

monastic **NUMBER SEVEN / 1969** studies

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Mount Saviour Monastery, Pine City, NY
10/19/18

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RECOLLECTIONS OF THOMAS MERTON'S LAST DAYS IN THE WEST

The death of Thomas Merton on Dec. 10, 1968, in Bangkok, during the course of the Meeting of Monastic Superiors in the Far East, deprives the editors of MONASTIC STUDIES of a most generous contributor and friend. Before leaving for the East he attended a meeting at Our Lady of the Redwoods Abbey in White-thorn, California, and the following notes were made there.

When I remember my last visit with Thomas Merton I see him standing in the forest, listening to the rain. Much later, when he began to talk, he was not breaking the silence, he was letting it come to word. And he continued to listen. "Talking is not the principal thing," he said.

A handful of men and women searching for ways of renewal in religious life, we had gone to meet him in California as he was leaving for the East, and we had asked him to speak to us on prayer. But he insisted that "Nothing that anyone says will be that important. The great thing is prayer. Prayer itself. If you want a life of prayer, the way to get to it is by praying.

"As you know, I have been living as a sort of hermit. And now I have been out of that atmosphere for about three or four weeks, and talking

a lot, and I get the feeling that so much talking goes on that is utterly useless. Something has been said perfectly well in five minutes and then you spend the next five hours saying the same thing over and over again. But here you do not have to feel that much needs to be said. We already know a great deal about it all. Now we need to grasp it.

“The most important thing is that we are here, at this place, in a house of prayer. This is probably the best Cistercian monastery in the United States. There is here a true and authentic realization of the Cistercian spirit, an atmosphere of prayer. Enjoy this. Drink it all in. Everything, the redwood forests, the sea, the sky, the waves, the birds, the sea-lions. It is in all this that you will find your answers. Here is where everything connects.” (The idea of “connection” was charged with mysterious significance for Thomas Merton.)

Three sides of the chapel were concrete block walls. The fourth wall, all glass, opened on a small clearing surrounded by redwood trees, so tall that even this high window limited the view of the nearby trees to the mammoth columns of their trunks. The branches above could only be guessed from the way in which they were filtering shafts of sunlight down onto the forest floor. Yes, even the natural setting of Our Lady of the Redwoods provided an atmosphere of prayer, to say nothing of the women who pray there and of their charismatic abbess. On the day we had listened to the Gospel of the Great Wedding Feast, flying ants began to swarm all across the forest clearing just as the communion procession began, ten thousands of glittering wings in a wedding procession. Everything “connected.”

To start where you are and to become aware of the connections, that was Thomas Merton’s approach to prayer. “We were indoctrinated so much into means and ends,” he said, “that we don’t realize that there is a different dimension in the life of prayer. In technology you have this horizontal progress, where you must start at one point and move to another and then another. But that is not the way to build a life of prayer. In prayer we discover what we already have. You start where you are and you deepen what you already have, and you realize that you are already there. We already have everything, but we don’t know it and

Thomas Merton's Last Days in the West

we don't experience it. Everything has been given to us in Christ. All we need is to experience what we already possess.

"The trouble is, we aren't taking time to do so." The idea of taking time to experience, to savor, to let life fully come to itself in us, was a key idea in Thomas Merton's reflections on prayer. "If we really want prayer, we'll have to give it time. We must slow down to a human tempo and we'll begin to have time to listen. And as soon as we listen to what's going on, things will begin to take shape by themselves. But for this we have to experience time in a new way.

"One of the best things for me when I went to the hermitage was being attentive to the times of the day: when the birds began to sing, and the deer came out of the morning fog, and the sun came up—while in the monastery, summer or winter, Lauds is at the same hour. The reason why we don't take time is a feeling that we have to keep moving. This is a real sickness. Today time is commodity, and for each one of us time is mortgaged. We experience time as unlimited indebtedness. We are sharecroppers of time. We are threatened by a chain reaction: overwork—overstimulation—overreaction—overcompensation—overkill. And yet, we are not debtors of the flesh (the flesh which is for St. Paul the principle of indebtedness). Christ has freed us.

"We must approach the whole idea of time in a new way. We are free to love. And you must get free from all imaginary claims. We live in the fulness of time. Every moment is God's own good time, his *kairos*. The whole thing boils down to giving ourselves in prayer a chance to realize that we have what we seek. We don't have to rush after it. It is there all the time, and if we give it time it will make itself known to us."

In contrast to the man whose time is mortgaged, the monk is to "feel free to do nothing, without feeling guilty." All this reminded me of Suzuki Roshi, the Buddhist abbot of Tassajara, who had said that a Zen student must learn "to waste time conscientiously." I was not surprised, then, to hear Thomas Merton refer explicitly to Zen in this connection. "This is what the Zen people do. They give a great deal of time to doing whatever they need to do. That's what we have to learn when it comes

to prayer. We have to give it time.” There is, in all this, a sense of the unfolding of mystery in time, a reverence for gradual growth.

We were sitting in front of a blazing fire when Thomas Merton again took up this theme of growing. “The main theme of time is that of inner growth. It’s a theme to which we should all return frequently in prayer. There is a great thing in my life—Christ wants me to grow. Move this around a little bit in meditation. Instead of worrying, where am I going? what kind of resolution should I make? I should simply let this growing unfold in my prayer. I should see what is holding me back from it. What is it? What kind of compromises have I made? Am I substituting activity for growth? (I have often asked myself, is this writing getting in the way? For me writing is so satisfying an activity that it is hard to say.) In someone else it is easier to see this process of growing and to see what hinders it. But when it comes to ourselves, all we can do is try to honestly be ourselves.

“One of the greatest obstacles to your growing is the fear of making a fool of yourself. Any real step forward implies the risk of failure. And the really important steps imply the risk of complete failure. Yet we must make them, trusting in Christ. If I take this step, everything I have done so far might go down the drain. In a situation like that we need a shot of Buddhist mentality. Then we see, down what drain? so what? (So that’s perhaps one of the valuable things about this Asian trip.) We have to have the courage to make fools of ourselves, and at the same time be awfully careful not to make fools of ourselves.

“The great temptation is to fear going it alone, wanting to be ‘with it’ at any cost. But each one of us has to be able to go it alone somehow. You don’t want to repudiate the community, but you have to go it alone at times. If the community is made up of a little group of people who always try to support one another, and nobody ever gets out of this little block, nothing happens and all growth is being stifled. This is possibly one of the greatest dangers we face in the future, because we are getting more and more to be that kind of society. We will need those who have the courage to do the opposite of everybody else. If you have

this courage you will effect change. Of course they will say, 'this guy is crazy'; but you have to do it.

"We are much too dominated by public opinion. We are always asking, what is someone else going to think about it? There is a whole 'contemplative mystique,' a standard which other people have set up for you. They call you a contemplative or a hermit, and then they demand that you conform to the image they have in mind. But the real contemplative standard is to have no standard, to be just yourself. That's what God is asking of us, to be ourselves. If you are ready to say 'I'm going to do my own thing, it doesn't matter what kind of a press I get,' if you are ready to be yourself, you are not going to fit anybody else's mystique."

He himself certainly didn't. When I saw him for the first time at the Abbey of Gethsemani he was wearing his overalls and I thought he was the milk delivery man. He wasn't going to fit my mystique either. Two other faces came to mind whenever I looked at his features, Dorothy Day and Picasso. When the chapel was getting dark and he bent down to hear confessions, there was more of Dorothy Day. When he read poetry (his own reluctantly, but his friends' poems with relish) there was more of Picasso. Again and again I was amazed to find him at once so totally uninhibited and so perfectly disciplined.

He saw the wrong kind of self-fulfillment as one of our great temptations today. "The wrong idea of personal fulfillment is promoted by commercialism. They try to sell things which no one would buy if he were in his right mind; so, keep him in his wrong mind. There is a kind of self-fulfillment that fulfils nothing but your illusory self. What truly matters is not how to get the most out of life, but how to recollect yourself so that you can fully give yourself." Self-acceptance, sober and realistic, was basic in Thomas Merton's view.

"The desert becomes a paradise when it is accepted as desert. The desert can never be anything but a desert if we are trying to escape it. But once we fully accept it in union with the passion of Christ, it becomes a paradise. This is a great theological point: any attempt to renew the contemplative life is going to have to include this element of sacrifice,

uncompromising sacrifice. This breakthrough into what you already have is only accomplished through the complete acceptance of the cross at some point. There is no way around it if we want a valid renewal."

It was with tongue in cheek that he spoke of renewal. "We have been pushing, pushing, pushing. Then came good Pope John. The door burst open, and now we are falling over each other, rolling down the stairs on the other side of the door. Let's face it, anything is possible now. Really, if you keep within reason you can do anything you want. But people keep pushing like mad on the most unlikely, most unreasonable things, just because there is nothing else left to push on, and they are so used to pushing. We have spent so much time pushing that we have never stopped to figure out what in the world we really want.

"So now, when most anything is possible, we really don't know what we want to do. And so we find all these little contemplative experiments being started, like among the Cistercians. They start and they evaporate. Kids who have come through a traumatic experience, pushing for real contemplative life, are suddenly being told: 'O.K. Here you are, go ahead and do it. Work the whole thing out.' They buy themselves a farm and set themselves up in a farmhouse, and suddenly realize that they either have to do it the old way (which they absolutely refuse to do), or they have to find a better way of their own (which they don't have). Then come the meetings and the dialogues, and it becomes an interminable yak session. And it evaporates.

"Maybe new structures are not that necessary. Perhaps you already do know what you want. I believe that what we want to do is to pray. After all, why did any of us become religious if we didn't want to pray? What do we want, if not to pray? O.K., now, pray. This is the whole doctrine of prayer in the Rule of St. Benedict. It's all summed up in one phrase: 'If a man wants to pray, let him go and pray.' That is all St. Benedict feels it is necessary to say about the subject. He doesn't say, let us go in and start with a little introductory prayer, etc., etc. If you want to pray, pray.

"Now that all the barriers are taken away and the obstacles gone and we find ourselves with the opportunity to do whatever we want, we

see the real problem. It is in ourselves. What is wrong with us? What is keeping us back from living lives of prayer? Perhaps we don't really want to pray. This is the thing we have to face. Before this we took it for granted that we were totally dedicated to this desire for prayer. Somebody else was stopping us. The thing that was stopping us was the structure. Now we simply find that maybe a structure helps. If some of the old structure helps, keep it. We don't have to have this mania for throwing out structures simply because they are structures. What we have to do is to discover what is useful to us. We can then discard structures that don't help, and keep structures that do help. And if it turns out that something medieval helps, keep it. Whether it is medieval or not doesn't matter. What does matter is that it helps you become yourself, that it helps you live a life of prayer."

Finding your true self and living a life of prayer were not two things for Thomas Merton, but one. For him structures and institutions had no value in themselves, and yet he saw their great importance in helping people find themselves in prayer. Again and again he came back to this point: "It's all a matter of rethinking the identity of the institution so that everything is oriented to people. The institution must serve the development of the individual person. And once you've got fully developed people, they can do anything. What counts are people and their vocations, not structures and ideas. Let us make room for idiosyncrasies. The danger is that the institution becomes an end in itself. What we need are person-centered communities, not institution-centered ones. This is the direction in which renewal must move."

There is a remarkable development taking place within all active orders. Many of their most dedicated members are discovering the great importance of the contemplative dimension of their religious life. In fact it was in this context that our little group was approaching Thomas Merton with questions about prayer. He was keenly interested in this so-called "House of Prayer Movement," and considered it possibly the most promising movement within the Church today. The name has come into use because the most noticeable phenomenon is the establishing

of Houses of Prayer within active orders (although these houses differ greatly from one another).

"Call it anything but House of Prayer," Thomas Merton pleaded. "Make it a House of Renewal. If you think you know what it ought to be like, you are already on the wrong track. It ought to be a forum for rethinking the very foundations of your community life. Let's not structure it to the point of obstructing its purpose, which is to give a chance to people for a personal breakthrough to greater maturity. It should be a place for all creative efforts of contemplatives. A house of spiritual research. Maybe prayer itself has to be renewed before we can have houses of prayer."

Much that was discussed referred specifically to the situation of active orders. But Thomas Merton felt that "The House of Prayer question is becoming a focal point for the re-examination and recovery of the identity of all religious life, that of the monks included. What we need in our houses of prayer are leaders who will help individuals to mature. The real function of the abbot is to be purely and simply a spiritual father who leads you to the point where you can go on your own, and then throws you out to do just that. He doesn't hold on to you any longer. But our institutions have always an inclination to turn this completely upside down. The institution calls you to something and then holds on to you for life, and you can't move beyond. It gets you to a certain point of usefulness, makes you a cog in the wheel of the communal machine, and then that's the way you are for life. You are not supposed to develop. Think of the lay brothers.

"I think it would be useful if we had a little more knowledge of how this sort of thing happens, say in the business world. In business and management people are intensely worried today and research teams are set up to study the fact that it's so easy for everybody just to fall into a neat little slot and never really develop. They are worried about the immense amount of money spent on keeping all these useless slots operating for their own sake. That's not my field. But someone ought to draw out the lines of this as far as religious life is concerned.

"Who are the people who need a House of Prayer? Mature religious who have served their communities well and who can foresee nothing else in the future but more and more official positions—a dead end to their religious vocation, which after all is the life of prayer. Of course these are the most valuable members of the community. But the supreme reward in a religious community should be that a man or a woman be set free for what they most desire. We'll just have to work this out in our communities.

"In the Greek monasteries this is foreseen. You have three steps: first, many years without commitment; then commitment and duties; finally (the great habit or *schema*) ultimate commitment and complete relief from duties. In our case people are relieved from duties when they go to the infirmary. Can't we produce people who are still physically strong and yet free to follow the lead of the Spirit? A certain amount of eccentricity will have to be taken in stride here."

The smile with which he said this, and his witty criticism of his own idiosyncrasies, made it clear that he realized that eccentricity is not without risk. But neither is prayer. "It's a risky thing to pray, and the danger is that our very prayers get between God and us. The great thing in prayer is not to pray, but to go directly to God. If saying your prayers is an obstacle to prayer, cut it out. Let Jesus pray. Thank God Jesus is praying. Forget yourself. Enter into the prayer of Jesus. Let him pray in you. (The Jesus Prayer is the best way to forget that you are praying. But don't take away from weak people the crutches they need.)

"The best way to pray is: stop. Let prayer pray within you, whether you know it or not. This means a deep awareness of our true inner identity. It implies a life of faith, but also of doubt. You can't have faith without doubt. Give up the business of suppressing doubt. Doubt and faith are two sides of the same thing. Faith will grow out of doubt, the real doubt. We don't pray right because we evade doubt. And we evade it by regularity and by activism. It is in these two ways that we create a false identity, and these are also the two ways by which we justify the self-perpetuation of our institutions.

"But the point is that we need not justify ourselves. By grace we are Christ. Our relationship with God is that of Christ to the Father in the Holy Spirit. A Christian is no longer under judgment. He need not justify himself. I must remember both that I am not condemned, yet worthy of condemnation. How can I live the message of Christian newness in these final days? I am not called to gather merit, but to go all over the world taking away people's debts. (This is not the prerogative of a priestly caste.) We need a theology of liberation instead of an official debt machine. I belong entirely to Christ. There is no self to justify."

There were so many points of contact with Zen Buddhist teaching in all this that I couldn't help asking whether he thought he could have come to these insights if he had never come across Zen. "I'm not sure," he answered pensively, "but I don't think so. I see no contradiction between Buddhism and Christianity. The future of Zen is in the West. I intend to become as good a Buddhist as I can."

And yet, Thomas Merton's Christian faith wasn't watered down to the point where it would become compatible with most anything. It was throbbing with life. This came out most clearly in little personal remarks, for example in what he said about so traditional a theme as prayer of intercession. "We are not rainmakers, but Christians. In our dealings with God he is free and so are we. It's simply a need for me to express my love by praying for my friends; it's like embracing them. If you love another person, it's God's love being realized. One and the same love is reaching your friend through you, and you through your friend."

"But isn't there still an implicit dualism in all this?" I asked. His answer was, "Really there isn't, and yet there is. You have to see your will and God's will dualistically for a long time. You have to experience duality for a long time until you see it's not there. In this respect I am a Hindu. Ramakrishna has the solution. Don't consider dualistic prayer on a lower level. The lower is higher. There are no levels. Any moment you can break through to the underlying unity which is God's gift in Christ. In the end, Praise praises. Thanksgiving gives thanks. Jesus prays. Openness is all." He was ready to go to Bangkok.