

THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF GOD AND HIS PURPOSE IN THE LIFE AND WRITINGS OF THOMAS MERTON

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I am very grateful to the Thomas Merton Studies Center and to Bellarmine College for inviting me here to speak to you this afternoon, and I am even more grateful to them for organizing this week in remembrance of the 10th anniversary of the death of Thomas Merton. At Gethsemani we knew Thomas Merton as Father Louis, and he was and is still most dear to us. The Community of Gethsemani, too, therefore, and more specifically its present Father Abbot, Dom Timothy Kelly, wish to have me express their gratitude to all of you, both those who have had a hand in arranging this week and to all who will participate in it. May it be a time of God's special grace for all and each of you.

It would be tempting to indulge in reminiscences of that fatal day ten years ago, when we first received news of Father's death, and perhaps interesting to you, but frankly my personal sense of loss is still too acute for anything like that, strange as it may seem, and then, of course, I also believe that his memory would be better served by using this opportunity to continue to speak his message — at least, as I understand it. It is for this reason that I have chosen as the subject for my talk and our reflections here today: "the consciousness of God and His purpose in the life and writings of Thomas Merton," for I believe that such a consciousness was, and is, at the heart of Thomas Merton's message, and was very much a part of his personal life.

As it happens, there is a most fitting starting place for our reflections in the statement that Father Louis wrote on the occasion of the inauguration of the Merton Collection here at Bellarmine on November 10, 1963. The enclosure for monks was more strict in those days than it is today, so Father Louis asked his very dear friend, Dan Walsh, to read the statement for him. Now, I intend to get in on the act, so to speak, by re-reading a part of this same statement to you here today (without, unfortunately, Dan's deep, rich voice).

"First of all, it is more than strange that the man who will read these words to you, Dan Walsh, is the one who first told me of the Abbey of Gethsemani. It is he, therefore, who first turned my thoughts in this direction. It is partly due to him that I came to this diocese and this state twenty-two years ago. But he is no more a native Kentuckian than I am, and if he is here now, it is partly because of me. I am quite sure that neither he nor I were ever able to foresee that he would one day be speaking here, on such an occasion as this. One of the awesome things about this event, then, is that it indicates to me that when Dan and I were talking together over a couple of glasses of beer in a New York hotel, years ago, God was present there and was doing His work in us."¹

That, to my mind, is a very explicit and moving expression of a consciousness, on the part of Father Louis, of both God and His purpose active in his life! And I must add, that I who read these words to you today, 15 years later, am also no native Kentuckian (as I'm sure you can tell), and more importantly, that my own personal life and vocation, (and that of so many, many others) was also being influenced by that action of God, taking place as those two men talked, over a couple of beers, in a New York hotel, years ago! In fact, my standing before you here today must, in all honesty, be considered part of that influence. And the statement continued with the thought:

"Therefore, we can trust He still continues to be just as present, and just as active here, in all of us now! This is a momentous consideration. . . ."²

It was precisely this consideration that dominated the personal thinking and doing of Father Louis Merton! The autobiographical nature of so much of his writing is not due to a man all wrapped up in

himself and in his own subjective view of the universe. It stems, rather, from the man's consciousness of himself as a being, called into personal existence by God for a purpose — a purpose that transcends all the immediate and pragmatic purposes people tend to let preoccupy their private thoughts and ambitions — a purpose which actually pertains to God Himself and His all pervading purpose for Creation. For Father Louis, the whole point of every quest was the discovery of, and the personal entering into, this purpose of God.

In an intriguing passage from his novel, My Argument with the Gestapo, written before his entrance into the monastery but only published after his death, Father Louis has his hero say: "But if you want to identify me, ask me not where I live, or what I like to eat, or how I comb my hair, but ask me what I think I'm living for, in detail, and ask me what I think is keeping me from living fully for the thing I want to live for. Between these two answers you can determine the identity of any person. The better answer he has, the more of a person he is."³

"What I think I'm living for" — the purpose and "in detail"! "And what is keeping me from living fully for the thing I want to live for," that is to say, all that goes to make purposeful living a struggle and perhaps even seemingly impossible, and the answers to those two questions determine the identity of the person! Now that is what I call self-scrutiny! And when the answers to these questions are hidden in God's own mysterious purpose, we realize very quickly that there is no true self-knowledge apart from our experience and knowledge of Him and His purpose.

But the answers to these questions are not the kind that can be found by mental inquiry alone — nor even by prayer alone. They must be found in the living out of personal life. As Father has his hero go on to say: "I am all the time trying to make out the answer, as I go on living. I live out the answer to my own two questions myself and the answer may not be complete, even when my life is ended: I may go on working out the answer for a long time after my death, but at last it will be resolved, and there will be no further question, for with God's mercy I shall possess not only the answer but the reality that the answer was about."

This sentiment, expressed so early in his career as a writer, seems to me to be a constant throughout all his life. It is what I am now referring to as a consciousness of God and His purpose, as it pertains, in detail, to one's personal life.

What do we know of God's purpose? In the statement, read by Dan Walsh, from which I have already quoted, Father Louis also says: "Whatever I may have written, I think it all can be reduced in the end to this one root truth: that God calls human persons to union with Himself and with one another in Christ. . ."

That echoes pretty well what St. John and St. Paul preached to the early Church, of how God's plan is to make us all into that one temple, with Christ as the cornerstone, a dwelling place for God in the Spirit where God would — eventually — be All in All!

God's purpose, therefore, is known to us through faith in His revelation in Christ, but it is not known



Thomas Merton

Drawing by Gloria Wollman for Bellarmine Vital Voices Program.

to us in detail—not on that day to day basis in which we have to live. For this, as Jesus Christ Himself taught us, we must learn the habit of watching and listening, that is to say, attending to God's living Word, and docility to His Spirit, living and active in our daily lives; in other words: having a consciousness of God and His purpose in our daily lives.

I submit that this kind of consciousness or attention is not, as a matter of fact, all that common—even among pious and well meaning people. Too often, I'm afraid, we fall into the error of attending only to abstract goods and ideals—abstractions formed admittedly after mature and sober thought, but abstractions nonetheless! And while we pursue our abstract good we all too often become insensitive to the possibility that God may have something else in mind. For example, we strive for justice, or peace, or food for the hungry, etc. — all very good ideals in themselves—but in the process we often neglect the consideration of how these things relate, here and now, to God's purpose!

This, unfortunately, is a very grave, and often costly, mistake, the consequences of which are many and mostly bad. For if and when our abstract ideal runs into trouble, especially from other obviously well-meaning people with other and perhaps somewhat contrary abstract ideals or methods of achieving them in mind, we may very well be led into situations and attitudes not quite compatible with, nor conducive to, the spirit of the gospel message. So much wasted energy and fruitless good will can result from good people struggling against one another. And this, as we know, is a great source of discouragement and disillusionment to all involved—a prelude to cynicism and despair.

Attending to God's purpose, with docility to the message of the moment can help to free us from such a bind. We have hints of this even in the life of Christ Himself. For example, when He was 12 years old and stayed behind in the temple. It seems, from the account that we have received, that He was of the opinion that it was fairly obvious that He was where He was supposed to be: "How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business?" But then, without any answer from Mary or Joseph to these questions, He receives the answer from His Father—perhaps only through the disconcerted looks of Mary and Joseph—that His Father's business is back in Nazareth, and that for a lot more years to come!

And when that time does actually come, it seems that Christ Himself did not know it, but once again learned it only by reason of His docility to the will and purpose of His Father as revealed to Him through the words and actions of others: "And Mary said: 'They have no wine.' But he replied: 'What is that to you or me? My hour has not yet come.'" But then, at Mary's words to the waiters that they should do whatever He tells them, His hour does come and He works that first sign of changing water into wine which would prove so decisive to His disciples and His public work and message. Somehow He had heard the word from His Father, that yes, the time has come! The kind of receptivity to the message and inspiration of God that He shows in these incidents only comes to those open and sensitive to such. As Jesus so often said in His own preaching: "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." The implication is that there are those without ears to hear—or, if having ears to hear as a rule, may not now be attentive. Once more I will say that it is precisely this kind of attentiveness to God that I mean by the expression "consciousness of God and His purpose."

As we all know a good part of Father Louis' writing had to do with prayer and contemplative living. The heart of his message in that regard pertains precisely to this kind of attending to God: prayer as listening rather than as speaking. He would agree, I'm sure, with Karl Rahner's designation of the human person as a "Hearer of the Word." And he would also agree with what Father Rahner says in the introduction to his book of that title, where he answers the perhaps unspoken objection: "But what if there is no word from God? What if God is silent?" Father Rahner answers: "Should God, of his free choice, wish not to reveal himself but to remain silent, man would attain the ultimate and highest self-perfection of his spiritual and religious existence by listening to the silence of God."⁴

The point here is that it is our being in the state of hearers, listening and attentive to God that matters. Even Divine words are not as important in practice as our listening. As it is, the world full of God's word, sounding loud and clear, in many and diverse ways, but an awful lot of it is falling on unresponsive ears— and this, not only because of indifference or disbelief or sinful desires, but also because all too often, otherwise good and generous people are too sure that they have already heard God's word and are busy now with trying to do it, or get it done, with the unfortunate consequences that they lose their hearing ability in the process.

Prayer as listening and being attentive to God, conscious always of Him and His unfolding purpose, is something that must be part of our daily lives, even moment to moment, as far as possible. I know that you will say that this is well and good for those who live in cloistered monasteries or in hermitages! I admit that it is easier there, though not necessarily always done! But I sincerely believe that it is possible and necessary in every way of life. After all, to paraphrase the Lord's words: What good is it for a person to accomplish all things, if he fails to fulfill the purpose for which he was personally created?

I believe that the writing of Father Louis on prayer and contemplative living gives much practical aid and inspiration for improved attentiveness to God, applicable to any way of life. If our way of life is too busy— or too filled to permit our being a hearer of God's Word, then let's face it: our way of life is too busy and too filled. Not to have room for attention to God is pragmatic unbelief!

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Another aspect of this teaching of Father Louis about attending to God and His purpose is the importance of humility and reverence in regard to the mystery of personal life, both of our own and that of others. To think that as baptized and believing Christians, we have the answers to life's questions once and for all, is a terrible and much too common mistake. Questions always remain and this is right and proper.

Just recently some of the monks and I were discussing a passage from Father Louis' writings on the monastic vocation where he makes this point himself explicitly. He says: "But the monastic vocation is a mystery. Therefore it cannot be completely expressed in a clear succinct formula. It is a gift of God and we do not understand it as soon as we receive it, for all God's gifts, especially His spiritual gifts, share in His own hiddenness and in His own mystery. God will reveal Himself to us in the gift of our vocation, but He will do this only gradually. We can expect to spend our whole lives as monks entering deeper and deeper into the mystery of our monastic vocation.... If we are real monks, we are constantly rediscovering what it means to be a monk, and yet we never exhaust the full meaning of our vocation."⁵

This, I'm sure, can be said with equal truth of any vocation and every human person has a personal vocation. In reading these words about God speaking to us in the mystery of our vocation, we can't help but be reminded of those earlier quotes from Father Louis' novel about the questions and answers that go to make up our identity as persons.



The Hermitage in Summer

A contemporary scholar and author has written a very

photograph by Thomas Merton

moving passage on the crucial nature of the question we live and are, and how it is so often a cause of profound unease. "To be uneasy in this regard," he says, "means to be uncertain of one's own center, to be an enigma to oneself, to be a wearisome and laborious question; but in addition, it also signals the need for transcendence. It is the existential self which grasps its identity as a metaphysical question, and thus encounters self-hood; the questioner is not only the questioned, but the very question itself."⁶

We have all heard the story, I'm sure, of Gertrude Stein on her death bed asking her companions: "What is the answer?" And when no reply was forthcoming: "Well, then what is the question?"⁷ Those were her last words and who knows, perhaps her salvation.

There is, therefore, no one, once and for all answer, applicable to all. Parents know this by their own experience for they usually try to hand on to their children the answers they have found. But, for the most part, it doesn't work, for each person has his or her own question to answer, and other people's answers, though we may be able to learn something useful from them, will never perfectly satisfy our own needs and situation. When parents or teachers fail to understand this they often spoil their ability to be helpful, for then the young people leave off their own quest for answers and spend their energies uselessly merely making objections to other people's answers.

They do this, of course, to some extent, in understandable self-defense, but unfortunately defensiveness and the putting up of defenses are not the best means of coming to personally meaningful answers. For this we need the opposite: openness of mind and receptivity, even eagerness and readiness to hear. God does give answers, in His own time and in His own way to the questions He has so knowingly set before us in our personal life and destiny. But we must have patience and a lack of avarice— even spiritual avarice— for God respects the nature of the life He has created and so must we. Finding the answers to the questions we are is a matter of growth and takes a life-time— perhaps even more. To paraphrase the Lord once more: Sufficient for the day are both the questions and the answers thereof.

In the Epilogue to his excellent book on Thomas Merton, George Woodcock quotes Father Louis as saying: "I do not have clear answers to current questions. I do have questions." And then Woodcock goes on to say himself: "There is indeed a sense in which one can regard his whole life as a question, for the contemplative does not ask questions only of men and of the world; his quest leads him to the very heart of existence within himself, and if he is a Christian he awaits there an even deeper answer."⁸

And so, in conclusion let me say: what Thomas Merton's message has to offer us is not the answer to our questions, but only some friendly and fraternal advice on a way of being conscious and attentive to God, so that we may hear the answers to those questions when they are spoken to us.

Thank you so much for your attention and for your being here today. May God bless each and everyone of you. Amen!

¹The Thomas Merton Studies Center, by Thomas Merton, John Howard Griffin, and Monsignor Horrigan, Santa Barbara, Unicorn Press, 1971, pp. 13-14.

²Ibid., p. 14.

³as quoted by George Woodcock, *Thomas Merton: Monk and Poet*, pp. 32-33, from *My Argument With the Gestapo*, New Directions, paperback edition.

⁴Karl Rahner, *Hearers of the Word*, Herder and Herder, 1969, p. 16.

⁵Thomas Merton, *The Monastic Journey*, edited by Brother Patrick Hart, Doubleday Image Books, 1978, pp. 29-30.

⁶Thomas M. Tomasic, "William of St. Thierry against Peter Abelard: A Dispute on the Meaning of Being a Person," *Analecta Cisterciensia*, Vol. 28, 1972, pp. 13-14.

⁷Elizabeth Sprigge, *Gertrude Stein: Her Life and Work*, Harper & Bros., 1957, p. 265.

⁸George Woodcock, *Thomas Merton: Monk and Poet*, New York, Farrer Straus and Giroux, 1978, p. 183.