

*Thomas Merton on the True Self*

The centenary celebrations of the January 31, 1915, birth of the Trappist monk and popular spiritual author, Thomas Merton, have generated renewed interest in him and his ideas on contemporary issues, such as racism, the nuclear threat, and interfaith dialogue.

Of special importance for living an authentic Christian life is Merton's insightful analysis of the call to grow spiritually by moving from the false self to the true self. His own life serves as an example of the quest for a more authentic version of the self, created and loved by God. As a student at Columbia University in New York, Merton made a chance purchase of a book by the French philosopher Etienne Gilson (1884-1978) entitled *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, which sparked an interest in the Catholic intellectual tradition that eventually led to his conversion to Catholicism. Pursuing his growing interest in medieval philosophy, Merton took a course at Columbia on Thomas Aquinas taught by Daniel Walsh, who studied under Gilson at the University of Toronto. Walsh, who served as a mentor to Merton and became a life-long friend, urged him to pursue his interest in the priesthood by joining the Franciscans. When that did not work out, Walsh helped Merton get a teaching position at St. Bonaventure College, a Franciscan institution in Olean, New York. There, Merton lived like a monk: attending daily Mass, praying the Office every day, living an ascetic lifestyle (quit smoking and cut back on his drinking), joining the Franciscan Third Order, and studying the great Franciscan theologians Bonaventure (1217-1274) and John Duns Scotus (1265-1308).

Merton's careful study of Scotus, the Subtle Doctor, who studied at Oxford and taught at the University of Paris, was especially important in developing his notion of the true self. Scotus is known for his disagreements with Aquinas: for example, he defended the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, which Aquinas questioned; and he insisted that the Son would have become man even if Adam and his offspring had not sinned, a position Thomas rejected. Against the general trend in medieval philosophy to abstract universal truths by an observation of the created world, Scotus insisted on the unique goodness of each individual created being. To describe the distinctive set of characteristics that constitute the essence of a particular created reality, he coined the Latin word "*haecceitas*," which can be translated as "*thisness*." Scotus directs our attention to the unique characteristics of individual things and persons. When the book of Genesis has God describe his creation of man as "very good," this means not just that human beings in general are very good, but that every individual man and woman is very good. Influenced by Scotus, the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889) coined the term "inscape" to describe the unified set of characteristics, created by God, that constitute the uniqueness of a particular creature. For Hopkins, every thing and every person has a world within that is "charged with the grandeur of God."

Appropriating the insights of both Scotus and Hopkins, Merton insisted that every creature gives glory to God by being true to its own "thisness" and manifesting its inscape. A tree glorifies God by taking root, spreading its branches and sprouting leaves. Blessed with free will, human beings give glory to God by freely choosing to do the divine will, by living as the true self created, known and loved by God. For Merton, to become a saint is to be our own true self.

Merton distinguishes the true self from the false self, which is alienated from God. The false or illusory self is unduly influenced by societal and cultural norms, and is overly concerned to impress others, to create a favorable public image, to demonstrate superiority over others, to maintain control of situations, to secure a prominent position in society, to earn divine favor by good deeds.

Well aware of the ultimately mysterious character of the true self, Merton reminds us that it is not like a motor in a car, or as we might say today, an inner GPS that guides our journey. It is not an object that can be studied, or apprehended by logical deduction, or even drawn into clear light by contemplative prayer. From a faith perspective, the true self is the self known and loved by God. It is, as Merton often repeated, simply myself, nothing more and nothing less. He points to its meaning and function through a variety of images. The true self is like: a mirror in which God sees the divine self; a little world illumined by the light of Christ; an inexhaustible resource for self-sacrificing love; a special place where God's name is written; a point of pure truth at the center of our being; a temple where God dwells; a center point or apex of the soul responsive to the Holy Spirit. These images remind us that our true self is grounded in our relationship to the triune God who created us, shared our life and sustains us on the spiritual journey.

As Merton gradually came to appreciate during his years as a monk our true self is essentially relational. On March 18, 1958, he went to Louisville on monastery business and at the crowded corner of Fourth and Walnut had a deep religious

experience which overwhelmed him with the realization that he was in a communion of love with all these people, each marked by "a sacred beauty." We could say he recognized that he loved all these people because they possessed a beautiful true self created by God. The true self is discovered and expressed in mutual love. We come to know more of our true self when others love us; we develop our true self by loving others.

Discovering and living our true self is a lifelong project, completed only in death, which is our passage into complete self-fulfillment. Although we do not create or control our true self, as Merton made clear, we can cooperate with God's grace in a process of self-discovery and self-actualization. We can come to a deeper understanding of ourselves by meditating on the example and teachings of Jesus, who resisted temptations to act on the illusions of the false self and who gradually came to understand his true identity and mission. Self-discovery is facilitated by contemplative prayer, which, according to Merton, is "an attentive watchful listening of the heart" to the God present in our true self. Acts of self-sacrificing love freely performed in accord with God's will can help reveal to us our authentic nature as participants in the self-emptying of Christ. Each one of us has to find our own best ways of cooperating with divine grace in the vital task of discovering and living our true self.

We can clarify Merton's portrayal of the true self by imagining some examples of individuals who found ways of living a more authentic Christian life. Prisca, a highly motivated and successful advertising executive, had a baby girl in her late twenties. After the birth, she returned as quickly as possible to her demanding job, relying on her husband, mother, and day care to attend to the baby. Six years later when she became pregnant for the second time, she was very introspective, examining her lifestyle and life choices. In a painful insight, she realized that she did not really like her job, that she had dedicated herself to a career path because cultural voices told her that this is the only way for modern women to be happy and fulfilled. With this realization, she decided to take an extended leave of absence and devote herself to raising her new baby, a responsibility that she found rewarding and satisfying. In Merton's terminology, we could say she moved from a false self, formed by societal expectation, to her true self, responsive to an inner call revealed in self-reflection. Although Prisca's story is not normative, since many women find genuine fulfillment in their careers, it is instructive, warning us against devoting a great deal of energy to pursuits that contribute to a false self and encouraging us to concentrate our efforts on living our true self.

For most of his life, Abe, now 30, has been trying unsuccessfully to live up to the high achievements of his older brother, an honor student and high school basketball star, who has a lucrative job. Abe, a man of average academic, athletic and business accomplishments, suffered from low self-esteem, feeling inferior to his brother and, incorrectly, like a disappointment to his father. He went for help to his parish priest who gave him sound advice: just be yourself; do not compare yourself to your brother or anyone else; recognize and appreciate your own gifts; follow your own interests; accept your father's love. Abe had to work hard to put this advice into practice, but over time he gradually gained self-confidence and improved his self-esteem. He discovered something of his true self and unmasked the illusions of his false self. His story instructs us in the danger of living in a comparative mode and reminds us that being true to ourselves grounds a healthy emotional life.

Isaac was highly respected in his community: as a family man who provided well for his wife and children; as an active parishioner who regularly went to Mass on Sundays and served on the parish finance council; and as an involved citizen who served on a number of important civic boards. In midlife, he began to question his motivation for all this respectable activity, discovering in the process that he was always playing to some imaginary audience, trying to impress some individual or group, wondering what people were thinking of him, hoping for praise from some imagined observer. Embarrassed by this discovery, he started a systematic effort to act in more authentic ways: for example, being a better listener in conversations with members of his family in order to get to know them better; praying from his heart at Mass in order to thank God for so many blessings; resigning from some prestigious boards so that he could anonymously tutor inner city children. Over time, Isaac reduced his imaginary audience and purified his motivation. We could say he moved from the false self intent on impressing others toward the true self dedicated to doing God's will -- a transformation that could enrich our own spiritual development.

Rebecca, a receptionist for a large law firm, who was generally very courteous to the many clients needing her assistance, was often judgmental and harsh toward her husband and teenage daughter. While praying for God's help to deal more effectively with her family, Rebecca realized that she had become more like her mother: opinionated, judgmental, critical of the faults of others, negative about people in general -- an outlook she hid at work but allowed to surface at home. In need of a radical conversion, Rebecca, following the advice of her wise aunt, started the daily practice of paying persons she encountered, including her family, honest compliments as a way of noticing their good qualities. We could say that she has at least begun a journey that leads away from her false, critical self toward a more open self that is able to see something

of the true self in other people. The more we develop our true self, the better prepared we are to see and appreciate the God-given talents, gifts and achievements of our fellow humans.

Rachel, a recent widow, has spent her whole life sacrificing herself to care for her family members: taking care of her parents in their later years; giving up her own opportunity for higher education to support her husband's career; and devoting herself entirely to raising her three children. Grieving the loss of her husband, she saw a counselor who advised her to take care of herself, to do her own thing, to find her own fulfillment. However, Rachel just could not follow this advice because it seemed to her contrary to the Christian ideal of self-sacrificing love that is part of her very being. At this point, she happened to reread one of her favorite books, Merton's *New Seeds of Contemplation*, noticing for the first time his notion of the true self, which suggested a way out of her dilemma. Instead of dealing with her grief by doing her own thing, she decided to move forward by concentrating on becoming her true self, responsive to God's call, dedicated to Christ's mission and animated by the Spirit's presence. By following this path, she found a new lease on life, more energy and deeper meaning for the next phase of her life journey. We could say she is moving toward greater holiness and fulfillment by becoming her true self. Rachel's story invites us to reflect on Merton's true self in the context of our culture which celebrates a type of self-fulfillment that easily leads to a self-centered egoism. By way of contrast, Thomas Merton's true self can be properly understood only as a product of God's love and a resource for loving others.