

## Thomas Merton on the Spirituality for Christians

Fr. Paul Kao Hao

### Modern People Searching for the Meaning of Existence and Spiritual Conversion

Modern people are constantly looking for the meaning of existence in their life. Spirituality is an indication that we are searching for the meaning of life and spiritual conversion. The meaning of conversion, on the one hand, may refer to the change of one's religious belief; it may signify, on the other hand, the deepening of one's faith. Just as Thomas Merton (1915-1968), a modern spiritual writer, wrote in his autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain*,<sup>1</sup> his spiritual experience is also his experience of conversion. He went through the two World Wars and the loss of his loved ones, and converted from the Church of England to Catholicism. His deeper experience was gained after he had entered the Abbey of Gethsemani of the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance in the United States, where he dedicated his latter part of life completely to God. In 1968, while attending an interfaith conference between the Catholic and non-Christian monks in Bangkok, he was by accident electrocuted and died in his hotel. But fifty years after his death, his works are still being published, providing penetrating insights and prophetic views to the spiritual life of modern Christians. Based on his books, we would like to examine the inspirations he offered to the spiritual life of modern Christians.

### Merton's Exploration into Spirituality

#### 1. Spiritual Life Calls for the Return to the Origin

Merton served as the master of novices at the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1955. While introducing the tradition of spirituality, he mentioned that the improvement of our spirituality called for our understanding of the origin of our spiritual life, that is to say, our understanding of Jesus Christ and the early church. We should learn the tradition and origin of spirituality from the Bible, liturgy and the works of the fathers.<sup>2</sup> Apart from understanding the origin of our spirituality, we should better adapt ourselves to the needs of our time and environment too. The review of tradition does not necessarily mean that we must imitate all the past details. Instead we should master the spirit of them and try to resolve some problems of our spirituality in our time. Here is an example he cited: The early church suffered a period of persecution in the first and second centuries, during which the Christians were faced with the serious issue of martyrdom. They believed, however, that the martyrdom not only represented the

fulfillment of spirituality, but also a way of union with Jesus Christ. Although our situation in the modern world may not be the same as that faced by the early church, we could still ponder, like the Christians of the early church, how we are connected with Jesus Christ and how we are dedicated unselfishly to the church. This can help us find something to reflect on our spiritual life.

Merton's reflection on the tradition of spirituality for the Christians can be found in his works. His books such as *The Wisdom of the Desert* and *The Shining Wilderness*<sup>3</sup> guide the believers to read the sayings of the desert fathers and discuss their spiritual wisdom. According to Merton, the monks in the second and third centuries were followers of the early martyrs. Under the call of God, they, by keeping chaste and by saying prayers, pursued their true self in Christ in the wilderness of Egypt, Palestine and Syria. They are the pioneers of the subsequent monastic traditions. With a very deep understanding of the tradition of the Christian fathers, Merton expounded such concepts as the connection with Christ and the simplicity in spiritual life in his books, especially in *The Last of the Fathers*.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Trust in and Love of God Constitutes the Foundation of Spirituality

In the life of modern people, there is one obvious fact, that is, lack of trust in the other people. Suspicion, jealousy and disputes among the people, are the negative phenomena in the human relationship. From the perspective of the relation between the people and God, the alienation of humans from God is a sign that indicates the lack of faith on the part of the populace. Having experienced the dark side of life, Merton talked about how one should be open in life to the other people and God, and he thought that the basis of that openness is to trust God in love. For this purpose, he quoted Saint Paul who said "Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, and always perseveres" (1st Corinthians 13:7). Thus, trust in love has become a concrete objective in the spiritual life. In living, trust in God can be regarded as carrying out God's will.<sup>5</sup> The truth of a spiritual life is to constantly experience God and constantly convert to Him at the same time. Only by trusting in God can our faith grow and we can also gradually grow in love this way. In one of his dairies, Merton wrote: "I wonder if I have already learned to pray for humility. I only long for one thing, that is, to love God. Those who love God will follow his Commandments. I only yearn for one thing: carrying out His will."<sup>6</sup>

## 3. A Spiritual Life Requires Some Amplitude of Contemplation

After finishing *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton wrote *What is Contemplation*,

*Seeds of Contemplation* and *Contemplation in a World of Action*, which is a collection of various types of essays,<sup>7</sup> as answers to different questions about spirituality and prayers posed by a multitude of readers. As is mentioned in *Contemplation in a World of Action*, he believed that a contemplative life does not just, in a narrow sense, refer to the secluded life in a monastery, befitting the monks only. A contemplative life, being a special level at which the people experience God internally, does not conflict with the external and busy life.<sup>8</sup> According to Merton, every believer is inclined to some kind of contemplation. At the moment when a person is being baptized, God bestows the seeds of contemplation in his/her heart, enabling him/her to experience God's beauty, virtue and presence. However, just as the Gospel says, our hearts are similar to soil, when seeds fall onto the stone or in the thistles and thorns, they will not bear any fruits. However, when we open our hearts to God, they, like fertile land, will yield ten times or even a hundred times more fruits.<sup>9</sup> Contemplation means to experience the presence of God in our everyday life and contemplation can also consolidate our sense of God's presence, turning it into a force that drives us to make positive changes, guide our conscience, formulate our goals and purposes in life and help us return to God. Contemplation is life itself, and a complete awakening is a yearning for spirituality, reverence for the consecrated or divine life and gratitude to the creator.

As to the practice of contemplative prayer, Fr. Basil Pennington of the Cistercian Order once discussed the relationship between Merton and the centering prayer.<sup>10</sup> Merton believed that God dwells in our hearts, because that is his empirical or sensory experience. In his letter to a friend, Merton wrote, "I have a simple praying method, that is, through faith and love, experience the presence of God in our hearts." The centering prayer method recommended by Fr. Thomas Keating and Fr. Basil Pennington to the lay Christian faithful is actually derived from an expression used by Merton, who said, "monastic prayer, in the beginning, does not call for serious thinking. Instead, it rests on the return to the inner self." In this way, we can search for our innermost center and awaken our existing realm in depth: Our existence depends on the presence of God, who is the root of our existence and source of our life.

#### 4. Spiritual Life Helps People Learn to Love the Others and Use Non-violence

Merton believes that the basic human dwellings, whether they are houses or monasteries, are the places where the people learn to love and sympathize with the others. In the monastery, a master of the temporarily professed or novices would feel duty-bound to offer his help when the young brothers need him. Merton's care for the people also consists of his support for the innocent victims in society or in the world. Having experienced the Vietnam War, the violence and the assassinations in his time,

Merton showed his deep concern for the victims. In his writings, Merton said that the foundation of his universal care is built on his deep feeling that there are common things in human nature and that God is willing to be united with everyone in Him.

Through his writing, Merton communicated his care to his readers. He found that although he lived in solitude in the monastery, he still had all the human miseries and longing for love in his heart, and that the true care and concern were his willingness to share the weal and woe with the other people. According to him, true contemplation and true prayer go hand in hand with the sympathy with and love for the other people."

## 5. Spiritual Communication in Different Religions and Cultures

In the latter half of his life, we find that Merton not only expounded the ways of spirituality for the Christians, but also was willing to open up and listen to the voices from the other religions and cultures through intensive reading and communication. The books he left behind include such titles as *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, *Mystics and Zen Master* and *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*.<sup>12</sup> In these books, Merton, on the one hand, reflected upon the transcendental experience of the Christians in their spiritual life through the Eastern concept of "false self", as he remarked, "the force that drives one to "empty oneself" and "transcend" explains correctly the transformation of the Christian consciousness in Christ, a transformation that leads to the emptying of oneself and one's self consciousness so that the boundless existence and love of God can be fully manifested"; on the other hand, through comparative study, he tried to communicate with the different religions, just like his dialogue with the Japanese Zen master D. T. Suzuki recorded in his *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*.

By looking at Merton and his reflections on spirituality, we can really imagine that in addition to truly understanding themselves and the relationship between the others and God, Christians living in this bustling society need to enhance their spiritual growth through prayer, reading and liturgical activities. As Merton pointed out, all these factors are associated with Christ, who is not only the source but also the goal of our spiritual life. We hope, at the end of our life, that we can eventually achieve an union with Christ. So the spirituality of the Christians can help us take part in the miracles of Christ and devote ourselves completely to Christ in order to illustrate the faithful life of the Christians.

Fr. Paul Kao Hao, a monk of the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance or Trappists, now lives at the Trappist Abbey of Our Lady of Joy, on Lantau Island, Hong Kong.

Notes:

1. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, trans. by Fang Guangluo and Zheng Zhili, Taipei, Jiujing, 2002.
2. 多玛斯·牟敦，《卡湘和教父》，帕特里克·奥康奈尔编，熙笃出版社，2005，5-7页。
3. Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert*, Hong Kong, the Catholic Truth Society, 1998; *The Shining Wilderness*, Hong Kong, the Catholic Truth Society, 1995.
4. 多玛斯·牟敦，《最后的教父》，纽约：哈考特·布雷斯出版公司，1954。
5. 《与多玛斯·牟敦的默观生活相沟通，I：进入经验学堂》，万福玛利亚出版社，37-41页。
6. *Encounters with Merton: Spiritual Reflections*, trans. by Henri Nouwen and Huang Meiji, Taipei, Kuangchi Press, 2007, p. 22.
7. *What Is Contemplation?* 1<sup>st</sup> edition, 1948; *Seeds of Contemplation*, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, 1948; *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, 1971.
8. 多玛斯·牟敦，《在现代世界中的默观》，纽约：花园城，Doubleday & Company, Inc.，1971，157页。
9. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, trans. by Luo Yanming, Hong Kong: Logos Publishers Ltd., 2002, p. 14-26.
10. 潘灵顿神父，《我的教友多玛斯·牟敦》，新城出版社，1996，“多玛斯·牟敦和归心祈祷”，114-129页。
11. *Encounters with Merton: Spiritual Reflections*, trans. by Henri Nouwen and Huang Meiji, Taipei, Kuangchi Press, 2007, p. 73-93.
12. *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, published in 1965; *Mystics and Zen Masters*, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, 1967; *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, 1968.

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