

Thomas Merton, Prophet of the New Monasticism

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In the 1960s, Thomas Merton (1915-1968), monk of the Cistercian (Trappist) Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky, described the contours of a “new monasticism” that would be simple, natural and nourished by the Bible and contemplation. Merton anticipated emerging lay contemplatives pointing to the moral decay of affluent society, manifesting Christ in society and helping create a “better world.”¹

This presentation explores Merton’s call for Christian monastic renewal adapted to new contexts. The word monastery refers to communities of men or women or of men, women and couples with children living in the monastery. The word “monk” refers to male and female monastics. Among the vows a monk commits herself or himself to is chastity, a commitment that is understood as sexual purity and, possibly, but not necessarily, celibacy. Historically, Catholic and Protestant houses have provided for dispersed members called lay associates, companions or Benedictine *oblates*. As in earlier times, *oblates* respond to awareness that God has called them to a life-profession and share in the practices a specific house: prayer, study, work and service of God and neighbour

Contours of a “New Monasticism” in Merton’s Writings

With publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948), a narrative of his life from his birth (1915) to the year he made his solemn vows (1947), Thomas Merton fuelled a spirituality revolution. Readers of many nationalities, races, or religions found a mirror by which they could see

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their story in Merton's. Although he later repudiated the book as it portrayed monks as persons who fled from the world, he continued to write about what he found attractive about the monastic life: liturgy, study, the practice of *lectio* (time spent in personal interaction with God's Word), silence, formation, conversion of life, a rhythm of prayer and work, contemplation and action; as well, he continued to examine areas that needed to be rethought to meet the problem of identity and authenticity of contemporary contemplatives.² Acknowledging that not everyone drawn to a life of prayer would become a monk, Merton saw the contemplative life as of great importance for everyone.

In *What Is Contemplation?* (1948) Merton wrote, "The seeds of this perfect life [contemplation] are planted in every Christian soul at Baptism. But seeds must grow and develop before you reap the harvest."³ In this early pamphlet, Merton expressed concern about quietists who are "empty . . . of all love and all knowledge and remain inert in a kind of spiritual vacuum." In contrast with such selfishness true contemplatives let go of all care and, trusting God, allow the brightness of Jesus to shine in their lives.⁴

In *Seeds of Contemplation* (1949) Merton counselled anyone wanting to lead a contemplative life to pursue the love of God, which includes all other ends, by finding time and space to unfetter oneself from the world.⁵

In *Monastic Peace* (1958), Merton highlighted major signs of aptitude for the monastic life: openness to *metanoia*, a complete change of heart and conversion of life; seeking and finding God in inchoate and mysterious ways; self renunciation; willingness to be guided and governed by the common will ordinarily determined by the Rule and the Abbot; public and private meditative prayer; spiritual poverty; normal physical and mental health. Merton sounded a cautionary, and later a loud refrain: often the monastic life is too busy, making it difficult to maintain a healthy balance between contemplation and action.⁶

In 1958, in notes on contemplation recently published as *The Inner Experience*, Merton reflected two areas of growth in his own experience, a preoccupation with the dark side of modern life and an appreciation of eastern writings and contemplative practices. Merton expressed surprise ". . . that contemplative monasteries are content simply to receive individuals as retreatants, encourage them to receive frequent Communion and make the Way of the Cross, but do not do more to form groups . . . who could help and support one another . . . a kind of contemplative Third

Order . . . the most significant development of the contemplative life ‘in the world’ is the growth of small groups of men and women who live in every way like the laypeople around them, except for the fact that they are dedicated to God and focus all their life of work and poverty upon a contemplative center.”⁷

In the early 1960s, in his journals and with a number of correspondents, Merton wrote of a need for monastic renewal. In a letter dated July 28, 1961 to Pierre Van der Meer, a Benedictine scholar of Beuron Abbey and part of a circle who frequented the home of Merton’s friends Jacques and Raissa Maritain, Merton observed,

The world has changed much since my entry into the monastery. It is no longer the society which I lately know, the world of my youth, of my parents. I think of myself as an exile two times, three times over. The way toward the Homeland becomes more and more obscure. As I look back over the stages which were once more clear, I see that we are all on the right road, and though it be night, it is a saving one.⁸

Merton identified at least three directions that such revitalization should take. First, he was concerned about emphasis on the institution as such, expressed in such ways as a preoccupation with the practices of specific orders. To Father Ronald Roloff of St. John’s, a Benedictine abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, Merton wrote that as Novice Master, “I feel myself obligated to instruct the novices not in a fanciful ‘Cistercian spirituality’ but to try as best I can . . . to give them a *monastic* formation in elements which are *common* to us all. I have never found it relevant to stress the fact that we don’t have parishes and that you do . . . You are monks, we are monks. The big thing is, do we really seek God?”⁹

Second, Merton encouraged those orientated to a contemplative life to withdraw to places apart. To Sister Elaine M. Bane and a small band of Franciscan Sisters of Allegany, New York, he wrote,

Remember that in the enclosed and solitary life, your solitude itself will do an immense amount for you. The sisters need not strain and struggle and worry too much about “degrees” of prayer. The great thing is to be emptied out, to taste and see that the Lord is sweet, and to learn the way of abandonment and peace. Littleness is the chief characteristic of the solitary . . . the gift to be silent and simple with the Lord is a treasure . . .¹⁰

A third feature of Merton's understanding of monastic renewal was the need on the part of small contemplative communities for opportunities to dialogue with members of surrounding society while preserving their life of prayer.¹¹ For Merton, openness to the world entailed a willingness to speak out on issues as such war and the threat of nuclear annihilation, and also to relate to adherents of other religions. In a letter to Aelred Graham, whose book *Zen Catholicism* had been reviewed favourably in *America*, Merton characterized Zen as "a life-saver for many people, here at the exhausted end of an era in which thinking has been dominated by Cartesiansism . . . We have to *be* real, not just mean to be."¹²

In a letter dated 21 October 1962 to Father Roloff, Merton worried about the business of his own house, and of many other monasteries: "There is overwork here as well as anywhere else. We lose people who go into work too deeply." Noting that at Gethsemani, a "very top-heaving schedule full of extra offices and community exercises has been considerably alleviated . . . [yet] a lot of people have taken advantage of this leeway to waste time diddling around." Merton concluded, "There *is* a monastic revival going on. One may well be dubious about its ambiguities and its numerous false pretenses, but the reality is nevertheless there."¹³

For Merton, monastic renewal was needed to enable those exploring monastic spirituality to go to the heart of the monastic life, *metanoia*, inner transformation and newness of life. Merton was encouraged by the convening of Vatican II (1962-1965) and took an active interest in its proceedings. Of the issues discussed at the Council, those that most concerned Merton were war and the relationship of Christians with the non-Christian religions. On 12 November 1963, Merton observed in his journal that some curia officials were "asses . . . parading and gesticulating, proclaiming ten thousand programs."¹⁴ Generally, however, Merton was pleased with the Council. Merton welcomed what he understood as a remarkable shift of emphasis in *Lumen Gentium*, the Constitution on the Church, which shifted focus from the hierarchical nature of institution to the church as a community of the faithful.¹⁵ He felt *Pefectae Caritatis*, the decree on the renewal of the religious life, emboldened monks to question the basic institutional structures of the religious life along lines he advocated.¹⁶

During the early 1960s, desiring greater silence, stillness and solitude, Merton began spending more time at a hermitage near the monastery. On 20 August 1965, Merton was relieved of responsibilities at the monastery and became a full-time hermit. Apart from attending Mass,

having a meal or getting his mail, Merton spent more and more time at the hermitage and expected eventually to end his days there.¹⁷ Barred from writing about social issues, Merton gave increased attention to monastic renewal. In articles collected in a book prepared for publication on the eve of his departure for Asia in October 1968, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, Merton reiterated the main areas needing renewal: de-institutionalization; more time and place for silence; a balanced life; and insistence that contemplatives understand the crucial problems of the day including “race, war, genocide, starvation, injustice, revolution.”¹⁸ Merton acknowledged, “Fortunately there are creative forces at work. There are communities and superiors who are fully aware of the real nature of the monastic vocation not simply as a summons to become a cog in an institutional machine, but as a charismatic breakthrough to liberation and love.”¹⁹ In the title essay, Merton summarizes his own experience of contemplation in a way that has proved visionary for the new generation of monastics:

Real Christian living is stunted and frustrated if it remains content with the bare externals of worship, with “saying prayers” and “going to church,” with fulfilling one’s external duties and merely being respectable. The real purpose of prayer . . . is the deepening of personal realization in love, the awareness of God . . . the exploration and discovery of new dimensions in freedom, illumination and love, in deepening our awareness of our life in Christ.

What is the relation of this to action? Simply this. He who attempts to act and do things for others or for the world without deepening his own self-understanding, freedom, integrity and capacity to love, will not have anything to give others . . .

[P]rayer and meditation have an important part to play in opening up new ways and new horizons. If our prayer is the expression of a deep and grace-inspired desire for newness of life – and not the mere blind attachment to what has always been familiar and “safe” – God will act in us and through us to renew the Church by preparing, in prayer, what we cannot yet imagine or understand. In this way our prayer and faith today will be oriented toward the future which we ourselves may never see fully realized on earth.²⁰

Rise of a New Monasticism

Today, few are inclined to follow Merton to a cloistered life. Yet

“hidden contemplatives,” laity “of the sort most remote from cloistered life, like Thoreau or Emily Dickinson” still read Merton whose appeal for a new generation of monastics is manifest in three contemporary currents.²¹ For Catholics, the reforms of Vatican II have given impetus to many changes. Monasteries that had once existed almost independent of other recognized institutions have embraced more porous boundaries. Lay vocations outnumber traditional vocations. Over the past ten years, for example, the number of Benedictine oblates has grown by 75 per cent. Single or married, these lay monastics seek to live the teachings of Christ as interpreted by St. Benedict and in association with specific Benedictine houses. Integrating the rhythm of prayer, study and work within their chosen way of life, oblates generally live near the monasteries and participate in their liturgies, an annual retreat or monthly meetings, each activity designed to strengthen religious commitment.²²

As for other orders, there are over 700,000 third-order Franciscans worldwide and growing numbers of Cistercian lay associates that claim the Cistercian charism as a gift of the Holy Spirit bestowed not solely on those who live within monastic enclosures. “We feel it is the gift of a ‘way of life’ that can be as appropriate for a layperson living in the world as it is for a monk or a nun living in a monastery.”²³ Some are active with local chapters of the International Thomas Merton Society.

New forms of Catholic community have developed. Examples are Catholic Worker Houses that continue ministries initiated by Dorothy Day (1897-1980) and Peter Maurin (1877-1949) or the Little Portion Community located at Berryville in northwest Arkansas, rooted in the Franciscan tradition. Two movements have Canadian origins. In 1946 Catherine de Hueck Doherty (1896-1985) and Eddie Doherty (1890-1975) co-founded Madonna House at Combermere three hundred fifty kilometres northeast of Toronto. Fusing Orthodox and Catholic spirituality, Madonna House inspires community members worldwide with a commitment to social ministry out of a life of prayer in the spirit of Christ. In 1964 Jean Vanier (b. 1928) created the first L’Arche community at Trosly Breuil in France. Members care for the disabled in houses around the world.

A second sign of monastic renewal is the vitality of Protestant monasteries. Prominent among them are the sisters of Grandchamp in French-speaking Switzerland, the brothers of Taizé in France and the brothers of Bose in Italy. In Orleans, Massachusetts, the Community of Jesus draws from Baptist, Presbyterian and Episcopalian roots, is richly observant of the traditional praxis of the church, evangelizes through the

arts and succours those who come to it, even as it reaches out to those who need but cannot come.²⁴ This is noteworthy as Luther, Calvin and other early Protestants rejected the institution.

A third sign of monastic renewal is the emergence of intentional communities that draw on older traditions of monasticism yet embody features of what Merton characterized as a new monasticism. Those called to communal life find strength and liberation in a rhythm of contemplation and action. Some offer alternative seminary formation similar to the Confessing Church's "House of the Brethren" described by Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) in *Life Together*, a book that remains a powerful tract for our time.²⁵ Examples include the Caritas Community in Memphis, Tennessee, modeled on the Church of the Saviour in Washington DC; the Open Door Community, a Presbyterian residential community in Atlanta, formed in the Catholic Worker tradition; the Simple Way and New Jerusalem in Philadelphia and the Common Life Community based at Five Oaks, a retreat centre of the United Church of Canada located in Paris, Ontario. No inventory exists from which to estimate numbers, but new monastic communities have attracted attention.²⁶

Over ten years ago, Jonathan R. Wilson, who holds the Pioneer McDonald Chair in Theology at Carey Theological College in Vancouver, British Columbia, discussed the call of prophets like Merton to construct local forms of community within which life can be sustained through the new "Dark Ages," which some believe are already upon us. Wilson wrote that we should pray, hope, and work for a form of life that would be continuous with the old monasticism in some respects, and discontinuous in other respects.

Wilson urged that Christians reverse the capitulation of the church to the Enlightenment project and return to the living tradition of the gospel. He outlined four marks that would be needed by a new movement to sustain faithful witness: a desire to heal the fragmentation of our lives in North American culture; a way for the whole people of God; discipline; and practices and virtues by which an undisciplined, unfaithful church might recover the discipline and faithfulness necessary to realize its mission in the world.

Wilson acknowledged that theological commitment and reflection must undergird a new monasticism. Right theology will not of itself produce a faithful church, which he characterized as the faithful living out the mission given to them by God in Jesus Christ, but that mission can be identified only by faithful theology. "So, in the new monasticism we must

strive simultaneously for a recovery of right belief and right practice.”²⁷

Wilson was describing an insight that theological reflection informs practice; conversely, practices shape theological reflection. As in the Second Testament, following Jesus today entails doing what he taught. “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:34-35).” For Paul, faith was lifeless without love (1 Cor 13-14). For James, faith without works was dead (James 2:26). In the fourth century, Evagrius of Pontas wrote, “If you are a theologian, you will pray truly. And if you pray truly, you are a theologian.”²⁸ Medieval Christians summarized in Latin, *lex orandi, lex credendi*, the law of prayer and belief.

Soon, Wilson’s daughter and son-in-law, Leah and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, helped found a new monastic community in Durham, North Carolina. Rutba House is one of a number of communities of Christians who think the church in western society has accommodated itself too easily to the consumerist and imperialist values of the culture. Responding to a call to enter more deeply into the pain of the world, many persons in the United States and elsewhere are on journey similar to that of my own Community of the Transfiguration, joining in prayer, simplicity of life and service to the poor.

In June 2004, Rutba House hosted a gathering of friends from around the country to discern the shape of a radical movement called the new monasticism. Out of the gathering came a book. Introduced by Jonathan R. Wilson, it offers strategic guidance for the movement. The new monasticism is diverse in form and characterized by these twelve marks:

- Relocation to the abandoned places of Empire;
- Sharing economic resources with fellow community members and the needy among us;
- Hospitality to the stranger;
- Lament for racial divisions within the church and our communities combined with the active pursuit of a just reconciliation;
- Humble submission to Christ’s body, the church;
- Intentional formation in the way of Christ and the rule of the community along the lines of the old novitiate;
- Nurturing common life among members of intentional community;
- Support for celibate singles alongside monogamous married couples and their children;

Geographical proximity to community members who share a common rule of life;
Care for the plot of God's earth given to us along with support of our local economies;
Peacemaking amidst of violence and conflict resolution within communities along the lines of Matthew 18;
Commitment to a disciplined contemplative life.²⁹

The new monastics are unified not by a shared theological tradition or denomination, but rather by the wisdom of a shared legacy, an overcoming of any division between the Marthas and Marys of the cloister and a spirituality that can shape the Christian life in post-modern society. Drawing on older traditions, they are living signs of God's presence in prophetic action, the re-shaping of Christian community and interfaith dialogue. One suspects the spirit of Merton is smiling upon them.

Concluding Reflections

Monasteries and intentional communities have played several positive roles in eastern and western Christianity. Sometimes monasteries have provided a place of safety or even survival. Emerging at a time when the wider culture collapsed, Benedictine monasticism provides an example. However, monasteries cannot be regarded primarily as places of flight or withdrawal. The monastic life is not an option for someone trying to escape her or his problems.

Monasticism is highly counter-cultural. Monasteries, or monastic-like communities, have at times been prophetic, witnessing to a culture in which discipleship has been difficult if not impossible. The confessing church movement in Germany with its clandestine seminary at Finkenwalde offers an example.

Monasteries have also served the role of generating renewal. During recent decades, the reform of traditional monasticism within the Catholic and Orthodox traditions, the emergence of ecumenical monasteries rooted in the Protestant reform tradition and the stirring of a new monasticism is providing sensitive and thoughtful people new ways to live as Christians.

The idea of redeeming time is a way to understand what is happening to monasticism in the west early in the twenty-first century. Every four hundred years or so Christian churches of the west have experienced an upsurge in monasticism. Today, if warnings about the effects of global warming and other environmental issues are realized, thoughtful critics

envison a transformation or collapse of civilization as we know it. The new monastics are preserving in post-modern, secular society not only a living tradition that has prospered in western society for nearly two millennia, but also a fresh vision of life's final meaning and a new spiritual direction by which an emerging generation of religious seekers may come into relationship with that meaning. Largely an urban phenomenon, the new monastics are multiplying around the world.

What is happening has led observers of the contemporary religious scene in North America to characterize the new monasticism or congregational monasticism as a framework by which the "practicing church" can give Christians in general and those involved in intentional community a revolutionary way to live more faithfully and to resist such aspects of western culture antithetical to Christianity such as individualism, materialism and anti-intellectualism.

Fifty years ago, living out of his Trappist vocation, Thomas Merton began to delineate the contours of a new monasticism through the growth of lay associations, the interest of Protestants in monasticism and the emergence of new forms of monastic community. Having abetted a veritable tsunami of interest in dialogue, contemplation and community, Merton called for ". . . the cultivation of a certain *quality* of life, a level of awareness, a depth of consciousness, an area of transcendence and of adoration which are not usually possible in an active secular existence" on the part of a generation seeking to be free from what William Faulkner called "'the same frantic steeplechase toward nothing' which is the essence of 'worldliness' everywhere."³⁰ While neither contemplation, nor action by itself, can guarantee the nurture of a the life envisioned by Merton, the mindful uniting of these two on the part of the new monastic communities offers a promising way by which Christians rooted in the messianic lifestyle of Jesus and the early disciples may address the challenges of post-modern living.

Endnotes

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2. Merton, *CWA*, 70, 53; and Lawrence S. Cunningham, *Thomas Merton and the Monastic Vision* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 191.
3. Thomas Merton, *What Is Contemplation?* (Notre Dame: St. Mary's College, 1948), 17.
4. Merton, *What Is Contemplation?* 71-7.
5. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (Norfolk: New Directions, 1949), 60-61; and Merton, "Learn To Be Alone," *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1962), 80-83.
6. Thomas Merton, *The Monastic Journey*, ed. Patrick Hart (Garden City: Image, 1978), 109, 114-17, 145ff.
7. Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience. Notes on Contemplation*, ed. William H. Shannon (San Francisco: Harper, 2003), 136-7, 142.
8. Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: Letters on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990), 139.
9. Letter dated 26 September 1962 (emphasis Merton's), in Merton, *The School of Charity*, 147.
10. Letter dated 4 July 1962, in Merton, *The School of Charity*, 145.
11. Letter dated 5 April 1963 to Archbishop Paul Philippe, then Secretary of the Vatican's Sacred Congregation for Religious, in Merton, *The School of Charity*, 165.
12. Letter dated 24 April 1963, emphasis Merton's), in Merton, *The School of Charity*, 167.
13. Merton, *The School of Charity*, 150-1 (emphasis Merton's).
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16. Merton, *CWA*, 23. His essay "Dialogue and Renewal" in this volume discusses the decree at length.
17. Thomas Merton, *Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey*, ed. Patrick Hart, *Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 7 (San Francisco: Harper 1999), 282.

18. Merton, *CWA*, 216.
19. Merton, *CWA*, 41.
20. Merton, *CWA*, 176-7.
21. Thomas Merton, "Notes on a Philosophy of Solitude," *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960), 177.
22. Linda Kulzer, "Monasticism beyond the Walls," *Benedict in the World*, eds. Linda Kulzer and Roberta Bondi (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2002), 5; and John Michael Talbot, "Call," <http://www.johnmichaeltalbot.com/Reflections/index.asp?id=155> (accessed May 2008).
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24. Phyllis Tickle, Foreword in *Community of the Transfiguration: The Journey of a New Monastic Community*, by Paul R. Dekar (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008), xi.
25. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. with an introduction by John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper & Row, 1954).
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27. Jonathan R. Wilson, *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World: Lessons for the Church from MacIntyre's After Virtue* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 76.
28. Evagrius, "On Prayer," *Philokalia*, 1, 62; cited in Holy Transfiguration Monastery, *The Beacons* (Breakwater, n.d.), 19; and Cunningham, *Merton and the Monastic Vision*, 188.
29. Rutba House, ed., *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2005), xii-xiii; and interview with Leah and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, Durham, NC, 14 June 2008.
30. Merton, *CWA*, 27 (emphasis Merton's).