

Dan Walsh's Influence on the Spirituality of Thomas Merton

by Anthony Distefano *

Each person is a mystery that ultimately only God can unravel. Fr. Dan Walsh, whom we called "Dan", was in my opinion a messenger from God sent to us to proclaim this truth. He and Fr. Louis (Thomas Merton) were the closest of friends and in God's Providence it was through Dan that Thomas Merton came to Gethsemani. Fr. Louis has been one of the most influential and widely known persons of our century in the religious sphere. Dan Walsh, though little known, was also a spiritual giant who passed through our midst. He lies buried in our secular cemetery alongside two infants who never came to the age of reason. Everything that happens to us has significance. I believe Dan, who was a true and great philosopher, would find this most appropriate. He often quoted St. Thomas: "God is nothing you can think." But the one thing that mattered most to him was the God who forms us spiritually in the Word before we received our nature in time. In this sense we are always infants and remain so as long as we are in this life—"Out of the mouths of babes and infants thou has perfected praise" (Ps. 8.2). I would like to share with you something of what this has come to mean to me.

I first came into contact with Dan when I entered Gethsemani in 1968. At this time he was living in a room in our retreat house. Prior to this, Dan had been a professor of philosophy at Manhattanville College of the Sacred Heart in Purchase, New York, from 1934 until 1960. He also served as a visiting professor of philosophy at the Graduate School of Columbia University in New York from 1936 until 1955. It was at Columbia that he

met Thomas Merton. Merton wrote of Dan in *The Seven Storey Mountain*: "Dan Walsh turned out to be another one of those destined in a providential way to shape and direct my vocation. For it was he who pointed out my way to the place where I now am...He, like Gilson, had the most rare and admirable virtue of being able to rise above the petty differences of schools and systems, and seeing Catholic philosophy in its wholeness, in its variegated unity, and in its true Catholicity."

Merton had made up his mind to enter the priesthood, but he puzzled over which order he should enter. As a suggestion, Dan related to Merton a recent experience. "Last summer," said Dan, "I made a retreat at a Trappist monastery in Kentucky. It's called Our Lady of Gethsemani." And so Merton eventually found his way here. In 1960 Dan accepted an invitation from Dom James Fox, Abbot of Gethsemani, to help in the re-organization of the philosophy department at the Abbey's seminary and to assist in the instruction of the monks studying for the priesthood. He stayed here at Gethsemani until 1970 when he moved near Louisville, and was a visiting professor of philosophy at Bellarmine College in Louisville, but also did part-time teaching at Gethsemani.

Dan and Merton were friends at Columbia and influenced each other in their thinking. This intimate relationship continued here at Gethsemani. In Dan's little room in the retreat house they would spend hours discussing the Christian fathers and sharing their insights. In 1966 Dan was invited by Archbishop John A. Floersh to enter the priesthood. Within a few months with the help of Merton's guidance Dan was ordained. During the first part of my novitiate Dan gave us conferences on various topics which were for the most part over my head. Sometimes he would speak on philosophy or mention ideas of Fr. Louis. I do remember a few of the things he said concerning Fr. Louis. Once he was speaking of how the young people were attracted to the writings of Fr. Louis and related that Tom said to him: "Well, I guess God wants me to speak for them what they cannot speak for themselves." This, I believe, was true also of Dan, at least this was what he did for me.

After I made simple vows I began to study some philosophy and the writings of Fr. Louis, which became my main interest—especially the spirituality of Fr. Louis. It was not until the summer of 1975 that I encountered Dan again. Fr. Flavian Burns had suggested that Dan come and give us some conferences on his notion of Person for he felt that he had influenced Fr. Louis and that it would be good for us to listen to him. Dan's health had been pretty bad but was now fairly good so he came. He gave us three conferences—one in May, June and July. His health took

a sudden turn for the worst and he died on August 28th, the feast day of St. Augustine to whom he was much devoted.

There is an incident that says to me much of what Dan was about. Before he gave us the first conference I happened to be in Louisville and stopped by his home to visit him. It was a huge, old-fashioned, two-storey house big enough for three families. Dan, who lived by himself, had recently moved in and had things pretty well organized with the help of some students from Bellarmine College. After taking me for a tour of what he called "The Shack," we talked a bit. His health was not too good so I said I had better be getting on. As I was about to leave he said, "Well, I'll be remembering you in my prayers. I say Mass over there (pointing to a card table in the living room) in the Mass petition 'for all' which includes you." After I got his insight from the conferences he gave us, it struck me how significant that statement was. He had a deep sense of the unifying insight of all in Christ and his own way of expressing it.

This he said came to him from his contact with the writings of Duns Scotus. I believe Dan's insight is an insight into the essence of Christianity that is especially relevant in our time. It is also a key to understanding the root of Fr. Louis' spirituality, and in general the Catholic mystical traditions. I found that Dan made more explicit the root of this spirituality which Fr. Louis does not make so explicit, and did so at its metaphysical base. We once had a Zen Roshi give us a retreat here. Several times he repeated forcibly, "The only basis for religion is—what is the basis of existence." To demonstrate what he meant he said, "We need to shake hands without gloves on." Then, as he was next to one of our brothers, he said, "You see, not Christian, not Buddhist, but the two are embraced by the All," and he reached out and grabbed the brother's hand. It was this sense of the root that makes us One, that moved Merton to desire to visit the East.

This root in all the Great Religions is the Transcendent Mystery of Being which we call God, who in various ways manifests himself to individuals. There is a distinction to be made between the presence of the revealing God and the expression of his self-communication. The expression of Christianity differs from that of the Indian religions, but it is the same God who is experienced. Dan was once asked if we needed Revelation to get to the Person (The Person is the term Dan uses for his insight, which refers to our sharing in the Triune life of God) to which, he replied, "No, that would smack of dogmatism." I think what he was trying to stress here is that what is primary is the presence of the revealing God. So often, in the history of the Church, dogma has been dissociated from the inner

dynamism of God's presence. Then God is reduced to abstract statements which we try to treat as absolutes. In inter-religious dialogue members of other religions are saying, "We, too, have the God of Love." We realize that it is what religious faith makes one to be, rather than what one speaks, and of our need to listen to one another. Our understanding of God is always evolving even after the appearance of Jesus: "The Spirit will lead you into the whole Truth" (Jn 16.13).

In the Christian tradition the manifestation of God is primarily expressed in terms of Love through the person of Jesus of Nazareth. The fullness of God's revelation was accomplished when he revealed himself as a life-giving Spirit to the disciples from within—a realization of interior liberation from the forces of sin and death through the act of God in the man Jesus. The incarnation which is the primary expression of the Christian mystery quite naturally evolved into an understanding of the mystery of the Triune God. Fr. Fortman, S.J., in his book *The Triune God*, writes, "Faith in the Triune God is at the center of Christian life; Christ without a Triune God is only a noisy gong or a clanging symbol. The driving thrust of the Christian's hope of eternal life is to see clearly the Triune God himself, just as he is." After tracing how the Trinitarian notion of God evolved in the history of the Church, he brought out that the modern trend today is attempting to give expression to how the Triune God is implicated in the structure of the human person. This is essentially what Dan's insight touches on and not so much how, but simply the fact that the Triune God manifests himself through our nature. Dan followed the approach of the great Christian minds in the tradition in which faith seeks understanding. In such a tradition, one begins with his existence rooted in the mystery of God's Love, i.e., with faith. Philosophy and theology are nothing but the effort of the mind to penetrate the mystery of Divine Love that envelops, sustains and brings existence to its fulfilment. Especially in the Franciscan school of Duns Scotus, which Dan followed, love is given the primacy over all intellectual pursuits. Everything is at the service of love. Without the motive of love the quest for God is frustrated.

Dan was at his best in speaking. He didn't write much for he felt it was not the primary way for him to communicate his insight. In the three conferences he gave I experienced the power of his speaking. There is a text from the letter of Paul to the Corinthians that I believe can be applied to him: "Only the Spirit knows what God is. This is the Spirit we have received from God, and not the spirit of the world, so that we may know all that God of his own grace has given us; and because we are interpreting spiritual truths to those who have the Spirit, we speak of these gifts of

God in words found for us not by our human wisdom but by the Spirit (1 Cor 2:11-13). Dan's primary interest was to awaken us to this insight. He used traditional language of the great minds, especially of the Scholastics, but it was simply a vehicle for expressing his own insight. To hear his word one must be disposed rightly, as St. Paul says, have the Spirit, judge in the light of the Spirit. And what is this but to be desirous of God, for the insight Dan is concerned with is "what God of his own grace has given us." The main obstacle to hearing his word is to judge it not in the light of the Spirit but as mere human wisdom, attempting to analyze it with a critical mind. We did this on a number of occasions. In this case Dan would give your words back to you in such a way as to make you see that you missed the whole point. I recall putting something to him in an analytical fashion to which he replied, "and what is that—its silence—God is nothing you can think, says St. Thomas" and then he would chuckle. It was in such instances as these that I was touched by the power and conviction of his words and received his insight. He had no obvious system or method. What you said to him determined what he would speak to you. He once said, following St. Augustine and St. Thomas that "Truth is one and God is the only Teacher. No one can teach another the Truth. All we can do is to help each other to remove the obstacles that prevent us from discovering the Truth present to each of us." Dan builds his insight on the Truth expressed by St. John: "God is Love." For him, the Person is simply the immediacy of the presence of God manifesting himself to us as Love. He tried to awaken us to this fact.

To get at the root of Dan's insight it is helpful to look at the approach he takes to get there, which is, as I have said, derived from Duns Scotus. Since we are made in the image of the Trinity, the primary way to know what we are about is to look to the Trinity. It is by meditating on the inner life of God that we hope to come to a sense of our deepest identity rooted in God and to live from this awareness. Dan once termed this "your metaphysical meditation on the primacy of Love in existence." Personally, I found this very fruitful and have returned to it again and again. We begin with the thought of God as the One Pure Act of Love which is an act of personal relationship. This act manifests itself as Triune. The Father and the Son relate to each other in the unity of the Holy Spirit. This is necessary to God, to be simply this fullness of Relationship. God is a Trinity which entirely exceeds the grasp of our human understanding. Our concepts cannot attain this reality but they can open us to the mystery that God is and therefore they are very important. It is improper conceptions of God that are one of the main causes of atheism and that obstruct us

personally from coming to intimacy with Him. The Christian tradition has always maintained that God is perfectly fulfilled and satisfied in the Relationship which he is. If there is creation, it is not because He needed it or was moved to create, but simply because in the freedom of his love he decided to do so. God has his own reasons of the heart. We are attempting to reflect on what God has freely decided from all eternity. There was really no before and after creation. There was never a moment in which God was not a Creator. We have to remind ourselves again and again that we are attempting to open ourselves to the mystery of Divine Love that we will only begin to comprehend in the next life. God freely decided that he wanted someone other than himself to share in the Triune Relationship: "that we may come to share in the very being of God" (2 Pt 1:4).

To do this he called forth a vision of this sharing which Dan terms—The Person. This is the bride of the Word which in some way shares in the Trinity and so is in a certain sense one with God. It is as nameless as God is nameless, sharing in the secret of his inner life. "And then God said: let us make mankind in our own image and likeness" (Gen 1.26)—and not only man but also angels. God is like a mother who conceives the whole of creation in this bridal-relationship of the Word: "through him all things were made" (Jn 1:3). Each person whether angelic or human is uniquely conceived and uniquely created. To the person Gabriel is given the nature of an angel so that he may realize the fullness of his personhood in the Corporate Person. Likewise, the person of Paul is given the nature of a man for the same purpose. Each of our natures is from the Person and towards the Person and it is the Bridal relationship in God—which the Person is—that is the innermost constitution of our nature. The Person is inseparable from our nature at once both immanent and transcendent. In our natures we are in the process of becoming the persons God willed us to be. We have no merely natural end, but a completely transcendent end. Our personhood is a transcendent self that acts through the vehicle of our nature. Our nature is simply a power of awareness by which we are meant to become conscious of the reality of God and his purpose for us. To be aware of being recipients of Divine Love and reciprocating this love is our only meaning for existing at all. Even in eternity our nature will identify us as receivers though it will be totally transformed beyond our conception.

To do what he wanted to do God had to create free subjects. For as free subjects we must freely welcome Divine Love which includes the possibility that we might refuse. In the Christian tradition the refusal of Divine Love is the great mystery of sin, for which we have no answer. Why did the angel Lucifer fail to welcome his call to be a person and the angel Gabriel

not fail? Then we have Satan interacting on Adam and Eve and their refusal. As persons we are interiorly dependent on each other for our perfection in the Person. The growth or failure of one does affect everyone in ways beyond our understanding. If we are going to get some grasp of the reality of the Person we have to get some grasp of the reality of faith.

Dan says that faith is the way the Person is to be lived out in existence, that faith is the symbol of the Person. When we look at what constitutes us as human beings we find that we are essentially a propensity, a power of desiring. We have the power of cognition and the power of loving what is cognized. This very power proceeds from God's ecstatic love which is as we have said the inner constitution of our nature. This propensity proceeds from the Person and is towards the Person. It is God's ecstatic love which comes to us and is to be returned to him, not as his but as ours. For the Person acts through our nature manifesting a humanized divine love. The Divine Love, which is the eternal ground of our being and, as such, transcends both our consciousness and unconsciousness, can in fact rise to our consciousness and even manifest itself through our activity of knowing and loving, which have then their own intrinsic meaning and validity which we are able to perceive. Yet, we also remain free to let it express itself through us or not. Fr. Louis writes in his book, *The New Man*, that "To find the full meaning of our existence we must find not the meaning that we expect but the meaning that is revealed to us by God. The meaning that comes to us out of the transcendent darkness of his mystery and our own. We do not know God; we do not know ourselves any other way. Meaning is not something we discover in ourselves, or in our lives. The meanings we are capable of discovering are never sufficient. The true meaning has to be given. And the fact that it is given is, indeed, the greater part of its significance: for life itself is, in the end, only significant in so far as it is given." Our concrete existence is an outright gift of God. We do not receive a gift, we ourselves are the gift. The Person in us is in process. We are moving towards God's future: "It does not yet appear what we shall be" (1 Jn 3:2). Although we can perceive God's action in us, yet what we are moving towards remains for the most part an unknown life. If we could see God we could not help but be drawn to him instantly—for he is beatitude itself. It is because we are ignorant of God that we can sin, that we can fail the test of faith. Lucifer somehow failed to assent to his own mystery hidden in God when it presented itself to him and chose rather to hold on to his own nature which he could see. He usurped the power from the Person given to him for the realization of his own personhood and used it to make his individual nature an end in

itself. This is a complete contradiction for nature has no end in itself but is always in relation to the Person. Apart from it, it has no meaning. So Satan was left isolated in a false reality of his own making—left with a meaning he tried to create that left him meaningless.

We could imagine Adam and Eve walking together in faith, on their way to their relationship opening out into the infinity of the Person. "*What God has joined together let no man put asunder.*" The relationship of man and woman is God's doing and its meaning can be only from him. Then Satan intervenes and draws them into his own grasping. What we term the fall of Lucifer or of Adam and Eve was in some way a failure in faith. God communicated to them in some manner that demanded of them a surrender to the unknown, to their own mystery. This would have been a realization of their personhood which would have opened them up to infinite growth. The grace to make this surrender was given to them by virtue of their inner constitution as persons; yet they directed that power which was from the Person to what they could grasp and lost the sense of their personhood, which at that time was beyond their grasp. Because they lost the sense of themselves as persons, the only way open to them for their fulfilment was their natures seen for the most part as an end in themselves. The effect of sin from which we all suffer is that we imagine that we are the source of our power of acting, that we create the meaning of our lives. That our lives are at our disposal. We become for the most part dead to the sense of what God is doing. We know from experience that to the extent we have attempted to grasp onto ourselves, onto things, onto others and even onto God, we have come sooner or later to experience dissatisfaction and even interior wretchedness. And why is this? It is because it is a contradiction between the whole of what we are in the Person and the partial part of ourselves we have tried to create by grasping for an identity of our own making. All of our well-being as well as that of others depends on our recovering the sense of our true personhood.

The greatness of the New Testament revelation is that our personhood has been restored. Dan says that "Christ has come to give us hope—hope that we shall be fulfilled in our personhood, in perfect love. Of utmost importance is realizing in our own person this restoration that God has already effected through the person of Christ." All that Dan tried to awaken us to can be summed up in the statement which he made: "I am simply because God loves me and for no reason whatsoever." This statement is utterly rooted in concrete existence. A simple exercise can help bring out what I mean by this. Suppose I become recollected and say to myself, "I am." The words, "I am," center my consciousness on the bare fact of

my act of existing. Then I follow my breathing until I come to the naked realization of this fact. What is taking place here is that the very act of my existence is communicating itself to my consciousness. To say, "I am simply because God loves me," is to become aware that my act of existing is simultaneously God's doing, that it is constituted by the relationship that constitutes God Himself. Our interiority is one Spirit with the interiority of God. We encounter ourselves as inseparable from God, as mystery, and awaken to hope, the expectation of what God wills to communicate to us through the powers of our nature. We can experience the love of God in faith regardless of how we may feel—neither aridity or affection are proof. The intuition of faith we are speaking of here transcends the senses although it can manifest itself through our sensual nature in ways that affect us emotionally. It is the transcendent self that *we are* rooted in Eternal Love *becoming aware of itself as such*. This is God's unspeakable gift given to us sinners.

Fr. Louis in his book, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, stresses how, in so far as we have been affected by sin the dimension of transcendent freedom is really not open to us. The basic intuition in Christianity is that it is given as a gift of divine mercy. That is why Fr. Louis said he insisted on dependence on God as Savior and giver of grace. Our highest good is to awaken to our personhood. But how to realize what we already are, or what has been given to us? Fr. Louis writes in *The Inner Experience*, an unpublished manuscript, "that the most important discovery in the interior life is the sacred attitude which penetrates into the darkness and nothingness that assails us when we are left alone with ourselves realizing that the mercy of God has transformed our nothingness into his temple and believing that in our darkness his light has hidden itself. This sacred awe is no mere magic illusion but the real expression of a release of spiritual energy, testifying to our interior reunion and reconciliation with that which is deepest in us, and through the inner self, with the transcendent and invisible power of God."

What I found that Dan's insight did was to give me the existential sense of my own mystery as inseparable from God's own mystery and thereby created the drive to abide in my own solitude, to journey through my own darkness and nothingness. For when we awaken to our transcendent self, then we can experience with stark clarity the effect of sin. It is this drive awakened in the intuition of faith that enables one to bear the pain and darkness until we are liberated and come to experience ourselves more and more like God. Dan quoted a letter from Fr. Louis once in a paper he wrote on Fr. Louis. The quote was: "What you say about the person is extremely

important to me. And it is witness to the failure of modern thinkers to recognize the mystery and darkness through which one must pass in order to arrive at the infinite reality of the human person—and beyond it to God.”

Dan’s insight is only the beginning of our interior journey. Most important is our going with this new current in our life however faintly we may discern it. What are the new possibilities of growth that present themselves when we become aware of our personhood and encounter others at this level where we are interiorly dependent on each other and yet perhaps feel most alone? Yet we are called on to integrate this unknown into every aspect of our conscious life. This is the challenge we are faced with: suffering through our own sinfulness, knowing that sin has been conquered but that its effects still have to be removed from our lives that we may become the persons we are meant to be. To grow into the sense of our communion with the whole of humanity and with the whole universe? That the least of our acts are of eternal significance and therefore matter very much? Such questions as these can only be answered by each one who enters the spiritual journey of becoming a person.

One of the strongest things Dan ever said was a reaction to our trying to pin down something he said. I have returned to it at times for direction and with it I will conclude this paper: “Consciousness must have an atmosphere in which to work, namely, love. And we must give up trying to pin down a meaning for love. God has no meaning—meaning as explanation. God isn’t grasped. You live God; he is your life. The life of consciousness is the divine life. When our consciousness is functioning the way it should, we are living the divine life. We can only be silent about this God of faith.”



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