

SPIRITUALITY AND ECCLESIAL REFORM AND RENEWAL

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INTRODUCTION

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) called for church renewal and reform. Renewal is interior, reform external. As a first generation post-Vatican II priest, I recall the enthusiasm with which we went about implementing the insights and decrees of that Council. New winds were blowing and it was refreshing and exciting for us change-agents. At my 20th anniversary of ordination, I recall making a television program based upon which I considered to have been the principal energy of those two decades: Change in the Church.

Now, 42 years after my ordination and in the first year of my retirement, I look back and sense a missing piece. Or perhaps better said, the wrong ordering of things. We went about the external reforms but perhaps we neglected to some extent the interior spiritual renewal from which the external reforms should have flowed. We turned altars around ordered congregants to active participation in the liturgy. We summoned laity into engagements in church governance and ordained permanent deacons. We questioned many church teachings and pressed for new theological insights. All well and good. But was all of this as well grounded as it should have been? I wonder.

SPIRITUAL RENEWAL AS THE BASIS OF ECCLESIASTICAL REFORM

Vatican II is often described as a theologians' council since they had such strong input in showing the bishops ways toward a new approaches of being "Church." An ancient dictum of our Catholic Traditions says that a theologian is one who prays and one who prays in a theologian. One person whose life affirms this aphorism is the American Cistercian monk, Thomas Merton. Merton's thoughts about the Church and its reform and renewal, born of his contemplative living and praying, can be instructive for those still striving to pursue the vision of Vatican II. His struggle to remain faithful in The Journey of Faith and in and with the Church both challenges us and gives us hope - or perhaps I should say Hope.

Near the end of his life he wrote: "The contemplative mind is, in fact, not normally ultra-conservative; but neither is it necessarily radical. It transcends both these extremes in order to remain living contact with that which is genuinely true in any traditional movement." Therefore he believed that contemplatives "will not normally be associated too firmly or too definitely with any 'movement' whether political, religious, liturgical, artistic, philosophical or what have you. The contemplative stays clear of movements, not because they confuse him, but simply because he does not need them and can go father by himself than he can in their formalized and often fanatical ranks."

Contemplatives, Merton contends, "will instinctively avoid becoming enmeshed in conceptual systems." Such persons become able to live within themselves, at home with their own thoughts and to an ever greater degree independent of exterior supports. Satisfaction is derived more and more spiritual creativeness. "He derives strength not from what he gets out of things and people, but from giving himself to life and to others. He discovers the secret of life in the creative energy of love." (The Inner Experience, 290-291)

Well, if all of this is true for Merton, what did it mean to affiliate with a Church - especially in its interior renewal and external reforms? In 1963 Merton professed that "The Church is fortunately a mystery that is beyond the reach of bureaucracy, though sometimes one is tempted to doubt it." (CT 82) For him Church reform was not primarily a political endeavor of power sharing or power grabbing. For monk Merton spiritual renewal was always primary and the reform of church structures was to flow from that on-going interior transformation. As he wrote in 1963, "There is no question that the mystics are the ones who have kept Christianity going, if anyone has." (HGL 583) This is true because the Church for Merton was the Holy Spirit dwelling and acting in the Mystical Christ.

When Merton became a convert to the Roman Catholic Church in 1939, his life was in a chaotic state. Early on he had been afraid of Catholicism even though he admired it. But after some serious Catholic reading, he found the Church with its clarity and certitude to be a kind of life raft in a sea of the world's

and his own confusion. After his baptism he said that he had "entered into the everlasting movement of that gravitation which is the very life and spirit of God: God's own gravitation towards the depths of His own infinite nature, His goodness without end. And God, that center Who is everywhere, and whose circumference is nowhere, finding me, through incorporation with Christ, incorporated into this immense and tremendous gravitational movement which is love, which is the Holy Spirit, loved me." (SSM 246) Throughout Merton's life the Church as The Mystical Body of Christ was the principal image and metaphor energizing his ecclesial faith.

Years later, in a letter to theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether, the monk described his conversion as "marked by a pretty strong and dazzled belief in the Christ of the Nicene Creed. One reason for this was a strong reaction against the fogginess and subjectivity and messed-up-ness of the ideas about Christ that I had met with up and down in various types of Protestantism. I was tired of a Christ who had evaporated." (At Home in the World, 22)

This initial enthusiasm for the Church was tempered over the years by experience and study. Life in the Church was not about security stemming from the right questions and answers. It was about flowing in the stream of life's complexities with ever maturing faith and a certain detachment from the institutional Church. In 1959 he realized the purity of the Gospel often involved an admixture of error and wrong attitudes in the Church. He told a friend: "We cannot demand that our Christianity be absolutely pure... There is inevitably plenty of prejudice and cant wherever there is a religion." Quoting Jesus, he said that in the Church the weeds and the wheat grow together until the harvest. The temptation is to think that the Church is without such "cockle." Our task is to make distinctions between the good and the bad and to adjust to the reality ourselves "in order to make sure that we ourselves are wheat and not cockle. And of course the thing is that one never can tell. Because we are not the ones appointed to do the judging. To look for an absolute assurance that one is pure wheat is to fall, after all, into the same old pharisaism." (HGL, 387)

To D.T. Suzuki, the Buddhism scholar, Merton admitted that the Church could become a prisoner of its own formulas, laws and structures. Writing things down about the Christian faith is "fraught with ludicrous and overwhelming difficulties," he wrote. "No one cares for fresh, direct and sincere intuitions of the Living Truth. Everyone is preoccupied with formulas." (HGL 564) He was particularly critical of the bureaucratic ways of the Vatican, claiming that, while "the Church itself is a permanent miracle witnessed to her own divine origin by her manifestly divine qualities," the "Roman Curia does not always bear this out, unless the eternity of God is conceived as a vacuum without activity in it." (HGL 397)

Merton's sense of Church was much more than a matter of signing up with a group called religion as if mere gregariousness brought one closer to God. He decried such ecclesiastical gregariousness as a kind of "huddling together against God rather than adoration of His true transcendent holiness." (HGL 43) In 1961 the monk wrote about the Church as "the Mother of Truth." Yet he asserted that truth cannot be equated with ecclesiastical formulas or rules nor any single school of theological thought. The Church mothers Truth by being open to all truth: "We must go straight to the truth without wanting to glance backward and without caring about what school of theology it represents." He contended that one must seek "to find the truth of love instead of the truth of formulas... of laws, of programs, of projects..." (HGL 560)

For the Church to be authentic, according to Merton, it had to contribute to the forward thrust of humanity because it is the continuation of the Incarnation. He wrote of this in late 1961 and early 1962. To the extent that the Church stands in the way of being a matrix for the humanization of persons and cultures, it may foreshadow the end of Western Christianity. His sense of the human was grounded in the biblical understanding of persons as the object of divine mercy and special concern on the part of God. In some mysterious sense "the spouse of God" and "an epiphany of divine wisdom." But he judged that the institutional Church was, in some ways, far from such an agent of divinization. Rather than a "body of perfections to be salvaged" but one of "infidelity and imperfection." He criticized efforts to stress the value and supreme importance of Western Christian cultural heritage which has become in some ways a religion of abstract formality without a humanist matrix. (HGL 541-2) A large part of the Church's infidelity to the Gospel lay, Merton thought, in its over-identification with the secular order, thus losing its real Christian center. "Centuries of identification between Christian and civil life have done more to secularize Christianity than to sanctify civil life." (HGL 649)

On the eve of the Second Vatican Council which began in the fall of 1962, Thomas Merton wrote to Catherine de Hueck Doherty, saying that, while he was tired of all of the complaining about the state of the Church, he realized that the Church was experiencing "a terrible spiritual sickness, even though there is always that inexpressible life." And then he added his own complaints: "What is wanted is love. But love has been buried under words, noise, plans projects, systems, and apostolic gimmicks... We are afflicted with the disease of constant talking with almost nothing to say... People like to get around the responsibility by entering into a routine of trivialities in which everything seems clear and noble and defined: but when you look at it honestly it falls apart, for it is riddled with absurdity from top to bottom..." (HGL 19)

During the summer of 1962 the monk, in a letter to an English friend spoke of the Church's graces and its need for renewal and reform. "What can I tell you about the Church? In a sense it is true that one only comes in with blinders on, blinders one has put on and kept on. One has to refuse to be disturbed by so many things... The Church is not of this world, and she complacently reminds us of this when we try to budge her in any direction. But on the other hand we also are of the Church and we also have our duty to speak up and say the Church is not of this world when her refusal to budge turns out, in effect, to be a refusal to budge from a solidly and immovable temporal position.. You will have the grace to see through all that is inconsequential and unfortunate in the Church."

Merton's advice in the face of difficulties with the Church was born of his spirituality. Church reform must flow from the spiritual renewal of the members of the Body of Christ. "Be true to the Spirit of God and to Christ. Read your Prophets sometimes, and go through the Gospels and St. Paul and see what is said there: There is your life. You are called to a totally new, risen, transformed life in the Spirit of Christ, a life of simplicity and truth and joy that is not of this world." (HGL 397-399)

Monk Merton in June of 1962 held out some hope that the Council would help the Church become more than a kind of ark into which one scrambles to escape life's flood. Sometimes, he admitted "one can also be tempted to wonder if the ark itself is going to leak or even foundered. But God is the one to worry about that." He spoke at that time for the first time of the Church as the People of God, a metaphor that would come to dominate the ecclesiological visions of Vatican II. He told a lay woman entering the Church that she would find that she would have some serious work to do because the Council would show how important is the contribution of the laity, the People of God. "The Church is not just an institution for the benefit of priests and nuns, with lay people around to fill in the background. The coming Council, may, we hope, give light and direction on these things." (HGL 110)

During the first session of the Council, while Thomas Merton continued to express his concern about not "feeling snug in the Church" as an institution - largely due to its "continual complicity with secular interests for purposes of gain for the Church" - he spoke glowingly of the holiness of the Church from a spiritual perspective - "the communion of saints in the Holy Spirit."

By the end of the session, he judged that the discussions were not radical enough. "The great problem is the fact that the Church is utterly embedded in a social matrix that is radically unfriendly to stifle justice and charity as well as genuine inner life." HGL 580) Christianity, he feared, "has become a complex and multifarious thing. It takes Chuang Tzu to remind us of essential elements of the Gospel which we have simply 'tuned out.' " (HGL 723) He thought that Christian had, over the years, done exactly what they had accused the Jews of doing: "finding an earthly fulfillment of prophecy in political institutions dressed up as theocracy... so perhaps we will be humble enough to dig down to a deeper and more burning truth." (HGL 432)

After the second session of Vatican II, Thomas Merton saw signs of hope in the conciliar discussion of collegial governance in the Church. This was based upon faith in the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the entire Church, Head and members of Christ's Body, the People of God. He wrote with some tongue-in-cheek no doubt: "Let's throw out the skeleton for good and all and take off for nowhere with that Vagabond (that notorious illuminist, the Holy Spirit)." This notion Merton found expressed especially in the Russian orthodox notion of sobornost, ie, the doctrine of the Spirit acting and leading the whole Church into the truth. "Collegiality is a step in that direction," he believed. (HGL 104)

By the summer of 1964, as the third session neared, Merton found himself discouraged and disillusioned about the Church inability to address important public issues of reform and renewal such as justice, war

and peace. The Church seemed "paralyzed by institutionalism, formalism, rigidity and regressions. The real life of the Church is not in her hierarchy, it is dormant somewhere." (CT 192) To Daniel Berrigan SJ he wrote: "It is of course not God's will that a religious or a priest should spend his life more or less in frustration and defeat over the most important issues in the church... I realize that I am about at the end of some kind of a line. What line? What is the trolley I am probably getting off? The trolley is called a special kind of hope... I don't need to be on the trolley car anyway, I don't belong riding in a trolley... As a priest I am a burnt-out case, repeat, burnt-out-case. I am waiting to fall over and it may take about ten more years of writing. When I fall over, it will be a big laugh because I wasn't there at all... Where we are all going is where we went a long time ago, over the falls. We are in a new river and we don't know it." (HGL 83)

Another concern of Merton's was what he discerned was the Church's becoming swallowed up in excessive activism in order to prove its worth in the secularized twentieth century. This was a betrayal of its purpose to be prayerful and a contemplative presence in the world. He asked, as the third session was about to begin: Why was that happening? "I think the root of the trouble is fear and truculence, unrealized, deep down. The realization that the Church of Rome is not going to be able to maintain a grandiose and preeminent sort of position, the old prestige she has always had and the decisive say in the things of the world, to some extent even in the last centuries. Contemplation will be regarded more and more as an official 'dynamo' source of inspiration and power for the big guns out there: Carmelite nuns generating electricity for the Holy Office, not so much by contemplative prayer as by action and official public prayer within an enclosure. In a word, the tempter of the Roman Church is combative and 'aroused' and the emphasis on contemplation is (if there is any at all) dominated by a specific end in view so that implicitly contemplation becomes ordered to action, which is so easy in a certain type of scholastic thought, misunderstood. When this happens, the real purity of the life of prayer is gone." (HGL 367-368)

At the end of session three Merton was more convinced than ever that the Church was having great difficulty moving beyond its ancient philosophical structures which meant little to that time and place. "It is even more true that among many Christians there is a lack of a living presence and witness to God, but rather an abundance of words and formulas, together with rites that many no longer understand. It is the old problem of institutional religion and of traditions that remain fixed in the past." (HGL 452)

The Trappist wrote to a Sufi scholar, Martin Lings, in early 1965 of feeling caught between baroque conservatism and "a rather irresponsible and fantastic progressivism a la Teilhard." He was trying to cling to what he called "a sane and living traditionalism in full contact with the living contemplative experience of the past - and with the presence of the Spirit here and now." (HGL 454) He somewhat cynically sensed that progressives didn't know what they were talking about "in their declarations about modern man, the modern world, etc. Perhaps they are dealing with some private myth or other. That is their affair." (HGL 546) Merton was in favor definitely of "a new mentality" in the Church but one that "implies above all a recovery of ancient and original wisdom. And a real contact with what is right before our noses." (HGL 382)

In the years following the Council, despite the initial enthusiasm for renewal and reform, Thomas Merton judged that the conciliar hopes were being sidetracked or neglected. "It is getting clearer and clearer that the institutional Church does not measure up to the tasks that she believes and proclaims to be hers, and it is a wonder more people are not fully aware of that. I guess a lot are..." (HGL 166) He expressed his fears that an authoritarian Church would destroy itself by becoming increasingly incredible to its thinking members. "Authority has simply been abused too long in the Catholic Church and for many people it just becomes utterly stupid and intolerable to have to put up with the kind of jackassing around that is posed in God's name. It is an insult to God Himself and in the end it can only discredit all idea of authority and obedience. There comes a point where they simply forfeit the right to be listened to." (HGL 230)

In early 1967, in correspondence with Rosemary Radford Ruether, the monk was trying to identify his place within the Church, wondering if he belonged there any longer. "I do wonder at times if the Church is real at all, I believe it, you know. But I wonder if I am nuts to do so. Am I part of a great big hoax? ...there is a real sense of and confidence in an underlying reality, the presence of Christ in the world which I don't doubt for an instant. But is that presence where we are all saying it is? We are all pointing (in various directions) and my dreadful feeling is that we are all pointing wrong. Could you point

someplace for me maybe?" (HGL 499-500)

Ruether told Merton she considered the Church to be less of an institution and more of a "happening." He liked that image and thought that if the two of them and others were thinking in this direction "then there is something going on." He said, though, that he felt the Church of the future "will be a very scattered Church for a while. But as long as I know what directions to be the one to do in, I will gladly go in it." He just did not want his sense of Church to be a "deception." "Because if that is where God speaks and the Spirit acts, then I can be confident that God has not abandoned us, nor left us at the mercy of the princes of the Church." As he looked back over the history of the Church, he could see "a bigger and bigger hole of conscious bad faith." One example of which was the Catholic Church's dictating to all other religions "that we are the one authentic outfit that has the real goods." (HGL 500-502)

By mid-1967 Merton was clear that he needed "to be free from a sort of denominational tag. Though I have one in theory (people still have me categorized in terms of The Seven Storey Mountain. I am really not any of the things they think, and I don't comfortable wear the label of monk either, because I am now convinced that the first way to be a decent monk is to be a non-monk and an anti-monk, as far as the 'image' goes: but I am certainly quite definite about wanting to stay in the bushes (provided I can make some sort of noises that will reach my offbeat friends)..." (HGL 511) He even told Ruether that, in some ways, he was "sneaking out the back door of the Church without telling myself that this is what I am doing. I don't feel guilty about this, though, and am conscious of it." (HGL 509)

Later in 1967 the Trappist wrote of his pure faith as a Christian. "Of all religions, Christianity is the one that least needs techniques, or least needs to depend on them. Nor is the overemphasis on sacraments necessary either: the great thing is faith. With a pure faith, our use of techniques, our understanding of the psyche and our use of the sacraments all become really meaningful. Without it, they are just routines." (HGL 532)

In the end Merton could see himself as a bridge builder within the Church "to keep communication open between the extremists at both ends." For "whatever may happen," he believed, "let us remember that persons are more important than opinions." (HGL 324-325) One of the things her most admired about John XXIII was his commitment to the Socratic principle. "This means respect for persons, to the point where the person of the adversary demands a hearing even when the authority of one's own ecclesial institution might appear to be temporarily questioned. Actually, this Socratic confidence in dialogue implies a deeper faith in the Church than you find in a merely rigid, defensive, and legative attitude which refuses all dialogue. The negative view really suggests that the Church has something to lose by engaging in dialogue with her adversaries. This in turn is a rejection of the Christian Socratism which sees that truth develops in conversation." This meant for John and for Merton that one meets one's adversary as an equal and "The moment one does this, he ceases to be an adversary." (Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, 217-218)

He could see this new life for the Church beginning to be expressed in Latin American, Africa and Asia and he felt that the real movement, when it comes, will start of itself.

Perhaps, as his life ended in 1968 at the age of 53, Thomas Merton had become in his own renewal and reform an incarnation of something he had written to Catherine de Hueck Doherty in 1966: "Well, we won't really get out of the wilderness until everything is pressed out and there is nothing left but the pure wine to be offered to the Lord, transubstantiated into his blood." (HGL 24)