

# “Thou art that”: Merton as Contemplative Photographer

By Thomas Del Prete

I am delighted to return to Anna Maria and very honored to be part of the ceremony that dedicates this new space to visual art.<sup>1</sup> What a beautiful way to enhance the Catholic tradition of learning and creative expression at the College. That Thomas Merton’s photographs are among the first exhibits, thanks to his Trappist brothers from St. Joseph’s Abbey, is a wonderful sign, I might say, of the divine designs for the new gallery.

In my brief talk today I aim to do two basic things. The first is to explain how Merton the contemplative monk and Merton the photographer fit together. What indeed can it mean when a monk goes off with a camera? The second is to suggest how Merton’s photographs, including those exhibited here, reflect his contemplative way of knowing. I will add a final comment on how his photographs invite us to enter into a contemplative form of seeing as well.

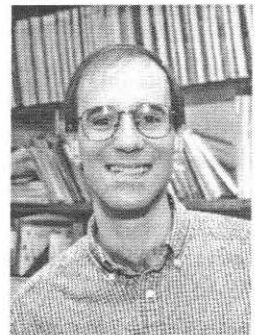
For those of you not familiar with his basic life story, Thomas Merton was a brilliant and reflective if somewhat aimless and spiritually rootless young man who converted to Catholicism while at Columbia University in New York in the late 1930s. Then, driven by his own desire for authenticity and spiritual fulfillment, and increasingly disillusioned by a world veering towards war, he entered the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky in 1941. In entering the Abbey’s silence Merton paradoxically found a new voice, becoming one of the most insightful and inspiring spiritual writers of the last century.

He also discovered photography. But this interest did not develop until 1964 or so, during the period when he was gradually moving from a communal to a more solitary life, spending time at what would become his full-time hermitage, just out of sight of the Abbey’s main buildings, by the end of the summer of 1965.<sup>2</sup> It was also the beginning of what would turn out to be the last few years of his life.

It is not simply that life in the hermitage afforded Merton more time for photography. In moving to the hermitage Merton had a great sense of freedom, not simply the freedom that came from relinquishing communal responsibilities at the monastery, but the freedom that comes from living without care; in particular from self-care.<sup>3</sup> It was the freedom of someone trusting and responding more fully to the indwelling love and presence of God. If anything, this interior freedom heightened Merton’s contemplative awareness of his new living environment. For Merton, poet and son of a painter as well as monk, living with a new sense of freedom in a new living environment, the condi-

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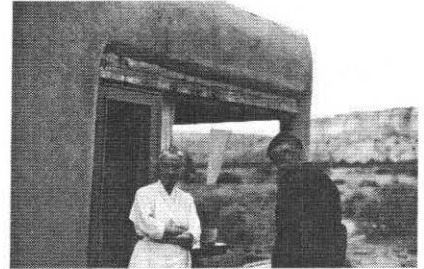
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**Thomas Del Prete**

tions were ripe for contemplating the world through the lens of a camera.

The first camera was quite modest, a simple Kodak instamatic. Merton borrowed other cameras from different sources over time. And then, fortuitously, John Howard Griffin, famous as the author of *Black Like Me* and as a civil rights activist, but also an accomplished photographer, arrived for a private retreat at Gethsemani and visited briefly with Merton. Griffin was to become Merton's primary accomplice in photography.<sup>4</sup> On one occasion the two went on a photographic foray into the wooded area surrounding the hermitage, Merton photographing each subject from a variety of angles, and each of them photographing the other photographing. One outgrowth of this mutual interest was Griffin's candid photographs of Merton, some of the best taken of him. Another was that Griffin's home darkroom became the production center for Merton's photographs; the local drugstore simply did not do justice to Merton's work. Finally, there was Griffin's loan of a beautiful 35-millimeter Canon FX camera in the spring of 1968 – the same camera used for the photographs of Georgia O'Keeffe and the scenes in Asia on display today. Merton could not have been more enthusiastic in using it, writing his generous friend, "What a joy of a thing to work with. . . . the camera is the most eager and helpful of beings . . . . Reminding me of things I have overlooked, and cooperating in the creation of new worlds. . . . So simply. This is a Zen camera."<sup>5</sup>



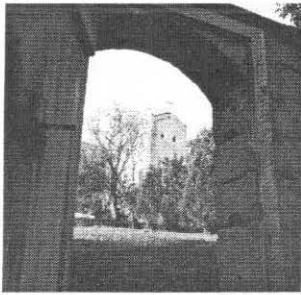
One clue to what Merton saw in the camera lens is in how he describes his life as a hermit. In the wonderfully ironic *Day of a Stranger* he writes, "I am not living 'like anybody.' Or 'unlike anybody.' . . . I exist under trees. I walk in the woods out of necessity. . . . Do I spend my 'day' in a 'place'? I know there are trees here. I know there are birds here. I know the birds in fact very well . . . . I share this particular place with them: we form an ecological balance. This harmony gives the idea of 'place' a new configuration" (*DS* 33). Merton's photographs become in some sense the image of his experience of place as a matter of shared being, of close mutuality. Birds were too much in motion for him to capture, especially with the instamatic. But trees became a favorite subject. He sought out as well the tall weeds, the sides of the monastery barns, the doorways and gateways, and the everyday objects and scenes in and around his hermitage. There is the bench on the hermitage porch with the tin pitcher, also his study desk, and the wheelbarrow. These, too, were intimate parts of his shared reality, respected in their simplicity, and having a certain presence of their own in the ecology of place.

In *New Seeds of Contemplation* Merton declares that "A tree gives glory to God by being a tree."<sup>6</sup> In his photographic images of trees Merton is illuminating something of their unique identity, their own fullness of being. Trees and wood are revealed in different forms – tree roots gripping the soil like silent feet, two trees intertwined and silhouetted against the sky, the split logs in the woodpile, the weathered grains of the old wooden wagon wheel resting against the base of a large cross made of logs in the hermitage clearing. Each grain of wood and grooved surface is set in relief, assumes its full proportion. Tree roots are lifted from anonymity, their silence transformed into presence, their being made real; something of their "inscape" – the term Merton borrowed from the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins and used occasionally to refer to the inner reality of things (see *NSC* 30) – is revealed. In this respect Merton's photographs may be the visual equivalent to his poetry, about which Mark Van Doren, his mentor from Columbia University, commented that "all the senses work

together to one end, the letting of things declare themselves.”<sup>7</sup>

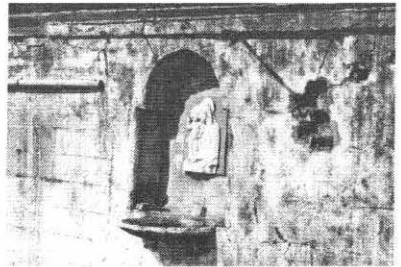
In his beautiful prose poem *Hagia Sophia*, Merton wrote, “There is in all visible things an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness, a hidden wholeness.”<sup>8</sup> In his photographic imaging Merton brings something of the hidden wholeness and reality of his place to light. His photographs capture in this respect not only his sense of place, but also his contemplative way of seeing. Merton wrote that to see means to develop “the ability to respond to reality, to see the value and the beauty in ordinary things.”<sup>9</sup> He spoke in another instance of attaining a “qualitative perception of reality . . . as a thing shining with the light of God.”<sup>10</sup> In yet another instance he wrote in his journal that he wanted “not only to observe but to *know* living things, and this implies a dimension of primordial familiarity which is simple and primitive and religious and poor.”<sup>11</sup> Referring to photography directly, he wrote of his aim to capture an “image” – not the imitation of an object, but an image which portrays “a new and different reality.”<sup>12</sup>

Merton’s contemplative eye could only be expressed through a basic technical mastery. I cannot



speak with any authority on the technical aspects of his photographs, but will mention a few things. His concern for composition and angle is clear, but even more striking is the interplay of light and shadow, and the related use of space. Consider, for instance, the photograph of the monastery chapel exhibited today,<sup>13</sup> framed in the foreground by a darkened arched gateway in one of the monastery walls, yet all alight in the depth of the image, with the cross set uppermost against the light. Light, angle, and framing work harmoniously to create the scene. But the archway is also metaphorical, drawing attention to how we see, and perhaps also serving as an invitation to enter from shadow into the mystery and light of faith. In the photograph of the alcove shrine, light exposes the weathered features of the surrounding wall, but also bathes the icon, warmly highlighting the simplicity and innocence and humanity of the mother and child.

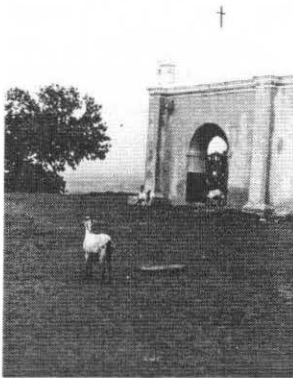
The other photographs that we see come from Merton’s travels in 1968: the photograph of Georgia O’Keeffe outside her home in New Mexico, the artist about whom Merton wrote, “a woman of extraordinary quality. . . . Perfection of her house and patio on ghost ranch, low, hidden in desert rocks and vegetation”;<sup>14</sup> the beautiful child in Darjeeling, India, a moment of pure joy and spontaneity that must have delighted Merton;<sup>15</sup> the goats moving unconcernedly through a small cross-topped entranceway, the cross again set simply against the sky. There is no doubt intentional humor and irony here; the goats, too, are part of the holiness of place. Then there is the photograph taken at Polonnaruwa, in Sri



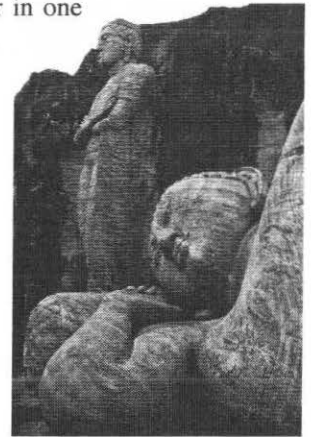
Lanka, one of Merton’s most well known.<sup>16</sup> The viewer is drawn to the face of the reclining Buddha figure; then to what Merton presumed to be the figure of Ananda, the Buddha’s favorite disciple,

standing serenely at his head. The silence and simplicity and peaceful demeanor of these figures and those nearby evoked a powerful response in Merton. He writes in his journal of

the silence of the extraordinary faces. The great smiles. Huge and yet subtle. Filled with every possibility, questioning nothing, knowing everything, rejecting nothing, the peace . . . . I was knocked over with a rush of relief and thankfulness at the *obvious* clarity of the figures, the clarity and fluidity of shape and line, the design of the monumental bodies composed into the rock shape and landscape . . . . The queer *evidence* of the reclining figure, the smile, the sad smile of Ananda standing with arms folded . . . . The rock, all matter, all life, is charged with *dharmakaya* – everything is emptiness and everything is compassion. I don't know when in my life I have ever had such a sense of beauty and spiritual validity running together in one aesthetic illumination" (*OSM* 323).



Merton is similarly revealing in responding to a photograph he took while visiting the Redwoods monastery in California. "John Griffin sent one of my pictures of Needle Rock, which he developed and enlarged. . . . The Agfa film brought out the great *Yang-Yin* of sea rock mist, diffused light and half-hidden mountain – an interior landscape, yet there. In other words, what is written within me is there, 'Thou art that'" (*OSM* 110).<sup>17</sup> In his photography, Merton's poetic sensibilities, his sense of place, his contemplative awareness and his contemplative way of knowing converge in visual image. The interior landscape he saw through the camera lens at Needle Rock on the Pacific coast becomes an image of hidden wholeness, and more, a reflection of his own interior landscape and what is written there, what he once described as the "signature of God" on our own being.<sup>18</sup> His photographs invite us likewise to see, to let go of our own self-centered awareness and awaken to an awareness of holiness in all that is, including ourselves.



- 1 This paper was presented as a "gallery talk" to mark the opening of a new art gallery at Anna Maria College in Paxton, Massachusetts on October 3, 2004. The opening exhibit featured six photographs taken by Merton, as well as the art of the monks of St. Joseph's Abbey, a Trappist monastery in Spencer, Massachusetts.
- 2 It may be that Merton took photographs occasionally prior to the hermitage period. But it is in the hermitage that taking photographs becomes a focused interest, that he explores photography as another way to express his contemplative vision. For more on Merton's early interest in photography, see Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984) 343-44, 400.
- 3 In his journal for August 21 and 26, 1965, he writes, "I am without care – no anxiety about being pulled between my job and my vocation"; and "What matters is . . . simply God, and freedom in His Spirit. . . . May the Holy

- Ghost bring me to true freedom!!” Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage Journals*, vol. 5: 1963-1965, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 283, 287. In his last talk to the novices before entering the hermitage (8/20/65), his theme was “life without care”: Tape #227B – “Life without Care – Departure for the Hermitage” (archives, Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY); the talk was published as “A Life Free from Care” in *Cistercian Studies* 5:3 (1970) 217-26.
- 4 John Howard Griffin, who was Merton’s official biographer until he had to relinquish the role for health reasons, writes about visiting Merton and his interest in photography in John Howard Griffin, *Follow the Ecstasy: Thomas Merton, The Hermitage Years, 1965-1968* (Fort Worth, TX: Latitudes Press, 1983) 3-15. For more discussion of Merton as photographer, see John Howard Griffin, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Visual World of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970) (subsequent references will be cited as “Griffin, *Hidden Wholeness*” parenthetically in the text); also *Geography of Holiness: The Photography of Thomas Merton*, ed. Deba Prasad Patnaik (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1980) (subsequent references will be cited as “Patnaik” parenthetically in the text); and Robert Daggy, “Introduction,” in Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1981) 9-10, 21-24 (subsequent references will be cited as “DS” parenthetically in the text).
  - 5 Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 141.
  - 6 Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 29; subsequent references will be cited as “NSC” parenthetically in the text.
  - 7 Mark Van Doren, “Introduction,” in Thomas Merton, *Selected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1959) xv.
  - 8 Thomas Merton, *Hagia Sophia*, in *Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 363.
  - 9 Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955) 33.
  - 10 Thomas Merton, “Bantu Philosophy,” Tape #220 (archives, Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY).
  - 11 Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk’s True Life. Journals*, vol. 3: 1952-1960, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 190.
  - 12 Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 134. For more on Merton and his contemplative way of seeing, see Thomas Del Prete, *Thomas Merton and the Education of the Whole Person* (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1990), and Patnaik, who discusses Merton’s contemplative seeing and artistic vision as a basis for his photography (ix-x).
  - 13 The photograph is published in Griffin, *Hidden Wholeness* (21).
  - 14 Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey. Journals*, vol. 7: 1967-1968, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998) 174; subsequent references will be cited as “OSM” parenthetically in the text. The photograph is published in Thomas Merton, *Woods, Shore, Desert: A Notebook, May 1968* (Santa Fe, NM: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1982) 36.
  - 15 The photograph is published in Patnaik (9).
  - 16 The photograph is published in Griffin, *Hidden Wholeness* (133), and Patnaik (2).
  - 17 The photograph is published in Griffin, *Hidden Wholeness* (125-126). *Shore, Desert: A Notebook, May 1968* (Santa Fe, NM: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1982) 36.
  - 18 “A Letter on the Contemplative Life” in Thomas Merton, *The Monastic Journey*, ed. Brother Patrick Hart (Kansas City: Sheed, Andrews & McMeel, 1977) 172.