

**Armand Veilleux**

## MONK ON A JOURNEY

*Fare forward, travellers, not escaping from the past*

*Into different lives, or into any future;*

*You are not the same people who left that station*

*Or who will arrive at any terminus*

(T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 111: 137-140)

I have read parts of Thomas Merton's indefatigable writing, and none of the flow-not to say flood-of books, doctoral dissertations, and papers on Merton. Therefore, what has been his real impact on the Church and the world, I cannot say. What I do know is that he has had a real impact on me, and I simply want to express, in these few lines, what his significance for my own life has been.

To use T. S. Eliot's imagery, I have greeted Merton at different stations along his journey, reading one of his books or articles every other year or so, from the time of my novitiate to the time of his death. What fascinated me was to perceive in his writings a monk on a spiritual journey, a man in a continual process of growth, whose field of consciousness was always both deepening and opening up to new horizons. It was refreshing to see the young romantic monk of The Seven Storey Mountain and the serious and too self-assured spiritual teacher of *The Ascent to Truth* learning to laugh at himself in *The Sign of Jonas*, and being able to take good "cracks" at his community, which he sincerely loved. The not very critical historian of *The Waters of Siloe* was able, some years later to bear with serenity some lucid and severe judgments on the institution whose faithful member he remained unto the end. And reading *The Asian Journal*, one encounters a Merton getting very close to the "final integration", its description in the article "A Monastic Therapy" having a definitely autobiographical flavor.

Thomas Merton studied and loved the Desert Fathers, the Cistercian writers, and the great Christian mystics. He found in them an inspiration for his life; but he did not transform their teaching, into an ideology. Or rather, he learned from their teaching without adopting their ideologies. From their inspiration, he developed his own spiritual synthesis, into which he integrated harmoniously not only insight from the great world religions,

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but also his vividly felt awareness of the great social, political and economic problems facing humankind today. He gradually developed a tender compassion for the world for which his first writings show a certain haughty commiseration.

His life was not guided by an abstract image of what a good monk should be or should do, or by any theory, but rather by a constant attention to God's voice in his heart. Therefore, when he became a hermit, for example, he did not copy any stereotype of a hermit, and he kept on with his literary activities, his voluminous correspondence and his great number of friends. He did not intend to set an example of what a modern hermit should be; he simply followed his own call, discerned within the framework of monastic obedience.

I admire also how he avoided the dangerous pitfall of the successful spiritual author: the danger of becoming a slave of the readers' expectations and of the image he had given of himself in his first books. On the contrary, each one of Merton's important books or articles seemed somehow to destroy at least partially the Merton-image of the preceding one. Thus, many persons who had admired the theoretician of the spiritual life of the first books were embarrassed by his later interests in Zen or in social issues. He was certainly sensitive to people's appreciation and expectations, and he was also vulnerable to their criticisms, but his own evolution was not dependent on them. He was free.

Merton did not elaborate a new system of spirituality. There is nothing particularly new in the things he thought. My impression is that he will remain known in history not so much by the things he wrote as by what he was. His gift seems to have been the ability to integrate into a unified personal experience not only the different currents of tradition, but also the deep spiritual movements of our time, and to share that experience in a unique manner.

I like to see his monastic life as a dance, a bit stiff at the beginning, more and more free and gracious with the years. The early Merton was a young dancer who had mastered the techniques of his art and was eager to teach them to others, indulging somewhat in being the type of "engineer of the soul" which he would judge severely later. At the end, he does not teach, but he is able to embrace every person from every horizon and carry them away in the whirl-winds of a dance that could be more and more daring, yet sure and peaceful, because the dancer was solidly rooted in the Source of the Dance.

*Except for the point, the still point,*

*There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.*

(T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 1: 66-67)