

Merton on Greed and the Economic Crisis

By **J. Patrick Mahon**

We have been in a shattering worldwide economic crisis for the past several years. When people discuss the root causes of the crisis, the word most often heard is greed. I saw a book in a bookstore in Ireland this summer. The title of the book was *Banksters*.¹ Obviously bankers and Wall Street are bearing the brunt of blame for the crisis. It is commonly agreed that irregularities in the housing industry played a large role in precipitating the crisis. Generous loans with skyrocketing adjustable-rate mortgages (ARMs), bankers extending credit where credit was not due, financial institutions bundling and selling this potentially bad paper, and prospective homeowners who wanted more house than they knew they could afford created the perfect storm, a cycle of greed.

Pope Benedict XVI indirectly addressed the issue of greed in his latest encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*. Profit as the exclusive goal of economic activity leads to greed which ignores the common good and creates poverty:

We recognize, therefore, that the Church had good reason to be concerned about the capacity of a purely technological society to set realistic goals and to make good use of the instruments at its disposal. Profit is useful if it serves as a means towards an end that provides a sense both of how to produce it and how to make good use of it. Once profit becomes the exclusive goal, if it is produced by improper means and without the common good as its ultimate end, it risks destroying wealth and creating poverty.²

In their 1986 pastoral letter on social justice and the economy, *Economic Justice for All*, the American bishops warned of the dangers of greed: “The ever present temptation to individualism and greed must be countered by a determined movement toward solidarity in the farm community.”³ Evangelical leader Jim Wallis wrote:

In the search for blame, some say greed and some say deregulation. Both are right. The financial collapse of Wall Street is the fiscal consequence of the economic philosophy that now governs America – that markets are always good and government is always bad. But it is also the moral consequence of greed, where private profit prevails over the concept of the common good. The American economy

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is often rooted in unbridled materialism, a culture that continues to extol greed, a false standard of values that puts short-term profits over societal health, and a distorted calculus that measures human worth by personal income instead of character, integrity, and generosity.⁴

The crisis seems to be passing but it will be helpful to examine one root cause of the crisis – greed – from a spiritual perspective. Pope Paul VI describes greed and its effects: “the acquiring of temporal goods can lead to greed, to the insatiable desire for more, and can make increased power a tempting objective. Individuals, families and nations can be overcome by avarice, be they poor or rich, and all can fall victim to a stifling materialism.”⁵ Greed is the desire to have more than we need. Greed is the desire to accumulate more and more, often at the expense of others who will then have less and less. Greed is amassing more and more grain in our silos while many people in the two-thirds world starve to death. Greed has been recognized since the early days of Christianity as one of the seven deadly or capital sins. As such, it is the root of further alienation from our true selves and from the Creator. Theologian Daniel Maguire reminds us that the Church’s focus has been on issues related to “pelvic orthodoxy.”⁶ We need to broaden the moral focus. Greed is the cause of much turmoil, oppression, exploitation, and even war in our world. It is easy to point the finger and scapegoat those who fall short on issues like abortion. Talking about greed gets much more up-close and personal for many more people because more people are complicit in greed and its effects. A contemplative living focus forces us to examine closely the impact of our behavior. For example, when greed drives us to seek inexpensive goods, we have to ask ourselves whether the goods have come from sweat shops which oppress and exploit the least among us.

Jesus condemned the Pharisees because they were clean on the outside but were full of greed and self-indulgence on the inside (Mt. 23:25; Lk. 11:39). Luke warned the members of his early community: “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions” (12:15). Paul warned the Ephesians not to let greed, among other sins, even be mentioned among themselves (5:3) and enjoined the Colossians to put to death various sins, including greed which is idolatry (3:5). Peter warned the members of his community to beware of false prophets who would exploit them in their greed (2 Pet. 2:3). In fact, “They have hearts trained in greed” (2 Pet. 2:14). If we couple these warnings about greed with Jesus’ warnings about the dangers of riches, we see a strong bias against greed, possessions and consumerism in the New Testament. The bottom line is that it will not be easy for rich people to enter the new Kin(g)dom proclaimed by Jesus. In fact, it will be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich person to enter the Kin(g)dom of God (Mt. 19:23; Mk. 10:25; Lk. 18:25). The rich young man who could not part with his possessions went away sad (Mt. 19:16-22; Lk. 18:23). Jesus condemned the farmer who built more silos: “This is the way it works with people who accumulate riches for themselves, but are not rich in God” (Lk. 12:21). Jesus told the poignant story of Lazarus, poor and covered with sores, who sat begging at the gate of the rich man (Lk. 16:19-22).

Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, continued to proclaim Jesus’ message about riches. In 1 Timothy, Paul speaks about those who want to be rich and “are trapped in many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction” (6:9). He says that “the love of money is the root of all kinds of evils.” He goes on to say that the pursuit of riches has led some to wander

“away from the faith and pierce themselves with many pains” (1 Tim. 6:10). James gives no quarter to the rich. They will wither away in scorching heat like flowers in the field (James 1:10-11). James chides the rich for having “dishonored the poor” by oppressing them (2:6). He invites the rich to “weep and wail for the miseries that are coming” to them (5:1). Revelation also warns the rich: “For you say, ‘I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.’ You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked” (3:18). The great city “where all who have ships at sea grew rich by her wealth . . . in one hour . . . has been laid waste” (Rev 18:19).

Thomas Merton, seeking solitude and greater union with God, realized the danger posed by the idolatry of riches and earthly possessions. He wanted to seek God and God alone. Thus, in 1941, he left the world with all its allurements and entered the Monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky. The student of the world realized that he needed the structure of monastic life if he were to grow in union with God. The new convert’s zeal led him to seek a place apart. He believed himself to be a wretched sinner. We know, however, the rest of the story. Merton came to realize that he was not apart from others. He was apart (but not separate) *for* others. He learned at Fourth and Walnut that he, the monk in solitude, was one with all people. Merton’s teachings on greed and consumerism can help us lead more contemplative lives based on Gospel values amid the woes of economic turmoil and the blessings (curses) of returning prosperity. If Merton were writing today, he would have some important messages for us.

Merton eschewed materialism, greed, and consumerism:

The great sin, the source of all other sin, is idolatry and never has it been greater, more prevalent, than now. Yet it is almost completely unrecognized precisely because it is so overwhelming and so total. It takes in everything. There is nothing else left. Fetishism of power, machines, possessions, medicines, sports, clothes, etc., all kept going by greed for money and power. The bomb is only one accidental aspect of the cult. Indeed, the bomb is not the worst. We should be thankful for it as a sign, a revelation of what all the rest of our civilization points to. The self-immolation of man to his own greed and his own despair. And behind it all are the principalities and powers whom man serves in this idolatry.⁷

Giving in to greed is self-immolation that leads to angst and alienation. Furthermore, Merton believed that greed is the root of violence:

A society that lives by organized greed or by systematic terrorism and oppression (they come to much the same thing in the end) will always tend to be violent because it is in a state of persistent disorder and moral confusion. The first principle of valid political action in such a society then becomes *non-cooperation* with its disorder, its injustices, and more particularly with its deep commitment to untruth. *Satyagraha* is meaningless if it is not based on the awareness of profound inner contradiction in all societies based on force.⁸

Merton thus identified structural violence. The very structure of economic and political systems perpetuates oppression and nonviolence. The first task of the Christian then is to non-cooperate with the injustices inherent in these structures. Merton would identify the second task as taking whatever

nonviolent steps are necessary in order to dismantle unjust systems. He strongly felt, for example, that it is the first duty of every Christian to do away with war: “The duty of the Christian in this crisis is to strive with all his power and intelligence, with his faith, hope in Christ, and love for God and man, to do the one task which God has imposed upon us in the world today. That task is to work for the total abolition of war.”⁹ Merton’s epiphany at Fourth and Walnut convinced him that, if we truly saw one another in the image of God, greed, among others things, would disappear:

Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God’s eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really *are*. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed.¹⁰

As we set about trying to come to terms with greed, Merton again reminds us to look within ourselves. Contemplative living requires us to do the inner work as we become more in tune with our true selves, the image of God deep within our being: “instead of hating the people you think are warmakers, hate the appetites and the disorder in your own soul, which are the causes of war. If you love peace, then hate injustice, hate tyranny, hate greed – but hate these things *in yourself*, not in another.”¹¹ Notice how violence, war, appetites of the false self, injustice, tyranny and greed all interconnect and work against peace. We must first hate these things in ourselves, in our false self. The false self is the driving force behind the acquisitiveness and consumerism which holds us captive and which alienates us from God, creation, one another and ourselves. We have become alienated from our true self. Our consciousness must be transformed.

The Merton Institute for Contemplative Living sets forth Merton’s prophetic role: “Merton’s interests were prophetic, for they are the major issues that confront society today, and they illustrate the alienation he foresaw. Whether it is war, social and racial injustice, violence, or religious intolerance, the source of the problem is that man ‘has become alienated from his inner self which is the image of God.’”¹² The degree of humanity’s alienation is reflected in the unrelenting violence of our time. Wars and acts of nations around the globe caused the death of more than 500 million people in the twentieth century. Closer to home, schoolchildren kill their fellow students in schools, and incidences of racial and domestic violence and child abuse occur with appalling frequency. The violence is all around us. We must change direction or perish. This requires a social conversion, a turning away from destructive behavior. The first step in this turning is a transformation of consciousness and Thomas Merton is a preeminent guide to us in this first step.

There is in the world today a thirst for God. People are seeking a reversal of the trends toward consumerism and materialism, prejudice and violence. They are discovering that what one does must be a means of both self-fulfillment and service to others. Albert Raboteau helps us understand how, in Merton’s thought, consumerism leads to alienation:

Consumerism commodifies human relationships and trivializes freedom of choice, so that individuals become alienated not only from others, but also from themselves. As Merton put it, “Our trouble is that we are alienated from our own personal reality, or true self. We do not believe in anything but money and the

power or the enjoyment which come from the possession of money.” Alienation is the source of the disregard for persons that produces apathy, hatred, and violence. The purpose of nonviolence, then, is to oppose alienation by offering people the possibility of reconciliation with one’s self as well as with others.¹³

Contemplative living attunes us to our relationships with the world, God, ourselves, and our fellow human beings. Taking the lead from Julian of Norwich’s concept of “oneing,” Merton’s beginning point was our oneness, the unity of all that exists. The separate self is a myth. We can only find our true selves in communion, in relationships. Interestingly enough, almost five decades after Merton wrote, quantum theory has given rise to a new consciousness. We have moved from Descartes’ rationality (I think; therefore, I am) to what Merton and others call relationality (I love; therefore, I am).¹⁴ Justice is all about right relationships. Thus, we have justice and its progeny peace as the fruits of contemplative living. When we encounter the impasse of darkness, poverty, and our limitations, we fall into the void and tumble out into the love of God who dwells deep within us. When we go into our cellars and close the door, we rest in God’s presence and God then transforms us into that which we are meant to become – our true selves. We can be our own worst enemies when it comes to transformation. The task is difficult because we have hardened our wills “in greed and cruelty and selfishness.”¹⁵ Greed hardens our hearts but Merton provides a blueprint for striving toward our true selves:

In seeking to awaken the inner self we must try to learn how this relationship is entirely new and how it gives us a completely different view of things. Instead of seeing the external world in its bewildering complexity, separateness, and multiplicity; instead of seeing objects as things to be manipulated for pleasure or profit; instead of placing ourselves over against objects in a posture of desire, defiance, suspicion, greed, or fear, the inner self sees the world from a deeper and more spiritual viewpoint. In the language of Zen, it sees things “without affirmation or denial,” that is to say, from a higher vantage point which is intuitive and concrete and which has no need to manipulate or distort reality by means of slanted concepts and judgments. It simply “sees” what it sees and does not take refuge behind a screen of conceptual prejudices and verbalistic distortions. Example: the difference between a child’s vision of a tree, which is utterly simple, uncolored by prejudice, and “new,” and the lumberman’s vision, entirely conditioned by profit motives and considerations of business.¹⁶

Contemplative living and contemplative practice follow the lead of Jesus. Amid a hectic schedule of preaching, teaching, healing, and challenging empire run amok, Jesus took time to go apart and to deepen His relationship with Abba God. Before he began his ministry, Jesus allowed the Spirit to lead him into the desert (Lk. 4:1). After announcing his mission in the synagogue and healing Simon’s mother-in-law and many others, Jesus went to a lonely place (Lk. 4:42). Contemplative living and contemplative practice bring us into silence and stillness where we can see more clearly, where some dim light emerges in the darkness, where we begin to discover the “invisible fecundity”¹⁷ in reality. We will see more clearly that we are not our possessions. We are

not what we can acquire. We are what we *are* as we enter into deeper union with the great I AM. We cannot earn or merit the gift of contemplation. It is gift, pure gift. We can, however, show up. We can practice contemplation – put ourselves in the position to receive the gift – by means of meditation, centering prayer, *lectio divina*,¹⁸ and liturgical prayer, especially the Eucharist. Merton met at least once with Thich Nhat Hahn, the founder of the engaged Buddhism movement. Thich Nhat Hahn teaches mindfulness which I find to be similar to Merton’s contemplation. When you are chopping wood, chop wood. When you are washing dishes, wash dishes. Such engaged practice bolsters our contemplative practice.¹⁹

Greed is the source of violence, oppression, and alienation in our world. Greed for oil and water led us into war with Iraq under the pretext of weapons of mass destruction and threats from Al-Qaeda terrorists. In Merton’s day, greed had led us to the Cold War with the Russians. Today it has led us to a hot war on terror. Greed is the root of the violence which leads to war. Contemplative living will enable us to overcome the greed that alienates us from our true self, from God, from one another, and from creation. Contemplative practice will allow us to trump the greed that causes oppression, exploitation, and financial crises. Realizing that we are one and are in relationship to all else that exists quiets the consumerism and acquisitiveness which leads to violence, oppression, exploitation and war.

Merton has a lengthy prayer in *New Seeds of Contemplation* in which he asks for the divine love that alone can liberate from the love of money and possessions and self:

Let me use all things for one sole reason: to find my joy in giving You glory. Therefore keep me, above all things, from sin. Keep me from the death of deadly sin which puts hell in my soul. . . . Keep me from loving money in which is hatred, from avarice and ambition that suffocate my life. . . . Stanch in me the rank wound of covetousness and the hungers that exhaust my nature with their bleeding. . . . [G]ive me the strength that waits upon You in silence and peace. . . . For there is only one thing that can satisfy love and reward it, and that is You alone. (NSC 44-45)

1. David Murphy and Martina Devlin, *Banksters: How a Powerful Elite Squandered Ireland’s Wealth* (Dublin: Hachette Ireland, 2009).
2. Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (29 June 2009), n. 21 (www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate_en.html) [accessed 1 September 2009].
3. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy* (Washington, DC: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1986) 119 (n. 248).
4. Jim Wallis, “Greed in the Economy: It’s the Morality, Sinner,” *Huffington Post* (18 September 2008) (www.huffingtonpost.com/jim-wallis/greed-in-the-economy-its_b_127428.html) [accessed 6 September 2009].
5. Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio* (26 March 1967), n. 18 (www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum_en.html) [accessed 16 August 2009].
6. Liz Garrigan, “All about Pelvic Orthodoxy,” *Nashville Columns* (25 May 2006) (www.nashvillescene.com/2006-05-25/columns/all-about-pelvic-orthodoxy) [accessed 6 September 2009].
7. Thomas Merton, *A Vow of Conversation: Journals 1964-1965*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1988) 174-75 [April 17, 1965].
8. Thomas Merton, ed., *Gandhi on Non-Violence: Selected Texts from Non-Violence in Peace and War* (New York: New Directions, 1964) 9-10.
9. Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Crossroad, 1995) 12.

10. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 142.
11. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 122; subsequent references will be cited as “NSC” parenthetically in the text.
12. The Merton Institute, “Merton’s Message and its Value to Individuals and Society” (<http://www.mertoninstitute.org/mertonsmessage.php>) [accessed 7 September 2009].
13. Albert J. Raboteau, “A Hidden Wholeness: Thomas Merton and Martin Luther King, Jr.,” in *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African-American Religious History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995) 175.
14. See Diarmuid O’Murchu, *Catching Up with Jesus: A Gospel Story for our Time* (New York: Crossroads, 2005).
15. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 210.
16. Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation*, ed. William H. Shannon (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2003) 19-20.
17. Thomas Merton, *Hagia Sophia*, in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 363.
18. For more on these practices see www.contemplativeoutreach.org.
19. See Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999).