

## The Joy of Being Catholic: The Relationship of the Conversion of Thomas Merton to the RCIA\*

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We live in a time when converting to Catholicism is a significant, if quiet, phenomenon. According to the 1999 *Catholic Almanac*, in the USA in 1998 more than 161,600 adults were either baptized as Catholics or received into full communion with the Catholic Church. In 1997 the figure was slightly higher at more than 162,000. In a popular culture where being an ex-Catholic is almost fashionable, and taking seriously any form of institutional, Western Christian religion makes one culturally suspect, these numbers may well give us pause.

At the same time, many life-long Catholics tend to be curmudgeonly about being Catholic. In Dickens' novel *Bleak House*, Mr Jarndyce has a small room he calls his 'growlery'. 'When I am out of humour', Mr Jarndyce says, 'I come and growl here.'<sup>1</sup> Whether of a progressive or traditional bent, many Catholics today tend to make the Church their growlery; they feel that they cannot go about being Catholic without being 'out of humour' about whatever they believe is wrong with the Church.

I wish the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin's Catholic Common Ground Initiative much success. At the same time, I also recall some words of Catholic convert G.K. Chesterton: 'Catholics know the two or three transcendental truths upon which they do agree; and take rather a pleasure in disagreeing on all the rest.'

\* The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) is the liturgical and catechetical process by which adults are either prepared for baptism as Roman Catholics or, if they are already baptized in another church, for initiation into full communion with the Catholic Church.

1. Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, Chapter 8.

In an era when there is no short supply of Catholic curmudgeons, when Catholic disagreements are rampant, it may be well to recall the simple joy of being Catholic; it may be well to let converts to Catholicism remind us of the joy they find in becoming Catholic. Every conversion to Catholicism is, of course, unique. Each new Catholic has a unique story to tell about his or her journey to the Church, and certainly people who convert in this post-Vatican II, RCIA era, have a different experience than did converts sixty years ago, when Thomas Merton converted to Catholicism. Still, I believe we today may learn something about conversion to Catholicism, and about being Catholic, if we reflect on the conversion experience of Thomas Merton.

Merton developed intellectually and spiritually to the point where he could criticize institutional aspects of the church with the best of them. All the same, to the end of his life he remained both realistic about and grateful for his Catholic faith. If anyone understood the joy of becoming Catholic, it was Thomas Merton. Perhaps by examining Merton's conversion and his thoughts on Catholicism we can learn something about ministry to prospective and new Catholics, and about being Catholic in today's church and today's world.

Merton's own comments about his conversion and about Catholicism are found in his journals and letters and, of course, in his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Other relevant remarks from Merton on this topic surface, or are implied, in his other books, and Merton's various biographers offer the occasional insight.

I shall divide my look at Thomas Merton's conversion and his thoughts on being Catholic into five phases: the youthful years prior to becoming Catholic, Merton's conversion experience itself, then the early, middle, and final Catholic years. With seven volumes of the journals and five volumes of letters, plus all of Merton's books, there is so much material, of course, that I cannot hope to say all that should be said. Nevertheless, I hope to touch on the high points.

### **The Years Prior to Becoming Catholic**

We know from Merton's own remarks that in retrospect, at least, he believed that the seeds for his conversion to Catholicism were sown early in life. For approximately the first half of his life Thomas Merton lived without a formal religious faith. This is not to say, however, that there were no religious influences in Merton's life during his childhood and adolescence. Tom's father, Owen Merton, seems to have had an Anglican faith that, for the most part, he kept to himself, although he did have Tom baptized.

Apart from this, however, I believe that the death of his mother, Ruth Merton, when he was 6, and the death of his father, when he was nearly 16, had a profound spiritual impact on Merton. In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, more than two decades after Ruth Merton's death from cancer, the experience was still fresh in her son's mind and imagination. Merton wrote about reading a note sent to him by his mother as she lay dying:

I took the note out under the maple tree in the back yard, and worked over it, until I made it all out, and had gathered what it really meant. And a tremendous weight of sadness and depression settled on me. It was not the grief of a child, with pangs of sorrow and many tears. It had something of the heavy perplexity and doom of adult grief...<sup>2</sup>

I have no trouble understanding the feelings Merton described, and I do not doubt that he could have such feelings at the age of six. I remember having similar feelings myself. When I was seven we lived in north central Idaho, and my parents left me for one month in the care of an older woman while they travelled to a distant city so my father could have surgery on his knee. I clearly remember walking outside one evening after dark, looking up at the vast and starry universe, and feeling completely alone—'lost in the cosmos', to borrow a phrase from Walker Percy.

I have even thought that this experience had something to do with how important Catholicism later became for me, after my baptism at the age of nine. At any rate, if I could have such depth of feeling merely from being left alone for one month, how much more could the six-year-old Thomas Merton feel sadness, depression, 'the heavy perplexity and doom of adult grief' when his mother died?

Ten years later, when his father succumbed to a brain tumor, Merton experienced the same emotional and spiritual desolation, but this time it was the experience of an adolescent: 'The death of my father left me sad and depressed for a couple of months', he wrote.<sup>3</sup>

Coupled with being orphaned by the age of 16 was the fact that the only homes Merton ever had were temporary. As a child and adolescent, for the most part he lived with his maternal grandparents, moved around with his father, or stayed in boarding schools. Even at Gethsemani Merton struggled with how the monastery was home for him. Oddly enough, only as he prepared for his ill-fated 1968 journey

2. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1948), p. 14.

3. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 85.

to the East did Merton speak of 'going home'. But the point is that on top of the emptiness left by the deaths of his parents, Merton's lack of an earthly home only added to his rootlessness.

For someone as sensitive to the mystery of life as Merton was, I believe the deaths of his parents and his homelessness resulted in a kind of cosmic loneliness, a deep emptiness that left him open to two possible directions, either a life of artistic despair and intellectual nihilism, or religious conversion. As it turned out, the mysterious grace of God bubbled up in the center of Merton's emptiness. His loneliness never left him, but it made him sensitive to the kinds of questions Catholicism responds to, not with crystal-clear answers but with the mysterious, life-giving presence of the risen Christ; with Sacred Tradition, Scripture, and Sacraments.

It would be years before Thomas Merton would embrace Catholicism, and during those years he would engage in considerable thrashing about before the light would dawn. He was a creative, intellectually gifted young man. But he was also afflicted, as we all are, with a radical self-centeredness, an inner drive to worship at the cold, bare altar of what Merton would later call the false self.

During a childhood lived in France and England, some seeds of Christian faith in general, and Catholicism, in particular, were sown. The parish church was the very center of the French town where Tom and his father lived. In his autobiography, Merton thought, in retrospect:

Oh, what a thing it is, to live in a place that is so constructed that you are forced, in spite of yourself, to be at least a virtual contemplative! Where all day long your eyes must turn, again and again, to the House that hides the Sacramental Christ!<sup>4</sup>

Merton wrote of wandering the French countryside as a boy, coming upon the ruins of medieval monasteries. He also remembered a French peasant Catholic family that he and Owen lived with the summer Tom was nine years old. Many years later, Merton learned that his stay with this family was prescribed by a physician so that he might recover from a touch of tuberculosis.<sup>5</sup> But all he remembered as he wrote his autobiography was that this devout Catholic family was 'among the most remarkable people I ever knew'.<sup>6</sup> 'Their farm, their

4. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 37.

5. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), pp. 37-38.

6. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 56.

family, and their church were all that occupied these good souls', he said; 'and their lives were full'.<sup>7</sup>

This encounter with early twentieth-century rural French Catholicism had an impact on Merton. It was one of the times of his young life that touched him deeply so that memories of these weeks came rushing back as, years later, he traced the tracks of God's love in his own life.

Three years in France, while a lycée student, also left Tom with the only two memories he had of his father showing something of his own Christianity:

I shall never forget a casual remark Father happened to make in which he told me of St. Peter's betrayal of Christ, and how, on hearing the cock crow, Peter went out and wept bitterly... We were just talking casually, standing in the hall of the flat we had taken... I have never lost the vivid picture I got, at that moment, of Peter going out and weeping bitterly.<sup>8</sup>

The other memory Merton had was of a response Owen made to a woman who spoke of despising one of her neighbors:

He asked her why she thought Christ had told people to love their enemies. Did she suppose God commanded this for His benefit? Did He get anything out of it that He really needed from us? Or was it rather for our own good that He had given us this commandment? He told her that if she had any sense, she would love other people if only for the sake of the good and health and peace of her own soul.<sup>9</sup>

Later in England, where father and son had moved when Tom was ten, Owen lay dying and unable to speak. But he made drawings Merton described as 'little, irate Byzantine-looking saints with beards and great halos'.<sup>10</sup> Merton took these drawings as an indication that his father's faith was active as he faced death.

There are studies which suggest that the father has a greater impact on the religious development of his children than their mother.<sup>11</sup> If there is anything to this, then we must allow that on those rare occasions when Owen Merton revealed something of his own Christian faith to his son, he contributed in a some way to the direction Tom's life took in later years.

7. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 56.

8. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 54.

9. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 54.

10. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 83.

11. See Michael E. Lamb (ed.), *The Role of the Father in Child Development* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2nd rev. edn, 1981), esp. Martin L. Hoffman, 'The Role of the Father in Moral Internalization', pp. 359-78.

Nevertheless, after the death of his father, Tom was unable to make any sense of it at all. Indeed, he felt devoid of any spiritual life. He gladly abandoned any semblance of religion in favor of a future dedicated to his own false liberty and independence. In fact, Merton became almost a prototypical twentieth-century teenager, sure that he had everything figured out. 'I believed', he later wrote, 'in the beautiful myth about having a good time so long as it does not hurt anybody else.'<sup>12</sup> When a gangrenous toe infection laid him low, convinced that life was meaningless, he viewed death with apathy.

All the same, if Merton's adolescent intellect failed him in the face of death, his imagination subsequently took up the slack. The summer he was seventeen, Tom visited Rome, and the old churches touched him deeply. This was particularly true, he later said, of the old Byzantine mosaics. 'For the first time in my whole life', he wrote, 'I began to find out something of who this Person was that men call Christ.'<sup>13</sup>

During this time, on his visit to the Basilica of Santa Sabina, Merton actually prayed. He dipped his fingers in a holy water font and made the sign of the cross.<sup>14</sup> I wonder what prompted him to do that. Had he observed others doing so and followed their example? He also recited the Our Father over and over again, so somewhere along the line he had memorized that prayer.

During this same visit to Rome, one evening alone in his room Tom had an experience of his deceased father's presence, and I don't think we should underestimate the power of experiences like this, which are more common than we may think.<sup>15</sup> In his autobiography, Merton described the experience as if he wanted to both insist on the reality of what happened and, at the same time, reassure the reader that he had not slipped a psychological gear:

I was in my room. It was night. The light was on. Suddenly it seemed to me that Father, who had now been dead more than a year, was there with me. The sense of his presence was as vivid and as real and as startling as if he had touched my arm or spoken to me. The whole thing passed in a flash, but in that flash, instantly, I was overwhelmed with a sudden and profound insight into the misery and corruption of my own soul, and I was pierced deeply with a light that made me realize some-

12. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 103.

13. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 109.

14. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, pp. 112-13.

15. See Andrew M. Greeley, *Religion As Poetry* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1995), Chapter 12, 'Religious Stories and Contact With the Dead'. See also Mitch Finley, *Whispers of Love: Encounters with Deceased Relatives and Friends* (New York: Crossroad, 1995).

thing of the condition I was in, and I was filled with horror at what I saw, and my whole being rose up in revolt against what was within me, and my soul desired escape and liberation and freedom from all this with an intensity and an urgency unlike anything I had ever known before.<sup>16</sup>

The result was that Tom began to approach prayer seriously for the first time in his life, 'out of the very roots of my life and of my being', he said.<sup>17</sup> Something important happened, to be sure. But remember that this was the experience of a youth barely 17 years old. When he visited New York during the following summer Tom's Roman 'conversion' experience slipped from consciousness, and when he returned to England and Cambridge University, his life sank to a new low in more ways than one. He became sexually promiscuous and eventually fathered a child—almost a ho-hummer in our jaded times, but a major transgression then. It is also likely that in the course of a drunken party in November, 1933, Merton allowed himself to be nailed to a cross in a mock crucifixion.<sup>18</sup>

These months might be called Merton's 'bottoming out' experience, and they belong to the story of his conversion. For according to modern recovery theory, in many cases a person cannot begin recovery until he or she has 'hit bottom'.

The following summer, 1934, Tom stayed in the United States and attended Columbia. Not least among the reasons was that his guardian, Tom Bennett, wanted nothing more to do with him after learning of Merton's wild lifestyle and that he had gotten a girl pregnant.

What does all this have to do with Thomas Merton's eventual conversion to Catholicism? I believe it can mean several things, not least of which is that we should never give up hope for wayward relatives and friends and should never stop praying for them. A loving, patient God sometimes works in the human heart in the most mysterious ways. I also believe that petitionary prayer is a mystery that can make a difference in the lives of other people.

### Merton's Conversion Experience

Young Tom Merton now entered upon the time in his life that would lead to his actual conversion to Catholicism. The mediators of grace

16. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 111.

17. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 111.

18. See Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, p. 128. See also Jim Forest, *Living with Wisdom: A Life of Thomas Merton* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), p. 30.

for Merton were—as William Shannon notes in *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story*—books and friends.<sup>19</sup> Merton was a reader, so as he later remarked, he ‘was turned on like a pinball machine by Blake, Thomas Aquinas, Augustine, Eckhart, Coomaraswamy, Traherne, Hopkins, [and] Maritain.’<sup>20</sup>

Friends played a key role in Merton’s conversion, too. Some—such as Ed Rice and Dan Walsh—were Catholic; some of them—such as Mark Van Doren—were not Catholic and never would be; others—such as Robert Lax—would become Catholic later. All, however, played a role in helping Merton along the path to becoming Catholic.

After his conversion and after entering Gethsemani, Merton saw clearly the priority of personal relationships to the life of faith. ‘Great though books may be’, he wrote, ‘friends though they may be to us, they are no substitute for persons’.<sup>21</sup>

Much as we might hope that it might be true of converts today, that they would all be voracious readers, such is rarely the case. Most participants in parish RCIA programs are average persons of our time and culture. They are good-hearted people who go to work, watch television, and marry. Indeed, not infrequently they come to Catholicism by marrying a Catholic. They have families and friends.

Whereas for Merton books were at least as important as friends in his journey to Catholicism, today’s converts are more likely to find relationships with other people the key element in their conversion. Perhaps because we live in a culture that alienates people from one another, potential converts often find attractive the contemporary Catholic emphasis on community.

Catholic parish leaders and those who direct RCIA programs should be cautious, however, about encouraging or being satisfied with an understanding of ‘community’ that is superficial, little more than an after-Sunday Mass, coffee-and-donuts conviviality. For the community that Catholicism offers is the communion of saints, the universal faith community to which Merton was attracted; an experience of community that includes but transcends space and time. Indeed, it was because he found and participated in this transcendent Christian community that Merton valued his relationships with other

19. See William H. Shannon, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), p. 21.

20. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979), p. 13.

21. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1956), p. 63.

people and could be more patient with other people's faults and idiosyncracies, as well as his own.

Remarks from two noteworthy writers illustrate what I mean, and I think Merton would have immediately identified with what these two writers say. The first comment is from Flannery O'Connor, whose work Merton admired. In one of her letters, written in November 1960, O'Connor recalls a time a few years earlier when she attended Mass each day:

I went to St. Mary's as it was right around the corner and I could get there practically every morning. I went there three years and never knew a soul in that congregation or any of the priests, but it was not necessary. As soon as I went in the door I was at home...<sup>22</sup>

We may be inclined to dismiss Flannery O'Connor's remark as a mere manifestation of the privatized spirituality of the pre-Vatican II parish. The second comment, however, is from Annie Dillard, a post-Vatican II writer Merton never knew about. Her first book, the Pulitzer prize-winning *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, wasn't published until more than four years after Merton's death. Annie Dillard reads and quotes Merton, however, and she converted to Catholicism a few years ago. Annie Dillard says that one of the things she found most attractive about Catholicism was that 'nobody pays any attention to you whatsoever when you go to a Catholic church. You're always anonymous... Here we all were...and I got to join anonymously, as a cipher, a representative of just one person in the chorus of praise and petition'.<sup>23</sup>

There are Catholics today who would read these words of Flannery O'Connor and Annie Dillard and be horrified: 'Why, if we take what they say seriously we will regress to a time when Catholic spirituality was individualistic!' It's debatable whether even popular Catholic piety, much less any authentic Catholic spirituality, was ever as individualistic as popular post-Vatican II opinion thinks it was. Regardless, I would say that if we don't appreciate what Flannery O'Connor and Annie Dillard are talking about, we don't understand the Catholic meaning of 'community' or the various Catholic meanings of 'church'.

Merton understood this when he emphasized the importance of inner spiritual solitude and the presence of others in one's solitude.

22. Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being* (selected and ed. Sally Fitzgerald; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979), p. 422.

23. Quoted in Ray Kelleher, 'Pilgrim at Planet Earth', *Notre Dame Magazine* (Winter 1998-99), p. 26.

'There is no true solitude', he wrote, 'except interior solitude. And interior solitude is not possible for anyone who does not accept his right place in relation to other men... Solitude is not separation.'<sup>24</sup>

If people today come to Catholic parishes and find a warm, welcoming 'community of faith', all well and good. But 'getting hugs' during the sharing of the sign of peace should not become the high point of the liturgy. If we take guidance from Merton, as well as from O'Connor and Dillard, we need to introduce converts and potential converts to the importance of solitude and the deeper spiritual meaning of 'community'. If we don't do this, converts are liable to remain on the surface of Catholicism, and they are liable to drift away from the church when they find themselves in different circumstances, in a parish, for example, that does not embrace the 'support group' model of parish; that does not offer, at least on the surface, a warm social womb or welcoming shelter from the world. It is possible for a parish to have a rich, nourishing sacramental and spiritual life without stationing smiling, glad-handing greeters at the doors before every Sunday Mass.

Returning to the progression of Merton's conversion, however, at Columbia he found the environment he needed. In Mark Van Doren he found a teacher who, he said, helped him to appreciate the truth for its own sake. At Columbia, Merton's journey to Catholicism took shape in earnest. The proximate intellectual foundations for his conversion came from his reading of authors such as Etienne Gilson and Aldous Huxley. In his journal, less than two weeks before he entered Gethsemani, Merton mentioned *Ends and Means*, by Huxley, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, by Gilson, Maritain's *Art and Scholasticism*, the poetry of William Blake, *Mysticism*, by Evelyn Underhill, and *A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man*, by James Joyce. He said that all of these books played a part in his conversion.<sup>25</sup> As time passed at Columbia, Merton also had his first contact with eastern mysticism, although he was not as impressed with it as he would be in the 1960s.

While we can admit that today's average convert to Catholicism is not likely to be as much of an intellectual as Merton was, still I believe we need to take seriously the need to give converts an adequate cognitive grounding for their faith. Becoming Catholic is not simply a response to a set of feelings or emotional needs, although these are

24. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), p. 56.

25. Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation* (ed. Patrick Hart; Journals, I, 1939-1945; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), pp. 454-55.

valid and have their place. RCIA programs, influenced by developments in catechetical methods since Vatican II, sometimes adopt a heavily experiential, process-oriented approach. This model clearly has its advantages, but it may also short-change converts by not impressing on them the importance of cognitive development in the life of faith.

Merton consulted books on Eastern mysticism early in his journey to faith, and later his mature Catholicism led him to cast a wide net, drawing on all kinds of religious and philosophical traditions to enrich his own faith and spirituality. This makes him an outstanding reminder that the Catholicism that is likely to be most attractive to people today is a Catholicism that embraces a 'catholic' outlook with a lower-case 'c'; a Catholicism that is open to goodness, truth, and beauty wherever it may be found. Lest we should assume this to be a relatively recent Catholic perspective, recall the words of St Thomas Aquinas: 'Every truth without exception and whoever may utter it is from the Holy Spirit'.<sup>26</sup>

It is well known, of course, that Merton's path to Catholicism was influenced by a Hindu monk named Brahmachari, whom he met in 1938. Unlike some Eastern religious guides today, but in company with the current Dalai Lama, Brahmachari encouraged Merton to stick to his own Western Christian tradition, and to read the spiritual writings of the West. Read St Augustine and Thomas à Kempis, Brahmachari said. Unlike many spiritual wayfarers today who concoct an eclectic spiritual mix for themselves, Brahmachari knew that in order to gather wisdom from other faith traditions a person must first be rooted in one religious tradition, preferably one that is close to home.

Finally, in July of 1938, Merton began the last leg of his journey to Catholicism. Taking Brahmachari's advice, he read Augustine's *Confessions* and *The Imitation of Christ*, and he began to make prayer a part of his daily life. Then, one Sunday morning in August, Thomas Merton went to a Catholic church, Corpus Christi, to attend Mass. Still, he seemed content to be an observer until one afternoon in late September, when—in the middle of reading about the conversion of Gerard Manley Hopkins—he found himself wondering what he was waiting for.

Now it is important to notice how natural and unforced this all was. It was as if something needed to take root in Merton's heart and

26. Tony Castle (ed.), *The New Book of Christian Quotations* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), p. 244.

gradually grow to a certain point before he was ready to become a Catholic. Working with people in RCIA programs today, sometimes there can be a tendency to presume too much, to move people through the RCIA process in a lockstep fashion. I think people need to be encouraged to let whatever needs to grow and develop in themselves grow and develop, and not feel that once in the RCIA process there is no exit, no way to step aside or pause.

Once Merton reached that point, however, the next step seemed natural. He met with a priest and arranged to 'take instructions', as the process was called in those days. A couple of months later, the morning of 16 November 1938, he was baptized.

### The Early Catholic Years

Relationships with other people continued to be an important part of Merton's faith development, most notably with Dan Walsh, from whom he took a course on Thomas Aquinas. While Merton's early spirituality had some of the characteristics of Catholic piety at the time, his understanding of faith was remarkably mature. In his journal, less than a year after his baptism, Merton described Catholic faith in a way that could be recommended to any Catholic or prospective Catholic today:

It should be the great pride and strength of every Catholic that we have no ready, ten-minute, brisk, chatty answer to the question what we believe, except in the words of the Apostle's [sic] Creed... It should be our greatest strength that we don't have, on the end of our tongues, a brief and pithy rationalization for the structure and purpose of the whole universe, only a statement that...is a scandal: an article of faith. God created the world and everything in it for Himself, and the heavens proclaim His glory...

Faith...is always contradicting itself, because everything we say about God is so inadequate that it always runs us head first into a paradox.

In certain things, it is even more the glory of the Catholic than that of the skeptic to say 'I don't know'.<sup>27</sup>

Today, many Catholics are unwilling to say, 'I don't know'. Particularly when it comes to specific issues, we are quite sure that we know, and while the pope's infallibility may be in question, mine is not. I would suggest that the goals of Cardinal Bernardin's Common

27. Merton, *Run to the Mountain*, pp. 226-27.

Ground Initiative might be furthered if, whenever we deliver ourselves of an opinion, we might always add, 'Of course, I could be wrong'.

It is not unusual for people to look to religion as a source of security. Those who approach Catholicism should learn, however, that it is as much a source of insecurity as security. Indeed, I would say that for Catholicism faith is a source of security only in the way that marriage or any other permanent commitment to live for others is a source of security: sometimes it can get to be a wild ride. Being Catholic should be a source of both comfort and affliction.

Merton's baptism brought him a sense of peace and direction, of course, but if there was ever a faith that led a person into the wilderness it was the faith of Thomas Merton. Just as Merton began to search for what he should do next, so today's new Catholics should be encouraged to see their baptism or reception into full communion with the Church as the beginning of a pilgrimage, even an adventure. Just as Merton floundered about a good deal and made a false start with the Franciscans before he finally found some direction for his life, so today's new Catholics should not expect everything to become suddenly clear.

Following his baptism, Merton embraced the life and liturgy and traditions of Catholicism and milked them for all they were worth. 'He was at Mass every Sunday, often on weekdays', wrote Jim Forest, 'and occasionally stopped in church to pray, make the stations of the cross, or recite the rosary.'<sup>28</sup>

I sometimes get the impression that today once people go through the official rituals of becoming Catholic they find themselves cast adrift, in a sink-or-swim mode. Sometimes they are offered an ongoing group experience designed to continue the experience of 'community' they found as they went through the RCIA process. But I get the impression that very little, if anything, is done to help new Catholics cultivate a strong personal spirituality. Indeed, I would say that because we are so sensitive today to the importance of a communal dimension to faith that Catholic spirituality lacks the personal component traditionally cultivated by the use of devotions.

Thérèse Johnson Borchard defines Catholic devotions as 'an organized form of prayer, separate but related to the liturgy, that deepens my personal relationship with God, strengthens my commitment to the Christian community, and leads me to a deeper understanding of

28. Forest, *Living with Wisdom*, p. 57.

the Paschal Mystery, the reality to which my faith continually looks'.<sup>29</sup>

Just as Thomas Merton entered wholeheartedly into a daily personal spirituality, we should encourage and help today's new Catholics to do something similar. This should include intimacy with Scripture and prayer practices such as *lectio divina*. But it might also include eucharistic devotions, devotional prayers such as the rosary, and/or the Liturgy of the Hours, or an adaptation thereof. In other words, converts should be introduced to the rich devotional heritage of Catholicism. Traditional devotions often, with no great difficulty, can be given a balanced post-Vatican II form.

### The Middle Catholic Years

The middle years cover from about 1953 until the early 1960s. What can we learn about becoming and being Catholic from so unique an experience—one that even in monasteries today would be unrepeatable? In Merton's journals and letters during this period we find a young monk who, while continuing to struggle with various personal issues, is basically happy to be where he is and grateful for the spirituality he finds there. One might think that Merton would have left behind the simple appreciation for devotional spirituality he developed before becoming a Trappist. But as late as 1 October 1959, Merton wrote about a recent hospital stay:

Benediction, rosary, litanies in the chapel with the Sisters and nurses, made a big impression on me: sense of the religious vitality in these devotions which are frowned on as 'unliturgical'. Felt that the Holy Spirit was really there—sense that this was the Church at prayer, even though not liturgy... Seemed to me that something of Catholicism was lacking at Gethsemani on this account—yet we can't have all these things. They are not for us—except in private. I would never do without the Rosary.<sup>30</sup>

In this same journal entry, Merton gives a definition: 'Catholicity is freedom', he declares '—no limitation on the spirit'. This is not just a throw-away remark tossed off by Merton in passing. It is a profoundly important insight into the nature of Catholicism, and it is remarkable to hear anyone immersed in the Catholic piety of the time

29. Thérèse Johnson Borchard, *Our Catholic Devotions: A Popular Guidebook* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), p. 13.

30. Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer* (ed. Jonathan Montaldo; Journals, II, 1941–1952; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p. 435.

speak such words. Typically, however, Merton could separate the wheat from the chaff. He knew that Catholicism can never be narrow minded.

The pious young monk matured during these years, and both his faith, and his understanding of faith, matured, as well. The Merton of these middle years teaches us how important it is for a person's faith to deepen with time. I find amusing a journal entry from 6 March 1958, where Merton gripes about the quality of the refectory reading during Lent:

The usual horrible Lenten reading in the refectory. Another French author of the early 20th or late 19th.

Where the Gospels say the youth clad in a sheet fled away from the soldiers in the garden naked, this monster says he fled away 'in a night-gown or at least a loincloth'. Falsification of the Word of God in favor of middle class decency. God is not enough of a prude for the pious people of our time. He must be made to conform.<sup>31</sup>

This is not merely an example of Merton's sense of humor, although it is that, too, and a sense of humor is vital to a mature faith. The Merton who wrote these words is a man whose knowledge of scripture and theology informs his faith. This deceptively light journal entry reveals a Merton who wants the Word of God precisely as it is; who knows that conflict is perfectly possible between 'middle class decency' and the gospel.

There are many ways that conventional Catholicism can confuse 'middle class decency' and authentic faith, and people in RCIA programs need to be helped to see that sometimes being 'respectable' is not the same as being Christian. Even in a culture that relegates religion to a private hobby, 'church-going'—especially of a mainline Christian variety—is often relegated to the realm of mere 'respectability'. On the contrary, Catholics need to know that faith can easily bring you into conflict with mere respectability. The following year, in January 1959, Merton wrote in his journal that sometimes being conventionally religious can even mask a loss of faith.<sup>32</sup>

In January 1961, Merton's understanding of what it means to be Catholic had developed to the point that he wrote:

One thing from which I must free myself is the popular Catholic image in this country. I am not at all that kind of a Catholic...

31. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life* (ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham; Journals, III, 1953–1960; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p. 178.

32. Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, p. 252.

At the same time, the subtler temptation, the temptation of the French avant-garde Catholic, to want to be on good terms with the proletarian left. To want to be 'part of the future'. But that is another myth. In many ways a worse one.<sup>33</sup>

For anyone who was around in 1961, it isn't difficult to imagine what Merton was talking about when he referred to 'the popular Catholic image' of the time. Merton had explained it himself in February 1959, in one of his letters: 'There is something much too mental and abstract, something too parochial about a great deal of Catholic thought and Catholic spirituality today.'<sup>34</sup>

Neither is it difficult to know what Merton was talking about when he wrote about 'the French avant-garde Catholic' who wanted to 'be on good terms with the proletarian left'. Essentially, what we have here is the Merton who wanted nothing to do with either religious or cultural idols, Merton the iconoclast. He reminds us that any mature faith needs to include a healthy dose of iconoclasm.

Merton understood that Christian faith is no ideology. Both the 'popular Catholic image' and the 'French avant-garde Catholic' of the time reduced Catholicism to an ideology, the former to a superficial religious ideology; the latter to a political and cultural ideology. Later, in August of that same year, 1961, Merton clarified his own meaning. 'To be detached from all systems', he wrote, 'and without rancor towards them, but with insight and compassion. To be truly 'Catholic' is to be able to enter into everybody's problem and joys and be all things to all men.'<sup>35</sup>

In January of the next year, 1962, in yet another letter, Merton explained himself in a way that even today some Catholics would find shocking:

I cannot be a Catholic unless it is made quite clear to the world that I am a Jew and a Moslem, unless I am execrated as a Buddhist and denounced for having undermined all that this comfortable and social Catholicism stands for: this lining up of cassocks, this regimenting of birettas. I throw my biretta in the river. (But I don't have one.)<sup>36</sup>

33. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years* (ed. Victor A. Kramer; Journals, IV, 1960–1963; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p. 87.

34. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: The Letters of Thomas Merton to Writers* (selected and ed. Christine M. Bochen; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1993), p. 56.

35. Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, p. 147.

36. Merton, *The Courage for Truth*, p. 79.

In other words, no ideology, regardless of how well-meaning it may be, regardless of how theologically and/or culturally justified it may seem to be, can encompass all that it means to be Catholic. This applies to the ideologies of our own time as much as it did to the ideologies of 1961. Both the liberal and the conservative Catholic ideologies of our time leave us ill-equipped to be authentically Catholic, for they all lead to division and isolation. To be truly Catholic is to 'enter into everybody's problem and joys and be all things to all' people.

### The Final Catholic Years

This final period includes, more or less, the years 1964–68. In July 1964, in a letter to a Latin American correspondent, Merton expressed his mature understanding of the nature of Catholicism. He declared that 'true Catholicism...is indeed universal'.<sup>37</sup>

At the same time, Merton was honest about his faith. In July of 1965, he wrote:

My one real difficulty with faith is in really accepting the truth that the Church is a redeemed community not only juridically, but so that in fact to follow the mind of the Church is to be free from the mentality of the fallen society. Ideally, I see this. But in fact there is so much that is *not* redeemed, and that seems to get into the thinking of those who represent the Church.<sup>38</sup>

With these words, Merton is squarely on the threshold of various post-Vatican II ecclesiological debates and, in particular, he was on the threshold of the post-Vatican II issue of freedom of conscience. Merton saw clearly what countless Catholics would face in the decades to come, the fact that there is so much about 'the mind of the Church that is *not* redeemed, and that seems to get into the thinking of those who represent the Church'.

This remains an issue for many Catholics today, and it is not one which those who direct RCIA programs should try to gloss over. Potential converts should be helped to see the tension that, in fact, exists; they should be neither encouraged nor given tacit permission to retreat to either an extreme conservative or an extreme liberal position in order to avoid the challenge of exercising their own spiritual and moral freedom.

37. Merton, *The Courage for Truth*, p. 233.

38. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage* (ed. Robert E. Daggy; Journals, V, 1963–1966; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p. 266.

One of the most marvelous expressions of Merton's respect for the mystery of faith, and his understanding that there is nothing automatic about it at all, appears in a letter he wrote in November 1966, to a young woman who wrote to Merton inquiring about religious faith.<sup>39</sup> The letter fills two and-a-third pages in the published volume, and the entire letter deserves to be read and re-read. For the sake of brevity, however, here are just a few excerpts that show both how strong Merton's faith was, and how grown-up and honest it was. Notice, as he begins, how Merton refuses to align himself with either unbelievers or conventional believers. This letter is a beautiful example of Merton's gift for identifying with whom he was trying to communicate, sometimes even to the point of overstatement for the sake of empathy and emphasis:

All I can say is that I think I am looking at it from a vantage point which is not yours and not that of your religious friends, either... But the whole thing has become so impossibly obscure (what with all the fighting and nonsense there has been) that, to my mind, anyone who has never had serious doubts has something the matter with him. You *should* doubt...

I was a non-believer until the day it dawned on me that the absolute voice of nothingness in which I could not possibly see anything or hear anything was also the absolute fullness of everything... To put it crudely, your 'unnamed something' without ceasing to be pure Nothing suddenly ran over me like a truck... But that doesn't mean anything, and it does not change the fact that if you don't see it, it doesn't matter...

So the position where I am is different from yours only in this: that I am perfectly happy with traditional religious concepts, I can use them, I see how far they go, and—I also see that they really go nowhere...

That is my quarrel with religious people. They are selling answers and consolations. They are in the reassurance business. I give you no reassurance whatever except that I know your void and I am in it, but I have a different way of understanding myself in it. It is not that much more delightful. But it does to me make a great deal of sense—for me...

I think the whole business of faith and the message of faith is in process of finding a whole new language—or of shutting up altogether. Hence the answer to your question: if God does not speak to you it is not your fault and it is not His fault, it is the fault of the whole mentality that creates the impression that He has to be constantly speaking to people. Those who are the loudest to affirm they hear Him are people not to be trusted. But nevertheless, there is a way of understanding that non-hearing is hearing. Maybe it is all too subtle.

39. Thomas Merton, *A Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994), p. 327.

This letter should be required reading for anyone having anything to do with evangelization, RCIA programs, and so forth. In it Merton reveals himself as a man of faith who can talk with nonbelievers and seekers in ways that both respect other people's experience and uniqueness and faithful to the best in the living Catholic tradition.

Merton's later Catholic years ended, of course, with his death in Bangkok. If we would understand Merton's Catholicism, and how important it was to him, how much a permanent part of his self-understanding, and what a quiet source of joy it was to him, I think the last words he wrote in his journal are significant. There he was in Bangkok, visiting Buddhist temples. He had meetings with the Dalai Lama. He may have had a profound spiritual 'breakthrough' or 'enlightenment' while viewing, a few days earlier, some colossal statues of a reclining Buddha.<sup>40</sup>

So here is Thomas Merton, excited about Zen Buddhism, in the midst of this Buddhist cultural environment, and on 8 December what is the final entry in his journal? It goes like this: 'Today is the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. In a little while I leave the hotel. I'm going to say Mass at St. Louis Church, have lunch at the Apostolic Delegation, then on to the Red Cross place this afternoon.'<sup>41</sup>

It was three years earlier, however, in November, 1965, that Merton wrote words in his journal that may best summarize his feelings during this last period. They are words that could only come from a heart that was still deeply grateful for the gift of his Catholic faith. 'Tomorrow is the twenty-seventh anniversary of my own baptism', Merton wrote. 'There is nothing more important than the gift of Catholic Faith—and keeping that faith pure and clear'.<sup>42</sup>

Catholics who have a post-Vatican II habit of complaining or whining about various things Catholic might well keep these words of Merton in mind. We might take a moment, now and then, to remember that being Catholic, and trying to live the Catholic faith, is not to be taken for granted. Once in a while, we might want to whisper a prayer of thanks. We would be well advised, also, to remember with Merton how important it is to keep that faith 'pure and clear'.

40. See, e.g., Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, p. 560, and Shannon, *Silent Lamp*, p. 278.

41. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey* (ed. Patrick Hart; Journals, VII, 1967–1968; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), p. 329.

42. Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 317.