

CARROLL COLLEGE

Thomas Merton: The Contemplative Life

Department of Theology

By

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## PURPOSE

The purpose of this honors thesis is to show, through the writings of Thomas Merton, that the contemplative life is not only available to people living in the secular world but it is necessary for one. It is necessary from the viewpoint of being able to be critically immersed in living in the world. The contemplative life, by the gift of God, can bring us to a deeper awareness of God, of ourselves, and of others. It enriches one by bringing one to a gentleness with which to love God's creations.

## CHAPTER ONE

### A Brief Overview of Thomas Merton's Life

Thomas Merton was born January 31, 1915, in Prades, France. His life was in a state of continual change. He was born of artistic parents who moved about in pursuit of their artistic calling. As a youth, Thomas moved from one school to another and travelled with his father.

Possibly due to travelling with his parents, Thomas did not become attached to any religion practiced by the people around him. His first introduction to religion came from his father's mother when she taught Thomas the Our Father. Thomas' father was aware of the religious obligations he should be teaching his sons, John Paul and Thomas. Friends of Thomas' father said that he had a leaning toward the Catholic Church but would not become a member due to the complications his sons would experience with the rest of the family. Thomas and John Paul were left on their own to discover religion.

Contemplation began for Thomas when he started travelling with his father. As he and his father left the States for France, Thomas felt he was returning to fountains of intellectual and spiritual life of a world to which he

belonged. Thomas had a love for the land of France. In this great land he began to contemplate God without realizing it. Apparently his contemplation was in various aspects of nature (4a:37), a kind of nature-mysticism.

Thomas admits that in this early contemplation he had no sense of Christ. "I did not even know who Christ was, that He was God...." But, even in his youth, he was drawn to silence. "I had no curiosity about monastic vocations or religious rules, but I know my heart was filled with a kind of longing to breathe the air of that lonely valley and to listen to its silence" (4a:48).

After attending school in France and travelling with his father, Thomas entered Ripley Court in England. Here he obtained what he once called natural faith. "Thus just about the time when I most needed it, I did acquire a little natural faith, and found many occasions of praying and lifting up my mind to God. It was the first time I had ever seen people kneel publicly by their beds before getting into them and the first time I had ever sat down to meals after a grade" (4a:68).

Then, after the time of Thomas' father's death, came a period when the little he knew of God left Thomas. In 1921, at the age of six, he had lost his mother. When Thomas was sixteen, his father died.

The death of my father left me sad and depressed for a couple of months. But that eventually wore away. And when it did, I found myself completely stripped of everything that impeded the movement of my own will to do as it pleased. I imagined that I was free. And it would take me five or

six years to discover what a frightful captivity I had got myself into. It was in this year too, that the hard crust of my dry soul finally squeezed out all the last traces of religion that had ever been in it. There was no room for any God in that empty temple full of dust and rubbish which I was now so jealously to guard against all intruders, in order to devote it to the worship of my own stupid will (4a:88).

Thomas felt he was now free to become a twentieth century man.

With his new found "freedom," he began to do as he pleased and to travel to many places. The world was his, and yet, he was still unhappy. As he travelled through Rome, he noticed the frescoes depicting the life of Christ. The effect of this discovery was tremendous. Thomas Merton became a pilgrim without even knowing it. He began to find out for the first time in his life who Christ was through the paintings which were painted for those who could not grasp Him in any other way (4a:112).

This feeling did not last forever. On his return to America, he began to criticize those around him and the different religious groups he encountered. His beliefs were not religious but political. Thomas joined the Young Communist League.

Thomas Merton embarked on furthering his education at Columbia University. Among his Young Communist League meetings and classes, he met Mark Van Doren. Mark was a sober and sincere intellectual. He had a manner of dealing with his subject, English literature, with honesty and objectivity and without evasions. Mark was remotely preparing Thomas'

mind to receive the good seed of scholastic philosophy. "It was a very good thing for me that I ran into someone like Mark Van Doren at that particular time, (1935), because in my new reverence for Communism, I was in danger of docilely accepting any kind of stupidity provided I thought it was something that paved the way to the Elysian fields of classless society" (4a:142).

Columbia University also introduced Thomas to Bob Lax. Bob, according to Thomas, was born with the clearest idea of God out of all the people he had met at Columbia. Bob Lax introduced Thomas to Huxley's Ends and Means.

By September of 1938, with the influence of Bob Lax, Mark Van Doren, the poetry of William Blake and Huxley's Ends and Means, all the ground work had been laid down for his conversion. Thomas had gone all the way from an atheist, to one who accepted a full range of religious experiences, even to the highest degree of glory. Not only had he accepted it intellectually but he had begun to desire it. Thomas wanted to achieve union and peace. He had a desire to dedicate his life to God, "dreaming of a mystical union when I did not keep the simplest rudiments of moral law" (4a:201).

It was not until August of 1938, that Thomas sought out a priest and began his instruction. He now had a burning desire to be baptized and a half formed idea of becoming a priest. During this time, he was taking a class on St. Thomas Aquinas offered at Columbia University by

Daniel Walsh. The added influence of Daniel gave Thomas the motivation to finally become a Catholic.

On November 16, 1938, Thomas Merton received Baptism, First Confession and his First Holy Communion.

And my First Communion began to come towards me, down the steps. I was the only one at the altar rail. Heaven was entirely mine--that heaven in which sharing makes no division or diminution. But this solitariness was of a kind of reminder of the singleness with which this Christ, hidden in the small Host, was giving Himself for me, and to me, and with himself, the entire Godhead and Trinity--a great new increase of the power and grasp of the indwelling that had begun only a few minutes before at the font... And He called out to me from His own immense depths (4a:221).

In spite of the confusion and lack of direction Thomas received after his entry into the Catholic Church, he still had an idea of becoming a priest. One evening as he and his friends were visiting, the thought took a firm form. " 'I am going to be a priest' It was a strong and sweet and deep and insistent attraction that suddenly made itself felt, but not as a movement of appetite towards any sensible good. It was something in the order of conscience, a new and profound and clear sense that this was what I really ought to do" (4a:248). Thomas searched the library, reading about the many different religious orders. He found a book on the Jesuits. After spending quite some time over it, he went to the Jesuit church of St. Francis Xavier. The decision of his whole life was about to be made.

A moment of crisis, yet of interrogation: a moment of searching, but it was a moment of joy, standing on the edge of the abyss of God. So now the question faced him. 'Do you really want to be a priest? If



Thomas still had a desire to go to the monastery and stay for good. The first week of Lent, 1941, he went on retreat at the Trappist monastery at Gethsemani. It was during this retreat that he learned what the Mass is. He saw the Mass and the Sacrifice in a new light.

What a thing the Mass becomes in hands hardened by gruelling and sacrificial labor, in poverty and abjection and humiliation! 'See, see,' said those lights, those shadows in all the chapels. 'See Who God is! Realize what this Mass is! See Christ here, on the Cross! See His wounds, see His torn hands, see how the King of Glory is crowned with thorns! Do you know what Love is? Here is Love, Here on this Cross, here is Love suffering these nails, these thorns, that scourge loaded with lead, smashed to pieces, bleeding to death because of people that will never know Him and will never think of Him and will never remember His Sacrifice. Learn from Him how to love God and how to love men! Learn of this Cross, this Love, and how to give your life away to Him' (4a:316-17).

Thomas felt his heart was going to explode. He had to get outside the monastery walls. All the prayers and silence were building up pressure. He could not bear to reopen the wounds left from leaving the Franciscan novitiate and being told that he had no vocation.

Thomas returned to his teaching and writing at St. Bonaventure's. Then Baroness Catherine de Hueck entered his life. She had come to speak to the summer students about living the Catholic faith. Following the summer session, Thomas joined her, working in Harlem. After leaving Harlem at the end of the summer, he continued to correspond with the Baroness, writing her long letters full of questions and receiving in return long letters full of her own vivid energetic wisdom (4d:233). Through Thomas' correspondence

you do, say so...' I looked straight at the Host, and I knew, now, Who it was that I was looking at, and I said: 'Yes, I want to be a priest, with all my heart I want it. If it is Your will, make me a priest--make me a priest!' When I had said it, then I realized in some measure what I had done with these last four words, what power I had put into motion on my behalf, and What a union had been sealed between me and that power by my decision (4a:250).

Thomas Merton talked with Daniel Walsh concerning the priesthood. Daniel spoke of the Jesuits, the Franciscans and the Cistercians of the Strict Observance. The idea of the Cistercians (Trappists) made Thomas shiver. He was afraid he could not handle the fast and abstinence and the silence. Thomas' leaning was towards the Franciscans.

Before entering any order, Thomas took a farewell-to-the-world trip to Cuba. It turned out to be nine tenths vacation and one tenth pilgrimage to the many shrines of Our Lady. On his return, he spent the few months before entering the Franciscan novitiate ~~thinking and living in the~~ Franciscan summer house. His thoughts turned to what the novitiate meant. He would undergo only one year of mild inconvenience then everything would be fine. He was still feeding his own ego and pleasures. It finally struck him that there must be more to a vocation than this (4d:66). He began to question whether or not he really had a vocation. Thomas left the Franciscan novitiate house.

Thomas resolved that even if he could not join the monastery, he was going to live as close to the religious life as he could. He went to work at St. Bonaventure University, teaching English and living in a small room under the same roof which held the Sacrament and the Friars.

with the Baroness, he began to feel something different. Now he no longer desired to receive but to give.

The silence of St. Bonaventure's was not enough after his experience in Harlem. The silence was merely the absence of trouble. It was not the peace of poverty and sacrifice. This type of silence was not enough. Neither did he feel that returning to Harlem would satisfy his desire. "Going to live in Harlem does not seem to me to be anything special. It is a good and reasonable way to follow Christ. But going to the Trappists is exciting, it fills me with awe and with desire. I return to the idea again and again: 'Give up everything, give up everything!' I shall speak to one of the Friars" (4d:270).

On an evening in December, 1942, Thomas Merton rang the bell at the gate of Gethsemani. "Presently Brother Matthew looked out. He recognized me, glanced at the suitcase and said: 'This time have you come to stay?' 'Yes, Brother, if you'll pray for me,' I said. Brother nodded and raised his hand to close the window. 'That's what I've been doing,' he said, "praying for you' " (4a:364).

Thomas Merton took five vows when he entered the monastery. The vows at the time of profession are poverty, chastity, obedience, stability and conversion of manners. The most difficult one for Thomas was stability. Thomas was searching for solitude. He faced many temptations to leave one monastery for another and for another order. He was told several times that where one is does not matter as

long as devotion to prayer, silence, poverty and solitude are a part of oneself. But Thomas found himself in a dilemma. "I found myself with an almost uncontrollable desire to go in the opposite direction. God pointed one way and all my 'ideals' pointed in another" (4b:20). Thomas found himself travelling towards his destiny in the belly of a whale, a paradox, like Jonas.

Part of this paradox was caused by his writing. He saw it as keeping him away from his desired solitude and not as a means to bring him closer to it. Dom Gildas told Thomas "to teach contemplation, and especially to let them know, in what I write, that the contemplative life is quite easy and accessible and doesn't require extraordinary or strange efforts, just the normal generosity required to strive for sanctity" (4b:28).

Thomas often doubted the whole business of his vocation. He had many visits with the Father Abbot regarding this. Father Abbot assured him over and over that this was where he belonged.

Thomas did not know what degree of solitude or what degree of the contemplative life was right for him. Maybe God did not want him to be a pure contemplative. His doubts were overturned by the insistence of his superiors that he was in the right place. Thomas found that the "important thing is not to live for contemplation but to live for God. That is obvious, because, after all, that is the contemplative vocation" (4b:38).

Many hours of Thomas' time were spent in reading about contemplation and searching for it outside of himself. He began to question the manner in which he was going about contemplation. "What is the use of my complaining about not being a contemplative, if I do not take the opportunities I get for contemplation? I suppose I take them, but in the wrong way. I spend the time looking for something to read about contemplation--something to satisfy my raffish spiritual appetite--instead of shutting up and emptying my mind and leaving the inner door open for the Holy Spirit to enter from the inside, all the doors being barred and all my blinds down" (4b:76).

The concept of contemplation continued to change. On January 12, 1949, he wrote, "Perhaps one of the functions of a contemplative is to help other people, by work or merely by example, to become aware of how much they are capable of loving God--or perhaps of how much they already love Him without knowing it" (4b:151).

On May 26, 1949, Thomas Merton was ordained a priest. His search for contemplation was now changed. He had discovered the essence of a solitary vocation. A solitary vocation is "a vocation to fear, to helplessness, to isolation in the invisible God. Having found this, I now began for the first time in my life to taste a happiness that was so complete and so profound that I no longer needed to reflect upon it" (4b:227).

Thomas discovered that his desire for a solitary life, a life of contemplation, was a vocation. In order for his contemplative life to have meaning, it must be in response to a call from God. Thomas defined contemplation as the highest expression of one's intellectual and spiritual life. Contemplation is the deepening of one's faith and brings one to an awareness of a direct union with God.

This realization of contemplation brought about a transformation of Thomas' thoughts on solitude and contemplation. On January 12, 1950, Thomas wrote of the deep solitude that continued to fill his life.

It is in deep solitude that I find the gentleness with which I can truly love my brothers. The more solitary I am, the more affection I have for them. It is pure affection, and filled with reverence for the solitude of others. Solitude and silence teach me to love my brothers for what they are, not for what they say (4b:261).

Thomas withdrew from the world to find contemplation, to find inner peace. He was drawn back into the world by contemplation. He discovered contemplation could not be lived at the expense of excluding others. Contemplation is a force which enables one to be receptive to all aspects of life and to be critically aware of one's immersion in the many facets of one's life. It is only by the grace of God that one is able to be consciously aware and receptive to one's life.

In his withdrawal from the world, Thomas learned that contemplation does not take place without people. He had turned away from people in his silence only to find that his flight from people had been turned into compassion for

people. Thomas' desert was compassion. During the sixties, Thomas took his compassion and put it to work. His contemplation became active. Active contemplation: action is the overflow of so much love that it pours itself out in teaching and preaching (4a:405). Thomas became an engaged critic of the events from 1960-68 and one of the most outspoken proponents of nonviolence (5:68).

Thomas' view of nonviolence was encouraged by Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi turned Thomas towards the Eastern religions to learn what they could teach Western Christianity about contemplation and action. Thomas studied the Eastern religions to find the secret of solitude and found that in many ways we are the same. He turned to the wise men of the East to seek a better understanding of active contemplation. The Western world viewed active contemplation as a contradiction of words and viewed nonviolence as an impossibility. Thomas turned to the wise men of the East "for whom contradictions and paradoxes do not lead to bitterness but to truth. He sought from them a better understanding of the situation of the West" (5:71).

Thomas learned from Zen that Zen does not teach anything, it enables us to wake up and become aware. "It does not teach, it points" (4i:50). Thomas learned from Chuang Tzu that the "East can only awaken what has fallen asleep in the Western consciousness" (5:82).

His contemplation, through exposure to the Eastern religions, brought him to a new perspective of life. He had turned to the East to find the secret of solitude. What he found was that it is through life's contradictions that one

becomes aware of life's possibilities. Life is not definitive but everchanging. It is through paradoxes that we are challenged. From the East Thomas learned that active contemplation is not a contradiction of terms but an awareness of what God can do with the contemplative in the religious or the secular world.

Due to his studies of the East, Thomas had been invited to attend a meeting of Asian Benedictine and Cistercian abbots, monks and nuns; "A few hours after his lecture on Marxism and the monastic ideals, he met death by electrocution when he came into contact with a faulty electric fan" (5:86). Thomas Merton died in Bangkok, Thailand on December 10, 1968.

According to Henri Nouwen, Thomas Merton went through three major phases of development during his life. Thomas began with a withdrawal from and a return to the world. During this time Thomas began to learn that the contemplative life is only completed through one's relationships in the world. Through his relationships, Thomas entered the second phase of being a social critic. Contemplation immerses one in the world but not into feverish activity. One must be critically aware and immersed in the events of the world. One must be open to all ideas and events and be able to sort them out as to the validity of the action. This critical immersion led him to the third phase. He turned to the Eastern religions where the idea of paradoxes is used as an aid to come to a better understanding of life.



## CHAPTER TWO

### The Major Influences on Thomas Merton's View of Contemplation

These three basic phases of Thomas' life are expanded in Chapter Two. His view of contemplation was influenced by many people and events that created the context for his development. Ultimately, his view of contemplation is that of a person coming to a deeper awareness of God in and through one's life. Thomas discovered that this deeper awareness is brought about by a gift from God. Thomas journeyed from a definition of contemplation as a withdrawal from the world to a definition of contemplation as a complete yet critical immersion of oneself in the world. Contemplation is a state of simple prayer and union with God which varies in intensity at different times, which finds a particular and proper rhythm in the life of each individual and which brings the soul at all times under the direct and intimate influence of God's action (4b:14).

Thomas' view of contemplation was influenced by the deep serene valleys of France, by the frescoes in the cathedrals of Italy and by his friends before he ever became a Catholic. Daniel Walsh, Mark Van Doren, Bob Lax and Baroness Catherine de Hueck are a few of the people who influenced him in

his conversion to Catholicism and in his entering the Trappist monastery. These friends encouraged Thomas to follow his desire for solitude. They helped Thomas see contemplation in direct confrontation with the happenings in the world. Thomas had developed a pessimistic outlook toward the secular world. But through the encouragement of his friends and the searching of his consciousness he became aware that contemplation needs peace before it can grow in oneself.

World War II was the beginning of the role peace was to play in developing Thomas Merton's contemplation. Thomas was afraid of the war: afraid that what he owned, his actions, could be killing someone. Thomas' sensitivity brought him to a point of wanting to be voluntarily poor. It seemed to him, desperately important to get rid of all possessions (4d:110). It seemed to him that even possessing a name or loving anything that one owned, could be killing someone somewhere.

World War II brought Thomas to the realization that we did not have peace because we had done nothing to encourage peace. We had done nothing to deserve peace, not even prayed for it! We had desired peace because we did not want to get hurt, we did not want to suffer. Thomas wrote in The Secular Journal of Thomas Merton: "If we are to get peace, we have got to desire something more than reefers and anesthetics. That is all we seem to want: anything to avoid pain" (p. 122).

We had not even prayed for peace. And when we did, what were we praying for? We were praying for a 'just peace', not a peace that would radically change our lives. We wanted Hitler to change, not us. The responsibility for everything was placed on Hitler. He was our scapegoat.

If I pray for peace, that prayer is only justified if it means one thing: not that the war may end, the fighting stop, and murdering and injustice continue in some other way. To pray merely for the war to stop and some fake armistice to be signed is not to pray for peace.

If I pray for peace, abstractly speaking it makes sense if I pray for a 'just peace', although I do not know what, in political terms, would constitute a just peace now, and I am totally unable to get any relevance, politically, out of the term.

But when I pray for peace I pray for the following miracle. That God move all men to pray and do penance and recognize each one his own great guilt, because we are all guilty of this war. Bloy says somewhere, of a murderer, that all the people were a tree of which this murderer was only one of the fruits, and we all nourish him, and he thrives most of all on our hatred and condemnation of him, when that condemnation disregards our own guilt, and piles the responsibility for everything upon somebody else's sins (4d:164-65)!

In the midst of society's discussion of the war, Thomas went on a retreat at the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani. He was impressed. To him, this was the center of America. This atmosphere, according to Thomas, was the binding agent holding the universe together.

Thomas spent Holy week of 1941 at the Abbey. The monks revealed the meaning of the religious life to Thomas. They allowed him to see the secret of how he could find his true self. They encouraged him to accept suffering and tribulation. The monks taught him the value of humility.

The monks revealed the religious life as existing and thriving not in buildings or dead things or flowers or beasts but in the soul (4d:190). The religious life exists as a constant purpose, as an unending love that expresses itself as patience, humility, courage, self-denial and as justice. It always exists in a strong knot of faith and hope. Thomas carried this thought with him. It became incorporated in his view of contemplation.

During this Holy week, Thomas learned from the monks that by God's love "we can begin to become like ourselves, that is we can find our own true selves, for we are made in His image and likeness" (4d:197). Thomas became aware of the tribulations God gives us. The monks showed him the unhappy people were the ones who could bribe their way out of suffering and tribulations. People who can bribe their way out of suffering do not come to realize their full potential or completeness.

As Thomas was preparing to leave at the end of the retreat, he stopped to analyze his own position.

...I wonder if I have learned to pray for humility. I desire only one thing: to love God. Those who love Him keep His commandments. I only desire to do one thing: to follow His will. I pray that I am at least beginning to know what that may mean. Could it ever possibly mean that I might someday become a monk in this monastery? My Lord, and my King, and my God (4d:203)!

Thomas Merton left Gethsemani at the end of the retreat. The atmosphere of Gethsemani did not leave Thomas. Its influence had invaded Thomas' thought. Gethsemani challenged Thomas to become himself and to accept the joys and sufferings God gave him. Thomas, in turn, challenged society's beliefs

on peace and nonviolence in light of contemplation; becoming a community of prayer and solitude. We must live our lives. We should not fear the responsibilities and the distractions of our work. We should embrace reality and find ourselves immersed in life and filled with the love of God (4c:47).

Thomas discovered, through the monks at Gethsemani, that everything is indifferent, except prayer, fasting, meditation and work. In Thomas' discovery that nothing really mattered, the challenge to evaluate values came back to him. He questioned his place in this chaotic world. This question led him back to Gethsemani and to the influence of his brother monks and to the influence of the monastic lifestyle. The challenge to become himself continued. The challenge of becoming a contemplative also continued.

Challenged to become himself, Thomas faced the dilemma his writing posed for him. Writing seemed to interfere with his desire for solitude. Deliberating with his superiors, the problem of solitude versus writing was one of God's tribulations given to Thomas. All of the lamenting about his writing was foolish. His writing was the one thing that gave him access to some real silence and solitude. He would pause at his work to find that his mind was clear and at ease. He could find God within himself without hunting.

Thomas Merton's writings gave him a sense of poverty. His contemplation was influenced by his writing. Through his poetry and prose, he experienced himself as no longer being private property. This poverty allowed him to be unpossessive. He could experience silence and solitude more completely.

In his work as a writer, Merton discovered also a new experience of poverty. By his writing he made himself and his most inner feelings and thoughts a public possession. In this way he had disowned himself and allowed others to enter into his monastic silence. In this way his fame had made him spiritually poor. But this same poverty made the world around him appear to him in a new way. It seems as if everything belonged to him just when there was nothing left to him which he could call his 'private property'. The air, the trees, the whole world, were now singing the honor of God and he felt fire and music in the earth under his feet. The beauty of creation made him poor and wealthy at the same time and gave him peace and happiness. This beauty kept him from wanting to experience nature as a possession, but helped him to deeply experience his silence and solitude (5:45).

Thomas resigned himself to the fact that being a writer was a part of him. Without it, he would not be complete.

Thomas' desire was to be as good a monk as he could, and to remain himself, and to write about it: to put himself down on paper. "But it requires so much honesty that it is beyond my nature. It must come somehow from the Holy Spirit" (4b:229). Writing and Gethsemani unveiled a new perspective of life and contemplation. The two are entwined and beneficial to each other.

Coming to the monastery has been for me exactly the right kind of withdrawal. It has given me perspective. It has taught me how to live. And now I owe everyone else in the world a share in that life. My first duty is to start, for the first time, to live as a member of a human race which is no more (and no less) ridiculous than I am myself. And my first human act is the recognition of how much I owe everybody else (4b:312).

This perspective brought about a refinement in Thomas' definition of contemplation. The real point of contemplation had always been a deepening of faith. The point of refinement came in Thomas entering the human race to make people, including himself, aware that their personal freedom could

bring them to the realization of a direct union with God (4k:175). Through God and one's personal relationships, one could freely enter into life not as one unthinkingly accepting everything placed in front of one, but as one using personal freedom to critically analyze and determine the value of the event for the Christian life.

Thomas' first duty was to start for the first time, to live as a member of the human race. Living as a member carried Thomas to a position of social critic. He wanted to show everyone his love for them. He involved himself in racial problems, politics, conscientious objection to the war and many peace movements. He was interested in everything and he was concerned about the people. He sought the meaning that the racial problems and political problems held for the Christian within his solitude. From his vantage point as a monk and writer, Thomas helped introduce the twentieth century 'counter culture' and nonviolent resistance to the bourgeois society. The meaning of the racial problems and other events made nonviolent resistance basic to Christianity (7:126).

Henri Nouwen said in Pray to Live that Thomas had gained a distant perception. Being in the monastery afforded Thomas the opportunity to look at the events of the sixties objectively. Thomas began writing to "the rhythm of the marches, praying and with great force(7:126). Distant perception gave rise to generous contemplation. From the contemplation flowed a real caring and concern for humanity. The events of the world

influenced Thomas' view of contemplation and strengthened his convictions. In 1968, he summarized his thoughts in a letter.

I am against war, against violence, against violent revolution, for peaceful settlement of differences, for nonviolent but nevertheless radical changes. Change is needed, and violence will not really change anything: at most it will only transfer power from one set of bull-headed authorities to another. If I say these things, it is not because I am more interested in politics than in the Gospel. I am not. But today more than ever the Gospel commitment has political implications, because you cannot claim to be 'for Christ' and aspose a political cause that implies callous indifference to the needs of millions of human beings and even cooperate in their destruction (Midsummer Letter, 1968; cf. 5:56-57).

Thomas Merton's writings on racial justice were very strong and influential. Martin Luther King commented that he could not have asked for a more effective statement of the case (7:126). Due to his strong statements, Thomas received death threats as all peacemakers have from the time of Christ, through Mahatma Gandhi and on to Martin Luther King, Jr. (7:153).

James Baldwin, a black author, and Mahatma Gandhi influenced Thomas' view of the social events taking place. They prepared him to put into words what he experienced in silence. James Baldwin helped Thomas to see the black problem as a problem of the white. Gandhi tempered Baldwin's proclamations by cautioning Thomas not to become a bitter idealist and taught him again and again to turn his own interiority. Gandhi's teaching made a deep impression on Thomas.

One of the insights Thomas received from Gandhi was that the spirit of truth is the spirit of nonviolence. The



spirit of truth reveals to us that our present situation is not definitive but carries with it a possibility of conversion to the good. Nonviolence is a possibility when evil or sin is turned into good through forgiveness (5:65). Thomas experienced in his own life that forgiveness is possible through Christ. This experience led to nonviolence not only being a possibility, but even a prerequisite for being Christian.

Gandhi knew the value of solitude as well as the value of a totally generous expenditure of time and energy in listening and communicating with others. He reinforced Thomas' belief that nothing really mattered except prayer, fasting, meditation and work. Gandhi recognized the impossibility of being a peaceful and nonviolent person if one submitted passively to the requirements of a society maddened by overstimulation and obsessed with noise and speed. " 'Jesus died in vain,' said Gandhi, 'if he did not teach us to regulate the whole of life by the eternal law of love' " (5:139). For Thomas, this law of love flowed forth from contemplation into action.

It was Gandhi who placed Thomas on the path to the East. Through Gandhi's encouragement, Thomas turned to the Zen Buddhists and the Taoists to learn what these traditions could teach Western Christianity about contemplation and action. This path led to Chuang Tzu, a Chinese philosopher and Taoist writer.

Chuang Tzu did not actually teach Thomas anything new. Chuang Tzu restated what Thomas had already learned from Zen Buddhism. "Zen teaches nothing; it merely enables us

to wake up and become aware. It does not teach, it points" (4i:50). In this sense, Chuang Tzu was a real master for Thomas. He did not teach Thomas anything new, but Chuang Tzu brought him to a new awareness of what he already knew. Chuang Tzu awakened and led Thomas through the barrier of his own inner contradictions to the deeper ground of his consciousness. Chuang Tzu awakened Thomas to simplicity, childlikeness and humility. He led Thomas through the self-conscious cultivation of good to a quiet growing in the humility of a simple, ordinary life. "The secret of the way proposed by Chuang Tzu(4g:24) is the non-doing or non-action, which is not intent upon results and is not concerned with consciously laid plans or deliberately organized endeavors." One should begin with the simple good. One of the inner contradictions is to become as a little child and not to always be trying to make things better by our own efforts. It is by the gift of God that we are able to enter into the contemplative life.

Chuang Tzu showed Thomas that life is continually changing and developing. Everything is in a state of flux. Therefore what is good in one set of circumstances today may be completely wrong tomorrow. These contradictions are not really contradictions as seen in the light of an ever changing society (5:71). Thomas often had his novices confused by setting forth for them a multitude of opposites.

Gandhi taught Thomas that nonviolence was more than a tactic or a technique, and it demanded a nonviolent heart

that could only be formed in the solitude of prayer and fasting. Chuang Tzu helped Thomas further on the path. It led him from nonviolence to non-action.

Non-action is not in contrast with nonviolence. It is action not carried out independently of Heaven and earth and in conflict with dynamism of the whole, but it is carried out in perfect harmony with the whole (4g:28). Non-action is carried out in the harmony of the basic principle of all nature or Tao. If one is in harmony with Tao, then the answer will make itself clear when the time comes to act.

Chuang Tzu displayed the artificiality of the distinction between contemplation and action. It is precisely through one's contemplation that one's action becomes free. There is in it no force and no violence. Chuang Tzu showed Thomas that the action in non-action is "a tranquility which transcends the division between activity and contemplation by entering into union with the nameless and invisible Tao" (4g:26).

#### Action and Non-action

from the writings of Chuang Tzu (4g:80-81)

The non-action of the wise man is not inaction.  
 It is not studied. It is not shaken by anything.  
 The sage is quiet because he is not moved,  
 Not because he 'wills' to be quiet.  
 Still water like glass.  
 You can look in it and see the bristles on your chin.  
 It is a perfect level;  
 A carpenter could use it.  
 If water is so clear, so level,  
 How much more the spirit of man?  
 The heart of the wise man is tranquil  
 It is the mirror of heaven and earth  
 The glass of everything.  
 Emptiness, stillness, tranquility, tastelessness,

Silence, non-action: this is the level of heaven and earth.  
 This is the perfect Tao. Wise men find here  
 Their resting place.  
 Resting, they are empty.  
 From emptiness comes the unconditioned.  
 From this, the conditioned, the individual things:  
 So from the sage's emptiness, stillness arises:  
 From stillness, action. From action, attainment.  
 From their stillness comes their non-action which is  
 also action  
 And is therefore, their attainment.  
 For stillness is joy. Joy is free from care  
 Fruitful in long years.  
 Joy does all things without concern:  
 For emptiness, stillness, tranquility, tastelessness,  
 Silence, and non-action  
 Are the root of all things.

Thomas believed that the East could make the West  
 Christian again. The East could awaken the Western conscious-  
 ness. It is this conviction flowing from the influence of  
 America and its racial difficulties, the influence of Gandhi  
 and his nonviolence and the influence of Chuang Tzu and his  
 non-action that went with Thomas Merton to Bangkok, Thailand.

Thomas' view of contemplation expanded from one of  
 escape and dwelling within oneself to a receptivity to all things.  
 It is not conditioned or limited by our own individual desires.  
 Contemplation is not situated in a program or a system. It is  
 to be found everywhere.

## CHAPTER THREE

### A General Analysis of Thomas Merton's View of Contemplation

My hypothesis is that the contemplative life can and must be lived not only in the monastery but outside of it as well. In exploring the major influence of Thomas' life I have found that contemplation cannot be institutionalized. It goes beyond any program or system and can be found everywhere, if one is open and responds to the call from God to seek the contemplative life.

Any romantic fantasies one has about a life of contemplation will only lead to disappointment and frustration. Thomas has described the life of contemplation as the most arid stretch of one's spiritual pilgrimage. Peace, joy and happiness are not easily found.

Contemplation is not a profession one chooses but is a vocation that requires a charism: "...we are called by the voice of God, by the voice of that ultimate being, to pierce through the irrelevance of our life..." (1:161). There are no maps for this journey, those who have travelled it say there is no certain way and those who have decided to become a contemplative on their own are doomed to frustration. Thomas leaves us a glimpse of hope. In The Sign of Jonas, he wrote "To teach contemplation, and especially to let

people know, in what I write, that the contemplative life is quite easy and accessible and doesn't require extraordinary or strange efforts, just the normal generosity required to strive for sanctity" (4b:28).

From the writings of Thomas Merton, I have deciphered five main points to bring his view of contemplation into focus for myself. First, what is one getting into if the call for contemplation is present? Second, how do we go about fulfilling this mission of the contemplative? Third, is there a place for contemplation in our world of technology? Fourth, what are the dangers of trying to follow the contemplative life? And last, what are the benefits of contemplation?

What is one getting into if the call for contemplation is present? It means we are responding to a call from God. We are meant to respond, answer, echo and in some way contain Him (4f:3). In our world of action, we must stand up for Him. To be a contemplative in our world of action we must go out on a limb to actually live the life God gave us. Thomas requests us not to fear the responsibilities and the inevitable distractions of our work (4c:47). We should embrace reality. In embracing reality we will find ourselves immersed in life. Contemplation will help us embrace reality. Contemplation is the highest expression of one's intellectual and spiritual life (4f:1). Becoming aware of our intellectual and spiritual life will enable us to work in the world and still have time for God.

The most important factor is not to live for contemplation but to live for God. What it means to be a contemplative in our world of action is to find God in our community and He will lead us to solitude (4c:110). Once He has started us on our way to solitude, we can't just sit back and let whatever happens happen. We have to accept the responsibility of being a contemplative. One of the responsibilities is to help others, by word or by example, to become aware of their capability to love God or how much they already love Him without being aware of this love.

Thomas summed up what it means to be a contemplative by means of what the mission of a contemplative is. In Faith and Violence he wrote:

The mission of the contemplative in this world of massive conflict and collective unreason is to seek the true way of unity and peace, without succumbing to the illusion of withdrawal into a realm of distraction from which unpleasant realities are simply excluded by the force of will. In facing the world with a totally different viewpoint, he maintains alive in the presence of a spiritual and intelligent consciousness which is the root of true peace and true unity among men. This consciousness certainly accepts the fact of our empirical and individual existence, but refuses to take them as the basic reality. The basic reality is neither the individual, empirical self nor an abstract ideal entity which can exist only in reason. The basic reality is being itself, which is one in all concrete existents, which shares itself among them and manifests itself through them (concrete existents). The goal of the contemplative is on its lowest level, the recognition of this splendor of being and unity--a splendor in which he is one with all that is. But on a higher level still, it is the transcendent ground and source of being, the not-being and the emptiness that is so called because it is absolutely beyond all definitions and limitations. This ground and source is not simply an inert and passive emptiness, but for the Christian

it is pure act, pure freedom, pure light (p. 221).

How do we go about fulfilling this mission of the contemplative? We must seek the true way of unity and peace. We do not need to leave our surroundings in order to do this. We do need to bring the radical love that Jesus taught into our surroundings. This radical love is an unpossessive love. It's not a romantic love but a love of really caring for others. The "contemplative life is not merely a matter of escaping the world, singing psalms, or mastering traditional techniques of meditation: it is also and above all a personal charisma" (4k:181). It is a gift from God and is meant to be used to help oneself to a new awareness of faith and to help others seek a deepening awareness of their faith. In order to fulfill the mission of a contemplative in this world, we must have faith in God.

The only way to become a solitary is to be open to God and try to maintain a freedom from feverish activity. We cannot turn our backs on the world of human beings. We must remain rooted in our world. Thomas said that to become a contemplative in our world of action we have to remain open and ready to share something of ourselves and to listen and learn from others (4k:181).

In order to become a solitary in our surroundings, we must learn to accept ourselves and to accept the world. This is not a blatant acceptance but a constructive criticizing of the world. Solitude is not something one hopes for in the future. It is a deepening of the present. In



The Sign of Jonas, Thomas has explained that if we do not look for our solitude in the present, we will never find it (p. 256).

Giving to other people is important in finding solitude and contemplation. The contemplative life is a life of love. It is a selfless love. One cannot be possessive and therefore lock the door to contemplation for oneself or for another. This love is not a head trip or pure feeling. It is a combination of thought and feeling. It produces a real concern and hope for all humanity.

True love, in helping each of us become a contemplative, is associated with "three fundamental human strivings: with 'creative work,' with 'sacrifice,' and with 'contemplation'". Where these three are present there is reliable evidence of spiritual life, at least in some inchoate form. There is reliable evidence of love. And the most important of the three is sacrifice" (4e:100). True love is a sacrifice. We have to give ourselves completely to one another with no regard of what we may in return receive. True love leads to fulfillment by forcing us to become more than what we are at this moment. To become a contemplative in our surroundings, we must be open to growing.

Is there a place for contemplation in our world of technology? Contemplation calls us to step out of our sheltered lives and grow. The experience I have had in the working world is that humans have become complacent. Why

should they think when there is a machine that can do everything else, it might as well think for them too. Thomas called them monstrous machines. They took away our fundamental need, our craving for 'creative work.' Machines and assembly lines do not encourage creativity. They do stimulate boredom. How can contemplation possibly find a place in our world?

We are insensitive to ourselves and to others because we have let technology push us into feverish activity. We depend on technology for almost everything. In our world, we have instant dinners, instant drinks, instant copies, we can even have instant highs through dependence on alcohol and drugs. According to Thomas, true contemplation delivers one from dependence on everything except for freedom and divine grace (4h:217).

The answer to the question: can contemplation still find a place in the world of technology, is yes. When society is made up of people who do not know any type of interior solitude it can no longer be held together with love. This interior solitude is an awareness of our own self worth. When we no longer have an appreciation of human life, the world will consequently be held together by violence and abuse (4c:13). If a marriage cannot thrive forever on violence and abuse why should we expect it to work for the larger community of society?

Thomas Merton answers the question from the point of one's need.

The answer to this is that, since the direct and pure experience of reality in its ultimate root is man's deepest need, contemplation must be possible if man is to remain human. If contemplation is no longer possible, then man's life has lost the spiritual orientation upon which everything else--order, peace, happiness, sanity--must depend. But true contemplation is an austere and exacting vocation. Those who seek it are few and those who find it fewer, still. Nevertheless, their presence witnesses to the fact that contemplation remains both necessary and possible (4h:215).

The world of technology, rather than throwing our contemplation away, has the potential to enhance the contemplative life. The thought of contemplation causes great disturbance among people today. It is alien to our practice of keeping busy. Inner peace is attractive but we've been taught that the only way to peace is in a life filled with movement and activity. We have taken the meaning of our life from some external force. Thomas states that the world has become a multiplicity of conflicting and limited beings enclosed in their own individuality (4h:220).

Technology can break us out of our prisons of individuality by offering us time to be creative and time to care for others. Let the machines advance. Let them free us to become as little children. The monstrous machine can do the menial tasks and free us to do things not because they are necessary, but because we want to do them freely and out of love (4d:188). Active contemplation can exist.

What are the dangers of trying to follow the contemplative life? Contemplation is not an implausible ideal. But this idea of contemplation is not just picked up. It is a gift from God. The contemplative life has beautiful benefits but it is not without its distortions. A distortion of the contemplative life is the misuse of the material objects of our world. These objects are not inherently bad but misused, these objects can lead one to become insensible to the true human values. Thomas explains that if one does misuse objects and people then one's contemplation stands condemned and vitiated in its very roots (4f:20).

A desire for contemplation can draw one away from the community for the wrong reasons. Contemplation is not for running away from people. It can be used as a means of escape but that is not its intended use. If one goes into a contemplative life to get away from the people disliked, one will not find peace or solitude. According to Thomas, in New Seeds of Contemplation, one will only isolate oneself with a tribe of devils. False solitude is only a refuge for the individualist.

Even the desire to become solitary is not very inviting. The invitation requires something of us in that we have to give of ourselves before we start our journey. "Our Lady of Solitude sums up my interior life (Thomas Merton's): if only I remember what solitude meant for her. It was not a luxurious solitude, full of comfort and relaxation.

It was a solitude with which she was alone in a crowd, on calvary" (4b:71). It is possible to be solitary in a crowd. We can lose ourselves without ever leaving our surroundings. True contemplation means the destruction of selfishness. It leads to selfless love and unpossessive love.

What are the benefits of contemplation? Despite the possible distortions of the contemplative life, there are benefits along the way. If we make a mistake on our journey we are not doomed. It is possible with guidance to start again. It is important to have a director help you along the path. We can find great joy and come to a deeper awareness of God's love for us through our trials and tribulations. Just because we make a mistake, does not mean that we are displaced from God's love. Thomas discovered how absurd it is to get uptight about our mistakes.

It seems to me the most absurd thing in the world is to be upset because I am weak and distracted and blind and constantly make mistakes! What else do I expect? Does God love me any less because I am so clumsy and helpless without Him--and underneath what I am He sees me as I will one day be by His pure gift and that pleases Him--and therefore it pleases me and I attend to His great love which is my joy (4b:107).

It depends on one's point of view as to whether the pointing out of our mistakes is a drawback or a benefit to becoming a contemplative.

A major benefit is that in solitude we can find a gentleness with which to love God's creations. Solitude

can teach us to love other's not for what they say or do, but for what they are. Solitude releases us to become more free to know people individually. If one is at peace with oneself, and has a positive attitude of his position in the world, then one can cross over to meet an individual on their own ground and still be able to come back to one's own position. When one comes back to one's own position, one brings a new insight into one's own meaning. This thought follows from reading J. Dunne, author of The Way of All the Earth.

Thomas crossed over to the Eastern religions to bring back to his own religion a new insight. He used the East as a place to become awakened to the West. If it can be done on the levels of different religions and cultures, it can be done on the level of individuals.

Another benefit is when one becomes a contemplative, contemplation becomes a way of life. One is living for God and contemplation has followed. Different techniques are no longer used to draw us away from activity for activity's sake. We have reached the end. The means are no longer useful. It takes a long time to reach this point. It also takes support from those around us for we are slow in grasping ideas.

Chuang Tzu wrote of being able to throw away the means once the end was achieved. His teaching accentuates

the fact that we are slow to grasp ideas.

Means and Ends

from the writings of Chuang Tzu (4g:154)

The gatekeeper in the capitol city of Sung became such an expert mourner after his father's death, and so emaciated himself with fasts and austerities, that he was promoted to high rank in order that he might serve as a model of ritual observance.

As a result of this, his imitators so deprived themselves that half of them died. The others were not promoted.

The purpose of a fish trap is to catch fish, and when the fish are caught, the trap is forgotten.

The purpose of a rabbit snare is to catch rabbits. When the rabbits are caught, the snare is forgotten.

The purpose of words is to convey ideas. When the ideas are grasped, the words are forgotten.

Where can I find a man who has forgotten words? He is the one I would like to talk to.

Each of us has our own way of expressing ourselves.

Chuang Tzu exhibited in "Means and Ends" that what works for one person is not necessarily right for others. Contemplation is questioned in the East as well as the West. The different means are not in conflict as each one must respond to one's calling. The question is, will contemplation survive? They, the Cistercian monk, the Zen Buddhist, and the student of Yoga, have seen the advantages of solitude, silence, and meditation. Even Westerners without faith value these. Their appeal will urge people already on the path of contemplation to continue, and encourage others to begin (4k:184).

Thomas believed that Christ imprinted His image upon St. Francis to call not some men or a few monks, but

all spiritual people to the "perfection of contemplation which is nothing else but the perfection of love" (4a:408). Once some have reached the heights of contemplation they will draw others to them.

Contemplation will survive. It is a gift from God. It is something for which we must learn to wait. It is also something we can learn to 'expect actively' (4k:353). The secret of contemplation is an active and expectant awareness where the activity is a deep and personal response to God's calling.

Shortly before Thomas' death, the Holy See asked Thomas to write a message to the world on the meaning of the contemplative life. Thomas answered immediately with a personal letter.

The contemplative has nothing to tell you except to reassure you and say that if you dare to penetrate your own silence and dare to advance without fear into the solitude of your own heart and risk the sharing of that solitude with the lonely other who seeks God through you and with you, then you will truly recover the light and the capacity to understand what is beyond words and beyond explanations because it is too close to be explained: it is the intimate union in the depths of your own heart, of God's spirit and your own secret inmost self, so that you and He are in all truth One Spirit (5:42).



## CHAPTER FOUR

### Thomas Merton and Contemplation in Christian History

Contemplation will survive. If we dare to penetrate our own silence, as Thomas suggests, and dare to advance into the solitude of our own hearts then we will come to an intimate union with God. Throughout Christian history people have been advancing into and developing contemplation. William Johnston, author of The Inner Eye of Love, has given a brief history of the development of contemplation.

In the early Christian world, Clement of Alexandria, Origen and Augustine discuss the life of contemplation as two lives. They separate the quiet life and the life of action. The quiet life, to them, were the people called to perfection and those called to salvation were the active people. Thomas Merton has put forth active contemplation not as a conflict of terms but a valid way to live contemplation. It is the overflow of contemplation which leads us into loving action: an action of real human concern. Thomas Aquinas validates this thought by his view that mysticism overflows into activity.

William Johnston draws from the years of the reformation Ignatius of Loyola's view of mysticism or life of solitude and silence. Ignatius went beyond Thomas Aquinas' view of mysticism overflowing into activity. Ignatius

Ignatius envisioned a mystical life that would not only share with others the fruits of contemplation but would experience God in the "hurly-burly" of action. Thomas Merton requested us not to fear the responsibilities and inevitable distractions of our work. We should embrace reality and therefore find ourselves immersed completely, and yet critically in the "hurly-burly" of action as seen by Ignatius of Loyola.

Another proponent of mysticism in action was Teilhard de Chardin. Teilhard had a poetic vision of a world vibrating with the presence of the cosmic Christ. He believed mysticism had a future and the future was that in which the eye of love saw God in the world. In more recent times, Mother Teresa of Calcutta has furthered the view of touching Christ in our world.

Mahatma Gandhi has helped to develop Thomas' view of contemplation by bringing him to an awareness of the possibility of nonviolence and placing him on the path to the East. Gandhi introduced Thomas to the writings of Chuang Tzu. Thomas' view of contemplation continued to develop from nonviolence to non-action.

Thomas Merton has left, for me, a challenge to continue developing my view of contemplation. He has left me with the challenge to find other people who like silence. Together, we can create silence and peace for one another. He has also challenged me to bring up my children

not to yell so much. Thomas states that "children are naturally quiet--if they are left alone and not given the needle from the cradle upward, in order that they may develop into citizens of a state in which everybody yells and is yelled at" (4b:302).

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