

THE TRAGEDY OF THOMAS MERTON

Part II

Hodie, si vocem ejus audieritis, nolite obdurare corda vestra, sicut in exacerbatione, secundum diem tentationis in deserto: ubi tentaverunt me patres vestri, probaverunt et viderunt opera mea.¹

It is matter that impedes knowledge. When the soul of a man is relieved of the body, all impediment to its knowledge is removed and the man then knows himself truly. All the illusion in which he may have indulged disappears in that eternal instant of understanding and recognition: he knows then, even as he is known². He understands with supreme clarity that there is only one Reality, the Alpha and the Omega, Almighty God present to the soul forever, in the beatific vision—or its absence.

Judgement came for Thomas Merton shortly after lunch on 10th December 1968 when he was electrocuted in his cabin in a conference centre in Bangkok, Thailand, by a defective electric fan. It was the 27th anniversary of his entry into religious life.

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Return to Psychoanalysis

Merton suffered a vocational crisis in 1952 and, again, in 1955, inevitable consequences of the conflict between his religious vocation and the conviction that he was meant to be a creative writer. He had begun to press his abbot to allow him to live as a hermit. Abbot Fox had resisted this at first but an opportunity arose in 1954 which made him reconsider the proposal. There was on the Gethsemani property a fire tower and the County authorities wished to have it manned full time during the summer to provide adequate warning in the event of forest fires. The abbot approached the Abbot General with the idea of Frater Louis being permitted to reside in the tower so as to assist the county authorities as required. He agreed and the offer was made but, to Abbot Fox's great surprise, Merton declined, later mocking the offer as an attempt to make him into a latter-day St Simon Stylites. The office of Novice Master had just become vacant and Merton asked, instead, to be named in that position. The abbot appointed him.

In the meantime, Merton's emotional instability had lead him, typically, to develop an interest in psychology. He gave himself a Rorschach test³ and decided he needed psychoanalysis. Notwithstanding that he had no expertise in the field, he began to

¹ Part of the Invitatory psalm, 94, recited at the beginning of Vigils (Office of Matins) every day at the monastery of Gethsemani: *If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts as in the provocation, on that day of temptation in the wilderness, when your fathers tempted me, when they tested me, though they had seen my works.*

² I Cor. 13: 12

³ A method of psychological evaluation used by psychologists to endeavour to evaluate the personality characteristics and emotional functioning of patients.

employ the techniques of psychoanalysis in his management of the novices with regrettable results.

He wrote to a psychoanalyst, Dr Gregory Zilboorg, a Jewish convert to Catholicism, asking for advice about reading in psychology and for advice about his own problems. Dr Zilboorg wrote back, mentioning that he held courses in psychiatry for religious in Collegeville, Minnesota, and that other Cistercians had attended them. Dr Zilboorg had gathered a great deal about Merton from their correspondence. It seems likely, too, that he wrote directly to Abbot Fox suggesting Merton needed help, and that Abbot Fox had responded. Whether Dr Zilboorg approached Abbot Fox, or whether Merton himself made the approach, eventually the abbot allowed him to attend a 'workshop' in psychiatry in Collegeville in July 1956. He was there for a fortnight, staying in nearby St John's Benedictine Abbey.

Merton had written a paper, *Neurosis in the monastic life*, and had sent a copy to Dr Zilboorg. Shortly after his arrival, Dr Zilboorg told him that his paper was "utterly inadequate, hastily written, will do harm, should not even be revised [and] should be left on the shelf."⁴ It was not an auspicious beginning.

On the morning of 29th July, before Mass, Merton spent an hour and a half with Dr Zilboorg who told him, bluntly—

You are a gadfly to your superiors.
You are very stubborn—you keep coming back until you get what you want.
You are afraid to be an ordinary monk in the community.
You and [another monk in the community] can very easily become a pair of semi-psychotic quacks.
[When you were] talking to Dr Rome (about Zen) you thought only of yourself using him as a source of information and self-aggrandizement. You thought nothing at all of your priesthood, the apostolate, the church, his soul.⁵
You [would] like to be famous; you want to be a big shot; you keep pushing your way out—to publicity. Megalomania and narcissism are your big trends.
Your hermit trend is pathological.
You are a promoter. If you were not in a monastery, you are the type that would clean up on Wall Street one day and lose it all on the horses the next.
It is not intelligence you lack, but affectivity.
It will do you no good to be forbidden to write—you need silence and isolation, but it needs to be prohibited in your heart. If it is merely forbidden, it will not seem prohibited to you...

In fairness to him, Merton reports this trenchant criticism in detail in his diary: "While he said all this I thought 'How much he looks like Stalin' but in reality I am tremendously relieved and grateful—and when I sung Mass with the monks I was praying

⁴ Diary, July 29, 1956; cf Monica Furlong, *Merton, A Biography*, new revised edition, London, 1995, p. 214.

⁵ This reference apparently related to a conversation Dr Zilboorg had overheard between Merton and one of the workshop lecturers, Dr Howard Phillips Rome, in which Merton had endeavoured to explain Zen Buddhism to him.

hard to know what to do about it.”⁶ One of his biographers, Monica Furlong, reports that he wrote to a friend the next day saying that Dr Zilboorg’s criticism had cured him of the desire to be a hermit.

There are many similes for the action of God upon the soul. The prophet Malachi describes God, memorably, as “like a refiner’s fire and the fuller’s alkali” [*Malachi* 3: 2]. Another simile is that of the sculptor at work on the native marble. While in the later stages of his work the sculptor will use delicate strokes of his mallet and chisel, in his early work he will use them coarsely so as to shape the stone. So may Almighty God use some great humiliation on a soul yet spiritually immature in order to shape it. It seems that something like this is what next occurred. Another biographer, Michael Mott, describes what happened:

“By July 30, the abbot had arrived for the last few days of the conference... Zilboorg called a second conference and discussed the ‘case’ of Father Louis in the presence of his abbot... Gregory Zilboorg stuck to the question of Merton’s religious vocation and his life as a monk, a would-be hermit... Merton was not ready to be exposed in front of Dom James. He flew into a fury and cried tears of rage... Zilboorg went on repeating in a level voice what he had said before about the hermitage idea being pathological: ‘You want a hermitage in Times Square with a large sign over it saying *Hermit*’ ... Merton sat with tears streaming down his face muttering ‘Stalin! Stalin!’”⁷

This was a crucial event—a crisis; perhaps *the* crisis—in Merton’s religious life. Dr Zilboorg had set out astutely Merton’s self-absorption and his tendency to intellectualise, rather than address, his own problems. He had remarked in trenchant terms their damaging effects on his vocation. The way that Merton and his superiors addressed these revelations would determine his future, for better or worse.

Significantly, there is no mention in the published version of Merton’s diary of this second meeting. There are no entries at all between 29th July and 2nd August, 1956 when he confines himself to writing about the local bird life. In the entries that follow he mentions only the preparations for the return to Gethsemani. On 3rd August, however, there is a poignant prayer to God to forgive him for his lack of faith and wasted time, which concludes:

“Teach me to live in You, with care for the purity of faith, with the zeal of true hope and with true and objective charity for my brothers, for the glory of the Father. Amen.”

⁶ This comment and the material quoted from Dr Zilboorg is set out by Merton in the diary entry of July 29, 1956.

⁷ Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, Boston, 1986, p. 297. Ingenuously, Mott remarks ‘[O]ne’s sympathy is entirely with Merton, who saw himself trapped...’ Monica Furlong sides with Merton also (*Merton, A Biography*, op. cit., p. 215). This is not the place to analyse their approaches in detail. It is sufficient to remark that neither seems to appreciate that there is something radically wrong with a man who while otherwise presenting as a mature adult behaves, when confronted with a grave humiliation, like a five year old child.

Having listed the issues raised by Dr Zilboorg, Merton never adverts to them again, except obliquely⁸. How are we to understand this failure? Merton seems to have had the characteristics of the temperament defined by Galen as 'sanguine'.⁹ He was quickly moved by external stimuli, but to no great depth. Moreover, as Dr Zilboorg had noted, Merton tended to intellectualise, rather than try and address, his problems.

Dr Zilboorg may have had little sense of discretion in his handling of Merton yet Almighty God uses the defects of others to achieve his ends. If Merton's temperament was, as we have suggested, of the sanguine type, it was essential for the sake of his soul that the truths Dr Zilboorg had set before him should be reinforced. His emotional response at this second conference is evidence that they were. Merton chose to ignore them. Regrettably, it would seem his abbot did the same. One would have thought that having seen Merton behave as he had, Abbot Fox would have been bound in conscience to suspend him from the office of Master of Novices forthwith, to compel him under obedience to attend Dr Zilboorg or some other psychiatrist for treatment, and to obtain a comprehensive report on the causation of his problems. Yet he appears to have done none of these things.

Almost seven years later Merton made a note in his diary which sheds further light on these events:

"I thought today at adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, what a blessing it was that I did not go in 1956 to be analysed by Gregory Zilboorg! What a tragedy and mess that would have been... the Abbot... was most willing... I am afraid that I was willing, at the time, to go, which shows what a fool I was."¹⁰

In truth, what Merton needed primarily was not psychoanalysis, but sound direction by a theologian experienced in the spiritual life, one who would apply the principles of the Church's spiritual doctors (as set forth, for instance, in Fr Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange's *The Three Ages of the Spiritual Life*¹¹) coupled with a commitment to follow that direction. For Merton's problem was one involving the will. Dr Zilboorg had seen this clearly when he told him: "It will do you no good to be forbidden to write—you need silence and isolation, but it needs to be prohibited in your heart. If it is merely

⁸ In a letter of December, 1959, to Dom Gregorio Lemerrier, Prior of the monastery of Our Lady of the Resurrection, Cuernavaca, Mexico, which he had hoped to join, Merton relates his suspicion that the reason the *Congregation for the Affairs of Religious* had refused to allow him to be released from his vow of stability was that the abbot had conveyed to the Prefect or the Secretary of the Congregation what he had observed of Merton's conduct. "In Merton's view," according to Michael Mott, "he had been presented in Rome by his abbot as 'un type instable et passionné qui cherche à s'évader de la vie régulière.'" (an unstable and emotional sort of person who seeks to avoid the demands of the regular life.) Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains etc*, op. cit., p. 339.

⁹ Claudius Galenus [129-200 AD], Roman physician and surgeon. He divided the temperaments of mankind into four types according to the way their possessors were moved by stimuli: either quickly, or slowly: and then, either deeply or shallowly. The four temperaments so hypothesised are: Choleric (quickly moved and deeply); Melancholic (slowly and deeply); Sanguine (quickly and shallowly); and, Phlegmatic (slowly and shallowly).

¹⁰ Diary, March 10th, 1963

¹¹ B Herder Book Co., New York, 1947.

forbidden, it will not seem prohibited to you..." Ten years earlier, Merton had identified this very problem:

"Because of the profound and complete conversion of my intellect, I thought I was entirely converted. Because I believed in God, and in the teachings of the Church, and was prepared to sit up all night arguing about them with all comers, I imagined that I was even a zealous Christian. But the conversion of the intellect is not enough. And as long as the will, the *domina voluntas*, did not belong completely to God, even the intellectual conversion was bound to remain precarious and indefinite. For although the will cannot force the intellect to see an object other than it is, it can turn it away from the object altogether, and prevent it from considering that thing at all."¹²

By 1956, he was incapable of following his own advice. He was to express contempt later for the writings of Gilbert Chesterton. Yet it was Chesterton, in his remarkable *Orthodoxy*, who had addressed the affliction from which Merton was suffering.

"A man cannot think himself out of mental evil; for it is actually the organ of thought that has become diseased, ungovernable, and, as it were, independent. He can only be saved by will or faith. The moment his mere reason moves, it moves in the old circular rut; he will go round and round his logical circle, just as a man in a third-class carriage on the Inner Circle will go round and round... unless he performs the voluntary, vigorous and mystical act of getting out at Gower Street. Decision is the whole business here; a door must be shut for ever... Curing a madman is not arguing with a philosopher; it is casting out a devil. And however quietly doctors and psychologists may go to work in the matter, their attitude... is really this: that the man must stop thinking, if he is to go on living... If thy head offend thee, cut it off; for it is better... to enter the Kingdom of heaven... as an imbecile, rather than with your whole intellect to be cast into hell..."¹³

Notwithstanding Merton's failure to follow up the opportunity presented by this crisis, it is lamentable that Abbot Fox should have failed to do so with an appropriate exercise of authority: lamentable, and reprehensible.

Merton's diary entries continued. While his comments about matters of objective fact were often valuable as, for instance, his criticism of excessive formalism in the Cistercian liturgy¹⁴, his mockery of the Order for descending to the level of commerce and advertising in the production of cheese, and his commentary on certain spiritual books, his subjective ruminations served to entrench his tendency to self-adulation. By 1964 he was acknowledging that his behaviour had become compulsive—

"One thing is certain—I am simply surfeited with words and typescript and print, surfeited to the point of utter nausea. Surfeited with letters, too. This is so bad that it

¹² *The Seven Storey Mountain*, New York, 1948. Published in Great Britain, with certain excisions and editing by Evelyn Waugh, as *Elected Silence*, London (Burns & Oates), 1949, (My copy, *Elected Silence*, 1969 reprint) at pp. 151-2.

¹³ G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, London, 1908, Ch. II: my copy a Fontana reprint, 1963, quoted material at pp. 21-2.

¹⁴ The correction of which was one of the beneficial reforms that flowed from Vatican II.

amounts to a sickness... The only hermit that can cure me is myself, and so I have to become that solitary in order to qualify as my own physician. I am so sick that the cure is going to take time. If by the end of the year it can be well begun, I can count myself fortunate. One plan to begin is perhaps in the area of letters—when I respond to *another* one asking for a blurb. I feel like a drunk and incontinent man falling into bed with another whore, in spite of himself. The awful thing is that I *can't* stop.”¹⁵

Notwithstanding his avowal in July, 1956, that Dr Zilboorg's diatribe had cured him of the desire to live as a hermit, Merton reverted to the idea and kept pressuring his abbot for a place of solitude to which he could repair. A project to construct a retreat house for non-Catholic visitors in the monastery grounds was mooted in 1960 and Merton was full of it. As time passed, however, his vision for the project narrowed. What resulted in the end was a two room shack which he came to refer to as a 'hermitage'. One gets the impression Abbot Fox felt Merton had manipulated the proposal to suit his own ends. By December of that year, however, the abbot had given him permission to spend time there each day.

Exempla trahunt and by 1964 Abbot Fox was himself expressing a desire for solitude. Apparently because of this new found sympathy for Merton's aspirations, the abbot gave Merton permission from October 1964 to sleep in the hermitage 'once in a while'.¹⁶ On the Feast of St Bernard, 20th August, 1965, the abbot relieved him of his responsibilities as Master of Novices and gave him permission to reside there permanently. Thus, by a process of attrition, Merton had achieved this concession to the demands of community life which had been a bee in his bonnet since his entry to the monastery twenty four years prior.

From this time on a repeated refrain appears in his diary that his living in the hermitage 'is God's will': this, for instance, on March 8th, 1966:

“[W]hen it comes to 'preparing for death', in my case it means simply this reiterated decision for solitude as the reality called for me by God as my penance and cleansing, as my paying off debts, as my return to my right mind, and as my place of worship and prayer.”

He ought to have remembered the teaching of St John of the Cross on the concessions Almighty God may make to one who insists on having his own will.

“A father of a family provides at table many different kinds of food, some better than the other. One of his children will ask for a dish, not of the better food, but of the first that meets the eye... Now when the father observes that his child refuses to eat the food offered to it and wants and likes only that first dish, he gives it to his child sadly so that it will not become unhappy and go without its meal... God accordingly condescends to some souls by granting what is not the best for them...”¹⁷

¹⁵ Diary, April 28th, 1964

¹⁶ Diary, entry 13th October 1964

¹⁷ The Ascent of Mount Carmel, II, 21, 3. This translation from Kieran Kavanaugh & Otilio Rodriguez, *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross*, Washington, 1979, pp. 173-4.

Abbot Fox resigned in December, 1967, and himself commenced to live in a hermitage on the monastery property¹⁸

Return to Communism

A change in Merton's intellectual focus seems to have occurred in 1957. For the first time he remarks in his diary that he must concern himself with worldly movements and concerns. He offers oblique criticism of the Church for adhering to an outmoded physics. Thus, on 2nd November 1957, in a sentence which is not in accord with the mind of the Church—

“It is futile to try and live in an expanding universe with atomic fission an ever present possibility and try to think and act exclusively as if the cosmos were fixed in an immutable order centred upon man's earth.”

Two weeks later he writes: “my psychology is that of a bourgeois intellectual partly predetermined by economic influences” and he asks rhetorically whether “I can prove by action that I can get free from this supposed determinism and rise above it?” He is slipping into the fatuous categories of Marxism. Contrast with these statements the sublime expression of the utter reliance of the religious on the providence of God he had written in *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

“It is only the infinite mercy and love of God that has prevented us from tearing ourselves to pieces and destroying His entire creation long ago... There is not a seed that falls into the ground and not an ear of wheat that nods on the end of its stalk that does not preach the greatness and the mercy of God to the whole world. There is not an act of sacrifice done, or a word of peace and gentleness spoken, that does not sing hymns to God before his Throne, and in the eyes of men.”¹⁹

By 25th June, 1963, he was writing to the renegade Jesuit, Fr Daniel Berrigan:

“[T]he monastic life is nothing if it does not open a man wide to the Holy Spirit. In actual fact, the head-in-the-ground type of monk is usually in practice the most damnable fascist you ever saw... In a word, it is all right for the monk to break his ass putting out packages of cheese and making a pile of money for the old monastery, but as to doing anything that is really fruitful for the Church, that is another matter altogether...”²⁰

There is a complete loss here of the sense of the metaphysical, an inability to see things *sub specie aeternitatis*: he can see only through the jaundiced glasses of materialism. He resents the way the Order has used his talents to assist its material ends. He cannot see that it has any other.

¹⁸ There was a bizarre twist to Dom James Fox's adoption of this aberration of community life. In 1977 two men broke into his hermitage and beat him severely. He was returned perforce to the community and lived with them thereafter until his death in 1987.

¹⁹ *Elected Silence*, op. cit., p. 92

²⁰ Quoted in Michael W Higgins, *Heretic Blood: the Spiritual Biography of Thomas Merton*, Ontario, 1998, p. 5

In March 1964, there is further evidence of a loss of the *sensus fidei* and an acceptance of the doctrines of the Left.

“I had been hoping to republish a few articles on nuclear war that had been permitted... Not so. The new General, Dom Ignace Gillet, dug into the files, held a meeting of Definitors, and declared that there was to be no republishing of these articles. Thus I am still not permitted to say what Pope John said in *Pacem in Terris*. Reason: ‘That is not the job of a monk, it is for the Bishops.’ Certainly it has a basis in monastic tradition. ‘The job of the monk is to weep, not to teach.’ But with our cheese business and all the other ‘weeping’ functions we have undertaken, it seems strange that a monk should be forbidden to stand up for the truth, particularly when the truth (in this case) is disastrously neglected.

“A grim insight into the stupors of the Church, in spite of all that has been attempted, all efforts to wake her up! It all falls into place. Pope Pius XII and the Jews, the Church in South America, the treatment of Negroes in the United States, the Catholics on the French right in the Algerian affair, the German Catholics under Hitler. All this fits into one big picture... I have the impression that my education is beginning—only just beginning—and that I have a lot more terrible things to learn before I can know the real meaning of hope...”²¹

Return to Oriental ‘Mysticism’

There is a hint of the re-awakening of his interest in oriental ‘mysticism’ in the interview with Dr Zilboorg in July 1956—he has discussed Zen with one of the ‘workshop’ contributors, Dr Howard Phillips Rome. His diary seems to show that he had been reading in the subject for at least two years prior, seeing no contradiction between his vows and studying the practices of paganism.

Zen is the Japanese name for a form of Buddhism established in the sixth century AD in China. It places great importance on moment-by-moment awareness, and “seeing deeply into the nature of things by direct experience.”

From about 1958, Merton had begun to correspond with various world figures including Boris Pasternak, author of *Doctor Zhivago*. In 1959 Merton wrote to Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, a Japanese Zen exponent, and the correspondence between them continued until Suzuki’s death in 1966. His interest in this form of Buddhism increased and when Suzuki visited America in June 1964 Merton obtained permission to visit him in New York. Merton reports one of their meetings:

“I sat with Suzuki on the sofa and we talked of all kinds of things to do with Zen and with life. He read to me from a Chinese text—familiar stories. I translated to him from Octavio Paz’s Spanish version of Fernando Pessoa. There were some things he liked immensely. (Especially ‘Praise be to God that I am not good!’—That is so important,’ said Suzuki with great feeling.) He likes Eckhart, as I already knew from the book I got at the University of Kentucky several years ago. These talks were very pleasant, profoundly important to me—to see and experience the fact that there

²¹ Diary, March 3rd, 1964

really is a deep understanding between myself and this extraordinary, simple man whom I have been reading for about ten years with great attention..."²²

How far has he come from his avowal in *The Seven Storey Mountain*—

"Ultimately, I suppose, all Oriental mysticism can be reduced to techniques... and if that is true, it is not mysticism at all. It remains purely in the natural order. That does not make it evil, *per se*, according to Christian standards: but it does not make it good, in relation to the supernatural..."²³

The Final Years

John Russell provides a synopsis of the last years of Merton's life.

"Shallowness too often characterised the public Merton of the 1960s. He was receiving an almost endless stream of visitors and corresponding with some 1800 people, including Popes John XXIII and Paul VI, Boris Pasternak, James Baldwin, Erich Fromm, Jacques Maritain and Czeslaw Milosz. He dived into the Civil Rights and anti-war movements with statements all too often marked by exaggeration, naivety and overstatement. He wrote the truly awful lyrics for a Joan Baez song, "The Bells of Gethsemane", and said he had laughed uncontrollably at the "pure, clean spirit" in the black humour of Lenny Bruce. Only after Bruce died did he learn that the comic's often obscene nightclub routine included a Merton meditation on Adolf Eichmann.

"Not surprisingly, much of Merton's previous Catholic hero status quickly fell away, with many earlier admirers trying furiously to bully his Abbot to suppress his writings. His relationships within the abbey were strained and he thought often of leaving, eventually opting to live as a hermit in the grounds, albeit with plenty of visitors taking lots of photographs.

"The mid 1960s brought Merton to the edge of disaster. After surgery for a back injury in Louisville, he fell in love with a nurse half his age (known to this day only as "M"). After leaving hospital, he wrote to her about needing friendship. She wrote back, instructed by him to mark the envelope "conscience matter" (lest his superiors read the correspondence). He wrote back with a declaration of love. Thus began a series of deceptions and clandestine meetings. His Abbot found out about the relationship and put him on the spot about his plans. Merton agreed to stay on at the abbey and dropped "M".²⁴

Abbot Fox required of him a written commitment that he would renounce his attachment to this young woman and live thenceforth in solitude for the rest of his life. He signed the document on 8th September, 1966, and broke it two days later when he telephoned her. He had reached the stage where he was incapable of keeping his word.

Six months later he writes candidly and accurately in his diary:

²² Diary, June 20th 1964

²³ *Elected Silence*, op. cit., p. 123

²⁴ *Thomas Merton, the Restless Trappist*, op. cit.

"I realize how confused I have been, not just because of [M] but in general because of my slackness, my imprudence, my inconsistency, my frivolity. I suppose also my laziness. It is certainly true that a great deal has gone wrong in my life. Yet I do not know precisely how or where. I can hardly pin it on any one symptom. My falling in love so badly was not cause but an effect. I think really it all comes from roots that had simply laid dormant since I entered the monastery. So too in my writing, my persistent desire to be somebody, which is really stupid..."²⁵

And a week later, on 13th May, 1968, with real compunction over the state of his soul:

"Vigil of Pentecost... Another booklet on the Marian apparition at Garabandal came in. A lot of it is perhaps somewhat questionable in detail, but the overall impression is moving, and once again I was stirred by it. Quite apart from the authenticity of the apparitions (and they seem for the most part genuine), I experience in myself a deep need of conversion and penance—a deep repentance, a real sense of having erred, gone wrong, got lost, needing to get back on the right path. Needing to pray for forgiveness. Sense of revolt at my own foolishness and triviality. Shame and amazement at the way I have trifled with life and grace—how could I be so utterly stupid! A real sense of being flawed and of needing immense help, pardon—to recover some capacity to love God. Sense of the nearness and mercy of Mary."²⁶

The Vigil of Pentecost: it was also the 50th anniversary of the first appearance of Our Blessed Lady at Fatima. It is hard not to see the merciful intervention of Christ's mother in this awakening.

Yet this spirit of compunction did not last. A few months later he is, for the first time—probably because of the influence of alcohol—using coarse language in his diary to condemn the shortcomings of others. Dr Alice von Hildebrand comments:

"There is no doubt that at this point [he] had lost sense of the true meaning and purpose of authentic monastic life... [H]is diary reflects this in a striking and tragic fashion. For example, when his abbot, Fr James, retired voluntarily... Thomas Merton imagined—and this was sheer imagination—that he might be elected as the next abbot. This was supported by no evidence whatever. And he started a campaign in reverse... posting little notices saying that he did *not* want the monks to vote for him because he would not accept in case he were elected, and one day he went so far as to say... that it might be a private source of embarrassment to the monastery if a child of the Abbot turned up at the gate... Now, someone else was elected. Then [Merton] wrote in his diary, and these words... are terribly illuminating, 'This man is essentially open, just inexperienced, and still a little closed on a set of positions. But I think that he can learn, given time.' In other words... [if] this man can be handled properly there is some sort of a chance that he is going to give me greater freedom than Abbot James had done.

²⁵ Diary, April 8th, 1967

²⁶ Diary, May 13th 1967. Incidentally, the Church has never approved of the alleged apparitions of the Blessed Virgin at Garabandal.

“And this was true, indeed. There were more and more people coming to Gethsemani—let us not forget he was supposed to be a hermit—and [Merton] had told them that there was a secret entrance into the property so that they did not have to report at the gate of the Monastery. And so, from time to time he would have regular parties in his hermitage in which there was a lot of beer that was being drunk... [A]s a matter of fact, to persuade the monks not to elect him as Abbot he had said, ‘I confess that if I were elected I would give you plenty of booze, but this is no reason... to elect me.’”²⁷

Merton’s commitment to Christ given in his vows has by now almost disappeared, replaced by a sort of perversity in which he mocks the Monastery of Gethsemani (his home), the office of abbot and the monastic vocation. Once again a strong mind was needed to take an executive decision, both for Merton’s sake and for the sake of the other monks in the monastery—his removal. And once again nothing was done.²⁸

John Russell summarises Merton’s last years.

“Merton's restlessness for religious stimulation led him as far afield as Jews and Southern Baptists. Eventually he settled on the monastic traditions and spiritual insights of Buddhism as the last great passion of his life... In *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (1968) he wrote—

‘Buddhism and Biblical Christianity agree in their view of man's present condition. Both are aware that man is somehow not in his right relation to the world and to the things in it ... they see that man bears in himself a mysterious tendency to falsify that relation. This falsification is what Buddhists call Avidya, usually translated [as] "ignorance"... Christianity attributes this view of man and of reality to "original sin".

‘The story of the Fall tells us in mythical language that "original sin" is not simply a stigma arbitrarily making good pleasures seem guilty, but a basic inauthenticity, a kind of predisposition to bad faith in our understanding of ourselves and the world.’

...

“In late 1968 the Abbot of Gethsemane attempted to assuage Merton's restlessness by approving a six-month visit to Asia... For two months from the beginning of October he criss-crossed southern Asia, visiting Singapore, the Dalai Lama in India and the great Sri Lankan recumbent Buddhas at Polonnaruwa.

In Madras, Merton visited the Hindu shrines of Mahabalipuram including the phallic shrine of the Hindu ‘god’, Shiva. Mott reports the visit he made to Polonnaruwa recorded in his *Asian Notes*. “Merton, the bishop’s driver, and the vicar general of the Kandy diocese went on to Polonnaruwa ‘with its vast area under trees...’ Here Merton was

²⁷ *The Tragedy of Thomas Merton*, lecture by Dr Alice Jordain von Hildebrand on cassette tape published by Keep the Faith Inc., P O Box 8261, North Heledon, NJ 07508. Much of what she says is confirmed in Michael Mott, op. cit., pp. 503-4 and 517.

²⁸ We have remarked elsewhere on the paralysis which seems to have afflicted the Church’s executive after Pope John XXIII’s Opening Speech to the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council (cf. <http://www.superflumina.org/executivefailure.html>). This debility seems to have communicated itself to the superiors of religious orders, as well as to the Church’s bishops.

left to wander alone among the huge figures, while the vicar general, 'shying away from "paganism", hung back, then sat under under a tree reading a guidebook."²⁹

"I am able to approach the Buddhas barefoot and undisturbed, my feet in wet grass, wet, sand. The silence of the extraordinary faces. The great smiles. Huge and yet subtle. Filled with every possibility, questioning nothing, knowing everything, rejecting nothing, the peace not of emotional refutation... that has seen through every question without trying to discredit anyone or anything... For the doctrinaire, the mind that needs well established positions, such peace, such silence, can be frightening... I don't know when in my life I have had such a sense of beauty and spiritual validity running together in one aesthetic illumination. Surely, with Mahabalipuram and Polonnaruwa my Asian pilgrimage has come clear and purified itself. I mean, I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for. I don't know what else remains but I have now seen and have pierced through the surface and have got beyond the shadow and disguise."³⁰

He arrived in Bangkok on 7th December. On the morning of 10th December he gave a talk to delegates at a conference of superiors of Asian Catholic monastic institutions on *Marxism and Monastic Perspectives*. He spoke about the difference between what he called the religious and the antireligious approach to society:

"I would just point out that in Marx himself you can see something of this same desire to evolve from *cupiditas* to *caritas*, when you see the idea of Communism—which is progress from capitalist greed (in their terms) to Communist dedication, according to Marxist formula in which Communism consists in a society where each gives according to his capacity and each receives according to his needs. Now, if you will reflect for two seconds on that definition, you will find that it is the definition of a monastic community."³¹

John Russell relates his last hours and his gruesome end.

"Merton gave what was planned to be the first of his Bangkok talks on the morning of December 10, the anniversary of his entry into Gethsemane. The heat was oppressive and after the talk he was very tired. He had promised to answer questions in the evening so he went to his cabin for a shower and a rest. Barefoot and still damp he walked across the terrazzo floor and reached for the stand-alone fan to direct it to where he was to sleep. It was alive with electricity. The current went straight into him. He was found about an hour later lying on his back with the fan crosswise across his body. The blades had stopped rotating but the current was still alive and his flesh was still burning...

Conclusion

Every day, in every Cistercian Monastery, some part of the Rule of St Benedict is read aloud: the whole Rule is repeated in the ears of the monks several times each year. No Cistercian can ever say that he is unaware of the commitments demanded

²⁹ Michael Mott, op. cit., p. 560

³⁰ *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, ed. Naomi Burton, Brother Patrick Hart, and James Laughlin, New York, 1973; quoted in Monica Furlong, op. cit., p. 310

³¹ *The Asian Journal* etc. quoted in Monica Furlong, op. cit., pp. 311-2

of him. Thus he hears St Benedict's admonition, in Chapter 3—"Let all follow the Rule as master, nor let anyone rashly depart from it. Let no one in the monastery follow the will of his own heart; nor let anyone presume to contend impudently with his Abbot..." And his condemnation of the two kinds of false monk, in Chapter 1—"The Sarabaites, who not having been tested, as gold in the furnace, by any rule or by the lessons of experience, are as soft and yielding as lead. In their actions they still conform to the standards of the world... Their law is their own good pleasure... [The other] those called Gyrovagues [who] spend their whole lives wandering from province to province, staying three days in one monastery and four in another, ever roaming and never stable, given up to their own wills and the allurements of gluttony, and worse in all respects than the Sarabaites."

God speaks to us through coincidence. What are we, Christ's faithful people, to gather from the facts and circumstances surrounding Merton's death? He dies on the very anniversary of his entry to Gethsemani. He dies precipitately—unaided—without the consolation of the presence of his brethren—without the ceremony essential to any Cistercian—without being clothed in the Cistercian habit—outside his Monastery, in a place almost as far away on the face of the earth from it as it would be possible to get—and, in a manner reminiscent of that in which criminals are executed in his own country after conviction for the most serious of criminal offences.

In the quotation from *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* cited by John Russell above, Merton reduces the Church's doctrine of Original Sin to a teaching based on a 'myth' in an attempt at religious syncretism with Buddhism. In the quotation from his final lecture, *Marxism and Monastic Perspectives*, he does the same with charity in religious life, reducing it to identity with a Marxist formula. He has in each case gutted the Church's teachings of their formal element in his satisfaction with a material similarity. He has lost the metaphysical sense—that the essence of a thing consists not in its material, but in its formal, character; that what matters is not *what you do*, but *why you do it*. He has forgotten that *the letter kills; that it is the spirit that gives life*³².

His adulatory comments about the shrines at Mahabalipuram and the Polonnaruwa Buddhas mark his settling in a state of, at least material, idolatry. There is, thus, a breach of the First Commandment: *Thou shalt not have strange gods before me*. But since this conduct breaches his vows—commitments made on oath to Almighty God—it involves a breach, too, of the Second Commandment: *Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain*. Chapter 5 of the Book of *Deuteronomy* is clear: *Thou shalt not have strange gods in my sight.. Thou shalt not adore them: and thou shalt not serve them. For I the Lord, thy God, am a jealous God...*

If, then, the manner and circumstances of his death were marks of the Divine displeasure, Thomas Merton could not complain.

Michael Baker

19th March 2007—*Solemnity of St Joseph*

³² 2 *Corinthians* 3: 6