

“The Christian Life as Oblation through Self-Transcendence”

The Scriptural Witness to the Theme

Luke 1.1-56

[26] In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth,

[27] to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary.

[28] And he came to her and said, "Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you!"

[29] But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be.

[30] And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.

[31] And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.

[32] He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David,

[33] and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end."

[34] And Mary said to the angel, "How shall this be, since I have no husband?"

[35] And the angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God.

[36] And behold, your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren.

[37] For with God nothing will be impossible."

[38] And Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

[39] In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a city of Judah,

[40] and she entered the house of Zechari'ah and greeted Elizabeth.

[41] And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit

[42] and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!

[43] And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?

[44] For behold, when the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy.

[45] And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."

[46] And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord,

[47] and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

[48] for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.

For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed;

[49] for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

[50] And his mercy is on those who fear him
from generation to generation.

[51] He has shown strength with his arm,
he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts,

[52] he has put down the mighty from their thrones,
and exalted those of low degree;

[53] he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent empty away.

[54] He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,

[55] as he spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his posterity for ever."

[56] And Mary remained with her about three months, and returned to her home.

Matthew 17.1-23

[1] And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain apart.

[2] And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light.

[3] And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Eli'jah, talking with him.

[4] And Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is well that we are here; if you wish, I will make three booths here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Eli'jah."

[5] He was still speaking, when lo, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him."

[6] When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces, and were filled with awe.

[7] But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Rise, and have no fear."

[8] And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.

[9] And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, "Tell no one the vision, until the Son of man is raised from the dead."

[10] And the disciples asked him, "Then why do the scribes say that first Eli'jah must come?"

[11] He replied, "Eli'jah does come, and he is to restore all things;

[12] but I tell you that Eli'jah has already come, and they did not know him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of man will suffer at their hands."

[13] Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist.

[14] And when they came to the crowd, a man came up to him and kneeling before him said,

[15] "Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and he suffers terribly; for often he falls into the fire, and often into the water.

[16] And I brought him to your disciples, and they could not heal him."

[17] And Jesus answered, "O faithless and perverse generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him here to me."

[18] And Jesus rebuked him, and the demon came out of him, and the boy was cured instantly.

[19] Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, "Why could we not cast it out?"

[20] He said to them, "Because of your little faith. For truly, I say to you, if you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you."

[22] As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, "The Son of man is to be delivered into the hands of men,

[23] and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day." And they were greatly distressed.

Luke 24.1-53

[1] But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices which they had prepared.

[2] And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb,

[3] but when they went in they did not find the body.

[4] While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel;

[5] and as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, "Why do you seek the living among the dead?"

[6] Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee,

[7] that the Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and on the third day rise."

[8] And they remembered his words,

[9] and returning from the tomb they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest.

[10] Now it was Mary Mag'dalene and Jo-an'na and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told this to the apostles;

[11] but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.

[13] That very day two of them were going to a village named Emma'us, about seven miles from Jerusalem,

[14] and talking with each other about all these things that had happened.

[15] While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them.

[16] But their eyes were kept from recognizing him.

[17] And he said to them, "What is this conversation which you are holding with each other as you walk?" And they stood still, looking sad.

[18] Then one of them, named Cle'opas, answered him, "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?"

[19] And he said to them, "What things?" And they said to him, "Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people,

[20] and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him.

[21] But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since this happened.

[22] Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning

[23] and did not find his body; and they came back saying that they had even seen a

vision of angels, who said that he was alive.

[24] Some of those who were with us went to the tomb, and found it just as the women had said; but him they did not see."

[25] And he said to them, "O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!

[26] Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?"

[27] And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.

[28] So they drew near to the village to which they were going. He appeared to be going further,

[29] but they constrained him, saying, "Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent." So he went in to stay with them.

[30] When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them.

[31] And their eyes were opened and they recognized him; and he vanished out of their sight.

[32] They said to each other, "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?"

[33] And they rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven gathered together and those who were with them,

[34] who said, "The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!"

[35] Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread.

[36] As they were saying this, Jesus himself stood among them.

[37] But they were startled and frightened, and supposed that they saw a spirit.

[38] And he said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do questionings rise in your hearts?

[39] See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; handle me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have."

[41] And while they still disbelieved for joy, and wondered, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?"

[42] They gave him a piece of broiled fish,

[43] and he took it and ate before them.

[44] Then he said to them, "These are my words which I spoke to you, while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled."

[45] Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures,

[46] and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead,

[47] and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

[48] You are witnesses of these things.

[49] And behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city, until you are clothed with power from on high."

[50] Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them.

[51] While he blessed them, he parted from them, and was carried up into heaven.
[52] And they returned to Jerusalem with great joy,
[53] and were continually in the temple blessing God.

Romans 12.1-21

[1] I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.
[2] Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.
[3] For by the grace given to me I bid every one among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith which God has assigned him.
[4] For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function,
[5] so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.
[6] Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith;
[7] if service, in our serving; he who teaches, in his teaching;
[8] he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who contributes, in liberality; he who gives aid, with zeal; he who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.
[9] Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good;
[10] love one another with brotherly affection; outdo one another in showing honor.
[11] Never flag in zeal, be aglow with the Spirit, serve the Lord.
[12] Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.
[13] Contribute to the needs of the saints, practice hospitality.
[14] Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.
[15] Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.
[16] Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; never be conceited.
[17] Repay no one evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.
[18] If possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all.
[19] Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."
[20] No, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head."
[21] Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

2 Corinthians 12.1-10

[1] I must boast; there is nothing to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord.
[2] I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven -- whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows.
[3] And I know that this man was caught up into Paradise -- whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows --
[4] and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.

[5] On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses.

[6] Though if I wish to boast, I shall not be a fool, for I shall be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me.

[7] And to keep me from being too elated by the abundance of revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to harass me, to keep me from being too elated.

[8] Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me;

[9] but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

[10] For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

Revelation 1.9-18

[9] I John, your brother, who share with you in Jesus the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

[10] I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet

[11] saying, "Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Per'gamum and to Thyati'ra and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to La-odice'a."

[12] Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands,

[13] and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden girdle round his breast;

[14] his head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire,

[15] his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters;

[16] in his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth issued a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.

[17] When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand upon me, saying, "Fear not, I am the first and the last,

[18] and the living one; I died, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.

Revelation 4.1-2

[1] After this I looked, and lo, in heaven an open door! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, "Come up hither, and I will show you what must take place after this."

[2] At once I was in the Spirit, and lo, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne!

Oblation

1) Prayer of self-offering. Oblation is "an offering of ourselves, our lives and labors, in union with Christ, for the purposes of God" (Book of Common Prayer [BCP], p. 857). Christian oblation is based in Christ's one offering of himself for our salvation. The BCP states that oblation is one of the principal kinds of prayer.

2) In reference to the Eucharist, oblation has a broad and generic meaning as well as a narrow and technical meaning. In both cases, oblation is a kind of offering. In the broad sense, oblation refers to any offering—money, bread and wine, self, soul and body—made at the Eucharist. The people's offerings are presented to the deacon or celebrant and placed on the altar for consecration (BCP, p. 361). The elements of bread and wine, consecrated at the Eucharist, are identified with Christ's self-oblation. At the Last Supper, Christ identified the bread with his body and the wine with his blood of the new covenant. Christ's sacrifice is made present in the Eucharist, uniting us in his one offering of himself (BCP, p. 859). The term "oblations" has at times been applied to money (alms) or other gifts that are presented at the Eucharist. However, the Prayer Book rubrics distinguish the oblations of bread and wine from such other gifts. The "oblations of bread and wine" may be presented by the newly baptized or their godparents at the baptismal Eucharist (BCP, p. 313), and by the persons newly confirmed at the Eucharist in a service of Confirmation (BCP, p. 412). One of the offertory sentences provided by the BCP is the bidding, "Let us with gladness present the offerings and oblations of our life and labor to the Lord" (p. 377). In its more technical usage, the term refers to the section of the Eucharistic prayer dealing with offering. The oblation comes after the memorial (anamnesis) and before the invocation of the Spirit (epiclesis) in Eucharistic prayers A, B, and D of the 1979 BCP. For example, Eucharistic Prayer D prays to God the Father, "offering to you, from the gifts you have given us, this bread and this cup, we praise you and we bless you." This prayer of oblation immediately follows the memorial prayer, "Recalling Christ's death and his descent among the dead, proclaiming his resurrection and ascension to your right hand, awaiting his coming in glory . . ." (p. 374).

The life of any Christian is a self-offering to God in gratitude and in loving response to the God who has first so lovingly and graciously offered Himself to us in Jesus Christ.

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“ Conversion as Self-Transcendence Exemplified in the Life of St. Thérèse of Lisieux” Joann Wolski Conn and Walter E. Conn

Christian spiritual life entails neither unqualified self-denial nor unrestricted self-fulfillment, but self-transcendence leading to authentic self-realization.

AFTER much too long a period of neglect, the fundamental spiritual reality of conversion is enjoying something of a mini-fad. A constant flow of writing about it comes forth -- from popular journalistic accounts of cults to scholarly theological analyses of Christian faith. Much of this writing is valuable.(1) Too much of it, however, is lost in the confused dichotomy commonly made between self-sacrifice and self-fulfillment. From the one side we are called to deny our selves, from the other we are urged to realize our full selves. While the gospel call to follow Jesus is often misunderstood as requiring the sacrifice or denial of the self's authentic realization, "pop psychology" has created a self that is essentially a bag of desires, whose realization means fulfilling as many of these desires as possible: "You can never do enough for yourself."(2)

We believe that an authentic Christian interpretation of conversion must be rooted not in self-sacrifice or self-fulfillment but in an understanding of the dynamic reality of self-transcendence as normative for the spiritual life. As an image suggestive of the authentic dynamism of the Christian spiritual life, self-transcendence stands in total opposition to any notion of self-sacrifice as a denial, renunciation, abnegation, or other negation of the self. Without a self, there is no self-transcendence. At the same time, the dynamic image of self-transcendence stands firmly against any idea of self-fulfillment which understands the self as a collection of desires to be fulfilled -- essentially a passive receptacle whose happiness lies in being filled. In contrast to both self-sacrifice and self-fulfillment, self-transcendence proposes the paradoxical claim that authentic self-realization consists, not in the self-centered and illusory attempts either to deny the self or to meet its desires, but in a dynamic movement *beyond* oneself toward the good of others. After a brief further consideration of self-transcendence, we will look to the life of Thérèse of Lisieux to see how a concrete instance of conversion can be interpreted in terms of self-transcendence.

One of the most profound and precise interpretations of self-transcendence has been presented by Bernard Lonergan.(3) According to his analysis, self-transcendence occurs whenever we respond to the radical, questioning drive of the human spirit for meaning, truth, value, and love. As dynamic components in this exigence for reality, questions for understanding seek meaning. But we are not satisfied with just any meaning, for once attained; we critically search for verifying evidence through reflective questioning heading for true judgments. Further, when understanding and judgment are not just speculative but oriented toward action, there follows the moral question of responsibility: Given my best value judgment of what the situation requires, what am I going to do? And last, since actions never occur in isolation but within the total cognitive and affective context of one's character, there remains the fundamental question of one's radical personal orientation: To what, finally, am I going to commit myself in love?

Among the seemingly endless possible realizations of human potential, such cognitive, moral, and affective self-transcendence is the criterion of authentic self-realization. The gospel's call to intelligent, responsible, loving service of the neighbor demands precisely the fulfillment of the radical personal drive for self-transcendence. Faithful response to this interior law of the human spirit is fidelity to the demand of the Christian life because it is response to the divine presence within us.

While self-transcendence occurs in every instance of intelligent, responsible loving, the crucial instances of self-transcendence are those special, life-transforming events we call conversions.(4) In simplest terms, a conversion is an about-face, a reorientation of one's life. We will consider the possibility of conversions as key instances of self-transcendence in the cognitive, moral, affective, and religious dimensions of life. None of these conversions introduces the reality of self-transcendence to a person's life. Rather, they bring the drive for self-transcendence to center stage and give it a starring role. They turn the possible and sporadic into the probable and regular.

TOWARD PERSONAL CONVICTION

Most broadly, cognitive conversion consists of an insight into one's knowing which allows one to take clearer possession of it and thereby transform one's life. Thérèse of Lisieux, for example, manifests a cognitive conversion insofar as she gradually came to the judgment that her own experience and understanding were a truly valid basis for interpreting her own spirituality as authentic. Her locus of cognitive authority shifts from others to herself and her own interpretation of Scripture and spiritual masters. In the nineteenth-century French Carmelite milieu which perpetuated social conformity and adherence to external religious authority, Thérèse shows, in her letters and autobiography, a gentle but firm trust in her own judgments despite the fact that these convictions were misunderstood or not shared by those around her.

Putting in summary form what is a very complex process in Thérèse's life, her cognitive conversion can be seen by noting the remarkable difference in the locus of authority for Thérèse's thinking at three points in her life. Her autobiography recalls how she thought in 1884, four years before entering Carmel:

All my teachers looked upon me as a very intelligent student, but it wasn't like that at Uncle's house [Uncle and Aunt] often spoke highly of the intelligence of others in my presence, but of mine they never said a word, and so I concluded I didn't have any and was resigned to see myself deprived of it.(5) What Thérèse judges to be true is only what others say or imply. Later, in 1891, during her third year in Carmel, she demonstrates some beginning of trust in insights she developed on her own. It is a meager beginning, still dependent on a confessor's reassurance, but very understandably meager, if we remember that the insights were theological and Thérèse, with no more than a ninth grade education, was an eighteen year old novice thinking about God in a way that differed from every sister in her community. When Thérèse told her prioress that the retreat confessor for that year understood her and explicitly confirmed her attraction to a God who could completely accept a person full of faults, the prioress was shocked at this uncommon view of God and forbade Thérèse to return to speak with that priest. Obediently, Thérèse never spoke to him again, yet she firmly retained this image of God (173-74).(6)

Still later she demonstrates a pattern of consistently trusting her own insights and experience. She becomes a kind of "explorer" into Scripture, for example. "I am constantly discovering in [the Gospels] new lights, hidden and mysterious meanings. I

understand and I know from experience that 'the kingdom of God is within you' (179). When she shared her insights with those dearest to her, they consistently misunderstood or disagreed with her. Thérèse made a basic effort to clarify her views; but when misunderstanding continued, she peacefully persevered in her own vision, for example, of spiritual development as spiritual liberty, not as counting acts of virtue or searching for the more difficult act. (207).(7)

Secure in her judgment that her insight into her experience of the "little way" of trusting love was true, she was faithful to this way even in the darkest trial of faith and eventually became source of strength for many others.

BEYOND SELF-SATISFACTION

In its most fundamental form, moral conversion is the choice, based on a realization of the difference between "value" and "what's good for me," of value over satisfaction, as the criterion for decision. The one event in her life which Thérèse explicitly designated as a "conversion" fulfills the criteria of a moral conversion. Many years after the event, Thérèse recalled that on returning from Midnight Mass on Christmas, 1886, she overheard her father express annoyance that at age thirteen Thérèse was still planning to be the center of Christmas customs typical of small children. Thérèse's sister, aware of how unusually sensitive Thérèse was and knowing Thérèse heard their father's remarks, was amazed to see Thérèse joyfully carry on as though she had heard nothing (98).

Thérèse calls this "my complete conversion" because a dramatic change happened, she says, "in an instant." The permanent change in direction is from being a girl who "was really unbearable because of [her] extreme touchiness" to a "strong and courageous" young woman whose "source of tears was dried up and has since reopened rarely and with great difficulty." She who "wasn't accustomed to doing things for [herself]" now experienced "the need to forget [herself] and to please others." She now had a great desire to work for "the conversion of sinners" (97, 99).

Thérèse gives this conversion a religious interpretation, but it is more accurately understood as a moral conversion. This is not to deny genuine religious aspects and implications to the event. Rather, it is to affirm that the basic change of direction Thérèse describes corresponds more closely, in three ways, to that of a moral conversion.

The primary characteristic of moral conversion is the shift from concern for self-satisfaction to a desire for a life devoted to value. Thérèse speaks principally of this event as marking a change in her criterion of decision from self-pity to concern for others. Second, moral conversion is an experience of more adult decisionmaking. A movement out of childhood is precisely the process that Thérèse identifies as most characteristic of this event; it marked her "growing up." Third, the qualities of strength and freedom of decision -- characteristics of moral conversion -- are singled out in Thérèse's later interpretations of this conversion (877, 97).(8)

BECOMING A LOVING PERSON

Unfortunately, moral conversion is not moral perfection. Moral conversion is more a beginning than an end, more a challenge than an achievement. To opt for value as a criterion for decision is one thing; to choose consistently according to it is quite another. If the choice of a life of value is to be effective in the long term, and not be just a short bloomer, it must be supported by affective conversion. For Lonergan, affective conversion is a falling-in-love. Through affective conversion one becomes a being-in-love. To a greater or lesser extent, love establishes itself as a first principle, takes over one's life, and from it "flow one's desires and fears, one's joys and sorrows, one's discernment of values, one's decisions and deeds." (9) Just as one can live for the good of one's beloved, or of one's children, when no sacrifice is too great, one's love can also extend to the entire human family. Jesus' example of a vision in which no one is a stranger can become a reality in one's own life.

Thérèse's life is marked by an ever deepening and expanding and maturing love. At her adolescent moral conversion she said, "I felt charity enter into my soul," a love she wanted, at that time, to express through work for the conversion of sinners. This youthful love was characterized by a certain condescending attitude toward these sinners -- she would reach down to "snatch them from the eternal flames." Nine years later she has become a woman who, in the dryness and darkness of her trial of faith, can lovingly identify herself in a relationship of sisterhood with these sinners, these unbelievers at whose table she is content to eat the bread of sorrow (99, 212).

The reality and development, over the years, of her affective conversion is clear when Thérèse declared that the particular grace of the year 1896 (the year before her death) was to finally understand perfectly what charity was. When meditating on John 15:13, she said: "I understood how imperfect was my love for my Sisters. I saw I didn't love them as God loves them," in their faults and weakness. "I understood above all that charity must not remain hidden . . .," The "more united I am to [Jesus], the more also do I love my Sisters" (220-21).

UNRESERVED SURRENDER TO GOD

A life committed to the gospel call of loving service to the neighbor is the route -- long and difficult -- to fully religious conversion, to falling-in-love with God without limits or qualifications or conditions or reservations. In fulfilling our capacity for self-transcendence, such an unrestricted being-in-love with God is experienced as otherworldly joy, peace, bliss.(10) Falling-in-love involves surrender, and falling-in-love with God involves the most profound surrender -- the surrender of one's deepest (though unadmitted) pretense to absolute autonomy. Such unrestricted, loving surrender allows God to move from the periphery to the center of one's life. Now all of one's life -- indeed, all of reality -- is seen as gift.

In the same year in which Thérèse wrote the autobiographical narrative of her Christmas conversion, she committed herself to an action that epitomized the definition

of religious conversion: total, permanent, unconditional self-surrender in love. On Trinity Sunday, June 9, 1895, she felt strongly inspired to make a total offering of herself to God's merciful love in the form of an Act of Oblation.

In order to live in one single act of perfect Love, I OFFER MYSELF AS A VICTIM OF HOLOCAUST TO YOUR MERCIFUL LOVE, asking You to consume me incessantly, allowing the waves of infinite tenderness shut up within You to overflow into my soul, and that thus I may become a martyr of Your Love, O my God! (277)

The surrender's totality is conveyed through the image of martyrdom. Permanence is implied in the desire that love consume her incessantly. The oblation is framed precisely in terms of love, a framework radically different from most offerings made by nuns in Thérèse's day who gave themselves to God's justice as victims of reparation for outrages of atheism and secularism.

Conversion is usually a gradual process, though its manifestation may be concentrated in a momentous decision or declaration.(11) So it is in Thérèse's case, where her earlier poetry, letters, and autobiographical manuscript manifest an ever deepening love of God. The Act of Oblation becomes the concentrated declaration of that total, loving abandon.

Conversion also means a new beginning that later blossoms in a cumulative sequence of developments.(12) In Thérèse's case, there is a new perspective at the time of the Oblation; then, later, still newer developments. Thérèse affirms that "the grace" of the Act of Oblation was a new understanding about how much Jesus desires to be loved, and a new beginning of being penetrated and surrounded by love. Her surrender was also a principle of later dramatically new experience and insight: the sudden experience, at Easter 1896, of a plunge into a radical trial of faith; and the remarkably new insights this generated regarding the fact of authentic unbelief and her own affirmation of a relationship of sisterhood with unbelievers. She who formerly was afraid of soiling her baptismal robe could later peacefully declare identity with unbelievers and speak of sinners as "us" (180-81, 212).

Thérèse's surrender in love also exemplifies qualities of the particular type of religious conversion that is Christian.(13) For Christians, conversion is God's own love flooding our hearts. Thérèse understands this love to be the focal point of her experience. Christian conversion is rooted in confidence. On her death bed, her hand barely able to hold a pencil, Thérèse wrote, "I go to Him with confidence and love." Heroism is not required for Christian conversion. Rather, the model is a child who takes for granted that it will receive. These are exactly Thérèse's own sentiments: "I am only a child, powerless and weak, and yet it is my weakness that gives me the boldness of offering myself as a victim of Your Love, O Jesus!" (181, 259, 195).

Dying in great pain and the darkness of her trial of faith, Thérèse's last writings are, nevertheless, permeated with a sense of being fulfilled -- filled with the immensity of

love -- and of missionary concern to draw everyone in the world with her into the immensity of this love. Even in emptiness she is fulfilled by reaching out in love.

NOTES

1. One of the best foundational treatments of conversion in the explicit context of spirituality is Donald L. Gelpi, *Experiencing God: A Theology of Human Emergence* (New York: Paulist, 1978). Also see the essays collected in Walter E. Conn ed., *Conversion: Perspectives on Personal and Social Transformation* (New York: Alba House, 1978).
2. For a more complete critical discussion of self-sacrifice and self-fulfillment, including authentic meanings of both in terms of self-transcendence, see our "Self-Transcendence in the Spiritual Life: Thérèse of Lisieux" (a paper presented at the annual meeting of the College Theology Society [Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, Penn., June 4-7, 1981] and to appear in the CTS annual publication, edited by Robert Masson (Chico, CA: Scholars Press 1982]) from which this essay is drawn.
3. See his *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), pp. 104-5, for a quick sketch; also see selected essays in his *Collection*, ed. F. E. Crowe (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), especially pp. 211-67, and *A Second Collection*, ed. W. F. J. Ryan and B. J. Tyrrell (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), especially pp. 69-86, 165-87.
4. For Lonergan on conversion, see *Method in Theology*, pp. 237-43, and "Natural Right and Historical Mindedness," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 51 (1977): 132-43, at 140. In the cognitive dimension, Lonergan focuses on the profound but relatively rare experience of intellectual conversion (philosophical selfappropriation); here we will deliberately consider cognitive conversion in the wider sense of one's discovery of oneself as a knower.
5. *Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux*, trans. John Clarke, O.C.D. (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1975), p. 82. Hereafter page references to *The Autobiography* will be cited parenthetically in the text.
6. See Jean-François Six, *Thérèse de Lisieux au Carmel* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1973), p. 141.
7. See letters of 6 July 1893 and 12 July 1896 in *Collected Letters of St. Thérèse of Lisieux*, ed. Abbé Combes, trans. F. J. Sheed (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1949).
8. See letter of 1 November 1896.
9. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, p. 105.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 243.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 130.
12. *Ibid.*
13. For an elaboration of these characteristics, see Hans Ming, *On Being a Christian* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976), pp. 249-50.

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“Current Trends: Self-Love, Self-Knowledge, and True Humility”, Donald Goergen

ARE self-love and humility compatible? This is just one of the current questions which affect Christian life in the contemporary world. Humility is one of the more prominent virtues in Christian tradition; self-image one of the major concerns of contemporary American society. The spiritual life requires that we recognize the tension as well as the degree of compatibility between the two. There are many expressions that manifest the contemporary theme of self-love: *self-esteem, self-respect, self-concept, self-acceptance, self-fulfillment, self-actualization, self-realization, self-transcendence, self-image*. And there are expressions of a spirit very akin to humility: *mortification, self-sacrifice, self-denial*.

Not only has the world changed in the past twenty years; so have the Christian churches, and noteworthy among them has been the Roman Catholic church since the papacy of John XXIII. If, as a Catholic, I reflect on the recent past, not all the change has been good, nor all bad. If we try to capture popular spirituality prior to the last two decades, we must admit, I would think, a destructive aspect to the way in which humility was frequently understood. It was not explicated in a wrong fashion theologically, but it was frequently understood as if Christian humility were incompatible with liking or loving oneself. To like oneself "too much" seemed to be pride; self-rejection or even self-hatred could parade itself as virtue. It was certainly better to be humble than proud, and taking pride in oneself or one's accomplishments was exactly that -- pride; whereas denigrating oneself was not seen as vicious, in the sense of vice, but more likely a manifestation of the Christian virtue of humility. In our own day perhaps the other extreme has become more common: humility no longer seems a highly valued virtue. Which would we rather have: self-esteem or Christian humility? Perhaps we have come to a point where we can recognize that these two need not be mutually exclusive.

As we recognize that much which passed for humility in the past may indeed have been self-rejection and self-punishment,(1) so we must admit that much which parades as self-love within the present generation is a self-preoccupation and ego-centeredness.(2) We need only observe some of the currents which emphasize human potential, the creative self, self-image, "my" needs, feeling good, sensuality, a "self"-consciousness in contrast to a "social"-consciousness where development means self-development rather than developing nations. Not all of this self-awareness is bad; on the other hand, neither is all of it good.

THE PROBLEM OF THE SELF

The "self" has been one of the valid concerns of modern philosophy. The nature of consciousness has been a concern of nineteenth and twentieth century philosophy and psychology. Greater self-understanding has been a goal of modern existential thought, but a goal in continuity with the early Greek desire for self-knowledge. Initially we must

recognize that part of our problem is the failure in our use of language to do justice to the wide variety of meanings contained within this word self. Is self to be identified with a deeper and inner self, the depth of ourselves, the source of our being, our "soul," so to speak, our spiritual self, or with our conscious self, our self as separate from others, our ego, our personal identity? How is self related to the many aspects of myself -- to my physicality or body, my emotionality or feelings, my mentality or thoughts and choices, my spirituality or capacity for transcendence, my sociality or relationships, my world or cultural roots? Does the word self refer to my "best self," my redeemed self, my natural self, or my "worst self," my sinful self, my pseudo self? Indeed, we see that there are many selves, or at least many meanings of self. The nature of self has been a subject of much discussion in religion and spirituality as well.

Many times the seeming conflict between theology and psychology in this regard reflects the use of the same word for different realities. Moralists can make anger sound evil, yet therapists make the expression of it good. But the seeming contradiction between the two perspectives is not a true contradiction. Two disciplines are using the same word to indicate different realities. The therapist is using the word anger to describe a feeling or emotion; these feelings in themselves are ordinarily neither moral nor immoral; they are indicators of the way in which I experience a reality, situation, or person. Like pain, they tell me something. And it is certainly better to diffuse or give expression to such anger than to let it collect, harden, and become insoluble resentment. But when the moralist speaks of anger, he is not speaking of an emotion in the modern sense but of something that has a hold on our wills, something seldom spoken of or acknowledged in modern psychology.

The moralist is referring to an anger that has a willed or willful aspect, a wishing harm on another; the moralist is concerned with how we express the feeling or felt aspect and transform it into behavior. While an angry feeling is neither moral nor immoral, the way we will to harbor it or reject it, or the way we choose to express it in behavior, usually is. Angry attitudes, behavior, and actions are of moral concern. Expressing anger by shouting in the presence of a therapist or writing in a journal is moral; destroying someone's property or life or reputation is something else, as is bearing and nurturing a grudge against someone.

Thus in themselves the seemingly contrasted perspectives of the therapist and the moralist need not be opposed to each other. Guilt is another excellent example: one word, two realities. The therapist sees guilt as a feeling, feeling bad about myself, feeling negative toward self. But the moralist is talking about a consciousness of responsibility. Owning my response-ability (freedom) implies a willed and controllable factor in personality. Saying "I am guilty" in the sense of "I am responsible" or "I can behave differently" is constructive; saying "I am guilty" in the sense of "I am no good" is not. All of this points to the need we all have to clarify our use of the even more varied ways in which we use the word self. To what reality is one referring when the word is being used?

THE REALITY OF SPIRIT

Before one can go further, however, several other clarifications need to be made with respect to problems that lie behind the conflicts between a psychological point of view and a theological point of view. Not all of the conflicts are simply a question of clarification, for example, anger as an emotion or anger as willed. In addition to a willed aspect to human life, Christians affirm a spiritual aspect. Sometimes these aspects are explicitly denied by modern psychology, or at least unacknowledged or unarticulated. Thus there can be a difference in the starting point as to how to understand the human person. The "voluntary/" and "spiritual" dimensions of personality are not simply to be taken lightly. They pertain strongly to what it means to be human. The contrast ought not be so much between a psychological perspective and a theological one as between a secular perspective and a theistic one. A psychological perspective need not exclude in principle the reality of spirit. The affirmation of the reality of spirit by theological anthropology, in contrast to many secular theories of personality, is the issue. Is there a reality, or an aspect to reality, that can be called spirit?

One has to admit that, even for many contemporary Christians, the reality of spirit is not so clear. Even many Catholics who seek "spiritual" direction would be hard put to explain how this may differ from "psychological" guidance. That there is more to our interior life than psychism alone, that spiritual or religious experience cannot be reduced to psychic experience alone, that the biblical distinction between *psyche* and *pneuma* flows from a valid and experienced perspective is not something all are willing to admit. But it is a significant question in any discussion of the self. The self, for a Christian, cannot be reduced to physicality, emotionality, and mentality alone, nor even to individuality and sociality alone; there is still "more" to me than all of these. A religious psychology in contrast to a secular psychology openly affirms the reality of spirit and the need to incorporate this into any holistic anthropology. Hence, there is a legitimate distinction between the spiritual self and the more empirical dimensions of self. Empirical psychology, moreover, ought not completely ignore the spiritual self. To be a human person is to be spirit as well as flesh, in relationship to God as well as in relationship to the world.

But mention of relationality in reference to God raises our consciousness once again, not only to the perspective of spirit, of our being spiritual, of our "pneumatic" core, but also to faith, that spiritual possibility through which the Divine Spirit enters into contact with the human spirit, that door through which God enters into our lives by our being open and willing to trust in one who transcends our way of being in the world. This is the first meaning of faith -- trusting in God. Before it says anything about a particular way of life or particular system of belief, it is an openness to, and trust in, the Lord. Faith allows the Lord access into our lives through the realm of spirit. Faith establishes not only a new but a new kind of relationship for us. The human person is not only individual and social but also spiritual, not only a nature but also more than a nature. There is more to us than ourselves alone; there is the Lord as well. And sometimes it is not I but he who acts in me. Thus there is my individual self (my uniqueness) and my social self (others who have relationally become a part of me) and my spiritual self (the Divine Presence or Holy Spirit in contact with, and dwelling within, my human spirit which is embodied

within a physical, emotional, mental, and social being rooted in the world and its varying cultures).

Just as spirit, so faith cannot be dismissed. It is a starting point for understanding the lives and the self-understanding of many human beings. But just as spirit and faith, so grace. Proper self-understanding implies that there is "more" to me than "my self" alone, or more to me than my human nature alone; but this supernature, this grace, is intimately tied up with me and who I am. My complete self is my individual self (my individuality), others (my relationality) and also spirit and grace (my spirituality and capacity for self-transcendence into self-actualization and union with God). But this kind of self-actualization does not take place apart from faith and grace. It is not "my/" project alone. It involves others, and a world of others, and the Lord our God. There is no authentic self-actualization apart from spiritualization (which does not mean negation of the power or reality or beauty of matter). Actualization of the spiritual self always involves grace.

THE SEVERAL SELVES

After all this we have come to a point where we can say something more clearly about self-consciousness, about selves-consciousness. This is certainly no exhaustive effort to resolve such questions, but I would like for the sake of simplicity to speak of three uses of the word *self* to refer to (1) my human self, (2) my graced self, and (3) my false self. Let us not try to identify these with disciplines like psychology and theology, nor with world or church, nor with modernity or tradition, nor even with humanism or Christianity. For these set up unnecessary either/or antagonisms. There is much confused thinking in both psychology and theology, in both previous ages and modern times, in both the world and the church -- and all are also our access to Truth. Thus here we need only to attempt to clarify three ways of understanding the self.

The human self. This could just as easily be referred to as "the natural self." It is actually a composite of many selves, a blend of my individual self (my particularity, singularity, and uniqueness) and social self (my relationality with world, other human beings, and God), also a blend of my physical, emotional, mental, sociocultural, and spiritual aspects. It is "me" and my many facets, but "me" as good, as whole, as I can be and often am, a human person as an exemplification of the good that lies within humanity, of human goodness. It is not always the person that I am experiencing, but is a person with its limitations, weaknesses, imperfections -- the multifaceted' aspects of who I am as a human being -- a living, natural, vulnerable, imperfect, good, social individual. This human self, which I feel I sometimes experience, may be something of an abstraction, a reference to a core humanness which exists but is often not experienced existentially. More often I experience the graced self or the false Self.

The graced self. Robert McAfee Brown writes:

To speak of grace is to say that finally our lives are not our own, that we are not only recipients of a gift we did not create, the very gift of life itself, but that throughout our life

we are given gifts we do not deserve -- friends, experiences, joy in the midst of pain -- and that at the end we will be upheld by a power we do not control, promising a fulfillment not of what we have crafted, but of what the giver of grace continually crafts through us, with us, and despite us.(3)

Grace is not really I strictly speaking, but it so fills me, upholds me, permeates me, that there is a unifying grace which can be distinguished from the uncreated grace that God is in Himself. One may recall in my reflections about the desert and beauty in the previous issue of this journal that there is a point where the distinction between transcendence and immanence breaks down, because that which is so transcendent is precisely that which is so immanent. So likewise the distinction between Grace in Himself and actualizing or unifying grace can be a verbal distinction. Grace involves a relationship, and our way of understanding a relationship can help. In a relationship, that which is over there or other than me is also here or within me. Relationally others are a part of me. I am not who I am apart from these others who are a part of me. The experience of grief is literally that of being torn apart. There is more to me than my individual self, my individuality alone. It is now not I but others who are a part of me. Thus, just as a relationship has two poles (the other and me) and I have two poles (the individual me and the other as part of me), so grace manifests that same character -- there are I and the Other as part of me. It is now not I but God in me. Myself includes all three poles: my individual self, my relational self, and my graced self. This grace is both I and not I, as is any other person to whom I am related. As graced I am even more my self than I am as my human self alone. Frequently, when I experience what I think of as my humanity, what in fact I am experiencing is my human self as graced.

The false Self. Frequently it is neither the human self or the graced self that we experience or that is the object of empirical study. Even the object or subject of humanistic psychology is often not the human self but the false Self, the sinful Self, the selfish Self, the egoistic Self, the ego-centered rather than healthily self-centered self. I shall capitalize S when conveying the notion of the egoistic or false Self which exaggerates or misunderstands the self. Thus the contrast between self-love and Self-love is that between an effect of grace or an effect of sin and what it is within me that is being valued. The false Self defines itself over against others rather than in relationship to others, in domination over creation rather than in harmony with creation, to the exclusion or negation of God rather than in relationship to God, as either material or spiritual rather than as psychosomatic, as an ego rather than as participating in something or someone greater than oneself. The false Self is demanding, craving, selfish, hostile, arrogant in contrast to the graced self which is loving, kind, gentle, joyful, peaceful, faithful, patient, and capable of self-control. Given the domineering and dominating force behind or within my false Self, the true self or human self is often at a loss, were it not for grace and for others. Thus it is that my true self, what my human self is and longs to be, cannot readily be distinguished in the concrete from my graced self. For practical purposes, then, we can distinguish between my true, human, graced self, and my false, subhuman, alienated Self.(4)

CHRISTIAN HUMILITY

Now we can return to the question raised about the compatibility of self-love, self-knowledge, and humility. Humility, as traditionally understood, was always seen as true self-knowledge. Well, then, the question is: What is the truth about ourselves? The truth is that I am capable of being both a self and Self, both true and false, both graced and sinful, both human and subhuman. To know myself is to know both sides of myself. It is to know that I am both "OK" and "not OK." Self-knowledge relates to which self I am knowledgeable of and to the knowledge of both selves that I am capable of. Is it now I, or the sin in me, or the grace in me? Love of Self that flows from false Self-knowledge, Self-love, Self-actualization, and Self-esteem is destructive; but self-love, self-actualization, and self-esteem are profoundly Christian. Self-knowledge then, true humility, recognizes the need for both self-love and Self-denial. In fact, the true self grows in inverse proportion to the false Self, or egoism. A narcissistic Self-love, or love of the narcissistic and false Self, must be uprooted for the altruistic self to develop. Thus, when we come to questions about self-esteem and self-actualization, we must ask: Which self do we esteem? Which self do we wish to actualize? True self-knowledge and self-esteem recognize the need for both self-love and Self-denial, both self-affirmation and Self-sacrifice, both self-fulfillment and Self-mortification -- precisely because we are many selves or complex, multifaceted beings.

I attempted to make this point in my discussion of self-esteem in the book *The Power of Love*.⁽⁵⁾ The concept of self-esteem is distorted if we do not see it in a complementary relationship with Self-denial. Which is more important for the Christian, self-esteem or Self-denial? Which is more important, inhaling or exhaling? Part of the difficulty is the way in which we pose the question. Must we speak of a psychological and human value in self-esteem over against a spiritual value in Self-denial? The answer is yes when we conceptualize the problem in an either/or fashion. But a both/and conceptual possibility enables us to see how we can both love ourselves and deny ourselves. A true self-concept does not end in a false ego but in a true humility, true self-knowledge, authentic self-love, freely chosen Self-denial.

A major difficulty in much thought about this topic is a failure to clarify the use of the word *self*. It may be the false, egoistic, selfish Self that is being esteemed, fulfilled, or actualized, and the true, altruistic, graced human self that is being deprived, rejected, or repressed.

This is an important human and religious question: How important am I? Self-importance falsely understood has serious consequences. And this Self-importance can be false in two ways -- either through exaggeration or through underestimation. The tendency in modern secularism is to exaggerate our Self-importance. The tendency in some religious traditions has been to underestimate it. But the truth is: I am both important and not as important as my ego would have me believe.⁽⁶⁾

I am an important person. And I am good. I have worth and value. I have been created in the image of God and I am called to develop that likeness. I can be a "sacrament" of the Lord. I have an important role to play in society, a responsible role that I cannot shirk by falsely underestimating what I can do. The Lord has called me to be a

responsible co-creator of the future. I cannot diminish my part. The Scriptures exhort me to love my neighbor as I love myself. I am important, but it is a self-importance which sees the human person in harmony and relationship to others who are also significant.

But I am also not as important as I sometimes believe. My self-importance must increase, but my Self-importance must decrease. My graced and human selves are important, but it is frequently the false or selfish Self which is the basis of my consciousness, Self-fulfillment, or Self-esteem.

Self-denial is necessary because this Self does not give up easily; my ego grows at the expense of my self. My ego leads me into believing that I am more important than I am, into believing that I am not only a member of the body, but that I am a body all by my Self. And I could be even more if it were not for those others who stand in my way. They are not my brothers and sisters; they are enemies or threats. It is I or we against them. I as ego define myself over against others rather than in harmony with others. As ego, my Self-importance has become a false importance.

Some traditional spiritualities have diminished my self-respect because they identified me with my false Self. But there is more to me than that false Self alone. Some contemporary psychologies exaggerate the need for Self-fulfillment because they do not recognize that there is more to me than the one Self. But again a psychology that is open to spirit, faith, and grace and a spirituality open to the human and natural need not be at odds. It is a question of self-actualization through the power of the Spirit, and Self-denial for the sake of self-growth. Thus we have a self-affirming humility, what humility was intended to be and what true self-love has to be -- aware of sin and grace.

NOTES

1. For the important psychological insight that apparent virtue can mask self-rejection, consider Karl Menninger, *Man Against Himself* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1938).
2. A brief, excellent article which makes us pause and think about our preoccupation with self is that by John Garvey, "Theology on the Knees," *Commonweal*, 24 April 1981, pp. 229-230. Also significant and worthwhile is Paul C. Vitz, *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977). Although Vitz makes a valid point well, he nevertheless overstates his case. At times his perspective reflects a Protestant depreciation of nature rather than the Catholic perspective of grace building on and restoring nature. Also, I would not dismiss the positive value in (or completely associate the cultic selfishness of the "self" movements with) the psychologies of Fromm, Rogers, Maslow, and May. But Vitz does alert us to an important point. Significant discussions of the self which are worthwhile are: Kohut, *The Restoration of the Self* (New York: International Universities Press, 1977); Quentin Anderson, *The Imperial Self, An Essay in American Literary and Cultural History* (New York: Knopf, 1971). Not only can psychology become a religion, but the opposite is also

- true; see Donald Meyer, *Positive Thinkers -- Religion as Pop Psychology from Mary Baker Eddy to Oral Roberts* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1965/1980).
3. Robert McAfee Brown, *Creative Dislocation -- The Movement of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), p. 80.
 4. From a biblical and theological point of view, some of these points are best made by Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *Becoming Human Together* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1977). He readily uses the word subhuman to describe the Pauline perspective of the one in sin.
 5. Donald Goergen, *The Power of Love* (Chicago: The Thomas More Press, 1979). Pages 42-72 discuss self-esteem and self-love. Pages 69-72 in particular point to the needed complementarity between self-esteem and self-denial in order to have a valid Christian perspective. Pages 268-80 discuss the thinking in terms of complementarity, in terms of both/and rather than either/or.
 6. Christ himself is the example of true humility in the Epistle to the Philippians, 2:1-11.

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<http://www.spiritualitytoday.org/spir2day/823426goergen.html>

The Work of Thomas Merton

The True Self

"It is not humility to insist on being someone that you are not.

It is as much as saying that you know better than God

who you are and who you ought to be.

How do you expect to arrive at the end of your own journey

if you take the road to another man's city?

How do you expect to reach your own perfection by leading somebody else's life:?

His sanctity will never be yours;

you must have the humility to work out your own salvation in a darkness

where you are absolutely alone...

And so it takes heroic humility to be yourself and to be nobody but the man,

or the artist, that God intended you to be.

You will be made to feel that your honesty is only pride.

This is a serious temptation because you can never be sure

whether you are being true to your true self or only building up a defense

for the false personality that is the creature of your own appetite for esteem.

But the greatest humility can be learned from the anguish

of keeping your balance in such a position:

of continuing to be yourself without getting tough about it

and asserting your false self against the false selves of other people."

Thomas Merton, *The New Seeds of Contemplation*, *New Directions Publishing Co.*
1961, p. 100-101

In his book, Life and Holiness, Merton defines sin:

"Sin is the refusal to be what we were created to be -- (children) of God, images of God. Ultimately sin, while seeming to be an assertion of freedom, is a flight from the freedom and responsibility of divine (childhood)."

The word "sin" literally means "to miss the mark." And the mark we miss when we abandon ourselves to the allure of sin is our true self. Merton wrote often about the battle between the "false self" we so often hide behind to shield ourselves from pain and painful truths, and the "true self," the self God created for union with himself.

In New Seeds of Contemplation, Merton wrote,

"All sin starts with the assumption that my false self, the self that exists only in my egocentric desires, is the fundamental reality of life to which everything else in the universe is ordered."

So if sin has its roots in the false self, where do I find who I really am? Again from New Seeds of Contemplation:

"The secret of my identity is hidden in the love and mercy of God...If I find him I will find myself and if I find my true self I will find him...The only one who can teach me to find God is God himself, alone. "

"Sin is the refusal to be what we were created to be -- (children) of God, images of God. Ultimately sin, while seeming to be an assertion of freedom, is a flight from the freedom and responsibility of divine (childhood)."

"The Meaning Of The Contemplative Life According To Thomas Merton"

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This title for this paper might seem rather pretentious. It is certainly not possible to determine the meaning of the contemplative life in one talk. Yet perhaps we can look at this from some of the aspects that Fr. Louis, as we knew Thomas Merton, treated in his many writings. For basically one can say that everything that Merton wrote was a development of his basic theme of "What is Contemplation?" Whether he was explicitly writing on prayer, monastic life, liturgy, the Psalms or on civil rights, peace and war, nuclear disarmament or ancient cultures, he was expressing the fullness of the nature of contemplation. For contemplation for Merton was not simply one aspect of life, still less some esoteric phenomenon attainable by only a few in life. For him, contemplation was the fundamental reality in life. It was what made life real and alive. It was what makes us to be truly human.

Perhaps we can begin by looking at a few descriptive definitions of contemplation given by Merton in one of his last works: The New Man

"Contemplation is the perfection of love and knowledge."
(p.13)

"Contemplation goes beyond concepts and apprehends God not as a separate object but as the Reality within our reality, the Being within our being, the life of our life. 11 (P.19)

"Contemplation is a mystery in which God reveals Himself as the very center of our own inmost self." (ibid.)

"Contemplation is the highest and most paradoxical form of self realization, attained by apparent self-annihilation."
(ibid.) (1)

These quotes show us the mature Merton in his approach to contemplation. Yet they remain in continuity with the body of his writings. In a much earlier work entitled: What is Contemplation?, Merton had written:

Why do we think of the gift of contemplation, infused contemplation, mystical prayer, as something essentially strange and esoteric reserved for a small class of almost unnatural beings and prohibited to everyone else? It is perhaps because we have forgotten that contemplation is the work of the Holy Spirit acting on our souls through His gifts of Wisdom and Understanding with special intensity to increase and perfect our love for Him. These gifts are part of the normal equipment of Christian sanctity. They are given to us at Baptism, and if they are given it is presumably because God wants them to be developed.... But it is also true that God often measures His gifts by our desire to receive them, and by our cooperation with His grace, and the Holy Spirit will not waste any of His gifts on people who have little or no interest in them. (2)

God, then, has created us to share in His own life. He has given Himself to us as the very source of our being. Not only that, but He has chosen to dwell in this very being of ourselves and to give us as share in His own knowing and loving of all creation and all beings. Merton says:

The seeds of this sublime life are planted in every Christian at Baptism. But seeds must grow and develop before you reap the harvest. There are thousands of Christians walking about the face of the earth bearing in their bodies the infinite God of whom they know practically nothing. They are themselves children of God, and are not aware of their identity. Instead of seeking to know

themselves and their true dignity, they struggle miserably to impersonate the alienated characters whose "greatness" rests on violence, craftiness, lust and greed. ... God does not manifest Himself to these souls because they do not seek Him with any real desire. ... But desire is the most important thing in the contemplative life. Without desire we will never receive the great gifts of God. (3)

The basis for such statements is Merton's understanding of the nature of the human person and also the nature of the Incarnation of God in Christ. Following the Greek Fathers of the Church, in many respects the true meaning of the Incarnation is perhaps one of the least understood of the Mysteries of our Faith. Christ did not become Man simply in order to perform a work of redemption, freeing us from sin and from hell. The Fathers frequently say: "God became man in order that man might become God". Christ became man in order to reveal to us our own true nature and to empower us to live as children of God. Contemplation is simply living out this mystery, not only in prayer, but in our whole life. Merton says:

If the Son of Man came to seek and save that which was lost", this was not merely in order to reestablish us in a favorable juridical position with regard to God: it, was to elevate, change and transform us humans into God, in order that God might be revealed in Man, and that all people might become One Son of God in Christ. The New Testament texts in which this mystery is stated are unequivocal, and yet they have been to a very great extent ignored not only by the faithful but also by the theologians. The Greek and Latin Fathers never made this mistake! For them, the mystery of the hypostatic union, or the union of the divine and human nature in the One Person of the Word, the God-Man, Jesus Christ, was not only a truth of the greatest, most revolutionary and most existential actuality, but it was the central truth of all being and all history. It was the key which alone could unlock the meaning of everything else, and even the inner and spiritual significance of the human person, of his actions as an individual and in society, of the world, and of the whole cosmos. (4)

As Merton says: "the very first step to a correct understanding of contemplation is to grasp clearly the unity of God and Man in Christ, which of course presupposes the equally crucial unity of man in himself." (ibid.) This, however, remains as the fundamental problem. For we are not in unity within ourselves. As a result of the fall of Adam and its effects on all humanity through all time, we find ourselves divided. We are much more aware of that "false self" which is identified with all our efforts at situating ourselves in a hierarchy of power, prestige and greatness ("like unto God" (Gen. 3:5). This "false self" is preoccupied with whatever will make us "look better" in the eyes of others and of ourselves.

This "false self" can even look at contemplation as a means to aggrandize ourselves. Merton cautions with some humor:

If such an "I" one day hears about "contemplation" he will perhaps set himself to "become a contemplative". That is, he will wish to admire in himself something called contemplation. And in order to see it, he will reflect on his alienated self. He will make contemplative faces at himself like a child in front of a mirror. He will cultivate the contemplative look that seems appropriate to him, and that he likes to see in himself. And the fact that his busy narcissism is turned within and feeds upon itself in stillness and secret love will make him believe that this is contemplation. (5)

Such an endeavor is condemned to failure from the start because it is simply our knowing of ourselves, whereas contemplation is God's own knowing of Himself in and through us. The inner self, he says "is not a part of our being, like a motor in a car. It is our entire substantial reality itself, on its highest and most personal and most existential level." (ibid.)

Merton belonged to an Order that is called contemplative. But he was not addressing his writings only to monks. He wrote for all people everywhere. He fully realized, as one of his books is entitled, that "No Man is an Island". The fact that God became man means that every person is called to this life of contemplation which is the realization of our true nature. In the life of the Church, however, certain Orders are called "contemplative" because of the particular way they gear their life and the means they use in order to live as fully as possible at the level of an awareness of this inner nature. Traditionally the Fathers of the Church have seen this expressed in the Gospel passage about Martha and Mary. Martha was busy with many things in preparing the meal for the Lord. But Mary remained at his feet, intent on His words. And the Lord Himself declared that "Mary has chosen the better part". The Fathers frequently interpreted this as a proof of the higher vocation of the contemplative who dedicates one's Life to search for God in prayer and reflection. In actual fact, however, not all of the Fathers took this same interpretation. St. Bernard of Clairvaux, one of our first and the greatest of our Cistercian Fathers, interpreted this in relation to the monastic community itself, but he extended it to include the brother, Lazarus, in the scene where Jesus eats with the three after having raised Lazarus from the tomb. Bernard says that every monastic community has its Marthas who are intent on the activities of the monastery, its Marys who are seeking primarily the leisure of prayer and reading, and its Lazarus who live their lives in a spirit of repentance from sin and past follies. But ultimately he finds all three within each monk. Contemplation binds these three into one family who can live in harmony and love.

The problem with defining contemplative life on a juridical level is that one can center on the externals of the life, and even more specifically on the negative elements of the life.

Merton recognizes this problem in the history of monasticism:

In the past, the contemplative life was proposed in a rather rigid formal sort of way. You entered the contemplative life by making a list of things which you were going to drop, so to speak. You took the world and all its possibilities and you just crossed everything off the list. You crossed off the joys of human love, you crossed off the joys of art, music, secular literature, enjoyment of the beauties of nature. ...The one thing necessary is not that which is left when everything is crossed off, but it is perhaps that which includes and embraces everything else. that which is arrived at when you've added up everything and gone far beyond.(6)

And yet Merton chose a contemplative monastery and remained in that vocation until his death. His reason for this was simply that he discerned that this way of life provided him with those conditions which best suited him and his temperament in striving to live on the level of his "true self" - that self that each one is in God and which each one is called to live out in their life vocation. The monk chooses a monastic way of contemplative life not because he hates or fears the world or people or pleasure, but because he finds it helps him to discover and live out his life on a level of truth - truth to himself and truth to God and to others. He said:

It is not enough to keep monks strictly enclosed and remote from all external activity - this does not itself constitute a sign of the eschatological kingdom. On the contrary, very often this limitation constitutes a serious impoverishment of the personality of the monks and at the same time prevents that impoverishment from becoming public! It is of course true that solitude and silence contribute very much to the ends for which monastic communities exist. But the fact remains that people are called to the monastic life so that they may grow and be transformed, "reborn" to a new and more complete identity, and to a more profoundly fruitful existence in peace, in wisdom, in creativity, in love. When rigidity and limitation becomes ends in themselves they no longer favor growth, they stifle it. (7)

The purpose of monastic practice must be to bring one to what he called "Final Integration". He drew this term from the writing of a Persian psychologist named Reza Arasteh. Merton developed the ideas of this man by showing that he was not speaking of some psychological reality alone. He is speaking of that which brings every person into touch with their true universal nature, their true bond with all peoples and all cultures and the experiences of all.

The one who has attained final integration is no longer

limited by the culture in which he has grown up. "He has embraced all of life." He passes beyond all these limiting forms, while retaining all that is best and most universal in them, finally giving birth to a fully comprehensive self. He accepts not only his own community, his own society, his own friends, his own culture, but all humanity. He does not remain bound to one limited set of values in such a way that he opposes them aggressively or defensively to others. He is fully "Catholic" in the best sense of the word. He has a unified vision and experience of the one truth shining out in all its various manifestations, some clearer than others, some more definite and more certain than others. He does not set these partial views up in opposition to each other, but unifies them in a dialectic or an insight of complementarity. With this view of life he is able to bring perspective, liberty and spontaneity into the lives of others. The finally integrated person is a peacemaker, and that is why there is such a desperate need for our leaders to become such persons of insight. (ibid.p.212)

As Merton shows, this kind of final integration applies not only to monks but to all:

As Dr. Arasteh points out, whereas final integration was, in the past the privilege of a few, it is now becoming a need and aspiration of humanity as a whole. The whole world is in an existential crisis to which there are various reactions, some of them negative, tragic, destructive, demonic, others proffering a human hope that is yet not fully clear. (ibid.)

It is this new hope that is leading many today to seek for contemplation. We implicitly realize that the task ahead of all of us is too large for our own wisdom and insights and abilities. We speak of a "new world order" and yet we see the world turning into the turmoil of Bosnia and Somalia and other places. Yet this very awareness of our own inability to face this new future is itself our greatest hope. For it allows one to face our own limitations and to accept what Merton calls our own nothingness. However this nothingness is not just a negative thing. It is something positive. Merton speaks of this in relation to the contrast between what he calls the "sacred" and the "secular". This distinction was spoken of a great deal in recent years by theologians who tried to delineate between what is the realm of God and what is the realm of the "world". Merton, however, carries this further and shows how both categories are found within ourselves.

"Secular" society is by its nature committed to what Pascal calls "diversion", that is, to movement which has, before all else, the anaesthetic function of quieting our anguish. All society, without exception, tends to be in some

respect "secular". But a genuinely secular society is one which cannot be content with innocent escapes from itself. More and more it tends to need and to demand, with insatiable dependence, satisfaction in pursuits that are unjust, evil, or even criminal. Hence the growth of economically useless businesses that exist for profit and not for real production, that create artificial needs which they fill with cheap and quickly exhausted products. Hence the wars that arise when producers compete for markets and sources of raw material. Hence the nihilism, despair and destructive anarchy that follows war and then the blind rush into totalitarianism as an escape from despair.

In the sacred society, on the other hand, the person admits no dependence on anything lower than himself, or even outside himself in a spatial sense. His only Master is God. Only when God is our Master can we be free, for God is within ourselves as well as above ourselves. He rules us by liberating us from our dependence on created things outside us. We use and dominate them, so that they exist for our sakes, and not we for theirs. There is no purely sacred society except in heaven. (8)

The problem is that it is painful to face this letting go of our illusions. To face this area means facing our own inner doubts, our own fears, our own anguish. And yet -such is necessary in order to enter into contemplation or even into true life. Merton says:

The truly sacred attitude toward life is in no sense an escape from the sense of nothingness that assails us when we are left alone with ourselves.

On the contrary, it penetrates into that darkness and that nothingness, realizing that the mercy of God has transformed our nothingness into His temple and believing that in our darkness His light has hidden itself. Hence the sacred attitude is one which does not recoil from our own inner emptiness, but rather penetrates it with awe and reverence, and with the awareness of mystery. This is a most important discovery in, the interior life. (ibid.)

Merton applies this to the coming to final integration. Following Dr. Arasteh he speaks of this Breakthrough in the language of Sufism and calls it "Fana", annihilation or disintegration, a loss of self, a real spiritual death. This leads us into the traditional way of seeing contemplation as a sharing in the Paschal Mystery of Christ: His death and resurrection. The Scriptures constantly remind us of this theme. "Unless the grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone. But if it dies, it bears much fruit." (Jo 12:24). "to live is Christ; to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21). This dying and rising is part and

parcel of our very Christian life. But it is particularly an essential part of entering into the life of contemplation. Merton says:

This change of perspective is impossible as long as we are afraid of our own nothingness, as long as we are afraid of fear, afraid of poverty, afraid of boredom - as long as we run away from ourselves. What we need is the gift of God which make us able to find in ourselves not just ourselves but Him: and then our nothingness becomes His all. This is not possible without the liberation effected by compunction and humility. It requires not talent, not mere insight, but sorrow, pouring itself out in love and trust. (ibid.)

St. Paul had spoken of this in other terms when he discussed the wisdom of God and the wisdom of the world. In I Corinthians he said:

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For the foolishness of God is wiser than men and the weakness of God is stronger than men. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption; therefore, AS IT IS WRITTEN, "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord." (I Cor. 1:18-30 passim)

It is in the wisdom of God that we can let go of our own false self, that we can die to ourselves in order that the power of God can live in us. The wisdom of the world fears abasement, rejection inner poverty and having to face our own shadows. But Christ embraced these things. He "emptied Himself" and because of this he was exalted. So we also are exalted in Him. For then the contemplative becomes a living expression of Christ in the world. As St. Augustine says, the Christian becomes the arms and hands and feet and voice of Christ in the world. Only then can one can ourselves and one another in this light of Christ. Only then can one "look upon the crowd with compassion" (Mt. 14:14)

All of this is brought about by the power of the Holy Spirit - the Spirit of Christ in us. This binds us in a oneness which exceeds anything that we might imagine. We do not have to reflect on it, we need only live it. Merton says:

We cannot get too deep into the mystery of our oneness in Christ. It is so deep as to be unthinkable and yet a little thought about it doesn't hurt. But it doesn't help too much either. The thing is, that we are not united in a

thought of Christ or a desire of Christ, but in His Spirit. (9)

Merton saw this as his own vocation in a special way. Already in 1951 he said:

Do you suppose I have a spiritual life? I have none, I am indigence, I am silence, I am poverty, I am solitude, for I have renounced spirituality to find God, and He it is who preaches loud in the depths of my indigence, saying: "I will pour out my spirit upon my children and they will spring up among the herbs as willows besides the running waters". (Is. 44:3-4). I die of love for you, Compassion: I take you for my Lady, as Francis married poverty I marry you, the Queen of hermits and the Mother of the poor. (10)

This compassion was the fruit of contemplation and the living sign of its presence within one. As Jesus said, "By this shall all know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (Jo. 13:35). True contemplation does not isolate one, even in solitude. true contemplation binds all together in -that love which Christ came to demonstrate. But the reverse holds true as well. True love and compassion brings us to a fuller awareness of the importance of contemplation in our lives. Its importance is not for ourselves alone, but for all peoples. In the Inner Experience Merton said that in our age -perhaps in a special way the contemplative is called to be, like Christ, a Suffering Servant.

The contemplative is one who is, 'like the Servant of Yahweh, "acquainted with infirmity", not only with his own sin but with the sin of the whole world, which he takes upon himself because he is a human among humans, and cannot dissociate himself from the sins of others. The contemplative life in our time is therefore modified by the sins of our age. They bring down upon us a cloud of darkness far more terrible than the innocent night of unknowing. It is the night of the soul which has descended on the whole world. Contemplation, in the age of Auschwitz and Dachau and other places is something darker and more fearsome than contemplation in the age of the Fathers. For that very reason, the urge to seek a path of spiritual light can be a subtle temptation to sin. (11)

This is not said in order to become melodramatic, but to be realistic in our approach to what contemplation is. It is not something which we will be able to see or even experience in any dramatic way. It is a life of faith, hope and love and as Paul says "hope that is seen is not hope. But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words." (Rom 8:24-26). Contemplation is the action of the Spirit within the heart of every person, it is the yearning of the Spirit for that-new creation which we become in contemplation. It is the fulfillment of that prayer of Jesus who prayed that we might all be one in Him as He is one in the Father and the Holy Spirit. (Jo.17:20-23).

Every person is called to this contemplation. Irrespective of whether one ever has any kind of extraordinary experience or not, irrespective of whether one finds God in light or in darkness, in joy or in sorrow, each person is called to live out this mystery of Christ in his or her own life.- It is not limited to monks or religious, not even to Christians or believers. It is intended for all, and only in that can we find our true fulfillment.

Merton certainly realized that seeking such a life and such a way of seeing and experiencing life is not easy for many people who live in the world, whose lives are filled with daily pressures of family, work and myriad of responsibilities. However he did point out several ways that even such people can strive to come to contemplation. In the Inner Experience he spelled out something of a program for such people. He suggested that people who are seeking a contemplative life should form groups to support one another in this endeavor to foster and protect something of an elementary contemplative spirituality. He says that the already existing movements interested in liturgy and the study of Scripture could help in this direction. He encourages contemplative monasteries themselves to help in this, striving not only to provide places for retreat and withdrawal, but to form groups of people who can help and support one another in something like a contemplative Third Order. Such groups could provide their members with books, conferences, direction and perhaps a quiet place in the country where they could go for a few days of meditation and prayer. But he cautions:

if you are waiting for someone to come along and feed you the contemplative life with a spoon, you are going to wait for a long time, especially in America. You had better renounce your inertia, pray for a little imagination, ask the Lord to awaken your creative freedom and consider some of the following possibilities. (12)

He then goes on to indicate five possibilities which might be considered:

1) He says that it might be possible by the sacrifice of seemingly good economic opportunities, you could move into the country or to a small town where you can have more time to think. This might involve the acceptance of a relative poverty; if so, all the better for your interior life. The sacrifice could be a real liberation from the pitiless struggle which is the source of most of your worries.

2) Wherever you may be, it is always possible to give yourself the benefit of those parts of the day which are quiet because the world does not value them. One of these is the earlier morning hours. Even if a person cannot put a few hundred miles between himself and the city, if he can get up earlier in the morning he will have the whole place to himself, and taste something of the peace of solitude. One thinks of the movements for Centering prayer with the encouragement to spend twenty minutes in the early morning and again, if possible in the evening in centering oneself before the Lord in a prayer which is wordless and which enables one to hold on to the Lord by a simple "word" to bring our wandering minds back before the Lord. He encourages one to go to early Mass, even though the later ones may be more splendid and solemn. At the earlier Mass, things are quieter, more sober, more somber, more austere. The poor go to early

Mass, because they have to get to work sooner. And Christ is more truly with the poor; His spiritual presence among them makes their Mass the more contemplative one.

3) He says that it should be obvious that Sunday, is set apart by nature and by tradition of the Church as a day of contemplation. Puritan custom tended to make Sunday seem a negative sort of "Sabbath" characterized more by the things one "must not" do. The inevitable reactions against this has stressed the legitimate, but more or less insignificant, recreations that make Sunday a day of rest for the body as well as for the spirit. Sunday is the "Lord's Day" not in the sense that on one day of the week one must stop and think of Him, but because it breaks into the ceaseless "secular" round of time with a burst of light out of a sacred eternity. We stop working and rushing about on Sunday not only in order to rest up and start over again on Monday, but in order to collect our wits and realize the relative meaninglessness of the secular business which fills the other six days of the week, and taste the satisfaction of a peace which surpasses understanding and which is given us by Christ. Sunday is a contemplative day not just because Church law demands that every Catholic assist at Mass, but because everyone who celebrates this day spiritually, and accepts it at its face value, opens their heart to the light of Christ the light of the Resurrection. In so doing they grow in love, in faith and are able to see a little more of the mystery of Christ. Simple fidelity to this obvious duty, realization of this gift of God to us, will certainly help the harassed lay person to take their first steps on the path to a kind of contemplation.

4) No matter where one seeks the light of contemplation one commits one's self by that very fact to a certain spiritual discipline. This is just as true outside the cloister as in it. But it would be a mistake for a man or woman with all the obligations and hardships of secular life, to try to live in the world like a monk. To try to do this would be an illusion. Active virtue and good works play a large part in the contemplative life that is lived in the world, and for this reason the discipline of the contemplative in the world is first of all the discipline of fidelity to their duty of state - to their obligations as a head of a family, as ,very great sacrifices. Perhaps indeed some of the difficulties of people in the world exact from them greater sacrifice than they would find in a cloister. In any case, their contemplative life will be deepened and elevated by the depth of their understanding of their duties. Mere conformism and lip service is not enough. It is not sufficient to "be a good Catholic". One must penetrate the inner meaning of the life in Christ and see the full significance of its demands. One must carry -out the obligations not simply as a matter of form, but with a real, personal decision to offer the good one does to God, in and through Christ. The virtue of a Christian is something creative and spiritual, not simply a fulfillment of a law. It must be penetrated and filled with the newness, the Christlikeness, which comes from the action of the Spirit of God in their hearts, which elevates their smallest good act to an entirely spiritual level. But, he cautions, this must entail more than simply verbalizing one's "purity of intention".

5) It follows from this that for the married person, their married life is essentially bound up with their contemplation. It is by marriage that such ones are situated in the mystery of Christ. It is by their marriage that they bear witness to Christ's love for the world, and in their marriage that they experience both the trials and the joys of love. Their marriage

is a sacramental center from which grace radiates out into every department of their lives, and consequently it is their marriage that will enable their work, their leisure, their sacrifices and even their distractions to become in some degree contemplative. For by their marriage all these things are ordered to Christ and centered in Christ. It should above all be emphasized that for the married person, even and especially their sharing of married sexual love enters into their contemplation, and this, as a matter of fact, gives it a special character. The union of husband and wife in nuptial love is a sacred and symbolic act, the very nature of which signifies the mystery of the union of God and human in Christ. Now this mystery is the very heart and substance of contemplation. Hence married love is a kind of material and it is a blind, simple groping way of expressing our need to be utterly and completely one. The Fathers of the Church thought that before the fall Adam and Eve were literally two _in one flesh_, that is to say, they were one single being, that human nature, united with God, was whole and complete in itself. But after the fall they were divided into two and therefore sought by sexual love to recover this lost unity. But this desire is ever frustrated by original sin. The fruit of sexual love is not perfection, not completeness, but only the birth of another Adam or another Eve, frail, exiled, incomplete. But the coming of Christ has exercised the futility and despair of the children of Adam. Christ has married human nature, united man and woman and God in Himself, in one Person. In Christ, the completeness we were born for is realized. In Him' all are one in the perfection of charity.

Merton concludes this section of his writing by saying that contemplation must not be confused with abstraction. A contemplative life is not to be lived by permanent withdrawal within one's own mind.

"The true contemplative is not less interested than others in normal life, not less concerned with what goes on in the world, but more interested, more concerned. The fact that he or she is a contemplative makes them capable of a greater interest and a deeper concern. The contemplative has the inestimable gift of appreciating at their real worth values that are permanent, authentically deep, human, truly spiritual and even divine. Their mission is to be a complete and whole person, with an instinctive and generous need to further the same wholeness in others, and in all humanity. They arrive at this, however, not by superior gifts and talents, but by the simplicity and poverty which are essential to their state because these alone keep one traveling in the way that is spiritual, divine and beyond understanding. (13)

Thomas Merton, then, presents to us both the great loftiness of contemplation and at the same time the simple ordinariness of it. It is not something that we do of ourselves, but which Christ does in us if we are poor of heart and ready to receive it from Him. For then He brings us to that original unity in which He created us and He is able to truly exert His Love, His Providence and His care for us, one and all. In that way we become the children of God that we are.

Fr. James Conner, OCSO
October 23, 1993
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FOOTNOTES

1. *The New Man*, Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, New York, 1961
 2. *What is Contemplation?*, Templegate Publishers, Springfield, IL. 1950. p.8.
 3. *Inner Experience*, unpublished MS., Abbey of Gethsemani, p. 35. Also found in *What is Contemplation?*, p. 16 & 23.
 4. *Inner Experience*, p. 28.
 5. *ibid.*, p. 5.
 6. *Contemplation in a World of Action*, Doubleday & Co., Inc. Garden City, N.Y., 1965, P. 341. in chapter "Is the Contemplative Life Finished?"
 7. *ibid.*, p. 207-208. Chapter: "Final Integration".
 8. I.E., op. cit., p. 37-38.
 9. *Hidden Ground of Love, Letters of Merton*. Farrar, Straus, Giroux,, New York, 1985, p. 360.
 10. *The Sign of Jonas*, Harcourt, Bruce & Co., N.Y., 1953, p. 334.
 - ii. I. E., op. cit., p. 55.
 12. *ibid.*, p. 68-69.
 13. *ibid.*, p. 69 ff.
- <http://essenenes.net/merton.html>

The Priesthood of Man in Christ

"To name a thing, in other words, is to bless God for it and in it. And in the Bible to bless God is not a 'religious' or a 'cultic' act, but the very way of life. God blessed the world, blessed man, blessed the seventh day (that is, time), and this means that He filled all that exists with His love and goodness, made all this 'very good.' So the only natural (and not 'supernatural') reaction of man, to whom God gave this blessed and sanctified world, is to bless God in return, to thank Him, to see the world as God sees it and – in this act of gratitude and adoration – to know, name and possess the world. All rational, spiritual and other qualities of man distinguishing him from other creatures have their focus and ultimate fulfillment in this capacity to bless God, to know, so to speak, the meaning of the thirst and hunger that constitute his life. 'Homo Sapien', 'Homo Faber'... yes, but first of all, 'Homo adorans'. The first, the basic definition of man is that he is the priest. He stands in the center of the world and unifies it in his act of blessing God, of both receiving the world from God and offering it to God — and by filling the world with this Eucharist, he transforms his life, the one that he receives from the world, into life in God, into communion with Him. The world was created as the 'matter,' the material of one all-embracing eucharist, and man was created as the priest of this cosmic sacrament...

To love is not easy, and mankind has chosen not to return God's love. Man has loved the world, but as an end in itself and not as transparent to God. He has done it so consistently that it has become something that is 'in the air.' It seems natural for man to experience the world as opaque, and not shot through with the presence of God. It

seems natural not to live a life of thanksgiving for God's gift of a world. It seems natural not to be eucharistic... The natural dependence of man upon the world was intended to be transformed constantly into communion with God in whom is all life. Man was to be the priest of a eucharist, offering the world to God, and in this offering he was to receive the gift of life. But in the fallen world man does not have the priestly power to do this... He knows he is dependent on that which is beyond him. But his love and his dependence refer only to the world itself. He does not know that breathing can be communion with God... When we see the world as an end in itself, everything becomes itself a value and consequently loses all value, because only in God is found the meaning (value) of everything, and the world is meaningful only when it is the 'sacrament' of God's presence. Things treated merely as things in themselves destroy themselves because only in God have they any life... Man lost the eucharistic life, he lost the life of life itself, the power to transform it into Life. He ceased to be the priest of the world and became its slave...

But it is the Christian gospel that God did not leave man in his exile, in the predicament of confused longing. He had created man 'after his own heart' and for Himself, and man has struggled in his freedom to find the answer to the mysterious hunger in him. In this sense of radical unfulfillment God acted decisively: into the darkness where man was groping toward Paradise, He sent light. He did so not as a rescue operation, to recover lost man: it was rather for the completing of what He had undertaken from the beginning. God acted so that man might understand who He really was and where his hunger had been driving him. The light God sent was His Son: the same light that had been shining unextinguished in the world's darkness all along, seen now in full brightness...

Man was created priest of the world, the one who offers the world to God in a sacrifice of love and praise and who, through this eternal eucharist, bestows the divine love upon the world. Priesthood, in this sense, is the very essence of manhood, man's creative relation to the 'womanhood' of the created world. And Christ is the one true Priest because He is the one true and perfect man. He is the new Adam, the restoration of that which Adam failed to be. Adam failed to be the priest of the world, and because of this failure the world ceased to be the sacrament of the divine love and presence, and became an organized transaction with the supernatural, and the priest was set apart as the 'transactor,' as the mediator between the natural and the supernatural... But Christ revealed the essence of priesthood to be love and therefore priesthood to be the essence of life. He died the last victim of the priestly religion, and in His death the priestly religion died and the priestly life was inaugurated... If there are priests in the Church, if there is the priestly vocation in it, it is precisely in order to reveal to each vocation its priestly essence, to make the whole life of all men the liturgy of the Kingdom, to reveal the Church as the royal priesthood of the redeemed world...

To be truly man means to be fully oneself. The confirmation (sacrament) is the confirmation of man in his own unique 'personality.' It is, to use again the same image (of priesthood), his ordination to be himself, to become what God wants him to be, what He has loved in me from all eternity. It is the gift of vocation. If the Church is truly the

'newness of life' – the world and nature as restored in Christ – it is not, or rather ought not be, a purely religious institution in which to be 'pious,' to be a member in 'good standing,' means leaving one's own personality at the entrance – in the 'check room' – and replacing it with a worn-out, impersonal, neutral 'good Christian' type personality. Piety in fact may be a very dangerous thing, a real opposition to the Holy Spirit who is the Giver of Life – of joy, movement and creativity – and not of the 'good conscience' which looks at everything with suspicion, fear and moral indignation. Confirmation is the opening of man to the wholeness of divine creation, to the true catholicity of life. This is the 'wind,' the ruah of God entering our life, embracing it with fire and love, making us available for divine action, filling everything with joy and hope... (an restoring us into the priests we were created to be)."

Excerpted from For the Life of the World, Alexander Schmemmann