object”—not a “thing” to be analyzed, dominated, possessed, understood. Merton says that God is never a “what” but always a “who,” always a “thou.” He is the supreme mystery of our own person and he is infinitely more than that. The contact with him as the mystery of our own person, at the “point of my con-

tingent being which depends upon His love,” at the “metaphorical apex of existence where I am held in being by my Creator” (37) transcends itself in the experience of Him in the mystery of His own divine personhood.

Likewise, the true self does not reify itself. The authentic person does not deal with himself as an object, objectifying himself by clothing himself in the pseudo-identities that come through accomplishments, pleasures, possessions. He experiences himself contemplatively, through knowledge and love, reverencing himself within his reverence for his ultimate origin.

Merton says that the created word that we are is both question and answer. In choosing to give us being, God is posing a possibility, offering a fullness of identity. But this offer is by its very nature a question, which God himself cannot answer on his own. By the inestimable gift of liberty with which God has endowed us, he has given us the glory and the responsibility to decide how we will answer the question which we are. God “is” the answer, in the sense that unlimited communion with him is the beatifying fulfillment of our destiny. But God cannot “give” the answer, in the sense of making us take up the offer. His self-communication waits breathlessly on our response, as the angel Gabriel awaited the answer from the Virgin Mary at the Annunciation.

This point is of tremendous importance to Merton. It is crucial to his understanding of the true self. The authentic human person collaborates in the creation of his own identity and his own destiny. That is his special dignity and responsibility as a spiritual person. Only by synergism does the human person arrive at his goal: to become himself and in so doing to give glory to God, perfect happiness to himself and a new voice of communion in the symphony of creatures. One can shirk this most fundamental of responsibilities for the whole span of one’s existence, moving back and forth from one mask of the false self to another. The result however is deadly in the deepest sense of the word: One day, “there will be nothing left of me but my own nakedness and emptiness and hollowness, to tell me that *I am my own mistake*” (35).

How does one participate in the creation of one’s own self? Through the progressive, transforming welcome of God into one’s own life. This welcome comes about essentially through love and knowledge. Love for Merton manifests itself in the taking up by means of our liberty the in-

numerable seeds of grace (grace is not a thing but the life of God) God continually plants in us through responsiveness to his will. God's will in all the circumstances of our existence is the concrete manifestation of his loving wisdom. We assimilate this loving wisdom when we consent to it, not in the defeatist sense of giving in to one more powerful than ourselves, but in a trusting intuition of God's holiness and blessing present in each one of his dispositions. Central to the idea of the true self for Merton is "dialogue of deep wills," a resounding of the will of God by the active acceptance of it on our part. (This, by the way, is at the very heart of monastic obedience and explains why obedience according to Saint Benedict makes no sense if it is accomplished fearfully, unwillingly, reluctantly, foot-draggingly.) God is not occupied in giving us an unending series of orders (Merton speaks clearly about the harm such an understanding of God leads to and why it would make more sense to flee from such a God than to seek intimacy with him). His will, present in absolutely every circumstance of our existence, is his sanctifying life offered to us. By our learning to be still enough to identify this will in all its manifestations and trusting and generous enough to cooperate with it, God's love, which is what his will essentially is, gradually permeates us and penetrates to the center of our identity. It is not accidental that the *unio Spiritus* described as the apex of mystical experience by the Cistercians is frequently described as *unio voluntatum*. Through this union of wills, Merton says, in conformity with the whole mystical tradition, we can come to love as God loves.

As I said above, this welcoming of God comes through love *and* knowledge. As our love is a reception of God's love into our lives through our liberty, our knowledge is a reception of God's knowledge of ourselves through contemplation. The great and central chapter on humility in the *Rule of Saint Benedict* begins with the existential awareness that we are known by God. This is not mere theological affirmation, but concrete experience. The person comes to know himself precisely as someone known by God. For the person tending towards the true self, this being known is not terrible. Merton calls it "God's discovery of us," God's coming down from heaven to find us. The divine life in us, whether as love or knowledge, is never quiescent; it never is communicated to us as something that God does and that we allow him to do. *The divine life*

in us always has as its goal to live its divine activity in our subjectivity, that is, to capacitate us to live this selfsame divine life, to live divinely. If God comes down to us to discover us, to know us, the goal of that activity is necessarily to enable us to know ourselves with his knowledge of us and—astoundingly—to enable us to know *him* with his knowledge of himself. Merton writes, “His seeing us gives us a new being and a new mind in which we also discover Him. We only know Him insofar as we are known by Him, and our contemplation of him is a participation in his contemplation of Himself” (39).

To say “love” and “knowledge” is ultimately to say “the Holy Spirit” and “the Son.” God’s love and knowledge are not things, nor simply activities, but persons within his infinite Trinitarian life. The divine love that communicates God’s will to us and that enables us to fully assent and respond is the “mission” (the sending) of the Holy Spirit into our hearts; the divine knowledge that enables us to participate in God’s knowledge of himself is the mission of the Son into our minds. To become the true self is in the final analysis to receive the gift of the Son and the Spirit into our deepest self and to become one being with them. Merton’s mysticism is not a-theological but profoundly theological, especially when we remember that in the ancient Church, theology meant quite specifically the love and knowledge of the Holy Trinity. (Merton has some cutting remarks on those who want simply to bypass theology to arrive at “experience”).

The true self, Merton insists, is a true and unrepeatable self. The most primordial and inviolate manifestation of God’s love and wisdom in our existence is our very existence in all its particularity. What God most wills in willing me is me; what he most delights to know in knowing me is the utterly specifically me that I am. The true self rejoices in its singularity, in its being “one of a kind,” all the while participating in the universe of billions of one of a kind. Merton uses the favorite term of the Jesuit poet Hopkins, “in scape” (Duns Scotus, *haeccitas*). The true self does not compete, does not compare, is not threatened by alterity. It glories in the being given to it by God and in God.

All of this can seem very Edenic, and, as we know, monastic and patristic theology often spoke of the work of God in us as a return to Eden. Merton himself was very aware that Eden does not simply happen; it is not a question of one day waking up in the joy of discovering that God

has exchanged one's false self for a true self. There are tremendous obstacles that have to be overcome: "As long as I am on earth, my mind and will remain more or less impervious to the missions of God's Word and Holy Spirit. I do not easily receive his light" (42). Why? "Because I am born in selfishness. I am born self-centered. And this is original sin" (43).

I do not say this to throw cold water on everything that Merton has been saying in the course of this conference. On the contrary: by God's grace and our liberty there is a way beyond these obstacles, a way that is the focus of the second half of *New Seeds*, the journey of contemplation. Merton wants us to know that it is an arduous journey: "Let no one hope to find in contemplation an escape from anguish, from conflict, or from doubt" (12). But this is not said to discourage us. There is an "*além*" [a "beyond"], which John of the Cross called the experience of the "living flame of love" and which Merton tasted as well. It is the light of this flame that illumines his works.

III – CONTEMPLATION AND THE JOURNEY TO THE TRUE SELF

IN THE FIRST conference we made an initial reflection about the false self; in the second conference we sketched out Merton's notion of the true self, and we concluded with the importance of attaining to the true self. But how are these two selves related, and how do we reach the true self?

Perhaps the most important thing to say about the false self as we begin is that it for Merton its "falseness" has to do with something much more profound than a moral fault. The false self is false precisely because it is an illusion; it does not really exist. It is a negation of our only genuine identity, our identity in the eyes of God (who is Truth), the person we really are. This negation creates out of nothing a pseudo-self (remember the hollow center?) and maintains it, holds on to it, with an incredible tenacity, the tenacity of attachment. The attachment of the false self is universal and "omnivorous." Merton writes: "All sin starts from the assumption that my false self . . . is the fundamental reality of life to which everything in the universe is ordered" (34-35).

The distance between what the false self (the Pauline "old man who

decays by illusion and desire, [Eph 4:22]) is—nothing—and its pretension—to be everything, to have everything, and to be at the center of everything—is infinite. It would be laughable, if it were not tragic, because the false self makes impossible the life of the true self: it substitutes it, it stifles it. The false self lives off the vitality of the true self as the demons in *The Life of Saint Anthony* live off the credence we place in their power. Just as the demons have been definitively vanquished by the power of Christ's resurrection and have no strength except that which we give them by believing in their strength (and that can be almost total), so the false self—the unreal self—has no genuine existence except that which we give it by allowing it to assume a shape and a solidity through our collaboration with its *modus vivendi*: attachment.

With this it becomes clear that the only way of unmasking and unmaking the false self and being introduced into the true self is through detachment. To let go of the false self at progressively more profound and more resistant levels is indispensable spiritual work, *the* indispensable spiritual work, for anyone who wishes to be given back his real—his only—identity. “The issue on which all sanctity depends is renunciation, detachment, self-denial” (255).

Before we begin to look at this process of detachment, in which Merton follows very closely the teaching of Saint John of the Cross and whose description occupies a third of *New Seeds* (chapters 25 to 38), two important affirmations should be made: 1) the unmaking of the false self, for all the struggle and anguish that it may involve on our part, is essentially a divine work, not a human work. For Merton, everything would be lost if the creation of a true self were considered as a personal accomplishment. This would mean nothing less than the complete victory of the ego—the ego that in transcending itself by itself divinizes itself—and the frustration of God's loving plan. The necessity that this process be understood as God's work and not ours (understood not just intellectually but at the very core of our being) explains the importance of key terms that Merton will use in his description of the process, such as poverty, inward destitution, night: “The dark night is a pure gift of God.” 2) Although in Merton's analysis of the process, especially in the beginning and for a good, long stretch, the stripping away is what is most emphasized (we think of the order of the four great treatises of Saint John of the Cross, in

which negation apparently dominates almost completely in the first two volumes), he is utterly conscious (much more than we the readers) that the entire process is essentially God's restitution to us of our true identity and that God's self-communication, self-gift, is both the dynamism of the process and the fulfillment of the process. Merton shows himself at his most lyrical and most sublime when he describes the moments of divine in-breaking as the process comes to its culmination, and above all when he describes its definitive (in this present life) taking place in the last chapter of the process, "Pure Love." It may be that it was Merton's pastoral concern for the reader that led him, as a contemplative teacher, to begin the book with the wonderfully inviting first chapter, "What is Contemplation?" and the others immediately following and hold off on initiating the description of the work of detachment until the middle of the work.

We are not surprised or affronted when Merton takes as his point of departure the need to become detached from "gross and sensual things." As he puts with his Columbia brand of humor, "Before you become a saint, you have to become human. An animal cannot be a contemplative" (256). For this first battle towards detachment, "fighting deliberate and evident vices," Merton recommends a direct, no punches held, approach. Flexibility may be necessary when one finds that one's methods are insufficient to overcome vice, but dogged perseverance is the chief requisite, along with awareness that "to avoid sin and practice virtue is only the beginning of what God asks of you" (256).

A crucial second step for the person who desires freedom and the new life is detachment from spiritual perks, those things which John of the Cross describes in the *Ascent* as the "way of the imperfect spirit." Whoever insists on inner peace, inner comfort, the preservation of one's own self-respect along the spiritual journey (what today we would call the "maintenance of a positive self-image" and what Merton considered the acme of spiritual quackery; it was already current in U.S. pop psychology in the fifties when Merton was writing this book) is doing no more than seeking the survival of the false self, even if on a slightly more refined and less coarse level. As in Saint John's illustration for the *Ascent*, the path of such a person briefly and waveringly rises, soon to disappear off the map.

The same thing holds true for recollection and all other so-called

spiritual consolations. The person on the journey should be looking for “God alone” (the motto inscribed on Gethsemani’s portal), and all spiritual satisfactions are simply creatures, no less a creature than a glass of beer (this against the Manicheanism and hatred of the body and the physical world that for Merton was a deeply suspect tendency in many ascetic writings).

Another important aspect of detachment from the false self is the acceptance of obedience, of spiritual direction with authority. The very involvement of it is (or at least should be) a death to a very strong attachment to the self-evident rightness and cogency of our personal ideas and intuitions, which Saint Bernard describes as *iudicium proprium*, the intellectual correlative of *voluntas propria*. The errors that everyone commits in the journey towards detachment and that frequently cost dearly, and the corresponding growth in self-knowledge, should lead any sane person to desire to be guided. Merton puts it very strongly: “The Spirit of God gives them [those who seek interior freedom] a desire for the simplest means of overcoming their own selfishness and blindness of judgment. And this is obedience to the judgment and guidance of another” (193–94). Merton goes so far as to speak of a “passion for obedience” (194).

A genuine non-attachment to one’s ideas is certainly a significant move towards the fortress of the false self. Anyone dedicated to the preservation of one’s ego would never allow another to question, let alone to counter his own ideas, particularly his own ideas about himself, his behavior, his character, his need for spiritual growth, and the best way of collaborating with God’s action. Merton sees that many would-be contemplatives have been shipwrecked on this reef as well as on the other ones already mentioned.

In Merton’s case, the question leads him to an important advance. If generous renunciation and unremitting effort help to overcome self-attachment in relation to material pleasures and possessions (by the way, Merton has an important passage on the absolute necessity for simplicity and some degree of material poverty in order one day to arrive at the new self), if this renunciation can successfully be applied to spiritual satisfactions, if obedience can liberate us from the domination of our own thinking, *what* will enable the renunciation and uprooting of all our *un-*

conscious attachments to created things and to our own will and desires? (256). Merton terms this struggle “the crucial problem of perfection and interior purity.” The obvious difficulty is that we have no way to get to them by means of our intellect—they are, precisely, unconscious—and our will will be of no use at all to us. On the contrary, it will be our enemy. For here our will, at least on the unconscious level, is the ally of the false self. Something decidedly more central is being touched on here, something akin to the “other law” that Saint Paul describes as being continually active in him and which impeded him in his obedience to the law of God. As with Saint Paul, Merton sees man’s helplessness at this juncture. To be liberated from unconscious attachments, God himself will have to act: “We need to leave the initiative in the hands of God working in our souls, either directly in the night of aridity and suffering, or through events and other men” (257).

Merton sees this moment—the encounter with the unconscious attachments, their partial breaking through into consciousness, their persistence and ineradicability, the awareness of the harm they do to oneself and to others, the intense misery this causes the spiritual sojourner—as the point where “many holy people break down and go to pieces” (258). At the same time, it is a moment beyond price. The passage merits being quoted at greater length:

It is in this darkness, when there is nothing left in us that can please or comfort our own minds, when we seem to be useless and worthy of all contempt, when we seem to have failed, when we seem to be destroyed and devoured, it is then that the deep and secret selfishness that is too close for us to identify is stripped away from our souls. It is in this darkness that we find true liberty. . . . This is the night which empties us and makes us pure. (258)

At this point, you, my listeners, are probably crying out for Mercy. Let us cry together: “Mercy!” Actually, all of this is the action of the relentless divine mercy (what Merton termed “mercy within mercy within mercy”). It is God saving *us*, as Merton put it, and not just “saving our souls.” What we actually need is the *coup de grâce*, and it is now that Merton leads us to it. It has two parts, two times.

The first part is called by Merton “inward destitution.” It can only come after long years spent in the search for God and spiritual freedom,

spent with as much generosity and dedication as the person is capable of. Without this investment, the inward destitution would not be possible. What is it? On the one hand it is the conviction that everything has been in vain, that you will never reach the only thing you desired, the one thing for which you were made. Let us listen to Merton:

Measure, if you can, the sorrow of realizing that you have a nature destined by God for a beatitude which utterly transcends everything that you are and can ever be; of finding yourself left with nothing but yourself; of finding yourself without the gift which is the only meaning of your existence. (262)

One has asked God for the *unum necessarium*, and it has not been, will not be, granted.

If that weren't bad enough (and we are still in the first part), there comes a truly revolting discovery. The spiritual seeker, in addition to being deprived of his unique *desideratum*, peers into the mirror of his self and sees that "your nature is still twisted and disfigured by selfishness and by the disorder of sin, and that you are cramped and warped by a way of living that turns you incessantly back upon your own pleasure and your own interest, and that you cannot escape this distortion: that you cannot even deserve to escape it by your own power, what will your sorrow be?" (262–63).

Believe it or not, Merton says that this experience, which he calls compunction, this "great poverty," is the "beginning of joy." The false self has been radically frustrated, radically defeated. The holiest and dearest of its desires, the desire for the supreme happiness that is God, and that is the most fundamental and most licit of desires, has been denied to it. Up until this point, at some intangible level, at some nucleus of the person, the false self has continued to survive and function (always parasitically), consenting to renounce everything partial, to become almost nothing, so as to have the All. And now it is has been denied.

You might think that this would kill the person. But it doesn't. The person, "beaten down and lying flat with his mouth in the dust, hoping for hope" (263), recognizes that the "whole meaning of our life is a poverty and an emptiness which, far from being a defeat, are really the pledge of all the great supernatural gifts of which they are a potency" (264). The

human person waits, with patience and impatience, awaiting God's time, "to be free and rid of all the last obstacles and attachments that still stand between him and that emptiness that will be capable of being filled with God" (264–65). He waits for his own death—that is, the death of his false self.

And it happens. God has been working towards it from the very beginning of the pilgrimage, and if he has never given up, he whose power and love alone have enabled us to persevere, it is because of the infiniteness of the gift he has desired from all eternity: the gift of himself in our self, the gift of God living his life in our life, the gift of two apparently separate lives being revealed in their deepest identity: God's life in mine, my life in God. The false self, in the most important sense of the term, was false because it was outside of God, separate from God.

Not any longer. Listen to some of Merton's ecstatic utterances:

The separate entity that is you apparently disappears and nothing seems to be left but a pure freedom indistinguishable from infinite Freedom, love identified with Love. Not two loves, one waiting for the other, striving for the other, seeking for the other, but Love loving in Freedom. (283)

Contemplation is no longer something infused by God into a created subject, so much as God living in God and identifying a created life with his own Life so that there is nothing left of any significance but God living in God. (284)

So it is with the one who has vanished into God by pure contemplation. God alone is left. He is the 'I' (Let us repeat that phrase: 'He is the 'I' who acts. . . . He is the one who loves and knows and rejoices. (286–87)

For Merton, as for Bernard and John of the Cross, it is in this way that the first commandment, to love God with one's whole mind, heart, soul, and strength is fulfilled in its integrity: God loving God in myself, whom he has so intimately united to himself.

Two tasks remain in this conference: an affirmation and a question. The affirmation: again and again, ever more profoundly and with ever greater certainty, Merton proclaimed that contemplation is not *part* of life, it *is* life. This means that the contemplative experience described

above is not something that is *had*, with greater or lesser frequency, intensity, totality. As Merton writes here in the chapter "Pure Love": "You are not you, you are fruition. . . . You do not have an experience, you become Experience" (283). Not at selected moments (selected either by you or by God) but in what Eckhart calls the "eternal now."

The question: Is the goal worth the process? I hope with all my heart that your answer is "yes," that my question draws out your affirmation.

IV – THE FLIGHT TO UNITY

AT SOME EARLY point in Merton's career as a writer, an astute observer noted that Merton's true literary genre was not fiction, poetry, or even theology, but rather, spiritual autobiography. This indeed was the line that Merton ended up following, not only in such explicitly autobiographical works as *The Seven Storey Mountain* and *The Sign of Jonas* (and of course his voluminous correspondence and his journals), but in almost all his writings, including *New Seeds of Contemplation*. And nowhere in this work is Merton more autobiographical than in the chapters where he describes the *volte-face* he made from the *fuga mundi* to what he poetically termed the "flight to unity."

Actually, at the same time that Merton is delineating his own personal spiritual history, he is closely following Saint Bernard's treatise on *The Steps of Humility and Pride*. This ought not surprise us, and for two reasons: 1) Saint Bernard is describing an archetypical monastic process, and 2) it is natural that the views and the spiritual orientation of a foundational figure in a religious order enter into the very feeling and thinking of monks of succeeding generations. This is why we speak of "Our Father Saint Bernard."

Merton speaks in chapters 7 to 10 of *New Seeds* of the human person's desire to "make himself real." Erroneously, a person believes that he can achieve this end "by cutting himself off from other people and building a barrier of contrast and distinction between himself and other men" (47). For the time being, Merton says, this is the only way that the person who does not truly know God can conceive of establishing his own reality. This yearning for a self-sufficient reality is so strong that it leads to the

desire to “establish the finite self as infinite, permanently independent of all other beings” (52).⁴

The monk is the classic case of a person seeking to define himself by his difference from others, by his superiority *vis à vis* other persons, by his “not being like other men” (the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican, Lk 18:9–14). To achieve this end, he possesses two special instruments: asceticism and prayer. Obviously asceticism and prayer, rightly understood and rightly applied, are genuine means towards sanctification; unfortunately and almost inevitably they are subsumed into the quest for the infinite self. In this quest, the monk seeks to place himself above others by introversion and sublimation: by going more and more deeply into himself (in separation from others) and in a neo-platonic ascension to the level of the divine. For a long time, says Merton, the monk (or anyone else who practices this spiritual isolationism) can fool himself into thinking he is achieving his end: “He burns with self-admiration and thinks: ‘It is the fire of the love of God’” (50).

What saves the monk, if he is truly seeking God (despite all the massive impurities and egoism latent in his search), is the experience of failure, failure that comes through the divinely conceded gift of self-knowledge. At some point the veil of delusion that he wove for himself is ripped in two and he perceives that, just like all the others, he is not worthy. He has not succeeded in making himself perfect; he *is* like other men after all. He is a sinner.

Where to turn to now? The self-styled saint (whether monk or lay person, whether his quest is through asceticism or learning or any other activity that can make him believe in and repose in his own excellence) goes into a tailspin. What saves him is the revelation of God’s mercy, a theme that assumed ever greater prominence in Merton’s writings. This piercing intuition leads Merton to say, in a beautiful re-phrasing of 1 Jn 4:10, “The root of Christian love is not the will to love, but *the faith that one is loved*. That one is loved *by God*. The faith that one is loved by God, although unworthy—or rather, irrespective of one’s worth” (75).

This intuition is not intellectual but existential: it produces a perma-

4. See John Cassian, *The Institutes*, trans. Boniface Ramsey, ACW 58 (New York: Newman, 1997) Book 12, “The Spirit of Pride,” 253–80.

ment “shaking of the foundations.” Everything has been turned inside out. As Merton puts it,

One of the paradoxes of the mystical life is this: that a man cannot enter into the deepest center of himself and pass through that center 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 a selfless love. (64)

But as the Virgin Mary said to Gabriel, “How can this be?” “How,” Merton asks, can “I who am without love become love?” (63)—and Merton the monk has by now recognized that to be love is the unique and universal human vocation, certainly the only one big enough for the human person made in the image of God. The only way that this transformation from the self-centeredness of original sin can take place is “if Love identifies me with Himself. If He sends His own love, Himself, to act and love in me and in all that I do, then I shall be transformed” (63).

This in fact is what God does, above all through the infusion of his own love into the human heart by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. And the results are colossal.

In the first place this identifying of the human person with divine love itself leads to a universal compassion. The genuinely holy person—that is, the person who has been made holy by the unmerited gift of divine *agape*—has been delivered “from the burden of judging others, condemning other men” (57). He is no longer interested in being different than others but is immersed in solidarity, a solidarity that starts with the “realization that he himself is one of them [sinners] and that all together need the mercy of God!” (57). This realization in turn inspires him to wish to serve, without denying his personal sinner-identity, as a minister of God’s compassion, “to bring the good out of others by compassion, mercy, and pardon” (57).

And to his surprise, the good in others, in poor, sinful humanity, is very great indeed. The proud self-seeking man blinded himself to everything in other persons except their defects, which served as a ladder for his own exaltation. Now that the blinders are off (for good), such people

are able to exult in the virtues and goodness of others more than ever they could have done in their own. They are so dazzled by the reflection of God in the souls of the men they live with that they no longer have

any power to condemn anything that they see in another. Even in the greatest sinners they see virtues and goodness that no one else can find.
(60)

What comes after the sense of “communion in misery” and “communion in grace”⁵ is a willingness to participate heart and soul in the effort to recompose the dismembered Body of Christ. This Body, broken by all kinds of hatred between Christians (and others as well) can have its “bones reset” if there are people who are willing to pay the price of this “physiotherapy.” “There are two things which people can do about the pain of disunion with others. They can hate or they can love. Hatred recoils from the sacrifice and sorrow that are the price of this resetting of bones” (72).

Love, on the contrary, is willing to pay the price. And the price is not some esoteric mystery. It is very simple. It is “to treat other men as if they were men. Not to act as if I alone were a man and every other human were an animal or a piece of furniture” (76). Although not recondite, constancy in treating other persons as persons is not something automatic; it is not a product of secular humanism. For Merton, the ability to habitually treat others as human beings results from a transfusion of the divine compassion into us. It is that which confirms us in our determination to work for the overcoming of disunion.

The overcoming of disunion, according to Merton (and all the Church Fathers) is one of the two supreme and interwoven ends of the Incarnation.⁶ As Merton says: “For Christianity is not merely a doctrine or a system of beliefs, it is Christ living in us and uniting men to one another in His own Life and Unity” (77). This is what Christ did in his Incarnation, Passion, and Resurrection and what he continues to do until the end of time: “gather into unity the scattered children of God” (Jn 11:52).

Christ is effective in his work, and the person freed from the blindness of pride perceives that in Christ, this unity is already present, although *in obscurity*:

This unity is something we cannot yet realize and enjoy except in the

5. See “On the Coenobitic or Common Life” in Baldwin of Ford, *Spiritual Tractates, Volume Two*, trans. David N. Bell, CF 41 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1986) 156–94.

6. See Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: The Social Aspect of the Dogma*, trans. Lancelot Sheppard (London: Burns, 1950).

darkness of faith. But even here the more we are one with God, the more we are united with one another; and the silence of contemplation is deep, rich unity not only with God but with men. (66)

Merton, knowingly or not (probably knowingly) accompanies Baldwin into the last communion: the communion in glory.⁷ It is in God's eternal glory that we will be most united with one another, *perfectly* united with one another. It will not be merely a communion of love (as we conceive it) or of understanding; it will be a communion of being, a communion of persons, where all those in Christ will live not only in God and God in them, but each one of them will live in all the others.⁸ It will be an unbroken and uninterrupted circle of life and love passing among us. It will be (the most beautiful thing that could be said about it) a complete reflection of the mutual indwelling of the persons of the Blessed Trinity: "We will one day live in God and in one another as the Persons of God live in one another" (69). For "the ultimate perfection of the contemplative life is not a heaven of separate individuals, each one viewing his separate intuition of God; it is a sea of love which flows through the One Body of all the elect, all the angels and saints, and their contemplation would be incomplete if it were not shared" (65).

So intimately related, so personally related, will we be, that the beatitude of one will be increased by the beatitude of the other, by the beatitude of all the others.

Merton looks joyfully to the future: "Because God's love is in me, it can come to you from a different and special direction that would be closed if He did not live in me" (67). And we must remember, it is not a question of one "me" and one "you" but of an infinite number of "me's and you's." God's love will come to me from all the "you's" that live in the blessed vision of God. And God's love living in me will go out from me to all the you's that live in the blessed vision of God. Then will be brought to pass the marvelous prophecy of Saint Augustine in his commentary on 1 John: "And there will be one Christ, loving Himself."

We conclude where we began—with "becoming real." Here is Mer-

7. See Baldwin of Ford, Tractate 15, *Spiritual Tractates*, vol. 2, trans. David N. Bell, CF 41 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1986) 156–191.

8. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Life Everlasting. Amen," *Credo, Meditations on the Apostles' Creed*, trans. David Kipp (New York: Crossroad, 1990) 99–104.

ton's appeal: "Let us live in this love and this happiness, you and I and all of us, in the love of Christ and in contemplation, for this is where we find ourselves and one another as we truly are. It is only in this love that we at last become real" (67–68).

V – CHRIST, THE "SUBJECT" OF CONTEMPLATION; MARY, THE MODEL OF CONTEMPLATION

AS WE BEGIN this final conference of our retreat, I see a photo of Merton on a big billboard, with his cap and work jacket—and his special smile. The legend: "Contemplation: It's more than just an experience!"

New Seeds makes it absolutely clear that contemplation is not an "experience" as we ordinarily understand it, wherein the praying individual, unique subject in the situation, through his contemplative activity comes to possess or enjoy a divine object in an aesthetic or mystical form. This would simply put us back into the world of the self-seeking ego and the false self, and the only purpose of contemplation would be the satisfaction and well-being that the experience furnishes the "contemplative."

No; for Merton, contemplation is relation: relation between us and Christ. More exactly, in Merton's own words, it is "the transsubjective union of love which does not unite an object with a subject but *two subjects in one affective union*" (153). Note that Merton says "transsubjective" rather than the more common "intersubjective." This is utterly intentional. His purpose is to say that in this completely personal union of two subjects, Christ and I, there is much more than mere "interaction" going on. Rather, Christ dwells in me and acts in me, and I dwell in and act in him—each of the two subjects actively participating in the life of the other, as well as in his own. Merton will go so far as to say that such "living in Christ" (which is what contemplation aims at, and why contemplation is indispensable for this life in Christ to truly come to fulfillment) is "a mystery equal to that of the Incarnation and similar to it" (158). For

as Christ unites in His one Person the two natures of God and of man, so too in making us His friends He dwells in us, uniting us intimately to Himself. Dwelling in us He becomes as it were our superior self, for He has united and identified our inmost self with Himself. (158)

The key word is *union*, or as John of the Cross would put it, “transforming union.” Contemplation is not a hobby, a pastime, the highest and most rarified of spiritual pleasures. It is a union of lives—not ontological, to be sure, as in the union between the Father and the Son, but “more than just a moral union or an agreement of hearts” (159). What kind of union is it then? Merton describes it as a “mystical union” (mystical implying permanent and not transitory) “in which Christ Himself becomes the source and principle of divine life in me” (159). This union is accomplished to such an extent that “a ‘new being’ is brought into existence. I become a ‘new man’ and this new man, spiritually and mystically one identity, *is at once Christ and myself*” (158, italics added). Contemplation, therefore, cannot be considered one among many of our human activities. It is the process of Christ transforming us into himself by the grace and power of his Holy Spirit. It is the reason and the enacting of our whole existence.

But *vamos com calma* (go slowly). As Saint Thomas says, “What is first in intention is last in execution.” What I have just described is the completion of a process with a long history, a process that begins with faith. This faith is a welcoming assent of both mind and heart to Christ’s revelation of himself—through the Scriptures, through the teachings of the Church, through the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Christ’s self-revelation is the manifestation of his love for us and a statement of intent on his part to dwell within us, to make his home in us, as Saint John writes. In fact “from the moment that we have responded with faith and charity” to this gift of Christ, “a supernatural union of our souls with His indwelling divine person” is established (158).

Normally, this presence within is not immediately perceived as such. In the beginning of the life of contemplative prayer, says Merton, we seek to make contact with Christ through *the imagination*, “picturing Christ as we think He must have looked” (151), and relating to him through the image we have created. Merton readily admits that “the normal way to contemplation is a belief in Christ that is born of thoughtful consideration of His life and teaching” (151). But thoughtful consideration does not necessarily mean imagination, and certainly, affirms Merton, it is not necessary to form a mental picture of the man Jesus every time one wishes to relate to him in prayer.

On the contrary, a simple “loving awareness” of Jesus through the

invocation of his name or through an “indistinct, unanalyzed notion” of Him (154–55) is “a thing more real and more valuable by far than anything we can arrive at by our interior senses alone” (155). Why? Because “Jesus himself causes this love to spring up within us, by a direct and personal effect of His will” (155). In fact, according to Merton, the whole purpose of passing through this stage of “reflecting on images of Jesus in our memory” is “that we may be prepared for this more intimate contact with Him by love” (155). Those of you who practice centering prayer or Christian meditation know exactly what Merton is talking about here.

Our imagination, utterly fallible, will never “teach us who Christ is and form Christ in us and transform us into other Christs” (156). This inward teaching, forming, and transforming is the work of the Holy Spirit. And the best way to let him realize his work and to allow Christ’s presence to become stronger and more determinative in us by “having in our heart the affections and dispositions that were those of Christ on earth” (157) is to *abrir mão* (let go) of images once and for all (radically different than to let go of Christ). As Merton expresses it in his habitually forceful manner, “Enter into the darkness of interior renunciation [the renunciation of images and concepts], strip your soul of images and let Christ form Himself in you by His Cross” (157).

This union that Christ realizes through self-communication and our transformation in contemplation is still not finished. Our whole soul is to be softened by a freely chosen exposure to and acceptance of God’s will, by not shrinking away from “the heat of the fire that is meant to soften and prepare you to become your true self” (161). Through this process, Merton says, we are being made ready to “receive at our death the seal of our own degree of likeness to God in Christ” (161). This heat, this fire, is Christ’s Holy Spirit, the “mystery of selfless love” (159). As he warms us, he “in-breathes” himself into us, and since his very nature is to be selfless love, to receive him in his selfless gift of himself is to be moved to give him to others with the same selflessness. “We receive Him in the ‘inspiration’ of secret love, and we give Him to others in the outgoing of our own charity” (159). Our life becomes a perpetual receiving God and giving God.

In *New Seeds*, Merton describes continual prayer in Eucharistic terms. For him it is crucial that the union with himself that Christ real-

izes with us in contemplation not be restricted to “a hidden supernatural participation in the divine life in eternity, but a participation in a divine mystery, a *sacred action* in which God himself enters into time,” the redemptive sacrifice of the Cross (163). Contemplative prayer is caught up in liturgical prayer, in our participation in the Mass, the great saving act of God in Christ, “an act of incomprehensible scope and magnitude, that . . . pursues you wherever you go; and in all the situations of your daily life . . . makes upon you secret and insistent demands for agreement and consent” (162). Here it becomes clear that liturgy and contemplation do not compete, do not alternate, but that the very reality of the Eucharist (both as celebration and in holy communion) is itself Christ’s “presence and continuous action going on within you.” Through participation in the Mass and the reception of Christ’s body and blood, Christ becomes “this anonymous Accomplice burning within you like a deep and peaceful fire” (162). This contemplation is not only individual but “mystical and cosmic.” It joins not only the individual Christian to Christ, but all Christians to one another in Christ, and the whole cosmos to God in Christ. “The whole creation as well as the labor of man in all his legitimate natural aspirations is elevated, consecrated and transformed” (166). In liturgical contemplation, all privatism is transcended.

From the time of the first Cistercians, Mary has been seen as the model of contemplation. Merton’s particular devotion to Our Lady manifested itself even before his entrance into Gethsemani, especially in an experience of her love that he had during a college vacation in Cuba.

Mary, for Merton, in her whole human person is the epitome of the contemplative’s active receptivity to Christ. Positively, “she is . . . in all her human and womanly limitations, [the] *one who has believed*” (170). She takes God at his word (believes in his word), and she lives according to his word. She has faith and faithfulness. In Mary, this dynamic openness to God through faith encounters no resistance whatsoever. There is no egoistic self-assertion in Mary. In herself she is poor, humble, empty, pure, peaceful, silent. “She is as nothing in the presence of Christ, of God” (169). All that obstructs the advent of Christ into our souls—self-sufficiency, pride, arrogance, sensuality, violence, restlessness, noise—is not found in her. She was protected from their onslaught by her Immaculate Conception. “She was, in the highest sense, a person precisely because,

being ‘immaculate,’ she was free from every taint of selfishness that might obscure God’s light in her being” (171). As a result she can be filled with God, “she can receive Him into the world, she can offer him the hospitality of a being that is . . . centered in utter humility” (169). She has nothing that she has not received from Christ, and this is her greatest glory.

But Mary is more than an example of the inner virtues that dispose us towards contemplation. She is mediatrix of the life of contemplation. “If we ever manage to empty ourselves of the noise of the world and of our own passions,” writes Merton, “it is because she has been sent close to us by God” (169). The fundamental contemplative attitudes spring up and are nurtured in us when, by God’s mercy, we live in proximity to Mary. Merton goes further: these attitudes thrive in us as a participation in the sanctity and hiddenness of Mary.

Ultimately, what Mary communicates to us (and this is the fullness of her contemplation) is not her own sanctity. “Because she is . . . the one who has absolutely nothing whatever that she attempts to possess as her own . . . she can most fully communicate to us the grace of the infinitely selfless God” (173).

The infinitely selfless God dwelling in the utterly poor human person. Absolute fullness emptying itself into radical poverty that glories in receiving everything from God and glories in having nothing of its own, nothing but what it has received from God, glories in giving all back to God in love and praise, glories in giving it all to other men and women in love and compassion. A poverty and a hiddenness glorified and enriched by God without ever ceasing to be poverty and hiddenness. Mary, Mertonian image (not poetic but real) of the contemplative, image of the word he revered above all others in talking about human beings: Mary, a *person*.

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