

Striving for Spiritual Community: The Example of Thomas Merton

By Robert Rhodes

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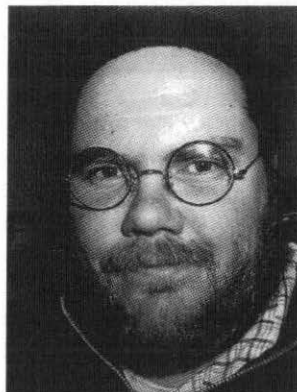
Our journeys to community can be as varied as they are sacred and mysterious. Truly, God seems to draw us seekers of covenants from all corners, from all different groundings of the soul, to share a life together and to embrace him as our unseen master. In my own personal journey to a life in a dedicated but imperfect Christian community, I have found much inspiration and example in a figure who has been a spiritual mentor for many in the past 50 years – Thomas Merton.

When I joined a Hutterite community in Minnesota, after a career as a journalist in Fayetteville, Arkansas, it was a journey my wife and I made very much in our own way, and our young daughter with us. The Reformation-rooted Hutterites, who in many ways have retained some of their long-ago austerity, as well as pursuing an existence very much apart from the mainstream, have a life that in many ways resembles the cloistered life Thomas Merton embraced. Joining such a life demands full commitment of self and abandonment of all resources, including, most of all, one's pride and ambition.

These were problems for us, just as they certainly were for Merton, though at the outset of the journey they seemed not so formidable. Indeed, it is only later that we realize the full impact of what we have done when we join wholeheartedly into a life of community, and certainly when that community is a Christian one. Undoubtedly, if we had known when we started how difficult the journey would eventually become as we sought this demanding ideal, we most likely would have quit before beginning.

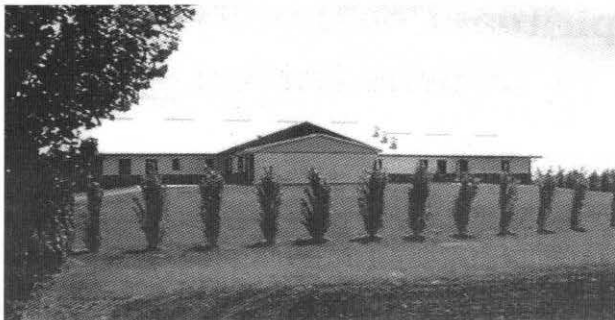
The Hutterites have been called a “forgotten people.” Despite our ties with other “Plain” groups like the Amish and Mennonites, we are practically unknown except to our neighbors, it would seem. Because we are remote and sponsor no mission work, very few people ever join the more than 400 colonies of the Hutterian Church in Canada and the United States. The result is a somewhat insular, but thoroughly spiritual culture of much beauty – attributes even the Hutterites seem to be unaware of.

When the Hutterites left Europe and came to the U.S. in 1874, they left few tracks, and few obvious ties to their continental forebears. This is not out of character, either. Having been chased by persecution from Moravia in the 1500s, to Russia in the 1700s, the communal, agrarian Hutterites – who take their name from an early elder, Jakob Hutter, an Austrian hatmaker who was burned at the stake



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Our communal kitchen, dining room and laundry. Our church meeting room is also part of this building. A large basement contains community stores and walk-in coolers.

life can entail a sacrifice that is neither attractive nor inviting, even if we consider the broad spectrum of spiritual treasure that might accrue in return. For most, because we are human, it is nearly an assault on the impossible to come together like this – to join souls to hearts, and to offer hands to help others.

There is an element of the miraculous in all of this, however. A Hutterite from nearly 400 years ago, Andreas Ehrenpreis, said in this kind of sacrifice “the impossible becomes possible,” which is really the simple essence of the whole Christian experience. Indeed, forgiveness of sins, conversion of life, and the never-ending quest for truth embodied in the Son of God are at once paradoxical and life-giving when we view them in light of our previous lives.

Ehrenpreis wrote at a time when the life of full community of goods was at perhaps one of its sharpest turning points, at least for the Hutterites. Personal property had crept back into the ever-mobile communities, which had been perilously whittled by the attritions of flight, spiritual turnbacks and persecution, and the group was starting to fragment and drift accordingly. A strict but compassionate reformer, Ehrenpreis wanted the people he helped shepherd to make this leap of faith only if it could be done joyfully, humbly, and with total commitment. This was easier said than done. And at a time when many church leaders might have loosened the reins to make the people around him feel a little more at ease, Ehrenpreis broke for the zeal of years gone by and expected everyone to rededicate themselves to the ideals of previous generations. He was not roundly successful, either, because the air of the worldly life had insinuated itself quite deeply in the communities.

By the late 1600s, when Ehrenpreis wrote, the Hutterites had weathered what would be their darkest days of temporal distress, but by reaching this island of momentary peace and relative stability, they were all the more open to readmitting the cares and ill influences most of them had left behind. Ehrenpreis knew that a Christian must keep the “impossible” ever before his eyes if he is to succeed in the spiritual life. By believing that the impossible truly is possible, and feeling this force at work in our own lives, we can never become so weak that we fall away altogether. Christ Himself taught that we must strive for the impossible – or what the world calls impossible – if we are to be His children. Having attained this, we must then teach others to long for the impossible, too.

What better place to do this, we believe, than in community, where all who live earnestly strive after the same things and can shore up those who stumble, or who become consumed altogether by the world of the miserably “possible.” By living, praying and worshiping amid our world of impos-

at Innsbruck in 1536 – bring with them an air of rootlessness, of distinct pilgrimage in this world. In a sense, it is this rootlessness that appealed to us, for indeed we are pilgrims in our search for Christ – again, just as Merton was in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. And like Merton, we wanted to join with other pilgrims. In our case, it was the Hutterites; in his, the poor men who labored and sacrificed at Gethsemani in Kentucky.

And sacrifice has been the key for us, too, as it was for Merton. Truly, this

sibility, we become accustomed, so to speak, to the impossible things our Savior has given us. Soon, when we come to view the world as turned truly upside-down, nothing, it turns out, is impossible after all.

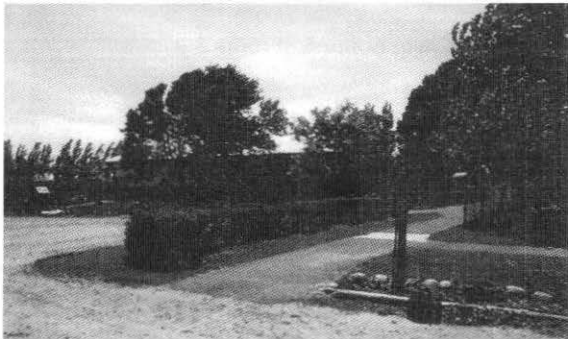
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Despite his ardent and often difficult leanings to the solitary life, Thomas Merton was very much a man of community. Though his final years at the Abbey of Gethsemani were spent somewhat separated from his fellow habitants there, and Merton found himself growing distant from the changing spirit of the religious order he had joined nearly thirty years before, his need for community with others never waned. Indeed, with his latter-day overtures to those of other traditions, and with his forays into the peace movement and protests against the Vietnam War, his sense of community grew to embrace nearly everyone he met or encountered – a burgeoning world community that most of us cannot grasp, and which many conservatives of Merton’s time dismissed as reaching too far beyond the monastic enclave. Yet at the root of Merton’s striving and longing remained his own community, that of Gethsemani, with all of its flaws and resentments and, of course, its innumerable graces. It is this way for anyone who lives in community.

As Hutterites, members of one of the traditional “peace churches,” we can understand this longing to seek together for a sense of real and abiding peace in the world. As part of our Christian conviction, we are dedicated to nonviolence and to nonresistant responses to evil. This goes beyond our refusal to bear arms or to serve in the military. It also means we strive for peace and solicitude among brothers and sisters, in our families, and in our relations with the outside world. We also oppose the death penalty, and stand square-on for a total separation of church and state. Despite our desire to live and pursue our convictions quietly, this striving can lead to much misunderstanding and even alienation between us and our neighbors and sadly, with other Christians, too – something Merton experienced himself in his attempts to write about peace issues, particularly in regard to nuclear proliferation. His was a tension we know all too well; it is almost a given for us, a way of life.

The most recent volumes of Merton’s journals illustrate this kind of inward crisis quite vividly, but without leading one through the two decades of growth and struggle that predated them. Here it is still good to return to the source, so to speak. By doing so, we see that our convictions for Christ, community, for peace, are all matters of degree – of how far we wish to go in pursuit of our ideals. In the case of Thomas Merton, this question of depth and intensity began with his entry into the realm of belief. One need only peruse *The Seven Storey Mountain* to see the absolute scope of the conversion that God worked in his life, and the depth of the journey Merton made to his own spiritual destination. Because of this, Merton continues to sway souls toward Christ in his own unique way, and he certainly has had a sonorous, redemptive effect on many who seek formal community settings to live out their convictions.

Why? Because those around him could see that Merton went deeper than most, and with far more vigor. People used to write to Thomas Merton during his first blush of fame in the wake of *The Seven Storey Mountain* and remark on the life he had given up in order to join the Cistercians. “You gave up so much,” they wrote, seeming to envy a little the relative peace and silence he had attained in exchange for his life of collegiate debauchery, even though they really had no concept of the struggles that always arrive in the same package. At first, Merton surely didn’t, either. They would have to read his next book, and all the others, to learn this. *The Sign of Jonas* certainly reflects this, and in his journals, which have only been published in complete form in the past few years, we see



A view of one of our residences.

this struggle set off in incisive relief to the impressions of ascetic quietism that even Merton himself seemed to believe existed at one time.

But recounting these letters he received early on, Merton seemed to choke on the adoring words of his newfound fans, if not on the familiar sentiments they conveyed. He had probably felt this pride himself, at first anyway, though he had long ago seen how distasteful such self-satisfaction can be. We are all this way a little. This, of course, served only to intensify Merton's embarrass-

ment at having become a popular author, even while he was struggling to live the strict rule and stability of the Trappist cenobium. One wonders how deep this embarrassment eventually became, once his fame and indeed his notoriety began to run away from even his own imagination. It could not have been easy, one imagines, to square this worldly fame with his avowed life of poverty, anonymity and servitude to God and his fellow monks.

Still, one does give up quite a bit, at least in terms of the world and its standards, when one comes to the kind of total community that we are considering here. At the time, it may even seem like quite a sacrifice to give up one's car, one's dwelling, one's money and especially, one's sense of self-determination. We might even be a little bit proud about it, or at least slightly awed at our own willingness and ability to cast everything aside. This is a wrong impulse, of course, and like all our other sins, we must repent of it again and again.

But there is a moment of transformation that takes place, too, usually after we have been in community for a period of time – a point after which one's sacrifice seems not only small and insignificant, but even of no spiritual merit whatsoever. This is what happened with Thomas Merton as well. In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, as he wrestles with the reality and not just the idea of his own religious vocation, Merton exclaims that by joining the Trappists over other less stringent orders, he opted for a more thorough sacrifice than what might be required elsewhere. "I want to give God everything," he said, perhaps a little dramatically.

And it is a dramatic moment any time one wants to throw away all his illusions, material and spiritual, in order to seek and strive after that which eludes most people in this life. In our life as Christian communalists, we had to throw away our illusions, too, and then try not to pick them back up again in spite of ourselves. It is a throwing away, and a guarding of the soul, that will continue this way until we die. For Merton, it would end at Bangkok. For the rest of us – who can say?

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In the week, several years ago, before we formally and forever joined the Hutterian Church, the weather changed three times. This is typical of life on a prairie, especially in winter, when sunny, precise days can quickly turn dour and bitterly torn by the fiercest of winds. Mild afternoons can become evenings and nights laced with danger and even the threat of a frozen death, if one is not careful. Our week started out with the leftovers of a mid-season snowstorm on the ground, but through which berms of black Minnesota earth were already beginning to appear. This melted during a day or two of 40-degree weather, followed by more snow, and then a terrible dip in the tempera-

tures, which placed a thick, frozen cap over everything and everywhere, it seemed.

So it was with our hearts as well, swinging as they did back and forth between being anxious about the event to come, and inner and outer excitement for what lay ahead. That entire week, and indeed for many days before, I found myself focusing at odd moments on the events of many years ago. These were not scenes of ill-living necessarily, but more often of childhood, in Arkansas – of the light after a storm in our flat, humid world; of unpeopled rooms and evening windows; of dirt roads and expanses of cotton and wheat and tar-paper shacks along Highway 61, as it slid from north somewhere to south somewhere else, and terminated in a place we knew nothing of. I remembered ever-so-slight earthquakes, and I remembered gray and silent tornadoes far away, beyond hearing, across the flatlands, and I remembered the heat shimmering above the road that passed between our yard in Arkansas and the Frisco Railroad tracks a few hundred paces away.

It is interesting that Highway 61 continues its north and south odyssey just a few miles east of here now, and another road – Highway 71, which passed near our home in Fayetteville – lies just west of here. This, then, is a reminder that though we may have traveled very far in our journeys sometimes, we seldom stray from the familiar ways, even though they might become unrecognizable to us as time and distance intervene. Sometimes these old paths leave us right where we need to be, even if we didn't see that place on the map.

The Tuesday before we made our lifetime commitment to the community where we live, I sat in a doctor's waiting room in Hutchinson, Minnesota – which is the “town” we mean when we “go to town,” as Louisville (my birthplace incidentally) was to Thomas Merton. I held in my hands a copy of *The New Yorker* magazine, and I was reading one of those leafy but unembarrassing articles about a playwright I had admired once, and whose shows I had even seen on Broadway. In college, I had appeared in a student production of a one-act play he had written, and had been told I had done a good job, which I am still puzzled by. His writing – his way of writing – excited me, though, and made me want to write, too. At one time, I might have put a lot of stock by anything this man might have said, though his speech, and his plays, were peppered with some of the most obscene language anyone could ever speak. Instinctively, however, even in college, I knew I had to put some distance between what I wanted to do, and how he would probably do it. I would say I've been reasonably successful by now.

Reading this article, and seeing how little it really mattered to me – when years before it might have provoked hours of careful attention and re-reading – I became sharply sentimental for something I could not quite identify. It was something that had been going on for several days, and I thought I knew why. Very soon, and for good, a seal of the most mysterious kind would be placed over everything that had gone before in our lives. Our time on this earth was about to begin anew in a very real sense. Though we had long ago committed ourselves to a new existence, and even to the colony that is our home, something was about to occur that would make it somehow more enduring.

I thought of Thomas Merton amid all this, too – of his days at Cambridge and Columbia, of the dichotomy between his life of girlfriends and cigarettes and movies on one hand, and Gerard Manley Hopkins on the other. For Merton, it was a choice between the world as it really is, and a certain kind of priesthood that even he did not yet understand; for us, it was nearly half a lifetime of living a certain way, complete with careers and prejudices and accomplishments, weighed against the prospect of a life forever out here on the cold windy prairie, struggling to pursue a common life lived in quite common terms. How strange, I thought, that for me, as for Merton, Manhattan should again be the ground of truth, the place where the journeys we made seemed really to have begun.

Laying the article aside, I realized what it was that I was actually bidding farewell to. It was college perhaps, and the night streets of Fayetteville; it was New York, and Soho, and the dowdy cemetery near Grant's Tomb where it seemed my mind found room to expand and seize on odd images and contemplate the lives now laid to rest there. It was the Thanksgiving I had spent one year in a little Connecticut town where I knew no one and was entirely anonymous, a shadow on the tidy and well-swept and snowless sidewalk. It was eating both dinner and supper for a week at Lutèce, simply because I could. It was loud drunk voices and Birdland. It was too much whiskey to drink and too many English cigarettes to smoke and too much money in my pockets that I hadn't earned. It was the sad, empty, repugnant feeling I had harbored for so many years that all there was to life was dying, and then – what? Fire? Melodious bliss? A sharp reproach and then heaven? Nothingness? I never knew, in all those years, that there could actually be an answer for all that had disturbed me for so long. Now I had it before me, and it almost didn't seem real. There was still something impossible about it all.

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As we mature in our longing for community, hopefully after we have been living it with others for awhile, we begin to sense the true emptiness of what it was we left behind. Our sacrifice no longer seems like such a sacrifice, because in our newfound illumination, one that now grows from deep within, all that went before pales and, with time, tends to disappear from even basic memory. Merton realized, years after he arrived at Gethsemani, that he had only been "beating the air" in his earliest years in community. He still had not left enough of himself behind to experience the real heart of the community that was living and existing around him. Instead of foundering in self-critical regret, however, he had learned enough to press on, which is what he did. We should, too, because this is the real adventure of community, and of the spiritual life.

Reminded of these things, it is more than a little painful to remember how we lived before we went through this transformation ourselves. With time and experience, we have come to attach to our material sacrifice the freight and meaning of our spiritual transformation, too. Our sins, so to speak, have vanished with our selves – or at least our old selves – and this is quite a mystery for most people. It is what Christ told us to strive after, though, so we should seek this state with ever-growing diligence, even if it is colored by much sorrow.

This is the first step, and a step one must repeat time and again on the path to community. It is a step we can learn perhaps best of all from Thomas Merton, for he put it into words for all of us who make this journey – who embark, arrive and endure on the same journey as he, no matter where we are. It is a common enough journey, but so seldom put into words that are true and plain. In our journey to community, we had received the chance to begin our lives again in true earnest, and we embraced it. And even if we fall, even if we fail miserably every day, we can still begin again because of the grace God has flooded us with – the grace he sends us to bear us away and bring us to him. I have found this grace in our life in common, in community with a people who have set themselves apart for nearly five centuries, and whose ancestors suffered much strife and privation because of it. Maybe we will have to do the same thing, too.

The world no longer matters when we look at life in this way. It should give us no more cause for care; instead, we should long for the salvation of everyone still adrift in its shadows, for those who are victims of its abuses and excesses, and of its terrible, dark misfortunes. Certainly, Thomas Merton longed for these very people.