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At worship with Thomas Merton

Tom Ryan sm

In Louisville, Kentucky, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut Streets, in the centre of the shopping district, stands a sign.

The words on it are in bold and gold print. They run:

A REVELATION

Merton had a sudden insight at this corner Mar. 18, 1958, that led him to redefine his monastic identity with greater involvement in social justice issues. He was 'suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people...' He found them 'walking around shining like the sun'.

Prior to these words he speaks of his solidarity with humanity:

...that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers.... I have the immense joy of being man, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate'.¹

This epiphany moment of Merton's is often quoted. It summed up a growing sense for Merton that living as a monk, in solitude and contemplation, was not meant to be one of isolation, lived out in a special domain.

He was called, not to be 'apart' from, but 'part of' our world. His monastic call was for the sake of a better world—one of justice and peace. This led to his involvement with anti-war and disarmament movements in the final decade of his life.

How does this awareness of solidarity with humanity relate to Merton's attitude to worship, specially to the celebration of the Eucharist?

Its roots are found at the experiential level for Merton; specific times when he was profoundly moved by the celebration of Mass— prior to his conversion, as a new Catholic and later with his ordination at a priest. It was one of feeling profoundly loved by a God.

For instance, in celebrating Mass after his ordination, he speaks of 'the greatest personal gift that can come to anyone is to share in the infinite act by which God's love is poured upon all.'²

Merton was deeply convinced that the Eucharist is a love-laden reality; it both transforms each person at the individual level but also in our various relationships. For this reason, Merton felt an ongoing responsibility to share the Mass he celebrated with others (especially his friends), to let them know he would remember them. The Eucharist was the gift beyond measure in which he, with them, participated in the love of God.

¹ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (London: Burns & Oates, 1968), 140-142.

² Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer (1941-1952)*, vol. 2 of *The Journals of Thomas Merton*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 319.

Years later, the moment of revelation in the shopping district of Louisville led Merton to turn his gaze to the world; he could not help but see Christ in his fellow human beings. This is the impulse urging Merton to write on issues of justice.

But he was also drawn to get involved in dialogue with a wide range variety of people. He came to view dialogue as being at the very core of the Christian life. In a letter written in 1959, he describes how dialogue has its roots in the Eucharist:

For, you see, when I enter into a dialogue with you and each of us knows who is speaking, it turns out that we are both Christ. This, being seen in a very simple and 'natural' light, is the beginning and almost the fullness of everything. Everything is in it somewhere. But it makes most sense in the light of Mass and the Eucharist.³

A refusal to engage in dialogue with others, adopting a posture that is unbending, defensive, and negative especially 'with adversaries and those with differing beliefs' is not really an option for 'those of us called to unite and to see others as Christ himself sees them'.⁴

As Hillis sums it up:

It must start with respect for persons in their beauty and worth who merit being given a hearing even when their positions are opposed to our own. To do otherwise is to be guilty of what Merton calls the 'heresy of individualism,' which is nothing else but the very sin of which Adam was guilty and which results only in fragmentation.⁵

But there is more to Merton's views about dialogue.

In 1967 (the year before his death), Merton writes of how the good news of Jesus' truth and love 'in our time...speaks out in strange places':

I have learned to rejoice that Jesus is in the world in people who know Him not, that He is at work in them when they think themselves far from Him...⁶

Over half a century later, such people can be viewed as amongst those acknowledged by the Church in its official worship when it prays:

Therefore, Lord, remember now... those who take part in this offering, those gathered here before you, your entire people, and all who seek you with a sincere heart.⁷

This brings us to a final comment—taking a lead from Hillis.

³*The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience & Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Harcourt, 1985), 387 cited in Gregg Hillis, "The Mystical Fire of Christ's Charity": Thomas Merton, the Eucharist, and the Meaning of Dialogues', *Cistercian studies quarterly*, 55:1 (2021): 77-97, at 92

⁴ Merton, *Conjectures*, 198.

⁵ Hillis, 'The Mystical Fire', 92.

⁶ A Letter on the Contemplative Life' in *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master – The Essential Writings*, edited by Lawrence S Cunningham (Paulist Press, 1992), 425.

⁷ Eucharistic Prayer IV.

When we consider the scope of the Eucharist and its place in worship for Merton, he was, in many ways, anticipating what Pope Benedict XVI was to write in 2007, some forty years later:

The Eucharist is the sacrament of communion between brothers and sisters who allow themselves to be reconciled in Christ, who made of Jews and pagans one people, tearing down the wall of hostility which divided them. Only this constant impulse towards reconciliation enables us to partake worthily of the Body and Blood of Christ. In the memorial of his sacrifice, the Lord strengthens our fraternal communion and, in a particular way, urges those in conflict to hasten their reconciliation by *opening themselves to dialogue and a commitment to justice*.⁸

For Reflection

1. What aspect stood out for you about Merton's 'epiphany' moment in the shopping district of Louisville?
2. Can you think of times when you found yourself changed in some way by attending Mass? How did it influence your behaviour?
3. People 'who merit being given a hearing even when their positions are opposed to our own'. What is your response to that sentence?
4. '*...opening themselves to dialogue and a commitment to justice*'. If we consider that phrase in relation to receiving the Body and Blood of Christ, what difference does it make do you think?

⁸ *Sacramentum Caritatis*, Vatican website, Accessed 12 November 2021, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-vi_exh_20070222_sacramentumcaritatis.html, 89, where Pope Benedict XVI quotes from his 2005 encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*. Emphasis added. Cited in Hillis, 'The Mystical Fire', 95.