

Plight of the Peregrinatus

By Jeffrey Cooper, CSC

"The 'sacred journey' has origins in prehistoric religious cultures and myths. [Humans] instinctively regard [themselves] as wanderers and wayfarers, and it is second nature for [them] to go on pilgrimage in search of a privileged and holy place, a center and source of indefectible life."¹

I have always been a bit disturbed by images of St. Peregrine. He is always standing there in his Servite robes, rashly raising his skirts to reveal a running sore on his leg. Sometimes he appears with greater modesty, his leg exposed but his wound well-wrapped. He seems at peace, at home with his wound, announcing in his silence: "Look here, everyone, see my weakness, see my infirmity, my disease!" It would seem that this man, whose very name can mean both "pilgrim" and "stranger," found his way to a place where, being no stranger to his wound, he was able to find there a healing and a home in God. For as the story goes, Peregrine, diagnosed with cancer, was to undergo an amputation of his infirmed leg. The night before the surgery, though, the saint, falling asleep in prayer, dreamed that Jesus touched him. When he awoke he was healed. St. Peregrine perhaps does not disturb me so much because of his immodest posturing but more because he speaks a truth that is hard to hear, his silent testimony having something to tell us about how we can only find our way, our center and holy place via the wound of exile.

Jonathan Montaldo, in a wonderful article entitled, "Loving Winter When the Plant Says Nothing," examines aspects of Thomas Merton's spirituality as exposed through his voluminous journals. At one point in his exploration, Montaldo defines the Latin term "Peregrinatus" as "stranger, wanderer, pilgrim, traveler, foreigner." He then, with a more explicit focus on Merton, further defines this term as, "exile, prodigal, orphan, marginal person, bystander to the main road, one who gets lost to find the right way, and a spiritual bum."² Merton himself describes such a one as: "a holy outcast, a consecrated tramp, living under a mystery of execration and protection, overshadowed by inscrutable love, a mystery and portent to every man" (*MZM* 99). What Montaldo and Merton both get at is the heart of the peregrinatus paradox. Merton lived it as one who is at once stable monk and master wanderer. He lived daily the spiritual existence of one always lurching outward, to go inward, to go "forward into further experiences of his God's mercy toward him which anchored him through all his experiences" (Montaldo). Merton himself explores this paradox even further in a particularly revealing letter: "This is my place and yet I have never felt so strongly that I have 'no place' as I have felt here [at Gethsemani] since becoming fully reconciled to this as 'my place.' My place is in reality no place, and I hesitate

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to act as if I were anything but . . . a transient, and this is the last happiness that is possible to me; but a very real one. More real than all the others I thought I knew before it.”³

Merton knew that identifying “no place” as “[his] place” in the world was somehow “the last happiness.” His realization that happiness is found in accepting one’s inherent transient existence, is, I would argue, both good news and hard news for our day. The dis-ease of our times, the reckless restlessness that scatters us all over, seems to be in direct opposition to this revelation of some thirty years ago. But here is why Merton is still so alive for us today, a new St. Peregrine of sorts, pointing at the wound we all share and saying, “It is here where you will find your healing, your home, your rest.”

How long have I sought, looked for, longed for somewhere to belong, all the while imagining that it is always somewhere other than right here, where I stand? How did I become so convinced that home is always elsewhere and my restlessness will find a resting place eventually on this plane of existence? My searchings, I find, have always been fueled by fear, the fear of stopping, standing still, and entering into the deeper wound of my own inherent exilic state. Such seeking has led to finding but the findings are false, artificial and only exacerbate the intensity of the wound and the desire to flee it; I prefer to keep my wounds cloaked.

A Trappist friend and spiritual director once said to me, out of nowhere, “Do you feel homeless?” I immediately thought, “How odd! I live in a religious community that has been more than good to me, I have a large Ohio family that is a continual source of blessing and support to me, and in my ministry experiences people have always opened their homes, offered their homes, and practically given their homes to me.” Yet with little hesitation I surprised myself by answering “Yes!” to my director’s inquiry. And suddenly, I am the one exposing my wound, at first with misgivings and shame, but then strangely finding healing in the exposition. I was beginning to see that my home is “no place” and my running to find “my place” is largely for the birds.

Thomas Merton was always for the birds and was a rather strange bird himself. He seemed to be always caught between wanting to nest (solitude) and wanting to fly (intercourse with the world). And that image comes to me because, if you have ever ventured into Merton’s journals, you cannot help but notice his knowledge and love of birds (perhaps a fledgling residue of an earlier Franciscan tendency). Whenever Merton describes the landscape on his journey it is often in connection to the birds. It could be the song sparrows outside his hermitage or the peacocks he encountered in Asia. It might be the towhees, tanagers, or maybe the crows, with whom he seemed to have a running argument that eventually softened. They seem to have struck him as acting far too much like humans. And of course there is St. Benedict and his raven who watches over all his Benedictine and Cistercian sons and daughters. Birds for Merton were somehow always the “dawn deacons of Wisdom.”⁴ So it seems natural that the image of a bird should serve as guide to understanding Merton. He himself, the pilgrim, the peregrinatus, is bird-like and if a bird, I suggest a falcon, and if a falcon then, of course, a peregrine falcon.

The peregrine falcon is known to be a hunter, a seeker for prey (perhaps we can say Merton, as all of us, are seekers for “pray”). These birds take possession of a territory but are and are not known to be great travelers. It has been noted that peregrines raised in the city, where many make their homes today, will not venture out beyond that city. But those who are raised in the Nordic wilderness will fly, in the winter, as far as Argentina to hunt. They are birds that are both attracted to staying put and taking off, attracted to city life and the wilderness.⁵ Merton’s recognition of his “my place” as

“no place” seems to be an acknowledgment and acceptance of his own paradoxical desire to fly, to hunt, to seek, but to eventually find a home and stay there, a home that would satisfy in a way that places as diverse as Kentucky or Asia could not. He longed for a real solitude, a place where a more intense relationship to the Divine could be fostered. His seeking for a physical place, though, is only the outer manifestation of a continual inner journey that was slowly revealing to him that exile itself is both the way home and his only real home. Like the ancient Israelites longing for the promised land while Egypt- or Babylon-bound, Merton came to know that it is only in exile that one can really be home.

When I first read Merton’s spiritual autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, I remember marveling over the amount of his travel, especially that which he did as a very young man and oftentimes alone. There are the journeys from France to America and back with family. Then there are trips to Bermuda and Cuba and his own solitary treks around Europe, as well as travels from schools in England to America and finally from New York to Kentucky to Bangkok. And it strikes me that this is so much more than wanderlust. It is the outward sign of an inward reality, a sacramental journey, as it were: an outer pilgrimage that marked the inner movement to the center via a spiritual landscape of Catholicism, monasticism, and eremitism. And even that inner pilgrimage was only a reflection of a still deeper spiritual trek that would lead him to accept exile as home; because only from there could he truly recognize the divine destination to which his pilgrimage tended.

Such searching for a place when no place here on earth will completely suffice is a tiring enterprise. Haven’t we all known what it is to fly (or flee), always looking elsewhere as if happiness, peace, and even God could only be found in a place other than the one we currently occupy? And too often we can confuse the place we seek with having to be a physical, geographical reality. As Robert Daggy writes in his introduction to the fifth volume of Merton’s journals, “Merton, who suffered as much as any human from the ‘grass is greener’ syndrome, [had] dreams about moving to a new location.”⁶ The new location, at the time, was Edelin’s Hollow, a piece of property given to Gethsemani where Merton imagined a new hermitage for himself. It is this “grass is greener syndrome” that fueled his desire for even more exotic locales just as in our own day it continues to fuel the interminable restlessness of American culture as it exacerbates our longing for belonging while alienating us from ourselves and our God.

Merton in *Mystics and Zen Masters* would define this ever-growing alienation as the result of what happened historically when spiritual pilgrimage was conflated with very real warfare or crusade: “The mentality of the pilgrim and that of the Crusader had fused together to create a singular form of alienation: that of the Puritan ‘pilgrim father’ and that of the conquistador” (*MZM* 109-10). Could it be that this hunger for home, this restlessness for a place, is at once the source of our finding a true home and also the source of the intense alienation that leads to the violence of our own world? A world where pilgrims wear crusaders’ masks and kill whoever gets in the way of their desired destination, even themselves?

I imagine many of us have known how that desire to move seems always to flare up as a physical response to a deeper and much less easy to satisfy spiritual hunger whose resulting frustration can so easily build to anger. How often have I sought a home, “my place,” and labored under the delusion that such a place exists? And all this seeking has often only sent me looking for homes where dangers lurk, turning toward people, who can not and should not be expected to provide for such a heavy need (no human being can resolve one’s inner alienation), and toward places that seemed to

promise what is missing when what is missing could only be found right where I stood. In our wider culture such continual flight has trapped us in a restlessness that at its least harmful leads to lacking fidelity and at its worst, to violence as it perpetuates the illusion that we will find a home, a place, that can completely satisfy.

The gift of Thomas Merton, and specifically, his life, as so wonderfully and messily revealed in his journals, is the reminder that the life of exile or pilgrimage is a deeply imbedded spiritual desire that we all share and that can never be satisfied by any concrete person, place, or thing. Our last happiness is making ourselves at home in exile. And if we can do that it can free us from the false, all-pervasive pressure of finding that perfect place in life that only leads to an ever more perfect alienation. It can save us from always seeking elsewhere so we might live in the nowness of God's powerful presence right here where we stand. Merton is a mess of contradictions and that is why he still attracts so many to him. Like the birds that surrounded him, reminding him of his own conflicted desires to fly and to nest, so many have flocked to his writings because we share the same conflict, the same alienation, the same exile. And it will only be a grace-filled exile if we strive to hear the voice of the Divine, who is both guide and destination for our own unique journeys.

Merton's missteps, failures, falls and flourishes recorded so honestly for all to read can serve as a starting point for us to move along our own spiritual trek toward God who is "my place," "no place," and every place. And our hope might be stirred in knowing that perhaps Merton himself caught a glimpse of the journey's end. As he wrote in the last weeks of his life concerning a certain revelation at Polonnaruwa:

Looking at these figures [the giant Buddhas] I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious. . . . The thing about all this is that there is no puzzle, no problem, and really no "mystery." All problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear. . . . Surely, with Mahabalipuram and Polonnaruwa my Asian pilgrimage has come clear and purified itself. I mean, I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for. I don't know what else remains but I have now seen and have pierced through the surface and have got beyond the shadow and the disguise.⁷

What did Merton see? Perhaps the face of the "hidden wholeness" inherent in all things? Or was it a glimpse of the paradise he claims humankind has sickened of seeking so that pilgrimages have been transmuted into violent crusades? Was it a place that "symbolizes . . . freedom and creativity, but in reality . . . must be worked out in the human and personal encounter with the stranger seen as our other self" (*MZM* 111)? Whatever Merton saw, it indicates that the journey is well worth taking and persevering on. The journey he described as one "from the limitations and routines of 'the given' – the *Dasein* which confronts us as we are born into it without choice – to the creative freedom of that love which is personal choice and commitment" (*MZM* 111).

Thomas Merton was one like a St. Peregrine who was no stranger to the mystery of how accepting and exposing the wound of exile could bring a much needed integrative healing. As he captured in a simple moment recorded in his journal on November 12, 1963: "Going over the Zen article has been a grace. It has brought me back to myself after a long while! A long, futile, round and round *peregrinatio* [journeying] all around nothing – just because I somehow got obsessed with a need to get somewhere and do something (God knows what)" (*DWL* 33).

We all know the power of that obsessive need and the grace of being brought back to ourselves. It seems to be the plight of the peregrinatus to fly falcon-like round and round or to constantly get lost in order to find the right way. The trick is to recognize the nothingness, the no-placeness, the woundedness of trying “to get somewhere and do something (God knows what)” and to share the struggle with our fellow pilgrims. It is in accepting that “God knows what” which then graces our messy journeys. As Merton wrote, a bit later on in the same journal entry cited above, “What a weary, silly mess. When will I learn to go without leaving footprints?” (DWL 33). Perhaps the answer to that can only be found when we learn to travel by standing still.

“And yet the pilgrimage must continue, because it is an inescapable part of [the human] structure and program. The problem is for [our] pilgrimage to make sense – it must represent a complete integration of [our] inner and outer life, of [our] relation to [ourselves] and to others” (MZM 111).

1 Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967) 91; subsequent references will be cited as “MZM” parenthetically in the text.

2 Jonathan Montaldo, “Loving Winter When the Plant Says Nothing: Thomas Merton’s Spirituality in His Private Journals” [unpublished]; subsequent references will be cited as “Montaldo” parenthetically in the text.

3 Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1993) 29.

4 See Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 118.

5 Fasken Martineau DuMoulin, Peregrine Falcon Information Centre, The Avian Science and Conservation Centre of McGill University (www.deev.com/falcons/english.html).

6 Introduction to Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage – Journals*, vol. 5, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) xv; subsequent references will be cited as “DWL” parenthetically in the text.

7 Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey – Journals*, vol. 7, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998) 323.