

## Introduction: Merton's Contemplative Presence within Contemporary Society

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### I

Think of reading Merton in the 1940s or 1950s: a seemingly pious convert with an *apologia* for inspiring ordinary folks to act like monks. Then ponder readers in the 1970s and 1980s. What happened to that earlier Merton? Some concluded he may have become a Zen Buddhist, or should have married. Now observe the readers of 1990s and the present, trying to make sense of a Church that has not been able to absorb Merton fully, and yet is finally beginning to see that he is prophetic. And now, in the early moments of the twenty-first century, observe a Church as it is learning from its lay people. Catholics are clearly profiting from links to Buddhists, to Jews, to Muslims and to other Christians. We are beginning finally to glimpse what Merton so prophetically saw: The contemplative is for all persons.

Think also today of scores of Oblates, Benedictine and Cistercian lay contemplatives, think of Merton reading groups and local ITMS chapters, people meeting regularly in Africa, or France, or China, or Chile or in the United States. Think then of the Abbot General of the Cistercian Order speaking as he did to a group of over 100 lay representatives who gathered for the Second International Meeting of Lay Cistercians at the Monastery of the Holy Spirit in Conyers, Georgia, in May 2002. He stated that he, and his brother Cistercians worldwide, are glad to be meeting with these lay people – not to teach them about the cloister, but rather to learn from them about Cistercian spirituality as lived in the world of lay persons. This is a wonderful reversal.

Merton's intuitions about the needs of our present culture are a gift which has now been accepted by enormous numbers of persons who are living in an amazing variety of secular circumstances. Through his texts

and by the example of his life, Thomas Merton has exerted a powerful influence upon others to bring change within our frequently overly active, and sometimes frenetic culture.

These aspiring contemplatives have learned to go to the center, to slow down, and are changed in their quiet. They read, contemplate and profit from association with monasteries and in doing Centering Prayer. Merton and his brother monks have helped to change the way people live and pray and have their being. Many of the essays included in this volume demonstrate this.

## II

What we are seeing in today's culture is the frequent actual living out of what Merton ardently hoped for: The transformation of persons which he dreamed and argued was necessary and about which he wrote in essays, journals, poems and correspondence. The trajectory of his career from the early edited manuscript pages which became *The Secular Journal* and toward *The Seven Storey Mountain* all the way to the end of his life is a vigorous movement in celebration of God's mercy and society's need for the contemplative mode within a widening range of circumstances in and beyond a monastery. This idea is powerfully demonstrated in his [c. 1963] classroom remarks which we have transcribed as the unpublished Merton piece within this volume. These heretofore unpublished, informal remarks resonate quite well with the bulk of the other articles included here. They confirm the need to cultivate the contemplative strain within a feverishly active culture. This edited, previously untranscribed tape, 'About Contemplative Life Today', captures Merton's thoughts concerning the life of some young urban contemplatives. His comments are significant because, in these rather casual remarks to his students before a class about 'Irish Mysticism', Merton captures what all persons intuitively know about the need for a contemplative dimension in life. Further, he admits that in some ways such experimentation as he learned about it from men living in a 'ghetto' could even surpass what is sometimes done complacently in a cloister. Here Merton anticipates his own essays later gathered posthumously in *Contemplation in a World of Action*.

Beatrice Bruteau's seminal essay included here, 'Eating Together: The Shared Supper and the Covenant Community', suggests how we as individual persons could, even should, choose to focus our lives in peacefulness. Bruteau's previous work, in areas that include prayer and ecumenism, as well as astute considerations about the relationship of a human person's prayer life to the creation of the cosmos itself, has

prepared her to strike a very important note for the opening of this group of essays, so many of which deal with the roles of ordinary people in a world greatly in need of trust, prayer and openness.

Bruteau's suggestion, so radically simple, is totally different from the patterns of domination, fear, mistrust and violence usually assumed to be necessary for survival in our 'Promethean' world. We can choose, however, instead to be a covenant community. Dr Bruteau's essay establishes the tone of concern, friendship and love which Merton would surely embrace. She demonstrates how we should be called to covenant responsibility and community. All too often we forget that we are even participants in a world of such possibilities.

When the idea for a group of articles about lay spirituality, prayer, and contemplation beyond the monastery within today's culture was first conceived, I contacted Father Thomas Keating, OCSO to inquire if he might contribute a piece about the world-wide Centering Prayer project. He graciously wrote back to say he could not take on such a responsibility while suggesting Frank Tuoti as a possible commentator about this 'movement'. Tuoti, a former monk of Gethsemani and a writer about mysticism, submitted an essay, 'Contemplative Prayer: Antidote for an Ailing Generation', which provides insight into the growing global movement called 'Centering Prayer'. Tuoti demonstrates some of the basic links between present-day contemplative prayer usage, the history behind such prayer in Christian tradition and Merton's own developing thought in relation to the unfolding of this movement. We also have an essay included in this volume by Gail Fitzpatrick-Hopler, which demonstrates the way Contemplative Outreach, an organization facilitating the Centering Prayer movement, works in a variety of circumstances.

### III

Three essays here deal with some systematic examination of Merton texts. Each of these demonstrates aspects of Merton's continuing influence upon our present-day culture, specifically regarding our need for the contemplative. Keith Egan's essay traces the evolution of Merton's early essay, *What is Contemplation?*, which was written at the behest of Sister Madeleva Wolff, CSC, of St Mary's College, Notre Dame, in 1948. This was the start of a project, never to be fully finished, which Fr William H. Shannon has examined in several studies and which he discusses in the interview included as part of this volume. Shannon's new edition of *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation*, published in 2003 with a commentary, emphasizes that this fundamental subject and,

importantly, its relationship to life beyond the monastery, remained central to Merton's thought for over two decades.

The essay by Brother Daniel Carrere, OCSO, does many valuable and related things. Through a careful examination of late texts from Merton, Carrere brings sensitivity to the need for contemplation in today's culture in several ways. It is significant that after Carrere was a professed monk, he earned his doctorate at Emory University and subsequently served as editor for a new edition of Merton's *Contemplation in a World of Action*. In 'Standing before God: Merton's Incarnational Spirituality', Carrere examines how Merton's late texts frequently examine the paradox of the Church as a 'collectivity'. Carrere then shows that the incarnational and contemplative prayer of monks and lay people is not a detriment to being institutionally religious, but rather that it can be a positive and growing force in the life of 'ordinary' Christians.

David King's article, 'Merton's New Novices: *The Seven Storey Mountain* and Monasticism in a Freshman Seminar', is delightful for many reasons, chiefly because it is about ordinary people and it is a fruition for *The Merton Annual*. Professor King served as my student assistant from 1991 to 1993 (Volumes 4, 5, and 6). He also provided editorial help by coordinating and editing book reviews for Volume 12. He has written reviews himself for *The Merton Annual* during this past decade. His teaching of Merton in a secular setting, and thereby his demonstration that Merton's is a life that can speak loudly to students within a large state university populated by commuters, is quite heartening. His positive points suggest that just such 'ordinary' students who are hardly even aware of monasticism profit immensely from learning about Merton's way of life. The very problems of monasticism and its challenges as well as advantages can serve as a counterpoint in a world so radically devoted to success, production and achievement.

#### IV

The interview which Glenn Crider has edited, conducted by Christine Bochen and myself on 15 August 2002, also seems especially appropriate in this setting. William Shannon (priest, author, educator, ecumenist) is able to illustrate by reflection upon his life that we are living within a hopeful yet mysterious era for the Church. Merton believed this too, and we see it daily as the Church's mission unfolds. As we listen to Fr Shannon, it is as if the mysteries of his own life and work (with Merton sometimes as a guide) are a symbol of what others should come to accept.

## V

The next group of articles are examinations about the contemplative life and prayer from four different perspectives. Two articles are reflections from particular communities – a group of Iowa Lay Cistercians and a Denver, Colorado Merton-oriented discussion group. Specific observations by a long-time editor, philosopher and writer about contemplation and by a relative newcomer to contemplative prayer follow. These four articles collectively offer proof of how thousands of people, like Merton, seek God through contemplative actions. Grace comes in myriads of ways, even within prison where, as Jens Söring writes, one entertains little hope of release. We have here four stories of hope.

James Somerville's point is that Merton was a 'voluntary prisoner'. The implication is that we all can be, too. So also does Söring instruct us about the way prayer might allow us to be changed even while we may remain physically imprisoned. The reports from Patricia Day and Dennis Day, 'Sowing New Seeds of Contemplation', and by Fred Eyerman, 'Thomas Merton Has Influenced our Lives', both demonstrate a living and healthy presence which bodes well for the future and reflects the continuation of Merton's presence in today's culture.

## VI

Other articles demonstrate other parallels and contemporary cultural connections. The article by William Apel demonstrates common themes between the life and visions of Merton and Howard Thurman. I myself recently gave a lecture at the Candler School of Theology about his work and civil rights, while the other main speaker addressed similar issues in Thurman. We know from Merton's journals, *Seeds of Destruction* (1964), and from his correspondence that Merton saw the work of leaders in the Civil Rights movement as a challenge to the whole society, something that might allow Western white people to choose not to manipulate and continue to control, but to accept change. Merton's idea of 'Kairos' and his fear of the dominant culture not being able to see when to act, or to wait and let others act, is prophetic. In the contemplative, above all, we learn to wait, to accept.

Acceptance is the key in most of the work of Merton. It is also the core element in the two remaining articles here. Gail Fitzpatrick-Hopler shows us how 'The Spiritual Network of Contemplative Outreach Limited' has developed from seeds planted by people like Merton. The article by Sr Pascaline Coff, OSB, 'The Universal Call to Contemplation: Cloisters

beyond the Monastery', shows how Christian contemplative practice can lead to other various practices and thus to a growing awareness of the different parallel practices that reconnect us to other faiths, and, still more importantly, provide connections from other faiths for Christians.

## VII

In the bibliographical review-essay, my co-editor George Kilcourse astutely provides an analysis of important Merton scholarship and commentary that appeared in 2002. Our book reviews – which cover a wide range from primary work of Merton, the letters exchanged with Fr Jean Leclerq, and works about Merton including the new *Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* – reflect the range of continuing scholarly interest in Merton and related matters. Too late for inclusion here is Paul Eile's new study of O'Connor, Merton, Day and Percy, a journey in and with fellow travelers.

*A Thomas Merton Curriculum*, produced by the Thomas Merton Foundation, is also reviewed, and stands as a sign of Merton's continuing usefulness. Merton's writing, and work about him, have influenced writers as vastly different as Joan Chittister, Thomas Keating, Jean Leclerq, and indeed scores of oblates and common readers, persons before imprisoned, now feeling more free to be themselves. Such influences remain an exciting reflection of Merton's courage to be.