

Monastic Scribe XVII: December 17, 2021

MERTON AND ME

Recently we noted the anniversary of Thomas Merton's death in Bangkok on December 10, 1968. Merton, who lived from 1915 – 1968, was a Cistercian monk, a gifted writer with a great breadth of knowledge of history and theology. He entered the monastery of Gethsemani in Kentucky in 1941, and then wrote the story of his conversion in "The Seven Storey Mountain" which became a best-seller book and promoted many monastic vocations. His teachings led the mid twentieth century rediscovery of mysticism and contemplative prayer for all believers. In 2015 Pope Francis addressed the United States Congress and held up Thomas Merton, along with Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, and Dorothy Day, as great Americans who were still models and purveyors of values for our own age.

Merton, known as Father Louis in the monastery, was a prolific writer. His earlier writings are mostly on prayer, contemplation, and the monastic life. He produced countless books and articles. His published Journals and Letters show the more personal side of this talented man.

Then, from around 1955, he started to address issues of the Vietnam War, non-violence, and racism. He became, not only a voice of the contemplative life, but a prophetic voice and social conscience of the times. In addition, he helped to open the west to the insights of Buddhism and eastern religions. He died an untimely death at the age of 63 when at a conference in Thailand.

What would Merton written and spoke about if he had another twenty or more years of life? I wonder how he might have dealt with the climate crisis of our times? What would he have thought about the women's movement, beginning in the seventies, and their place in society and the church? How would he have dealt with the sexual scandals that rocked the church?

Believe me, I am no Merton. I lack the depth of his insights into so many areas of interest and his comprehension of the spiritual life. I lack the personal gifts that helped him to touch so many people and to reach out to people in so many areas of life. Literature, poetry, history, psychology and education were as much part of his intellectual gifts as were theology and spirituality. Having acknowledged these differences, I must also claim that Thomas Merton has been somewhat of an inspiration and model to me. He also helps me to understand my own struggles and contradictions Around April of this year I was feeling overwhelmed by the

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state of the world and the church. I feared for our country where, for the first time, we did not have a peaceful transfer of power after a presidential election and where open sedition was seen at the Capitol on January 6th. The open disdain that members of Congress showed for each other and for the other party was shocking. Examples of racism and white supremacy were openly practiced in the land. While the majority of people are good, caring and law-abiding, we have seen such terrible demonstrations of selfishness and rudeness. Articles began to appear that questioned the future of our democracy.

If that wasn't enough, our religious traditions seemed impotent to challenge and support us. The sexual abuse scandals and ensuing cover-up of our bishops drained any credibility in the influence and example of the Catholic Church, the largest church in America. Yes, there are numerous Catholics who serve in Congress and on the Supreme Court but they hardly seem to know what Catholicism has to say about the social issues of our day. In fact, the political polarization that characterizes our country seems to be the force that also polarizes Catholics. There is open disdain to Pope Francis and his teachings on immigration, climate change, racism, and openness to the poor and marginalized. I realize, of course, that the church has faltered in its ways of accepting women and sexual minorities into its life. Its whole theology of sexuality needs an overhaul and its medieval ways of government are soaked in clericalism and male power.

That, in capsule, was what really weighed me down. What could I do to help alleviate this mess? I am getting on in years and my energy is limited. What is my gift for the community? Well, I think I am good as a teacher and writer. Then I thought of Thomas Merton. From inside his monastic domain, he reached out and touched millions of people, and still continues to touch many to this day. No, I could not be him but I could take his example. And, so I began writing semi-monthly blogs.

I don't have any sustained theme or topic. I mix up spirituality, theology, social justice. In the end they are all related – action and contemplation. I have heard from many people in response to these blogs and some have poured out their hearts to me. Just to be listened to is a precious gem for some.

I will try to continue to share my vision, my faith, my hope, with you in the new year. I will try to encourage people to believe, to hope, to sustain their life with

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God and the community. Feel free to write at any time. Your suggestions for topics for the blog are appreciated. You can contact me at joycet@glastonburyabbey.org

Merry Christmas and a Blessed New Year to you.

Fr. Timothy Joyce, OSB, STL

Please note that I do not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey, the Archdiocese of Boston or the Catholic Church, though I hope my faith is in harmony with all these. Any error in judgment should be credited to me and not anyone else.