

The Humanism of Pope John XXIII, Thomas Merton and J. F. Powers

By John P. Collins

In a letter to James Laughlin during the mid-1950s, Thomas Merton mentions J. F. Powers¹ as a possible contributor to the journal *Perspectives*, although it evidently was soon “closing down.” Merton states: “I . . . suppose you have already used something by J. F. Powers. Or would that be bad publicity for the Church in the U.S.? I suppose it would be. But he is accurate as he can be.”² Thomas Merton had first heard about Powers when Evelyn Waugh visited Gethsemani in November of 1948.³ Later, in a *New York Times* interview, Waugh had mentioned a number of his favorite American writers including Thomas Merton and J. F. Powers.⁴ Merton describes Powers in a journal entry after an enjoyable visit with the writer: “Powers is a man with the hand of God on him – but one who is in no position to realize the prophetic character of his vocation. . . . I am left with the impression that here is a man in whose life – forlorn and desperate – there is no place for facetious metaphysical extravagances. I am impressed by his humanism and his contact with reality.”⁵

Thomas Merton reviewed Powers’ novel *Morte d’Urban*, and in the review he mentioned the Second Vatican Council, which was currently discussing the renewal of “Catholic life and the Catholic apostolate.” Relating the Council discussions to the book by Powers, Merton declares: “*Morte d’Urban* has a very distinct bearing on the need for renewal as it is now experienced in American Catholicism.”⁶ In the latter part of his review Merton alludes to Pope John XXIII when he cites the humanism of the Encyclical *Mater et Magistra*.⁷ Merton applauds the satiric nature of the book which can be interpreted as an admonition to Catholics that the Church must distance itself from the adoption of the ways and practices of American business. Indeed, the real mission of the Church is more than promoting a popular image of itself to attract benefactors from the marketplace, but rather “[w]e are here to celebrate the mystery of salvation and of our unity in Christ” (*LE* 151).

Many of Powers’ works satirized the contradictory roles of the Catholic Church – that is, its spiritual mission in conflict with ecclesiastical administrative structure and its concomitant commercialism. As noted above, Merton recognized the prophetic nature of Powers who through irony and satire invited the reader to read between the lines about the problem. Both Merton and Powers, through their differing literary genres, were concerned about the Catholic Church and its propensity to deviate from one of its important missions – the concern for humanity. Merton and Powers recognized John XXIII as a Catholic leader who clearly demonstrated his own humanity and real love of all people created in the image and likeness of God. Expressing



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his admiration for *Mater et Magistra* in a journal entry of July 26, 1961, Merton writes: “*Mater et Magistra* is being read in the refectory and is one of the greatest Encyclicals of the modern papacy from the point of view of Christian humanism.”⁸ The canonization of Pope John was, indeed, prophesied by Merton, who wrote in a letter to Sister Thérèse Lentfoehr: “I have no doubt he was one of the great saints of our time.”⁹

Like Merton, Powers admired Pope John and expressed his admiration in an interview with Sister Kristen Malloy, OSB about his fiction-writing.¹⁰ A clear connection between Merton and Powers about their mutual admiration for the pontiff was a print of Pope John sent to Merton by Powers. Merton wrote: “J. F. Powers sent a wonderful print of Pope John made by a friend of his: it is really remarkable, it gets the spirit of his simplicity and love in a striking way. I am going to have it framed and put up in the novitiate somewhere – it is quite large. I guess Pope John is, as far as I am concerned, ‘my Pope.’ I don’t expect to outlive too many more of them” (*RJ* 245).

In some ways the “humanity” of *Mater et Magistra* foreshadowed that of *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Apostolic Exhortation issued by Pope Francis on November 26, 2013. Emphasizing the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* by Pope Leo XIII, Pope John cites the “defense of the earthly interests of the poor” (*Mater et Magistra* §15) and the state’s role to “protect the rights of all of its people, and particularly of its weaker members, the workers, women and children” (*Mater et Magistra* §20). Pope John warns the economically developed countries about the denial of spiritual values and the growing emphasis on materialism which is infecting the “work that is being done for less developed countries” (*Mater et Magistra* §176). In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis states that: “Our faith in Christ, who became poor, and was always close to the poor and the outcast, is the basis of our concern for the integral development of society’s most neglected members.”¹¹ In a powerful statement about “the new idolatry of money,” Pope Francis echoes John XXIII about the dangers of materialism and the growing chasm between the rich and the poor and through implication the slow erosion of the middle class into the ranks of poverty (*Evangelii Gaudium* 41).

Finally Thomas Merton and J. F. Powers recognized John XXIII as “The Good Pope” in his concern for humanity and I conjecture they both would have equally been enamored with Pope Francis, “The People’s Pope,” as one who is vitally concerned about the glorification of materialism creating spiritual sloth and worldliness within its clergy and Church membership (*Evangelii Gaudium* 57-58, 65-68).

1. James Earl Powers (1917-1999), novelist and short story writer, wrote primarily about the life of Catholic priests in the Midwest.
2. Thomas Merton and James Laughlin, *Selected Letters*, ed. David D. Cooper (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997) 112.
3. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993) 20 (June 5, 1968 letter to Paul A. Doyle).
4. *New York Times*, March 13, 1949 (<http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/05/04/reviews/waugh-interview.html?module=Search&mabReward=relbias%3Ar>).
5. 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) 58 [7/29/1956].
6. Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart, OCSO (New York: New Directions, 1981) 148; subsequent references will be cited as “LE” parenthetically in the text.
7. John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra* [May 15, 1961], Papal Encyclicals Online (<http://www.papalencyclicals.net/John23/j23mater.htm>); subsequent references will be cited as “*Mater et Magistra*” parenthetically in the text.
8. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 145.

9. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 245 [6/30/1963]; subsequent references will be cited as “RJ” parenthetically in the text. John XXIII was canonized on April 27, 2014.
10. See *J. F. Powers*, ed. Fallon Evans (St. Louis: Herder, 1968) 11, 14.
11. *The Joy of the Gospel (Evangelii Gaudium)* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2013) 128-29; subsequent references will be cited as “*Evangelii Gaudium*” parenthetically in the text.

Thomas Merton: Hedgehog and Fox

By Ron Dart

The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.

Archilochus

Already there are some who unabashedly compare Merton to the Fathers of the Church. In fact, this comparison is not far-fetched. It is simply an expression of the significance of what this compulsive writer from silence had to say, and a statement of his promise for the future.

Victor A. Kramer¹

The publication in 1953 of Isaiah Berlin’s classic study *The Hedgehog and the Fox*² opened up fine pathways regarding the tensions that exist between those who think broadly and those who think deeply. The fox, of course, embodies those who think in a wide-ranging manner – the hedgehog burrows deeply into a narrow channel. Tolstoy, Berlin suggested, lived the tension of the fox and the hedgehog – so did Thomas Merton. Merton thought, read and wrote widely – his sheer breadth links him to the best of the Christian humanist tradition. Merton also, more than most, played a significant role in reviving and renewing the contemplative way of knowing and being – he was very much the contemplative hedgehog in doing so. I think the perennial significance of Merton is the way that he, like Tolstoy, was both fox and hedgehog.

There can be little doubt that Merton’s turn from the bustling and driven world of New York to the ordered silence of the Cistercians was a conscious turn to the *vita contemplativa*. Merton knew, in the depths of his mind and soul, that things were out of joint in Western civilization, and like the proverbial canary in the mineshaft, Merton felt the toxins in his heart and imagination. Many of Merton’s books, beginning with *What is Contemplation?*³ and *Seeds of Contemplation*,⁴ track and trace his longing to understand and live into the contemplative way both within the historic Christian tradition and, in the 1960s, in a more focused manner, the mystical way in other faith traditions. Daniel Adams, in his early book, *Thomas Merton’s Shared Contemplation*,⁵ followed, like the



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