

H O M I L Y
for
The Funeral Mass
of
Father Louis Merton, o.c.s.o.

December 17, 1968

by
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"It is not as an author, dear reader, that I would speak to you, not as a story teller, not as a philosopher, not as a friend only: I speak to you in some way as your other self. Who can tell what this may mean?

I myself do not know. But if you listen things will be said that are perhaps not written in this book. But this will be due not to me but to One who lives and speaks in you and me."

Thomas Merton

Preface to Japanese edition
of the Seven Storey Mountain 1963.

On Dec. 10th, 1941 a young man of 26, comparatively unknown entered this Trappist Cistercian monastery of Gethsemani. Thomas Merton entered a monastery whose reputation as a house of prayer, silence, solitude and sacrifice, was known somewhat throughout the Catholic world but relatively unknown to the American public or the world-at-large.

On Dec. 10, 1968 that same man, now 53 but just as young at heart - Trappist monk, priest, world-famous author of some 20 books, not to mention the hundreds of articles, reviews, paintings and photographic studies, departed this life as Father Louis Merton in far-away Bangkok while on a mission for the Church - the Church he loved so well and served so faithfully both here at Gethsemani in his monastic commitment, and in the world through his writings. After he left on his mission to Asia - a mission which was finally to take him to the eternal dwelling of his heavenly Father, he wrote frequently of how much he missed what he left behind - the mind and heart of his love here in this House of God. Nothing short of the call to serve God in the unselfish cause of monasticism in the East could have taken him away from his beloved Gethsemani.

When we talked the night before he left on this mysteriously providential journey, he said to me: "Of course I will come back but only if God wills it, and if He doesn't, what better place and time to leave this world." We heard a beautiful echo of all this in the touching words which Father Flavian addressed to us at the requiem Mass on last Wednesday when he said: "The possibility of death was not absent from his mind - we spoke of this before he set out at first jokingly, then seriously. He was ready for it. He even saw a certain fittingness in dying over there amidst those Asian monks who symbolized for him man's ancient and perennial desire for the deep things of God. And though he died away from us in body he did not die away from us in spirit."

Anyone who has had the privilege of meeting with Fr. Louis could not fail to recognize in him the great artist he was and the great spiritual force he

was and still is. This was brought home to me quite vividly in the homily from which I have quoted. Speaking of Fr. Louis' message as "the same for all of us"- Fr. Flavian added: "each of us would receive this message differently and this is the way Fr. Louis would have it - for, we are men of God only in so far as we are seeking God and God will only be found by us in so far as we find Him in the truth about ourselves - and Fr. Louis undertook this trip to Asia in the spirit of this same quest for God."

Now, this privileged task of paying final tribute to your "Louie", and our "Ton" and the world's "Thomas Merton", coming as it does from the great generosity of the hearts of all concerned, is indeed a magnanimous one but one that makes us feel all the more how inadequate I am to perform it. For though I have known him for the past 30 years as student, writer of world renown, priest and monk of great intellectual and moral depth, close friend over these 30 years and loving associate for the past ten in our work here at the Abbey of Gethsemani - despite all this - I hardly feel prepared to talk about what I personally regard as his true greatness: that deep and abiding sense of God in Christ - and of God in man through Christ - of Christ in His Church - Christ in each one of us through the action of His Holy Spirit - the Christ of God who in the spirit of His love lives in the people of God - the Christ who is in us when we love and serve one another in true brotherhood - when we realize that we are not our brother's keeper but our brother's brother.

Let us try then to envision this man of great spiritual power and personal depth - the man whose vocation in the Church and in the world lies hidden in the mind and heart of Christ - the mystery of a saintly life en route to the Beatific Vision. We see at once how the depth of his Faith in God nurtured his prayer life and how his prayer life increased his spiritual power and enriched his person. Like Newman he had his problems but he too also knew that a thousand difficulties do not make a single doubt. He told his friends in his Christmas letter of last year that he dispelled the temptation to doubt as soon as it appeared. "Away with you, enemy of my Faith!" True his search for God was at times thorny but he never wavered in his steadfast devotion to the God of his deeply religious Faith. In return he was given great gifts of mind and heart and his humility, patience and perseverance were the added rewards of his abiding Faith.

All these gifts which contributed so much to his spiritual genius are seldom given to men in the proportion in which they were given to him - and it was this spiritual genius that brought him ever so close to all men to God everywhere regardless of their race, creed or color. He inspired love and trust in

God and as a consequence he brought to his religion and to the Christian Church in her all-embracing catholicity a deeper sense of things spiritual.

And it was this great spiritual sense of things and people, the charism he, no doubt, shared with Pope John the XXIII, that gave him that powerful insight of the unity of spirit and person in all of us - the living truth they shared with the Fathers of the early Church. Neither Fr. Louis nor Pope John thought very much of the scholastic doctrine which abstractly referred to men as individual substances of rational nature who hope to give their lives a spiritual quality by dedicating their thoughts, words and activities to a transcendent God, one whom they recognize as the Creator and End of their being - an All-Powerful God who exacts all this from us as the price we must pay for our spirituality and moral perfection. NO - this kind of spirituality, though commendable in itself, did not suffice for these men of spiritual genius.

Their discourse was on a deeper level - and one, I think, more humanly satisfying to the people of God - a level on which God meets man in men - and men encounter God in the God-man who is in each man when men find their true selves. And so the spiritual to Fr. Louis and Pope John was not primarily the work of man - be he the most noble and dedicated of men. The spiritual is primarily the work of God in us and which we continue in our offerings to God, for God accepts only that which is truly spiritual - as when we say to Him in the Canon of the Mass: "Make it truly spiritual and acceptable." And it is truly spiritual because it is a work begun by God and continued by men. Thus it is the authentic search for God in the person of each and everyone of us - that person through whose likeness we are conformed to God through the Son of God in the Person of the Holy Spirit. This is the spiritual life in which men and angels are conceived by God from the beginning - the work we continue through the exercise of our natural and divine gifts. —The truth of the spiritual life in creation - fulfilling the person in us - through what God wills for each and everyone in our pilgrimage through life. It is the manifestation of Truth in the Spirit of Love. And the external act of offering thus becomes significantly efficacious when it is seen as the expression of the inner act of the person in the all-embracing Spirit of God's love.

If we but realized this sufficiently, as Fr. Louis said and wrote, we would not be making all the absurd statements we sometimes do about body and soul - as for instance, when we think of the person as a composite of body and soul, thus identifying the person with the nature in us, and so confusing the means with the end of our existence. Or perhaps when we think of the person as soul or the person as body in the one-sided thinking of some philosophers

and theologians. Fr. Louis saw clearly that the ambiguity of the person seen as a composite nature yields to the temptation of idealism on the one hand, and materialism, on the other. Through such teaching the spiritual life and the religious life become impossible in practice. The consequence is that for the most part the practice of true spirituality and true religion remains without any philosophical or theological foundation. The people of God must live by Faith alone, that is without any support from their nature. Fr. Louis saw this as a pity because God gave us rational nature to be used as a means in living the truths of our Faith.

Face to face with this realization no wonder Pope John and Fr. Louis were revolutionaries! And they are now together directing their revolution.

Therefore they call upon the Church on earth to reconsider in her doctrinal teachings the notions of body, soul and person and further to conform her liturgy to their revampment and reappraisal. When this is done the legal structure of the Church will find its true significance in the adjustment of the moral to the spiritual rather than the converse which is altogether too often the case. Like with John XXIII this was Fr. Louis' deep concern during his lifetime and I feel sure that same concern will remain with him in his life with God in the abode of the blessed.

It was the deep concern for the Church in this age of ecumenism. The Church re-examining her doctrines in the Spirit of Truth Who is God - Who is Love - for the name of God to a Christian is and must be Love. And when we worship God as Love we reach to everyone who is in that Love. This is why Fr. Louis in his devotion to God as Love went out to every human being. Those who received this out-going recognized it. And their response was always the same: "to want to love God more."

When I congratulated him for having written a best-seller in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, he answered that he was not concerned about the best-seller, but ever so many people wrote in to say the book made them want to love God more, and that pleased him.

We could call many witnesses to bear out this, but I will call only one. Speaking of this spiritual quality in Fr. Louis' works, his great friend, the distinguished philosopher, Jacques Maritain, wrote these words to a mutual friend: "The essential thing is that they make their way into people's souls - and they seem to be spontaneously adopted to the American soul and attuned to touch it." But what I want to say is that American finds herself now at a critical turning point in her spiritual evolution - the great call to the

spiritual life experienced by the American conscience - the desire for contemplation which has welled up in a numerous elite is an event of capital importance in the history of the Church.

And when Maritain came here to Gethsemani 3 years ago he said to me as he was leaving that he asked God for the special grace to come to Gethsemani before departing this life so that: "I may have the experience of God's Truth in personal encounter with Tom Merton." It was a joyful meeting in which I was privileged to participate. It brought me back in memory to Fr. Louis' own ordination day when he came out to the front garden and talked to us (all characters of the Mt.). His discourse was centered around what he called: "the pursuit of truth in the very presence of truth" and he emphasized the point that no man can remain in the truth unless he is constantly pursuing it and the reward is the joy of always having what you are always pursuing. What a contrast to those of us who accept the Faith and do nothing about it, like the servant in the Gospel who buried the treasure, but Fr. Louis is indulgent.

From another approach, in the communication on the occasion of the institution of the Merton Room at Bellarmine-Ursuline College, Fr. Louis pointed out with much emphasis the fact that "no Christian has to realize in himself all the truths and all the mysteries of the Christian Faith. For we are all members of one another, and what one cannot do, the other does for him. "I suppose," he said, "that one of the things which will make this event meaningful for the college and the Church, is that I seem in some way to be designated by God to articulate some experience of this mystery for all of you.

"And whatever I may have written, I think, can be all reduced in the end to this one root truth:

that God calls human persons to union with Himself and with one another in Christ, in the Church which is His mystical body - it is also a witness to the fact that there is and must be in the Church a contemplative life which has no other function than to realize these mysterious things and return to God all the things and praise that human hearts can give Him."

To me this reference to the role of the contemplative life in the Church is the key to the understanding of much that Fr. Louis has written, at the moment it suggests Fr. Louis' Easter homily of last year and with some reference to it - I should like to bring this homily to a close. Taking as his text Mark 16: vs. 6 and 7 (He is risen, he is not here - he is going before you into Galilee) Fr. Louis tells us that "this cult of the place where Christ

is no longer to be found can be valid only on one condition - THAT WE ARE WILLING TO MOVE ON - to follow Him where we are not yet - to seek Him where He goes before us. We are called therefore to experience the truth of the Resurrection in our own lives by entering into its dynamic movement, by following Christ who lives in us. And Christ lives in us if WE LOVE ONE ANOTHER. Our love for one another means involvement in one another's history - the new future we build for one another and that future we call the 'Kingdom of God'."

"And although the Kingdom of God is already established and is a present reality, there is still work to be done. Christ calls us to work together in building His kingdom. This is the message of the Church EVERYDAY OF EVERY YEAR and every year until the world's end....This is the dynamism which is at the heart of the Christian faith and the life of the Church - the action of Christ in us by His Holy Spirit....this is why in the Easter sequence, the Church sings of the duel of death and life in our heart - a bitter desperate fight, the combat of life and death in us, the battle of human despair against Christian hope. But let us remember the risen life is also a dying life - for the presence of the resurrection in our lives means the PRESENCE OF THE CROSS (the focus of all contemplative life.) For we cannot rise with Christ unless we first die with Him. And it is by the cross that we enter the dynamism of creative transformation - the dynamism of resurrection and renewal - the DYNAMISM OF LOVE."

Fr. Louis then asks us:

"Recall the holy women - when they arrived at the tomb - they found the stone was rolled away - but the fact that it was rolled away made little difference. The Lord had risen!

"So too with us. When Christ was risen, we were risen. The resurrection of our bodies is something we can look forward to in the Christian economy of our salvation. For we work out our salvation with Christ in a world already redeemed by Him. It is a pity therefore that we create obscure religious problems for ourselves trying desperately to break through to a dead Christ behind a tombstone. Such problems are absurd - because they are based on false thinking. And even if we could roll away the stone we would not find the body because Christ is not dead. He is not a kind of super religious heirloom. He is not there - He is risen. And the risen Lord is Spirit and Life - the Son of the Living God."

Fr. Louis then gives the final exhortation:

"Today let us come with Faith to the banquet of the lamb, the risen Savior - to the bread of Life which is not the food of the dead but the true

and risen body of Christ. He who encounters the risen Christ in the banquet of his body and blood shall live forever!

"Come, people of God, Christ our Passover is sacrificed. And in sharing his banquet we pass with him from death to life.

HE IS RISEN

HE IS GOING BEFORE US INTO HIS KINGDOM

ALLELUIA

GLORY ALLELUIA

His Truth is marching on
With Brother Louie in the vanguard
leading the marchers.

Thanks be to God.