

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE EARLY POETRY OF THOMAS MERTON:

Reading

“The Quickening of St. John the Baptist”

By **Martin J. Burne, O.S.B.**

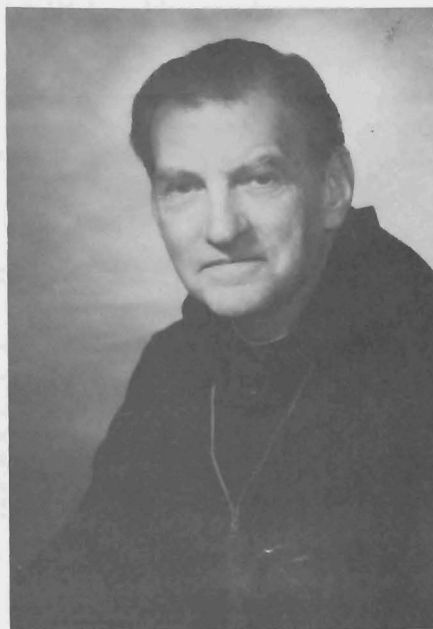
In his book, *Thomas Merton, Brother Monk*, Basil Pennington notes that during Merton's early days at Gethsemani he found the “early morning period, which often coincided with dawn, a creative time. He began to write some poetry — some of the best that he wrote — and some seeds of contemplation” (page 6). When *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* was published in 1977, the publisher happily arranged the various collections chronologically as they were published as books, so that it is not difficult to ascertain approximate times, at least, in which the poems were written.² Some of the early poetry of which Pennington spoke seems to reflect the strong influence that liturgy and monastic life exerted on the younger Merton. In *Thirty Poems*, published in 1944 and dedicated to the Virgin Mary, Queen of Poets (*Virgini Mariae, Reginae Poetarum / Sanctissimae Dei Genetrici Ac Semper*), one finds a poem entitled “The Flight into Egypt,” another called “The Holy Sacrament of the Altar,” and a third, “The Holy Child's Song.” A number of poems in the collection concern the Mother of Jesus: “The Evening of the Visitation,” “Song for Our Lady of Cobre,” and “The Blessed Virgin Mary Compared to a Window.” The poem, “The Trappist Abbey: Matins,” reflects something of the effect that Gethsemani had already had on the poet.

In 1946 a collection known as *A Man in the Divided Sea* was published, and again, the dedication reads: “To the Immaculate Virgin Mary, Queen of Poets” (*Virgini Mariae Immaculae / Poetarum Reginae / Dominae Monachorum Beatissimae / Salvatoris Matri*). A far larger collection than *Thirty Poems*, it includes four poems bearing the names of saints: “St. Paul,” “St. Thomas Aquinas,” “St. Alberic,” and “St. John Baptist.” There is a poem entitled “Advent,”

□ **Martin J. Burne, O.S.B.**, is a monk of Saint Mary's Abbey and is on the faculty of Delbarton School, both located in Morristown, New Jersey. He was Abbot of Saint Mary's Abbey from 1966 to 1971 and President of the American Cassinese Congregation from 1971 to 1983.

another called "Carol," a third on "The Candlemas Procession." Also present are "A Song of the Blessed Sacrament;" a poem recalling an Old Testament figure, "Rahab's House;" and two poems having to do with New Testament miracles, "Cana" and "The Widow of Naim." Interspersed are three poems that have to do with Merton's monastic life: "Trappists, Working," "After the Night Office — Gethsemani Abbey," and "The Trappist Cemetery — Gethsemani." *Figures for an Apocalypse*, published in 1947, and *The Tears of the Blind Lions*, published in 1949 and dedicated to Jacques Maritain, are again rich in poetry that permits the reader to enjoy a poet then living for several years within the cloister of a Cistercian Abbey of the Strict Observance.

In many of the poems mentioned thus far there is a richness that will delight the perceptive reader. A problem arises, however, if the allusions used by Merton are completely unfamiliar: words and ideas that have a predominantly Biblical or liturgical or monastic orientation can at times stand illumination if a given poem is to be fully enjoyed.



MARTIN J. BURNE

A Bachrach Photo

THE QUICKENING OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST

On the Contemplative Vocation

Why do you fly from the drowned shores of Galilee,
 From the sands and the lavender waves?
 Why do you leave the ordinary world, Virgin of Nazareth,
 The yellow fishing boats, the farms,
 The winesmelling yards and low cellars
 Or the oilpress, and the women by the well?
 Why do you fly those markets,
 Those suburban gardens,
 The trumpets of the jealous lilies,
 Leaving them all, lovely among the lemon trees?
 You have trusted no town
 With the news behind your eyes.
 You have drowned Gabriel's word in thoughts like seas

And turned toward the stone mountain
 To the treeless places.
 Virgin of God, why are your clothes like sails?

The day Our Lady, full of Christ,
 Entered the dooryard of her relative
 Did not her steps, light steps, lay on the paving leaves
 like gold?
 Did not her eyes as grey as doves
 Alight like the peace of a new world upon that house, upon
 miraculous Elizabeth?

Her salutation
 Sings in the stone valley like a Charterhouse bell:
 And the unborn saint John
 Wakes in his mother's body,
 Bounds with the echoes of discovery.

Sing in your cell, small anchorite!
 How did you see her in the eyeless dark?
 What secret syllable
 Woke your young faith to the mad truth
 That an unborn holy baby could be washed in the Spirit of God?
 Oh Burning joy!

What seas of life were planted by that voice!
 With what new sense
 Did your wise heart receive her Sacrament,
 And know her cloistered Christ?

You need no eloquence, wild bairn,
 Exulting in your hermitage.
 Your ecstasy is your apostolate,
 For whom to kick is *contemplata tradere*.
 Your joy is the vocation
 Of Mother Church's hidden children —
 Those who by now lie buried in the cloister or the hermitage:
 The speechless Trappist, or the grey, granite Carthusian,
 The quiet Carmelite, the barefoot Clare,
 Planted in the night of contemplation,
 Sealed in the dark and waiting to be born.

Night is our diocese and silence is our ministry
 Poverty our charity and helplessness our tongue-tied
 sermon.

Beyond the scope of sight or sound we dwell upon the air
 Seeking the world's gain in an unthinkable experience.
 We are exiles in the far end of solitude, living as listeners

With hearts attending to the skies we cannot understand:
 Waiting upon the first far drums of Christ the Conqueror,
 Planted like sentinels upon the world's frontier.

But in the days, rare days, when our Theotocus
 Flying the prosperous world
 Appears upon our mountain with her clothes like sails,
 Then, like the wise, wild baby,
 The unborn John who could not see a thing
 We wake and know the Virgin presence
 Receive her Christ into our night
 With stabs of an intelligence as white as lightning.

Cooled in the flame of God's dark fire
 Washed in His gladness like a vesture of new flame
 We burn like eagles in His invincible awareness
 And bound and bounce with happiness,
 Leap in the womb, our cloud, our faith, our element,
 Our contemplation, our anticipated heaven
 Till Mother Church sings like an Evangelist.

Leon Bloy, French novelist and pamphleteer (1846-1917), in his early life had moved away from the Church. Through a kind of mystical experience he returned to the Faith and became its vigorous defender. He is perhaps best known for his novel *La Femme Pauvre* ["The Woman Who Was Poor"]. The title for Merton's collection of poetry known as *The Tears of the Blind Lions* (1949) stems from Bloy, who had written: "When those who love God try to talk about Him, their words are blind lions looking for springs in the desert." It is in this collection of Merton's poetry that "The Quickening of St. John the Baptist" appears.

Not by accident has the poet added just beneath the title of the poem: "On the Contemplative Vocation." The yen for contemplation with which Merton's name was to be connected as the years went on, is seen by the poet fulfilled in the person of Saint John the Baptist on the occasion of Mary's visit to Elizabeth. In Saint Luke's Infancy Narratives (Luke 1 and 2), one of the great moments occurs when Mary visits her cousin, Elizabeth, and the infant in Elizabeth's womb responds to the divine presence in Mary's womb, so that Elizabeth says to Mary: "Why, as soon as ever the voice of thy greeting sounded in my ears, the child in my womb leaped for joy" (Luke 1:44). Merton begins his poem by addressing Mary, and in doing so, he describes in lovely language the landscape, smells, people, markets, gardens, flowers, and trees that the Virgin is leaving behind as she wends her way to the home of her cousin. In the following verse, the poet continues to address Mary: she has trusted no town with the extraordinary revelation entrusted to her by Gabriel. The archangel's words are drowned in thoughts like seas and Mary's clothes (retaining the metaphor) are like sails.

Merton now speaks of, not to, Our Lady, describing her as "full of Christ," entering the dooryard of her cousin's home. When, in the following verse, the poet describes the salutation of Mary singing in the stone valley like a Charterhouse bell, the reader is reminded of Merton's sometime yen for Carthusian life: was that already present as he wrote these lines? Priceless lines

follow: the unborn John wakes in his mother's body and *bounds* with the echoes of discovery. Who but Mary (and the archangel) knew of Mary's treasure? "Sing in your cell, small anchorite!" chants the poet. John's extraordinary privilege — small anchorite — is that toward which Merton will himself move increasingly, and here already the poet sees the greatness of the anchoritic life: complete absorption in the divine, present at this moment in the womb of Mary. The reader cannot fail to note the concluding words of the verse: "Oh burning joy!"

A few lines later reference is made to "her Sacrament" — Mary bears the outward sign of inner grace in the humanity lying within her — true God and true human. And so the "wild bairn" (that lovely Scottish word not often used among us, signifying here the child in the womb of Elizabeth) need not speak in his hermitage (is the poet looking forward?): his ecstasy is his apostolate, and his kicking in the womb is *contemplata tradere*. One must pause at these two words of venerable tradition. Renowned theologians considered the passing on (*transmissio*, *tradere*) of truths contemplated (*contemplata*) the great privilege of the theologian. Study in itself was not simply the aim, but rather the fruit of that study, the conveying or passing on to others what had been learned. The tiny John, hidden within Elizabeth, has no way to pass along the fruit of his contemplation except to kick! And so, *contemplata tradere*.

Merton, by this time of his life, was also, of course, a theologian, and his introduction a bit later of *Theotocus* recalls to the reader that whole early period in the Church's history when, at Ephesus in 431 A. D., Theotocus — Mother of God — loomed as an important title as the humanity of Christ came to be defined. Nestorius wanted Mary called *Christotocos*, but the Council Fathers found that that did not tell the whole story they were setting out to explain.

"Clothes like sails," heard in an earlier verse, recurs. It is we now, not John, who, faced with the revelation granted us by faith, leap and bound "Till Mother Church sings like an Evangelist."

If scriptural and theological overtones give this poem a great richness, as indeed they do, one does not want to overlook what might be spoken of as certain technical aspects of the poetry. Not least of all, the flow of the poem is aided by both its rhythm and its rich alliteration. Simply saying the words aloud — "women by the well," "leaving them all, lovely among the lemon trees," "sing in your cell, small anchorite," "cloistered Christ" — lifts the poem, as it were, on its way and furnishes the reader with an aesthetic satisfaction. Rhythmic richness may seem a bit more elusive, yet as one reads certain passages one feels oneself in the presence of fine music.

Night is our diocese and silence is our ministry
Poverty our charity and helplessness our tongue-tied sermon.

Writing of that kind helps confirm Pennington's view, with which this essay began, that Merton's early poetry ought not be overlooked.
