

understood that here are all those parts of us that have been denied and repressed, where the root of projections and prejudice lurk, and where the unpalatable human emotions of rage, lust, envy and hatred lie.

This reality is further acknowledged by Merton in his next couple of sentences when he writes: “I have been summoned to explore a desert area of man’s heart in which explanations no longer suffice, and in which one learns that only experience counts. An arid, rocky, dark land of the soul, sometimes illuminated by strange fires which men fear and peopled by specters which men studiously avoid except in their nightmares” (*HGL* 156). Merton takes us here to the heart of the experiential where rational, coherent, conceptual thought has no place; down into the deep unconscious where the primitive, strange, uncontrolled heat of passion and anger and the ghosts we would rather banish from the civilized world are encountered.

Merton’s final sentence in this chosen extract confirms the personal journey that he has taken through this unforgiving terrain when he writes: “I have learned that one cannot truly know hope unless he has found out how like despair hope is” (*HGL* 156). This is the mystical recognition that beyond the usual sense of good and bad, black and white, lies the darkness which is itself light – where the apparent emptiness contains a fullness, and so where dualistic thought includes an immanence beyond the separation. Later in the same message Merton tells us that the hope in the despair is from the love of Jesus that also is found by those who search within: “Hope because Jesus is with those who are poor and outcasts No one on earth has reason to despair of Jesus because Jesus loves man” (*HGL* 157.)

Rather than find answers for big existential questions Merton urges us first to seek our inner world, to know ourselves in all that complexity. As Merton wrote elsewhere, “I am realizing more and more that my big task is within myself.”² This then is the message for now – far from any triumphalism or intellectual certainties Merton returns us to, at the very least, an awareness of the “log in our own eye” before rushing to sort out “the speck” in another’s (Matt. 7:3).

1. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 154-59; subsequent references will be cited as “*HGL*” parenthetically in the text.
2. Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: Letters on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990) 134 (9/16/1960 letter to Mother Angela Collins, OCD).

Soul Brothers

By Robert Grip

I admit to being part of a generation who read Thomas Merton, but worried that we might be the last to appreciate his enormous gift both to those of the Christian faith and to the world in general. It is perhaps opportune

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that Merton's reliance on dialogue, both within the Church and with those following their own paths to salvation, is not unlike the approach of the member of another religious order who has also risen from relative obscurity to the world stage as the first Jesuit to be elected pope. It is a similarity that could stir new interest in Merton, and encourage students to consider the commonality of the two.

Ignatian prayer includes an emphasis on the power of imagination; I believe in *the truth of my heart* that Merton would have been delighted with the election to the papacy of Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio. Consider their mutual devotion to peace. Francis, in his *Message for the World Day of Peace 2014*, lamented that “New ideologies, characterized by rampant individualism, egocentrism and materialistic consumerism, weaken social bonds, fuelling that ‘throw away’ mentality which leads to contempt for, and the abandonment of, the weakest and those considered ‘useless.’”¹ Compare the Pope's statement to Merton's statement in “The Root of War is Fear,” where he notes, “The ‘cold war’ is simply the normal consequence of our corrupt idea of peace based on a policy of ‘every man for himself’ in ethics, economics and political life. It is absurd to hope for a solid peace based on fictions and illusions!”²



Francis, in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*,³ notes the importance of *lectio divina*, an ancient tradition whose resurgence can be credited to Vatican II and about which Merton wrote and taught extensively.⁴ In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis also focuses considerable attention on ecumenical – especially interreligious – dialogue. In section 251, Francis writes: “True openness involves remaining steadfast in one's deepest convictions, clear and joyful in one's own identity, while at the same time being ‘open to understanding those of the other party’ and ‘knowing that dialogue can enrich each side.’ What is not helpful is a diplomatic openness which says ‘yes’ to everything in order to avoid problems, for this would be a way of deceiving others and denying them the good which we have been given to share generously with others.” In my imagination, I can see Merton agreeing wholeheartedly, especially in light of his considerable correspondence with those of other faiths and his fateful and final trip outside the abbey in 1968.

“Christianity is against alienation,” said Merton during his final spoken comments before his death, and, “Christianity revolts against an alienated life.”⁵ As Francis puts it: “Jesus teaches us another way: Go out. Go out and share your testimony, go out and interact with your brothers, go out and share, go out and ask. Become the Word in body as well as spirit.”⁶

Using the power of imagination, I can see Merton and Francis sitting on the front porch of the hermitage, watching the deer and enjoying a beer. They would, and do, have much in common.

1. “Message of Pope Francis for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace, January 1, 2014” http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco_20131208_messaggio-xxvii-giornata-mondiale-pace-2014.html.

2. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 122.
3. *The Joy of the Gospel* (Evangelii Gaudium) (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2013); subsequent references will be cited as “*Evangelii Gaudium*” parenthetically in the text.
4. See Thomas Merton, *The Rule of Saint Benedict: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* 4, ed. Patrick F. O’Connell (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2009) 223-25; Thomas Merton, *Monastic Observances: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* 5, ed. Patrick F. O’Connell (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2010) 149-55, 166-83; William H. Shannon, “*Lectio Divina*,” in William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O’Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002) 253-54; Mary Murray McDonald, “The Soul-Rich Monk/Priest: Thomas Merton on *Lectio Divina*,” *The Merton Annual* 25 (2012) 197-204.
5. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 335.
6. Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio to his priests in Argentina in 2012 (*New York Daily News*, March 14, 2013).

Why Merton Matters to This Non-Catholic

By Hans Stefan Gustafson

As a non-Catholic undergraduate at Boston College over a decade ago, I first encountered Thomas Merton. I have remained non-Catholic, but when I reflect on all of the times I considered entering into the Roman Catholic Church I can trace the primary inspiration to do so back to Merton (as I am sure many have done). I suppose that if I ever do decide to become a Catholic, Merton will have played perhaps one of the largest roles in that decision. In my early college days I read *The Seven Storey Mountain* and some of his other popular texts (e.g., *Seeds of Contemplation*). In *Seven Storey*, I found kinship with Merton as I confronted the common questions, struggles, tensions and pulls of a young man in America. He gave me a license to wrestle with the shortcomings of humanity and religion without abandoning it, a powerful and necessary lesson for many people.

Back in my college days, I recall a Catholic professor of philosophy saying something along the lines that “Merton is good. But only his early stuff, not the later stuff” – the suggestion here being, I suppose, that his later works, which dabbled in interreligious discourse, intermonastic spirituality and social justice issues, were somehow too progressive and possibly “heretical.” Of course, I quickly procured Merton’s later works and devoured them and soon discovered that they were truly his best works, especially his journals. After reading his *Asian Journal* twice, I ended up studying in Kathmandu, Nepal for a semester and then upon graduation moved to Southeast Alaska (as a non-Catholic in the Jesuit Volunteer Corps) to live in a place Merton considered special. In fact, my fascination with his later years and his quest for place prompted me to publish an article in *The Merton Annual* entitled, “Place, Spiritual Anthropology and Sacramentality in Merton’s Later Years.”¹

Without question, one of the greatest impacts Merton has made on my

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