[TMA 16 (2003) 148-151]
ISSN 0894 4857

Merton as Voluntary Prisoner

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After the *Risorgimento* in Italy (1870), when the city of Rome was occupied and the Papal States taken over by the troops of General Raffaele Cadorna in a successful effort to bring about the unification of Italy, the Popes became voluntary 'prisoners of the Vatican', refusing to venture abroad in protest against the losss of the Papal lands.

Thomas Merton, until the last year of his life, was something of a 'prisoner of the Abbey of Gethsemani'. I am told that he protested to friends that superiors had refused to grant him permission to travel or give talks in other parts of the country outside the immediate confines of the monastery. He was allowed, however, to visit doctors in Bardstown and Louisville, should the need arise.

But as Merton buffs know, locking him up did not prevent him from acting in the world, through letters, conversation with important visitors, and by his books. Whether it was his involvement in the Peace Movement with his friend Daniel Berrigan, or in the proceedings of the second Vatican Council in relation to the Declaration on the Jews with Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, Merton put his stamp on the world as few cloistered monks have ever done.

In fact, the more he retreated into solitude in his hermitage on the grounds of the Abbey, the more effective he became as a figure to be reckoned with in the civic life of the nation and in religious affairs. For Merton the pen was mightier than the sword, or mightier than making public appearances, addressing multitudes, and autographing his writings on a mandatory publisher's book-signing tour. If permitted to travel, he could have accepted invitations to lecture throughout the whole of North America and Western Europe. Instead, he coveted the elected silence that was the source of his power. If he could not get out and go to the mountain, the fact was that, according to one of Mohammed's sayings, the mountain came to him in the form of an endless stream of

influential visitors. And they drew from Merton fuel for the fight against the kinds of subtle and hidden forms of oppression that our society fosters.

Certainly one of the more admirable qualities of Merton was the fact that although he chaffed under the curfew that held him at home, he kept faith with his vocation and vow of obedience, even when the confinement made little sense to him. But providence, as they say, 'works in a mysterious way its wonders to perform'. The fact that Merton could not gad about at will was the very limitation that made him a powerhouse beyond the walls of his monastery. In this, he had something in common with Mother Teresa. She required that even her contemplative nuns devote several hours each day to the care of the sick and dying on the streets of Calcutta and in 100 other cities around the world where her community had taken root. She insisted on combining the contemplative life with the active, hands-on care of the poor. Merton, by reason of his contemplative vocation, and in spite of his ball and chain, was able to 'act in the world'.

And the truth of the matter is that Merton was very much a man of the world. He had 'lived it up' in his junior years so that he was not naïve in his more mature years. Kneeling or sitting cross-legged in his hermitage, he was, paradoxically, a man of action, truly a man of the world, though not exactly *in* it.

Is that so unusual? Find me a true mystic who, having folded his or her wings around themselves, preferred to swoon away in isolated forgetfulness of the needs of the poor and disenfranchised members of their society. Some forms of mysticism can easily become narcissistic, self-enclosed or self-serving, like those business executives who take up transcendental meditation in order to act more efficiently in a competitive world. Merton cared intensely and groaned inwardly over the sufferings of those he could not reach directly. A good part of him was outside the walls hungering and thirsting for universal peace and justice.

Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556), founder of the Society of Jesus, could have spent the rest of his life in mystical rapture in the cave at Manresa. But no, in spite of being a grown man, he attended the equivalent of elementary school in order to learn Latin with children. After that, he was qualified to attend the Universiy of Paris where, mystic though he was, he rounded up a team of educated men to create a Catholic alternative to Luther and the Protestant Reformation. Eventually, he wound up tied to a desk in Rome receiving and answering letters from all over the world. Not very mystical! But several hundred schools, parishes and missions later, he was still the contemplative he had been in his earlier years. That is what gave him the courage and strength to be a bureau-

crat! If contemplation is genuine, it will not stay put inside monastery walls nor will it dry up in a busy office.

Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179) is another example of a visionary and mystic whose activities did not interrupt her continual sense of the presence and power of God. Founder of a religious community, presiding over its move, lock, stock and barrel, to a distant location; author, theologian, prophet, retreat giver, musician, artist, doctor and pharmacist, her dazzling talents made her the conscience of kings and popes. She is an outstanding example of the standard 'contemplative in action'.

Of course, Merton eventually 'got out' and appropriately ended his course 10,000 miles away from his monastery walls, now very much in the world, the place where in spirit he had always worked and acted.

Does this tell us anything about 'lay spirituality and life beyond the monastery'? Yes, because with or without walls, you cannot fence a good contemplative in. The lay mystic or contemplative has the task of finding time in or after work to meditate. Neither the lay mystic nor the monastic can dispense with those all-important minutes or hours of silence, when one's batteries are recharged for action in the world. Would Merton be essentially any different if he had left the 'walls' and married? I think not, and he knew it, even after he had fallen in love. Married life would not have changed his basic orientation, though it would have divided his attention, as St Paul knew (1 Cor. 7.33-34).

Dan Berrigan, in view of the nature of his calling, has no doubt about the advantage of being celibate: the married man with dependent children may not have the right to expose himself to long prison sentences for civil disobedience, thus leaving his wife alone with the burden of having to provide food, clothing, housing and education for their children. So, in that sense Merton chose the better part. He could reach out from his hermitage and act in the world without having to provide for the legitimate needs of a family. But the downside can be loneliness. Fortunately, Merton's mind was so active that he did not have time to dwell on the joys of family life.

That is a luxury from one point of view. Those of us who have to rough it in the world may be inclined to envy the monk who, 'carefree', needs only to brush his teeth twice a day and wait for the dinner bell to ring. Wrong. The monk has a heavy responsibility, if he is willing to adjust to it. He is not clothed and fed by the generosity of his lay admirers and the sale of cheese and bread to live a self-enclosed life. If he closes up and folds his wings in the state of contemplation alone, he may have to answer for it in the world to come: 'When did you find me hungry and gave me food, and thirsty and gave me to drink?' (Mt. 25.37). One answer is, 'Never'. Well, look again. Merton worried about

injustice and did what he could from where he stood. That is the lesson of this short essay. 'Where he sat'. Where do we stand? The lay Christian, by the very fact that he is a Christian, is not excused from service in the double-pronged vocation of contemplative and activist. In the latter case it may include, among a dozen other opportunities, nothing more burdensome than taking time to write a letter to one's congressman about some burning social issue. In any case, to be a contemplative one must act. That is the lesson Merton models for us in his active-contemplative vocation.