

## II.

“Merton’s Secret”:  
Homily for the Fortieth Anniversary of  
Thomas Merton’s Ordination,  
St. Robert Chapel, Bellarmine College, 26 May 1989

By **Paul J. McGuire**, S.C.J.

In a poem entitled “The Transformation: For the Sacred Heart,” Thomas Merton asked:

Why are we all afraid of love?  
Why should we, who are far greater than the grain  
Fear to fall in the ground and die?

This is a great, recurring insight in so many of Merton’s experiments and explorations in the geography of the spiritual life: that the rhythm of that life and the dynamism of the spirit begin to unfold in solitude and darkness. Only when we bury the shell of our outer self in the mysterious depths of a dark but loving creation can our true identity break through, spring forth and blossom into the full humanity we are meant to be. And the process is all so hidden and mysterious. As Jesus said: “This is how it is with the reign of God. A man scatters seed on the ground. He goes to bed and gets up day after day. Through it all the seed sprouts and grows without his knowing how it happens. The soil produces of itself first the blade, then the ear, finally the ripe wheat in the ear” (Mark 4: 26-28).

Today, during our First General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society, we have the happy coincidence of being able to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of Merton’s ordination to the priesthood. But of all the Merton’s Merton was or became or left behind or aspired to be, none, perhaps, is more obscure or paradoxical or seemingly superfluous than Merton the Priest. After all, what did he do that he could not have done had he never become a priest? What did he write that he could not have written had he never been ordained? What do we know of his inner and outer journeys that we would never have known had he not become, forty years ago today, *Father Thomas Merton*? The answer is: precious little.

But, I believe, the little we know of the meaning of Merton’s priesthood is precious. He once wrote: “There can be no contemplation where there is no secret” (*New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 83). I believe that the significance of his priesthood was one of the great secrets of Merton’s life. In a journal he was keeping at the time of his ordination he writes a little about the priesthood, but other than that, throughout the vast corpus of Merton’s works, he says little else, almost nothing, about his experience of being a priest. In the published version of that journal, *The Sign of Jonas*, we read: “My priestly ordination was, I felt, the one great secret for which I had been born” (p. 181). “For this I came into the world” (p. 194). “The Mass is the most wonderful thing that has ever entered into my life. When I am at the altar I feel that I am at last the person God has truly intended me to be” (p. 195). He said of his ordination and first Mass: “I am left with the feeling not only that I have been transformed but that a new world has somehow been brought into being through the labor and happiness of these three most exhausting days, full of

sublimity and of things that none of us will understand for a year or two to come" (p. 193).

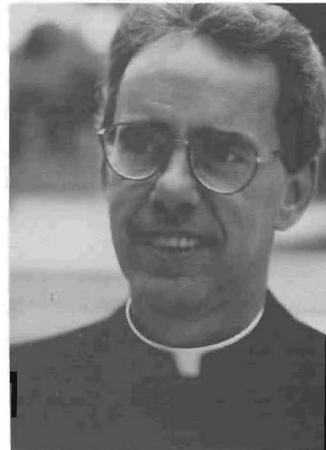
But in the years that followed Merton was uncharacteristically silent about his own priesting. We learn of his opinions about everything from Trappist cheese to the nuclear freeze, but of his experience of priesthood we learn almost nothing.

Merton suggests that because his priesthood was so important, personal and transforming, therefore he could not write about it nor explain the experience. He said: "That which is most perfect and most individual in each man's life is precisely the element in it which cannot be reduced to a common formula. It is the element which is nobody else's but ours and God's. It is our own, true, uncommunicable life, the life that has been planned for us and realized for us in the bosom of God" (p. 181). For Merton this secret personal element, essential to his life, was his experience of priesthood. He wrote: "This truth is so tremendous that it is somehow neutral. It cannot be expressed. It is entirely personal. And you have no special desire to tell anybody about it. It is nobody else's business" (*New Seeds*, p. 162).

Perhaps Merton learned this reticence from his first experience of trying to announce his desire to become a priest. It is one of the truly comic passages in his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. After a night of jazz, cigarettes and drinking with his friends Ed Rice, Bob Gerdy, Bob Gibney and Peggy Wells, they closed Nick's Bar on Sheridan Square in Greenwich Village at four in the morning. Gibney and Wells crashed at Merton's apartment on Perry Street. Up at the crack of noon the next day, they are sitting around the floor drinking coffee and listening to Bix Biederbecke on the phonograph when Merton announces, "You know I think I ought to go and enter a monastery and become a priest" (p. 253). He gets no reaction. It's as if he were invisible and nothing had been said. Later that afternoon standing with Peggy Wells under the abutments of the Westside Highway he says it again, "I am going to enter a monastery and be a priest." She said nothing in response and took the subway back uptown to her place. Later that evening he found himself at the Jesuit Church on Sixteenth Street attending Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. He was looking for a sign when he felt himself questioned by the Host in the Monstrance: "Do you really want to be a priest? If you do say so . . ." He prayed back, "Yes, I want to be a priest, with all my heart I want it. If it is Your will, make me a priest — make me a priest" (p. 255).

The following spring he travelled to Cuba on a kind of pilgrimage to the shrine of Our Lady of Cobre. Again he was looking for a sign, a "vision in the ceiba trees" (p. 283). He made his way to the yellow Basilica of Caridad del Cobre, but only had time to say a prayer and make a promise: "If you will obtain for me this priesthood, I will remember you at my first Mass" (p. 282). The quiet of his solitude was quickly disturbed by a pesky middle-aged woman in a black dress who was eager to sell him a lot of medals. He tried to sneak around and dodge her, but in the end she persisted. Disappointed and resigned, he bought a medal and left.

The next day back in Havan he happened upon a children's Mass. After the elevations at the consecration a Franciscan Friar in his brown



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robe and white cord stood up in front of the children and all at once they burst out: “Creo en Dios . . .” (I believe in God). This loud, bright, sudden, joyous, triumphant shout of those Cuban children formed in Merton an awareness and a realization of what had just taken place on the altar. He said of it, “a realization of God made present by the words of Consecration in a way that made Him belong to me” (p. 284). This struck him like a thunderclap. “It was a light that was so bright that it had no relation to any visible light and so profound and so intimate that it seemed like a neutralization of every lesser experience.”

But what struck him most of all was that it was all so “ordinary.” The light, which took his breath away, was offered to all. There was nothing fancy or strange about it. It had the “peculiar quality of sudden obviousness” about it. He said: “It was as if I had been illuminated by being blinded by the manifestation of God’s presence.” Unexpectedly, he was given the sign he had sought: at a children’s Mass, after the elevation of the Host, when they made their spontaneous affirmation of faith. He was granted his momentary vision which saw into the deep reality before him in the Eucharist: “Heaven is right here in front of me: Heaven, Heaven!”

Nine years later when he was ordained and had fulfilled his promise to Our Lady of Cobre, the principal insight priesthood disclosed to him was, once again, the extraordinary presence of God in the ordinary. He learned that God “does not make us priests or make us saints by superimposing an extraordinary existence upon our ordinary lives. He takes our whole life and our whole being and elevates it to a supernatural level, transforms it completely from within, and leaves it exteriorly what it is: ordinary” (*Jonas*, p. 182). He discovered that his priesthood was something greater than a momentary flight above everyday existence, it was a permanent transformation in which all that was ordinary and natural was elevated to the level of the sublime. The things of earth were transformed into the stuff of heaven. After his first Mass he wrote: “I saw most clearly that it is useless and illusory to look for some spectacular and extraordinary way of serving [God], when all ordinary service immediately becomes sublime and extraordinary as soon as it is transfigured by love for [God].” Thus his whole life took on the structure and the substance of one never-ending Mass.

This was Merton’s secret, the secret of his priesthood, the secret “encounter of the substance of [his] soul with the living God” (p. 190). Merton the Priest was not just another one of the faces of this multifaceted man, it was the inner transformation of the man himself. It was as priest that he became the “person God . . . truly intended [him] to be” (p. 195). It was as priest that he entered into the cosmic dance of God’s gracious creation.

Edward Schillebeeckx began and ended his study of *Jesus* with a reflection on the cure of the crippled man by the Apostle Peter. In a coda which concludes his book he recounts a Hasidic tale by Martin Buber about his grandfather who was a rabbi. “My grandfather was paralysed. One day he was asked to tell about something that happened with his teacher — the great Baalschem. Then he told how the saintly Baalschem used to leap about and dance while he was at his prayers. As he went on with the story my grandfather stood up: he was so carried away that he had to show how the master had done it, and he started to caper about and dance. From that moment on he was cured.” Buber adds, “That is how stories should be told” (*Jesus*, p. 674).

That, too, is how priesthood enabled Merton to tell his story. He became the tale he told, so much so that we could say of Merton, with the words of William Butler Yeats from “Among School Children” — in the end “How can we know the dancer from the dance?”