

*Order better known. The abbot also urged the young monk to write his autobiography, which was published under the title *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948) and became a best-seller and a classic. During the next 20 years, Merton wrote prolifically on a vast range of topics, including the contemplative life, prayer and religious biographies. His writings would later take up controversial issues (e.g., social problems and Christian responsibility: race relations, violence, nuclear war and economic injustice) and a developing ecumenical concern. He was one of the first Catholics to commend the great religions of the East to Roman Catholic Christians in the West. Merton died by accidental electrocution in Bangkok, Thailand, while attending a meeting of religious leaders on 10 December 1968, just 27 years to the day after his entrance into the Abbey of Gethsemani. Many esteem Thomas Merton as a spiritual master, a brilliant writer and a man who embodied the quest for God and for human solidarity. Since his death, many volumes by him have been published, including five volumes of his letters and seven of his personal journals. According to present count, more than 60 titles of Merton's writings are in print in English, not including the numerous doctoral dissertations and books about the man, his life and his writings.*

Patrick Hart, OCSO

Silence, Holiness, Sanctity

By **Lars Adolfsson**

“‘What you should say’ – he told me – ‘what you should say is that you want to be a saint.’”¹ The words are not actually from the mouth of Thomas Merton, even though he put them in his autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain*. At the time they belonged to Bob Lax, a friend of his, a very good one. The question must have haunted Merton for many years, for his memory of the event seems vivid and struck a chord which later came to life in his writing. From his somewhat puzzled religious background he finally had a question that both challenged him and gave comfort at the same time. The aim for his life of faith was holiness.

This was of course not something unique in the life of the church that he discovered, but in his own life it opened up something new. Much of his later work, both his manual labor in the monastery, the liturgical prayers and his teaching and writing were part of his own answer to that question. In particular the small collection of reflections in *Life and Holiness*² captures some element of that answer. I find in that collection at least three valuable invitations of faith to help our understanding of what Christian holiness is. I call them invitations because I do not see them as forced upon the reader by Merton. Instead they are his reflections on his experience from a life lived in close relationship with God.

His first invitation is to accept that holiness and sainthood are part of our reality. Holiness has to be real and not just merely symbolic (see *LH* 17 ff.). If it is God's intention for us to become holy then it must surely be something

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God has in store for us. But this does not mean that we always know what God wants and that our religious life is turned into something about our morals. Merton reminds us that it is not in a search for human perfection that we will find holiness but in deep communion and solidarity. The reality of holiness includes our body; our inner life with God in silence and prayer urges us to respond also to others around us. If the life of holiness seems hard and austere, it is because it is a response to God's love toward us who share our own fragility and transform our own fragmentation into something whole.

This response leads to the next invitation – to become more, not less human. In short, it means that it is in Christ the Incarnate Word we find the pattern for holiness (see *LH* 21). Merton knew how desires in man could be perverted and turned against God, but he had also explored how false religious habits could lead away from God. Christian holiness is therefore not something to be seen as a rejection of creation and of the desires of mankind; holiness is seeking the grace that builds on nature, not by suppressing instinct but by healing and elevating it to a spiritual level. Christ is the perfect human – a perfection that is fragile, suffering and united with God the Creator, all at once and without diminishing one or the other. In practice this means more concern for the world, more understanding and more sympathy for the other. This of course excludes the possibility of total escape from the world and turning to narcissism. It also leads to a greater appreciation of the beauties in life, the joy and the good. Merton shows in this a great affection for creation – both the human dimension and the world as such. But it is also true that each one is a unique creation and therefore holiness has to be personal. We are not meant to be bleak copies but beautiful originals. This is the third invitation.

A sanctity which is personal “is God's very presence and action within us” (*LH* 30). Merton points out that our ordinary concept of grace as “a kind of spiritual gasoline which we find necessary in order to make our journey to God” (*LH* 30) is false. When it is grace that is working within us it is not as something strange and unreal or as some extra value, but the essence of life itself working dynamically within us. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit, this inwardly uncreated grace, is the same sanctifying Spirit that helps us to gaze not as much towards our selves but upon God.

The response to God's call is first of all a listening, and it is within the realm of silence we can learn to recognize God's presence within us. Merton points out that we need more to emphasize *uncreated grace*, i.e. the Holy Spirit within us, than just grace coming to us as a thing. When Merton guides the reader into social action and love for our sisters and brothers, his own beginning is silence. There is a juxtaposition of silence and holiness in his writing, like a couple who are in love walking together holding hands. As long as there will be confusions about the realities and unrealities in the life of the Christian faith, that is also how long the answer we get matters. A good start to walking the narrow path of sanctity is to accept the invitations of Thomas Merton and follow his road of silence and holiness.



1. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 238.
2. Thomas Merton, *Life and Holiness* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1963); subsequent references will be cited as “LH” parenthetically in the text.

Merton’s Search for God

By **William Apel**

One reason why Thomas Merton continues to matter to thousands of readers throughout the world is because the search for God continues to matter. Like that of other spiritual masters, Merton’s quest for God is all-consuming. It leads to a journey inward and outward. It is one that helps reveal his own inner self and uncovers the infinite worth and value of every human being on the face of the earth. There is little doubt that his search for God is contagious. Countless numbers of people have resonated with his honest, straightforward and uncompromising search for union with God. Many, myself included, have wanted to travel with Merton on his spiritual journey – and to the best of our abilities we have. I have no doubt others will soon follow. In some inexplicable way, he has opened his heart to us and invited us in. Usually, we sit as beggars at the gates to our own true selves. But here is someone who invites us in – and we are admitted into the interior of Merton’s life – or is it into our own?

Mary Luke Tobin, SL, a dear friend and Kentucky neighbor of Merton, has written this about her friend: “At the center of Merton’s thought was the search for God – the careful search for God’s will in the events of his life.”¹ Indeed, from his early publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain* to his last writings found in *The Asian Journal*, Merton shares with readers all the twists and turns, the false starts and unexpected trajectories of his relentless quest for the One with many names, and no names at all. Merton’s lifelong search, not only to know God but to experience God, may arguably be the leitmotif of his entire, massive collection of writings.

There is little doubt that Merton’s search for God has a relevance for our times as well as his own. This has much to do with what Sister Mary Luke understood to be Merton’s willingness to open doors, and not to shut himself off from others – no matter how different they might be. She has noted: “He yearned constantly for conscious union with God. . . . Well acquainted with all the great mystics of the Christian tradition, he became increasingly well informed about the spiritual masters of other traditions, never ceasing to integrate their original insights into his thoroughly Christian identity” (Tobin 72).

The “amazing grace” of Merton’s search for God is his ability during his mature years to live out a full gospel life, while remaining open to what is best and most true in other religious traditions. As Sister Mary Luke has

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