

March Reflection

During 2015, centenary celebrations honoring the birth of the Trappist monk and spiritual writer Thomas Merton (January 31, 1915 -- December 10, 1968) are being held all across the world: Prades, France where he was born; England where he studied at Cambridge; Corpus Christi Parish in New York City where he took instructions and was baptized Catholic; St Bonaventure University in Olean, New York where he taught; Louisville where, as a monk, he had an important religious experience at the corner of Fourth and Walnut; Asia where he travelled at the end of his life, dying of accidental electrocution in Bangkok, Thailand; and hundreds of other places sponsoring conferences, workshops, exhibits and lectures.

What accounts for the amazing, ongoing popularity of a man who spent most of his adult life in the Trappist Monastery of Gethsemane near Bardstown, Kentucky? Merton first became well known when his autobiography *Seven Storey Mountain* was published in 1948, seven years after he joined the Trappists. The book made the New York Times best seller list, eventually selling over 600,000 hard back copies and three million paperback editions, and appeared on some of the lists of the best books of the twentieth century, including the National Review. More recent commentaries, however, have been critical of the book, noting its exclusive tone and a certain Catholic triumphalism, which Merton himself outgrew and later repudiated.

Merton's enduring influence is connected more with the searching, probing, inclusive, dialogic character of his later writings. Without claiming definitive answers, he wrestled with some of the crucial tensions that still occupy many people today: freedom and authority; nature and technology; contemplation and action; mysticism and politics; Christianity and world religions. Engaging these tensions in his life and thought, Merton refused to settle for easy answers and approaches, nor would he collapse one side of the dialectical tension by exclusively embracing the other side. For example, he maintained his commitment to his Catholic faith and monastic vocation while remaining open to the Buddhist tradition and appropriating elements of its truth, goodness, and beauty. Many serious spiritual searchers today see Merton as an honest, self-critical, wise spiritual guide in dealing with the complex tensions of contemporary life. His spiritual journey is reflected in his popular prayer which begins: "My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going . . . I do not see the road ahead of me," and ends with the faith conviction: "You will never leave me to face my perils alone."

After his conversion to Catholicism in 1938, Merton had to wrestle with the relationship between his new faith and life in the world. As he pondered that question, he taught English at St. Bonaventure College for a year and a half and did volunteer service in Harlem during the summer. With his entry into Gethsemane in 1941, he renounced the free-flowing life he had lived in New York and entered into a new "life of freedom," as he called it, within the monastic structure. During his early years in the monastery, he tended to see the world as an evil place filled with enticing temptations. He envisioned the monk as one who not only renounces the world but immerses himself in contemplative prayer, free of worldly concerns. Starting in the mid-1950s, however, Merton began developing a more worldly spirituality, signaled by his *No Man is an Island* (1955), which recognized that seeking happiness just for oneself is a fundamental error that denies the social character of human existence. In *Disputed Questions* (1960), he went further, insisting that Christians cannot turn their backs on the world, but must accept responsibility for humanizing the world. The task of the Christian today is, as he pointedly put it, "to build the Kingdom of God in this world."

Exploring this responsibility, Merton wrote a long laudatory article on his friend and correspondent, the Russian writer Boris Pasternak, who courageously criticized the Soviet regime at great personal cost. It seems Merton came to see himself as a writer like Pasternak with a responsibility to criticize the questionable aspects of U.S. public policy, such as the nuclear arms race and the Vietnam War.

In his mature thought, Merton saw clearly that a genuine contemplative life cannot be a withdrawal from the world of suffering and crisis, but must involve "a rejection of all standards of judgment which imply attachment to a history of delusion, egoism and sin" and a refusal to participate in "the reign of untruth, greed, cruelty and arrogance in the world of men." Merton recognized the vital contribution of lay persons to the great cause of peace and justice, but, at the same time, insisted that contemplative monks had a distinctive role to play. He saw himself as free from the responsibility of making instant decisions and pronouncements on the latest newsworthy issues. As a contemplative he had an opportunity to reflect prayerfully on issues and to write about them after they were no longer headline news. This luxury of time enabled him to examine contemporary problems from a faith perspective and to penetrate to the core of issues, which instant analysis might overlook. This may be another reason he still seems relevant today, despite changed circumstances.

During the 1960s, Merton's prayerful reflection issued in important articles on the problem of racism that are still valuable today. To concentrate on just one example, he calls us to remember and celebrate the progress already made by African Americans in our society over the last half-century, while confronting the fundamental prejudice that blocks further progress. He himself celebrated the passage of the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Bill, which outlawed discrimination in public

accommodations, effectively overturning the Jim Crow laws, and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, which opened up the ballot box for blacks, but he tempered his enthusiasm with a warning that racial prejudice would limit their effectiveness. He saw positive aspects in the Black Power movement and argued that African Americans needed to acquire political power in order to make progress in our society. Merton would have us celebrate the progress of the last half-century: black mayors in major cities; forty some members of the Congressional Black Caucus; and a two-term black president. It is important for young people, black and white, to know the history and accomplishments of the civil rights movement. The annual Martin Luther King Day celebration offers a marvelous opportunity to reflect on the progress made since his assassination in 1968.

At the same time, Merton challenges us to a more radical analysis of the racism that inhibits the progress of African Americans. He argued that there really is no room in American society as currently structured for most blacks, except at the bottom of the economic totem pole. He recognized that some blacks make it in our society by "becoming white," speaking standard English, dressing properly, and conforming to the American work ethic. His contention that this would not work for most blacks has so far been confirmed by economic realities. Over the past six decades black unemployment has consistently been double the figure for whites. The median wealth of black households has remained significantly lower than whites. College educated blacks generally do not do as well financially as their white counterparts. Such statistics can be used to support Merton's position that systemic racism continues to block economic progress of black Americans.

Merton was convinced that only a radical restructuring of American society could overcome this fundamental problem and enable most African Americans to make it economically in our country. Such a restructuring could only occur if white Americans come to see some fundamental truths: whites are a minority group in the human family which has a majority of people of color; white culture is not normative nor superior to other cultures in all aspects; white persons are not essentially superior to people of color; whites cannot achieve full integrity without appropriating insights and values found in other cultures.

These truths suggest that white Americans should listen to African Americans and learn from them. The predominant American culture must be open to the richness of black culture. This sets the stage for the kind of restructuring Merton spoke about. Unfortunately, he did not offer a blueprint for a truly pluralistic society, nor did he indicate concrete steps to move in that direction. He did suggest, however, that white Americans need a change of heart, a conversion that unmasks all illusions of superiority and opens up genuine dialogue. Mutual dialogue among equals prepares the way for collaborative efforts to create a more just society where our black brothers and sisters can find a true home.