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Man, the Image of God: The Theological Anthropology of Thomas Merton

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MAN, THE IMAGE OF GOD: THE THEOLOGICAL
ANTHROPOLOGY OF THOMAS MERTON

by

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VITA

The author, Michael Allan Yonkers, is the son of Joseph Allan Yonkers and Rita (McDonald) Yonkers. He was born April 22, 1950 in Chicago, Illinois.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

THOMAS MERTON AS THEOLOGIAN

Thomas Merton was not a man who could easily be labeled. He was a monk, an artist, a priest, a hermit, a social critic and a theologian. But it is the first of these categories, that of monk, that dominates and determines the characteristics of all the other designations, particularly that of theologian. As theologian Thomas Merton was formed in, and became a principal contemporary expositor of, "monastic theology." In order to understand Merton the theologian, then, it is necessary first to understand the nature and purpose of this "monastic theology."

"Monastic theology" is the name that is given to the manner of theological thinking and biblical exegesis that was developed in the monasteries before the ascendancy of the "schools" and the scholastic method in the high Middle Ages. The chief characteristics and governing principles of this "monastic theology" were determined by the chief characteristics and governing principle of the monastic way of life itself, a life totally oriented to the search for inner union with God. As Dom Jean LeClerq put it:

In the cloister theology is studied in relation to monastic experience, a life of faith led in the monastery where religious thought
and spiritual life, the pursuit of truth and the quest for perfection go hand in hand and permeate one another.¹

It is this orientation that also determines the difference between the method of monastic theology and that of scholastic theology. Stemming from the daily practice of the lectio divina (the meditative reading of Sacred Scripture), the former is always couched in terms of the style and literary genre which conforms with the classical and patristic traditions. This meant that the language and images employed by monastic theology would be borrowed primarily from Sacred Scripture. Scholastic theology, on the other hand, would derive its images and language from classical philosophy, characterized by Dom LeClerq as "dialectics." This orientation also accounts for the essentially conservative, non-speculative nature of monastic theology; "the monks were, as if by instinct, oriented toward tradition rather than toward the pursuit of problems and new solutions."²

This is not to imply, however, that monastic theology did not employ a logic of sorts in its endeavors. In fact, "dialectics" did play an important role in the theological writings of many of the monastic Fathers. But it is employed in a manner uniquely their own, quite different and distinct from the way this method was used by the

²Ibid., p. 246.
scholastic theologians. For monastic writers, "dialectics" were indeed a method that could be used in the soul's search for inner union with God, but it was always regarded as a particularly dangerous method in as much as it seemed to them opposed to the primary Benedictine concept of humility. It could be used, but only with the utmost caution lest it strike a fatal blow at the heart of the monastic way of life. Since the ninth century scholasticism's chief method was that of the "disputation," i.e. an open and reasoned questioning of the object under consideration. And it was precisely the genius of the scholastics to have the daring to turn this method to the task of interpreting sacred doctrine. It was precisely this kind of daring that most alarmed monastic theologians. They saw in the scholastic method of open "disputing" gross disrespect for the mystery and "otherness" of God, and a place for personal pride to gain a foothold in the soul of theologian, imperilling his vocation and his soul.

Since both schools employed dialectics to some degree in the theological task the distinguishing difference between the two must be sought elsewhere. That "elsewhere" lies in the psychological content of their doctrine. In employing dialectics the monastic theologians took scrupulous pains to avoid the excesses of this method, excesses which they could clearly identify in the works of Abelard. The principle way in which they did this was in keeping the ideal and virtue of simplicity ever before their eyes. They did this, not by cultivating the notion
that ignorance is virtuous, but rather by keeping the ultimate goal of their theological task uppermost in their minds, that is the search of the human soul for inner union with God. All learning was radically oriented to this principle. In the words of Dom LeClèrq,

A single quest and a single search must be substituted for all these questions. To seek God, to avoid the inner turmoil of overly subtle investigations and disputes . . ., to flee from the outer noise of controversies and to eliminate futile problems, such is the foremost note of simplicity . . ., "holy simplicity" is the humility which safeguards the integrity of the mind, which ensures the search for God alone. All else including intellectual pursuits should remain subordinate to the search for God.3

Again, it is important to note that the monastic theologians did not reject the values and methods of scholasticism categorically. The object of their reservations and objections was the excesses to which this method could lead. One could safely personify what the monastic Fathers feared and rejected in scholasticism by pointing to the methods and thought of Abelard, while personifying what they admired and valued in the method and thought of St. Thomas Aquinas. It is simply the difference between a proud rationality, existing for its own sake, and a saintly rationality, existing for the sake of leading souls to God.

It would be a gross mistake to define monastic theology solely as a reaction against the methods of the schools. It was and is much more than this. Before scholasticism even came into existence

3Ibid., p. 254.
monastic theology was alive and effective in leading men and women to God. Monastic theology had and has a unique contribution to make to the total theological enterprise. And this contribution stems chiefly from its radical orientation to the search for inner union with God.

Monastic theology is, first of all, an experiential, existential phenomenon. It is this precisely because it is the articulation of all of the elements involved in the human experience of quest for inner union with the reality of God. And this "experience of quest" is precisely the experience of a life of prayer and contemplation, a life in which the monk gains knowledge through the experience of love.

St. Bernard has stated in a few words, that "We search in a worthier manner, we discover with greater facility through prayer rather than disputation, orando quam disputando." The reverence for God's mysteries which characterizes the monk's theology evolved from what St. Benedict calls "the reverence of prayer." This is the additional value which is superimposed on the scientific method: it is the source of all understanding and life.4

It can be said, then, that the object of monastic theology, that is to say, of the monastic experience, is a kind of Gnosis, in the true, orthodox sense of the term. It is this Gnosis that gives monastic theology its experiential, concrete orientation. Monastic theology is grounded in and directed to the acquisition of knowledge of God in the experience of the "loving gaze" which is contemplative prayer. To put it another way, there is first of all an objective knowledge of God, the basic data of revelation. This is given to man so that he can prepare

4Ibid., p. 262.
himself for a more personal, committed kind of knowledge, a subjective knowledge of God found in the personal appropriation of the data of revelation in the experience of personal loving union with the Divine. This is the true Gnosis toward which monastic theology directs the human person. It is the fruition of first-faith in the experience of mystical love. This experiential, subjective orientation is one of the chief contributions monastic theology has made and is making even today to the entire theological endeavor. Indeed, it is precisely this kind of theology, with its deeply personalistic approach, that speaks most clearly to the situation of the twentieth-century human reality.

There were two basic themes around which the whole of monastic theology took shape. The first, of course, has to do with God's dealings with man. The mighty deeds of God performed on behalf of man are, logically, the first matters to be considered in the narratives of Sacred Scripture. These mighty deeds were the first object to occupy the attention of the monastic theologians. It was the peculiar genius of the early monastic writers to comment on the saving initiative of God as it was recorded in Scripture. That this is an important element in the overriding monastic task of the search for inner union with God is self-evident. The initiative in the dialogue between man and God must always begin with the mercy and action of God.

It was not long, however, before the monastic theologians turned their attention to another dimension of the dynamic of man's quest for
inner union with the Divine. It was the followers of St. Bernard who first began to consider at some length the constitution of the response the human person should make to the saving initiative of God. From the perspective of the twentieth century it is this aspect of the work of monastic theology that holds the most interest and value. Bernard and his disciples were among the first to provide the community of faith with a viable theological anthropology. It was developed in the life-long meditation of the monks on the question of just what exactly is man's proper relationship to the Almighty. Dom LeClerq has summarized the approach of the Cistercian tradition in this matter in this way:

St. Bernard and his disciples are less concerned with the acquisition of an explicit knowledge of God's salvific plan than with the consent to this plan. Everything comes back finally to a problem of spirituality: what is important is the way in which the work of salvation becomes man's possession in his interior life. Everything can be reduced to the two correlative aspects of one and the same religious knowledge: knowledge of self and knowledge of God. The end in view is not knowledge of God for its own sake; the knowledge of the self has its own value. One is the necessary complement of the other, it leads to the other and cannot be separated from it. Noverim te - noverim me.5

In pursuing this matter of the nature of the human response to the divine initiative the theologians of the Cistercian school made extensive use of the psychological insights developed by St. Augustine concerning the nature of man as the "image of God". In doing so the concept of the divine image in man became the primary vehicle by which the

5Ibid., p. 275.
Cistercian Fathers communicated their unique insights into theological anthropology. Thomas Merton himself pointed out this fact in an essay on one of the most significant thinkers of the Cistercian theological tradition, St. Aelred of Rievaulx:

Since the theology of the Cistercians was so intimately personal and experiential, their exposition of it was bound to take a psychological direction. All that they wrote was directed by their keen awareness of the presence and action of God in their souls. This was their all-absorbing interest... hidden in the soul was the image of God, for God had made man in "his own image and likeness." This image implied a capacity for union with God. The soul could, in a manner of speaking, contain the infinite God in so far as it was a mirror capable of reflecting his triune life and participating fully in that life. But how was such a participation possible? By charity: Deus caritas est. The soul that is possessed entirely by the pure love of God becomes, by analogy, what God Himself is.6

Thomas Merton as theologian stands solidly in this Cistercian tradition. He is a monastic theologian, and he is a Cistercian theologian. The interests of this school are his, as are its methods. His theology is framed in Scriptural terminology. It is non-speculative and experiential. Indeed, his most popular works can be aptly described as "theology by autobiography." While Merton exhibits all those characteristics common to monastic theologians, he excels in that area of monastic theology which is the proper genius of the Cistercian tradition—the sensitive probing of the meaning of man and his response to the saving call of God to union. And he does so precisely by inquiring tirelessly into the meaning of that concept so dear and central to the expression of Cistercian theological anthropology, the divine image in man.

The purpose of this study, then, is to examine the theological anthropology of this twentieth-century monastic theologian as he expressed it in terms of the divine image in man. This will be done by tracing Merton's expression and understanding of the great component elements in human salvation: creation, sin, redemption/grace and union by means of the vehicle of the divine image concept. From this will emerge a clear picture of Thomas Merton as monastic theologian.

As has been stated above, Thomas Merton was not a man easily labelled. The particular value in examining his identity as theologian, however, lies in the fact that this kind of an examination provides an anchor by which investigations of other aspects of Thomas Merton, the man, may be made and held secure. This kind of understanding would serve to keep ever in the forefront of Merton studies the basic fact that this wonderfully complex man can be really understood only in terms of his Christian and monastic commitment. Thomas Merton, the monastic theologian, speaking from the perspective of his monastic dedication is the first and most important of the many "Mertons" one can choose to study. All things in his life were ordered to that quest for inner union with God which his theological writings expounded. What Etienne Gilson penned concerning Merton's spiritual father, St. Bernard, is equally applicable to Merton himself:
No one is likely to forget the soul of the mystic, but I think, on the other hand, that we shall come to know it better for the future, the less we forget the thought of the theologian.  

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CHAPTER II

THE IMAGE: ONTOLOGICAL CALL TO UNION WITH GOD

Whatever I have written, I think it may be reduced in the end to just one truth: that God calls human persons to union with Himself and with one another in Christ, in the Church which is his Mystical Body. . . . 8

These words, composed by Merton for the occasion of the opening of the Thomas Merton Studies Center at Bellarmine College in Louisville, Kentucky, form a unique and succinct summary of the major thrust of all his works. It is all the more valuable since it comes from the author himself. Man, for Merton, is a creature made for union with God. The very constitution of man's being forms an "ontological call" to this state of union with the Almighty. This concept was not one created by Merton, but rather was derived from a basic datum of revelation given in the mysterious words in the Book of Genesis 1:27:

God created man in the image of Himself, in the image of God He created him. . . .

It was in a life-long meditation on this concept of the divine image of man that Merton was to give the world one of the richest elements of his thought; the groping answer to the question put so well by the Psalmist:

What is man that you keep him in mind, mortal man that you care for him? (Psalm 8:4)

Following the Fathers of Church and the Cistercian Fathers, Merton

saw the image of God in man as a reality rooted in the depths of man's being. It is an essential part of his nature. Indeed, it is that which constitutes him properly as a man. It is impressed on man first as the source and ground of his physical existence. Thus, for Merton, God is involved intimately with the destiny of man from the very beginning. There is never a moment of human existence that is not "graced." Another monastic author put it:

At the first moment that one steps into the human scene he already enters into a supernatural atmosphere, for so has the loving will of God ordained. God has assigned a destiny which finds its anthropological counterpart in man.

This is not to say that Merton saw man as having a "natural" right to union with God, as if it were something owed to him by virtue of his creation. The point is, rather, that man, from the very beginning of his existence, is ontologically oriented to such a union with God by virtue of the free gift of creation as a man. As Henri de Lubac put it:

... the end of the spiritual creature is something that surpasses the powers of his nature as any other created nature: and this because the spiritual creature has a direct relationship with God which results from its origin.

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So, also, Merton writes:

Man is the image of God, not his shadow.\textsuperscript{12}

It is important to note the evidence of the radical Christocentricity that appears here and forms the ground of all of Merton's theology. Standing solidly in patristic tradition, he sees all of creation and human history oriented to Jesus Christ. Christ is at once both the goal of all existence and the source and ground of it as well. Transcending time in his divine nature, Christ is truly both the \textit{Alpha} and the \textit{Omega} of all that is:

The whole of the creation was determined by the fact that God was to become man and dwell in the midst of His own creation. \ldots \textsuperscript{13}

This is all the more true with regard to the crown of creation, the being of man:

\ldots we too, from the very moment we come into existence are potential representations of Christ simply because we possess the human nature which was created in Him and was assumed by Him in the Incarnation, saved by Him on the Cross and glorified by Him in His Ascension.\textsuperscript{14}

From the beginning of his existence, man is graced and this grace is essentially Christological in as much as man carries about in his being "the natural presence of the uncreated image"\textsuperscript{15} by virtue of creation by


\textsuperscript{13}Merton, \textit{The New Man}, pp. 82-83.

\textsuperscript{14}Ibid., p. 82.

\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., p. 84.
God. As the Scriptures say: "... through him all things came to be..." (John 1:2).

This centrality of Christ was brought out even more clearly in a conference given by Merton on the Feast of Christ the King, 1968, a few short weeks before his tragic death in Asia:

Christ is King but He controls by love. This love is the very root of our being... Even before the Lord dwells in us by His Spirit there is a deeper presence which comes, in a certain sense from the fact that we are created in Him, and, as we read in Colossians today, live in Him -- our being is in Christ even ontologically. God wills us to come into being in Christ.16

"Grace," then, as the dictum goes, "builds on nature." But clearly nature for Merton is not a "pure nature," but rather a nature ontologically oriented to God in Christ from the very first moment of existence.

(It is interesting to note here the close affinities of Merton's thought with Karl Rahner's concept of the "supernatural existential").17 Merton writes:

Man is in his basic structure capax Dei. He is an openness, a capacity, a possibility, a freedom whose fulfillment is not in this or that isolated object, this or that circumscribed activity, but in a fullness beyond all "objects," the totality of consent and self-giving which is love. God is love. Man is an openness that is fulfilled only in an unconditional consent to an unconditional love.


This openness, this freedom, which is at the very core of man's being—and which imperiously demands that he transcend his being—is what monastic theologians call the image of God in man.\textsuperscript{18}

This "ontological" orientation in man, this image of God within, is therefore, openness, freedom. It is, in more precise theological language, an "obediential potency," located in the core of man's freedom, the intellect.

Our intelligence is naturally disposed to arrive at truth with the help of the senses. However, St. John of the Cross is careful to explain that it also "has a faculty for the supernatural. . . ." This "aptitude" which the soul has for receiving such illumination is not, properly speaking, natural. But the intelligence is by nature in a state of passive or obediential potency to receive this light. This state of passive potency does not give the soul, strictly speaking, any aptitude for supernatural illumination. That aptitude comes with the active potency conferred by grace upon the soul proximately disposed and attuned to supernatural things.\textsuperscript{19}

Yet is not this "disposition" itself a kind of supernatural gift inasmuch as it intrinsically orients man to divine life? Here Merton seems constrained by the scientific precision of the scholastic language he used in this particular work, The Ascent to Truth. It seems that he was out of his natural element of monastic theology here. Interestingly enough, The Ascent to Truth was the only book-length attempt Merton ever


made at theologizing from the scholastic frame of reference. It is not his most powerful or effective work.

However, within and beyond this concept of "obediential potency" lie the two elements essential to patristic and monastic anthropological thought which Merton saw as genuinely constitutive of the divine image in man -- the human capacity for freedom and love.

At the very core of our essence we are constituted in God's likeness by our own freedom, and the exercise of that freedom is nothing else but the exercise of disinterested love -- the love of God for his own sake, because He is God.20

Putting the concept forth more succinctly, Merton writes: "The capacity for freedom is the image of God because God Himself is pure freedom and pure love."21

Here can be seen the clear echoes of the teaching of St. Bernard on the image of God as man's freedom. The freedom that is in our nature, given to us by God is the capacity to love someone outside of ourselves for his own sake. So Merton sees freedom as the primary constituent of the divine image in man precisely because it is that which makes man capable of selfless, disinterested love. In exercising this freedom, man comes to love as God loves and thus, with the help of grace, the "image" grows into greater and greater "likeness" to the Exemplar.

Here Merton adopts the traditional distinction made in the teaching of


the Fathers between the "image" and "likeness" of the Genesis passage, the former being related to the latter "... as potency to act." It is this image, this capacity, this openness, that gives man his true spiritual identity and dignity. Indeed it is what makes him man.

Man's greatest dignity, his most essential and peculiar power, the most intimate secret of his humanity is his capacity to love. This power in the depth of man's soul stamps him in the image and likeness of God. It is only in the exercise of this capacity for disinterested love that man is truly man, raised above the natural animal order. "Man is distinguished from the rest of creation by his intellect and his freedom." Thus, for man to love, and to love freely and disinterestedly is for him to be truly himself, his true self, the self that is known to God, the self in whom God is found inasmuch as it is created in His image. By loving, by exercising the freedom that is the capacity for disinterested love, the image of God, the true self, man can become what he truly is, a son of God.

The law of love is the deepest law of our nature, not something extraneous and alien to our nature. Our nature itself inclines us to love and to love freely.


25Merton, Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, p. 121.
And again:

My true identity lies hidden in God's call to my freedom and my response to Him. This means that I must use my freedom in order to love, with full responsibility and authenticity. ... 26

In what must be considered one of the peak passages in all of his works, Merton sums up his doctrine concerning the constitution of man's fundamental nature in this way:

To say that I am made in the image of God is to say that love is the reason for my existence, for God is love. Love is my true self. Love is my true character. Love is my name.27

The breathtaking reality behind all this lies in Merton's understanding of the nature of love. True love is a relationship between two beings as a subject to a subject. It is an exchange of interiorities in which each lover in a sense "becomes" the beloved. To say that man is ontologically oriented to loving union with God is to say that man is called to exchange interiorities with God, actually to "become" God in a mysterious manner.

Since the image of God in man is this innate capacity for disinterested love, it can never be viewed in its proper function as something merely static. By its very nature it is a dynamic phenomenon, something that must be in action in order to be at all. The moment it ceases to propel man toward union with God, in a certain sense it ceases


to be, or rather it ceases to be what it was created to be, since it is an indestructible reality. It becomes a caricature of itself, a spiritual monster that never was intended to be.

The indestructibility of this image stems from the fact that this ontological orientation to love is the constituent element in man's nature. Remove this and man ceases to be man. This indestructible image exists even in Hell. In fact, in Hell it becomes the principle of the torments of the damned.

This then is the foundation of Merton's theological anthropology. Man is created as ontologically oriented to a loving union with God in complete freedom. Man can be defined as an openness, a being with an innate capacity for disinterested love. This capacity, however, was never to be actualized in this original state. The mystery of sin was birthed by the mystery of human freedom. This inner innate capacity for disinterested love at the heart of man's being became disoriented, disfigured and confused. Innate human openness to the reality of God's love turned in on itself and became an ontological lie. Consequently man was beset on all sides by illusions, the most deadly of which lay in the clouding of his proper understanding of himself and also of the God to whom he was destined to be united. In sin man became a stranger to himself, condemned to endless wandering in the "region of unlikeness."
CHAPTER III

SIN: THE IMAGE DISTORTED

The Book of Genesis teaches that man was created as an openness, a being intrinsically oriented to union with God in freedom and love. But Genesis also teaches that something horrible and tragic happened to turn this openness in upon itself and to make this intrinsically oriented being into a radically twisted and ontologically misdirected being.

Merton described this perversion that is original sin in this way:

The inner, basic metaphysical defilement of fallen man is his profound and illusory conviction that he is a god and that the universe is centered on him.28

Following the teachings of St. Bernard, Merton understands the essence of original sin to be "... an act of pure pride, untainted by the slightest sensuality, passion, weakness, fleshiness, or fear. ..."29

This pride is a mysterious insatiable need for unreality, a need to escape the truth. It is an attitude of mind that cut Adam off from God, an attitude that by its very nature condemned man to unreality. Adam possessed an experiential, existential knowledge of the good and the real. He was


29 Merton, The New Man, p. 65.
united with God from the very first moment of creation. Yet for some mysterious reason Adam desired to improve somehow on his situation by attempting to know something more, something different. To be exact, he desired to know evil by experience; he wanted to know it "... in a way in which it was not even known by God. ..."\(^{30}\) But to increase his knowledge and experience of reality and goodness by experiencing unreality and evil was a metaphysical impossibility. In attempting to do so he reached out for more and more and found out that it was sadly, "disastrously less."\(^{31}\) In fact, in doing so man lost everything that he had as a son of God. He now knew evil and knew it was terrible and "he hated himself for it."\(^{32}\)

Merton sees the real core of Adam's sin as arising from a kind of "Promethean mentality" that indicated the basic distrust on Adam's part of God, and consequently a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of God. In attempting to "steal" this experiential knowledge of evil Adam showed that he "... did not understand that the gifts which had been given to him could only be possessed as long as they were received as gifts."\(^{33}\) In other words, Adam rejected his status as a creature and

\(^{30}\)Ibid., p. 66.

\(^{31}\)Ibid.

\(^{32}\)Ibid.

\(^{33}\)Ibid.
attempted to usurp the rightful place of God. St. Bernard saw in this
the *sapor mortis* and was the direct opposite of the *sapida scientia*,
the existential knowledge of the good with which man was created. The
two could not exist together. When Adam gained the one he forfeited the
other. Adam lost his "rectitude," that is to say, his "right orienta-
tion" to God and the universe. Consequently, because of the sin of Adam
it has become impossible for man to be true to his own innermost nature
and destiny without the aid of divine grace. This intrinsic orienta-
tion to God, the divine image in man's being, is distorted and mutilated.
It has lost its likeness to God.

All of those elements naturally resident in man's nature which
oriented him toward union with God were lost in Adam's Promethean drive.
Man lost his immortality because the basis of that immortality was life
shared with God.

Breaking the contact between his soul and the source of life, and
left to his own contingency, he himself became his own source of
life. But he was a deficient source that soon ran dry.34

He also lost his freedom, not the freedom of choice, but rather the
freedom not to sin. This was the essential element of the image that was
so tragically distorted. Man lost the freedom to fly to the divine love,
for which he had been created, without encountering any obstacles. His
perfectly ordered nature, sustained by contact with God was exchanged

34Ibid., p. 68.
for "... the compulsions and anxieties and weakness of a will left to itself, a will which does what it does not want to do, hates what it ought to love and avoids what it ought to seek with its whole being."\(^\text{35}\)

Man had become his own god, and everything now had to bow to him. But in Adam man's rectitude, his proper ontological order was lost. He no longer "fitted" into the order of things intended by God. The basic illusion and lie of Adam's pride made man a god of sorts, but he was an alien god attempting to rule an alien and hostile world.

The effects of these disorientations are tragic and profound. Adam's sin has turned man "inside out." Merton writes:

\[\ldots\;\text{whereas Adam started with his spirit centered in God and everything ordered to that supreme union, he first withdrew spiritually from God into his own soul, as if he could live in his spirit privately and alone, referring everything to himself instead of to God.}\(^\text{36}\)

With original sin, man develops "... an instinctive prejudice in favor of his own selfish desires, and all things are veiled in unreality because they are seen as centered on man rather than on God."\(^\text{37}\) In this condition man is completely out of touch with reality as God has made it. He has reached this condition by making his own idea of self the object of his inner orientation to love. From this primal lie man finds himself caught up in the whole complex web of unreality that is sin,

\(^{35}\text{Ibid.}\)

\(^{36}\text{Ibid., p. 71.}\)

\(^{37}\text{No Man Is An Island, p. 148.}\)
alienated from himself and from the God who waits for him secretly within that self. So it is that "... fear, anxiety, greed, ambition and our hopeless need for pleasure all distort the image of reality that is reflected in our minds."38

All sin participates in the nature of this first sin in as much as it is a refusal to be what we are and to be what we are called to be.39 Sin is "... a lying misuse of one's freedom, turning against itself and sabotaging it or pretending to affirm it."40 It cuts at the heart of man's being, attacking man's inmost reality. For Merton sin is not merely a juridical matter, but also an ontological rupture with reality, destroying the one thing on which man's true nature depends, the innate capacity for disinterested love directed to God in freedom.

We are created to will what God wills, to know what He knows, to love what He loves. Sin is the will to do what God does not will, to know what God does not know, to love what God does not love. ... In all these things sin proves itself to be a supreme injustice not only against God but, above all, against ourselves. ... Our deepest spiritual need is for whatever thing God wills for us. To will something else is to deprive ourselves of life itself. So, when we sin our spirit dies of starvation.41

38 Ibid.
40 Merton, Introduction to The Monastic Theology of Aelred of Rievaulx by A. Hallier, p. x.
41 Merton, No Man Is An Island, p. 75.
Merton's concept of sin as the radical refusal to be what we are leads to one of the major concerns found in all his works—the web of illusions and unreality that surrounds fallen man, most particularly that illusion of the "false self," the self that in Adam usurped the rightful place of God, becoming the new object of man's freedom to love. This "false self"

... is the man I want myself to be but who cannot exist, because God does not know him. And to be unknown to God is altogether too much privacy. My false and private self is the one who wants to exist outside the reach of God's will and God's love—outside of reality and outside of life. And such a self cannot help but be an illusion.42

It is in this sense that man is said to be "born in sin." Man is born with a false self. Merton writes:

I was born in a mask. I came into existence under a sign of contradiction, being someone I was never intended to be and therefore a denial of what I am supposed to be. And thus I came into existence and non-existence at the same time because from the very start I was something that I was not.43

Man's commitment to the illusion of this false self is the proper source of the complex of sin in the world. This "self," unknown to God, and therefore unreal is for Merton the ontological dysfunction that is the mother of all sin and evil in the world. The "sin of the world," in the end, can be understood only from the point of view presented by an anthropology that takes the deep spiritual sickness and disorient.

42Merton, New Seeds of Contemplation, p. 34.
43Ibid., pp. 33-34.
ness of man into account. In the manuscript being prepared for publication shortly before his ill-fated Asian journey, Merton wrote this powerful analysis of the man-rooted situation of sin in the world:

The story of Adam's fall from Paradise says, in symbolic terms, that man was created as a contemplative. The fall from Paradise was a fall from unity. The Platonizing Greek Fathers even taught that the division of humanity into two sexes was a result of the Fall. St. Augustine, in a more cautious and psychological application of the narrative, says that in the Fall Adam, man's interior and spiritual self, his contemplative self, was led astray by Eve, his exterior, material and practical self, his active self. Man fell from the unity of contemplative vision into the multiplicity, complication and distraction of an active worldly existence. Since he was now dependent entirely on exterior and contingent things he became an exile in a world of objects, each one capable of deluding and enslaving him. Centered no longer in God and in his immost, spiritual self, man now had to see and be aware of himself as if he were his own god. He had to study himself as a kind of pseudo-object, from which he was estranged. To compensate for the labors and frustrations of this estrangement, he must try to admire, assert and gratify himself at the expense of others like himself. Hence the complex and painful network of loves and hatreds, desires and fears, lies and excuses in which we are all held captive. In such a condition, man's mind is enslaved by an inexorable concern with all that is exterior, transient, illusory and trivial. And carried away by his pursuit of alien shadows and forms, he can no longer see his own true inner "face," or recognize his identity in the spirit and in God, for that identity is secret, invisible, and incommunicable. But man has lost the courage and the faith without which he cannot be content to be "unseen." He is pitifully dependent on self-observation and self-assertion. That is to say, he is utterly exiled from God and from his own true self, for neither in God nor in his immost self can there be any aggressive self-assertion: there is only the plain presence of love and of truth.

So man is exiled from God and from his immost self. He is tempted to seek God, in happiness, outside himself. So his quest for happiness becomes, in fact, a flight from God and from himself: a flight that takes him further and further away from reality. In the end, he has to dwell in the "region of unlikeness"—having lost
his inner resemblance to God and losing his freedom to enter his own home, which is the sanctuary of God.44

This "aggressive self-assertiveness," attendant upon the illusory state of fallen man is painfully evident in society today. From the petty cruelties that can exist in everyday family life to the potential global horrors of nuclear proliferation and the mindless acts of terrorism, all of these things are rooted in the ontological "cramp" of man's fixation on the false self. An even more terrible illusion lies in the collective false self that is so evident in modern totalitarian societies. The important point in this is that all of Merton's incisive social criticism had its basic inspiration in his understanding of and sensitivity to this web of illusion and unreality created by the ontological dislocation and disorder existing in the heart of every man.

Despite the depths of illusion into which man has plunged because of original and personal sin, human nature in itself cannot be considered totally depraved. Again following the teachings of St. Bernard, Merton does not see the Fall as a regression from the supernatural to the natural, but rather as a "... collapse into ambivalence in which the historical nature in which man was actually created for supernatural union with God is turned upside down and inside out, and yet still retains the innate capacity and need for divine union."45 Man, although

44Thomas Merton, "The Inner Experience," Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine College, Louisville, Kentucky, pp. 34-35.

45Merton, The New Man, p. 69.
crippled and limited, remains free. Sin does not deprive him of his manhood or his radical "openness" to the Absolute. In a conference on St. Bernard's doctrine concerning the divine image in man Merton pointed out:

No matter what happens to a man, he is always in the image of God, even though the image is distorted, because he preserves this capacity for love, for God's kind of love, and for God's kind of life because God's life is His love and God is love.46

This remnant of God's image within man is a graced reality inasmuch as it serves as the principle of unrest in man making it difficult for him to rest content with the illusion of the false self. The remnant of the image also makes man's use of creation a bittersweet affair. Merton points out that for fallen man all created things present "... something that reflects the fulfillment of heaven and something that reflects the anguish of Hell."47 The anguish that is reflected in things is merely the impact of the essential "collapse of ambivalence" that is the state of fallen man. Because of the restless longing of the image within him the very riches of creation serve only to add to the discomfort of the usurper self.

There is deep within man an "inner urge" recalling him to his original condition of openness to God. This is ontologically and metaphysically rooted in the damaged but indestructible image of God within him. It is the ground upon which the supernatural grace of Christ


reconstructs man into the likeness of God. Merton writes:

There is in us an instinct for newness, for renewal, for a liberation of creative power. We seek to awaken in ourselves a force which really changes our lives from within. And yet the same instinct tells us that this change is a recovery of that which is deepest, most original, most personal in ourselves. To be born again is not to become somebody else, but to become ourselves.\textsuperscript{48}

It is this "instinct for newness," remaining in man even after sin, that forms the natural basis on which the grace of God in Jesus Christ can begin to act. The recognition of the illusions of the sinful false self and the will to face those illusions and to begin to strip them away are the first impulses of the salvific grace of God. From the very beginning the secret of man's true identity, his "true self" made in the image of God, is hidden in the meaning of the Image of God, Jesus Christ. It is only through and in Jesus Christ that man's personal reality can be discovered.

He alone can make me who I am, or rather who I will be when I at last fully begin to be.\textsuperscript{49}


\textsuperscript{49} Merton, \textit{New Seeds of Contemplation}, p. 33.
CHAPTER IV

CHRIST: THE IMAGE RESTORED

If man is to answer God's call to union, the damage done by the sin of Adam must somehow be undone. We have seen that for Merton this damage consists in the turning in of man's freedom to love on himself. It is the usurpation of the throne of God in our hearts by an illusion, the illusion that man is the center of the universe. In Adam, man has withdrawn into himself, turning away from God. He has passed through himself and has gone forth into creation. As Merton has put it man is literally turned "inside-out." To begin the return to God, therefore, it is necessary for man to retrace Adam's erring steps back to God, returning the way our first father came. In describing this reverse path Merton writes:

We must withdraw ourselves (in the right and Christian sense) from exterior things, and pass through the center of our own souls to find God. We must recover possession of our true selves by liberation from anxiety, fear and inordinate desire. And when we have gained possession of our souls we must learn to "go out" of ourselves to God and to others by charity. The first step in all this is to recognize our true condition. Before we can ever hope to find ourselves in God, we must become conscious of the fact that we are far from Him. Before we can realize who we really are, we must become conscious of the fact that the person we think we are, here and now, is at best an imposter and a stranger.

50 Merton, The New Man, p. 70.
51 Ibid., p. 73.
The first step in a man's progress toward union with God then must be the development of a sense of sin, that is to say man must first recognize the illusion of the false self for the illusion that it is. What brings about this transformation of consciousness? It is the action of God's grace working upon the intrinsic ontological orientation to the good. It is the action of God's grace working upon the image within us, refashioning and restoring that image to a true likeness. Man's very nature compels him to face the fact that the illusions and preoccupations of this false, exterior self fall tragically and radically short of the goal to which the gnawing hunger of his inner being drives him. Goaded by this inner hunger, man frantically seeks refuge from the insistent pain it causes in countless diversions which only serve to sharpen the pain, making the dissatisfaction and hunger more acute. The concerns of status, career and reputation, the attempted escapes into drugs, alcohol, sexual promiscuity, the ceaseless din of the omnipresent radio, television and "muzak"—all provide man with readily available refuges into which he can flee to temporarily dull the deep ontological ache within his heart.

In order to cease this aching it is necessary first to recognize it for what it is. Man must come to grips with the insistent ontological call to union with God that is within him. To do this man must first quiet the cacophonous din of distractions that bombard his every waking moment. A certain amount of genuine physical solitude and
silence is necessary for this. Once things have been quieted on the outside, it is necessary to bring quiet to the inner things. For this a certain amount of meditative prayer and a conscious effort at detachment are necessary. Only then can man look deep within himself and retrace there the errant steps of Adam. Retracing these steps, man comes to realize that the self he commonly knows, the empirical self, is largely a matter of sham, confusion and hypocrisy. He must come to understand that at the center of his being he is utter poverty and utter emptiness. This experience in a man without faith produces anguish and a conviction that meaninglessness is all. In a man committed to faith, however, while the initial feelings are the same, the outcome is quite different. Having faith in the utter goodness of God, the experience of inner poverty and emptiness produces an anguish indeed, but it is an anguish which leads to a greater understanding and meaning. The anguish is real but what the anguish reveals is of the utmost importance and worth:

We begin to see the nonentity and triviality of our exterior self: and since we are still completely identified with that exterior self, this means that to all intents and purposes we begin to experience ourselves as evil, ungodly, hypocritical and utterly contemptible beings. We should experience this for as long as we live in our exterior consciousness alone, and identify ourselves completely with the superficial and transient side of our existence then we are completely immersed in unreality. And to cling with passion to a state of unreality is the root of all sin: technically known as pride. It is the affirmation of our non-being as the ultimate reality for which we live, as against the being
and truth of God. Hence we must become detached from the unreality that is in us to be united to the reality that lies deeper within and is our true self—our inmost self-in-God.\textsuperscript{52}

But the retracing of the steps of Adam cannot stop here. It continues and "passes through" this realization of man's nothingness to the graced realization that the true self is indeed an "emptiness," an emptiness that is brought into substance by the very fact of its dependency on the power of God to give it that substance. At this point the cry of the anguished man becomes a cry of power:

Man's real power lies hidden in the agony that makes him cry out to God: and there he is at the same time helpless and omnipotent: he is utterly helpless in himself and yet he can "do all things" in the Invisible who strengthens him.\textsuperscript{53}

The realization of this leads to a momentous transformation of consciousness which Merton describes in this way:

It is not enough to turn away in disgust from my illusions and faults and mistakes, to separate myself from them as if they were not, and as if I were someone else. This kind of self-annihilation is only a worse illusion, it is a pretended humility which by saying "I am nothing" I mean in effect "I wish I were not what I am. . . . " To really know our "nothingness" we must come to love it. To love our "nothingness" we must love everything in us that the proud man loves when he loves himself. But we must love it all for exactly the opposite reason. The humble man also loves himself and seeks to be loved and honored, not because love and honor are due to him but because they are not due to him. He seeks to be loved by the mercy of God.\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{52}Merton, "The Inner Experience," p. 87.

\textsuperscript{53}Merton, The New Man, p. 14.

This transformation of consciousness is really a "return to paradise." Retracing the steps of Adam, man finally comes to the "condition of the Garden," that is to say, man becomes conscious of his self, his true self as a being-in-dependence. Man is a creature whose true nature is an openness, a capacity, a freedom, a radical dependency upon the Almighty.

This true, inner self is the self "hidden with Christ in God." This true self, as the ontological orientation to union with God, touches upon and opens out into the mystery of the uncreated Image of God. In this way it is an indication of man's ultimate destiny; an actual participation in the love-life of the Three Divine Persons. So the real meaning of the true self as the created image of God is grounded and brought to completion in its identification with the Image of God. Merton describes the characteristics of this profoundly mysterious true self in this exceptionally poetic passage from "The Inner Experience:"

This inner self is precisely that self which cannot be reached or manipulated by anyone, even by the devil. He is a very shy wild animal that never appears at all whenever an alien presence is at hand, and comes out only when all is perfectly peaceful, in silence, when he is untroubled and alone.55

The retracing of the errant steps of Adam to the discovery of this true self, the self made in the image of God, is a very great gift of grace. It is a grace that has been made available to man only in the

55Ibid., p.5.
mystery of the Incarnation of Christ. Christ is always the key to a proper understanding of Merton's theological anthropology. All comes from Christ in his thought and all is oriented to Christ. The discovery of the true self that is also the discovery of God within and the transformation of consciousness that occurs with it is understandable only in the broader context of the total mystery of Christ as Merton understood it.

The key to understanding the concept of the mystery of Christ in Merton's writing lies in his use of the patristic concept of recapitulation. Adam, by the perversion of his freedom, brought misery and ontological frustration to the human race. He substituted "self-assertion for self-realization." In this way he placed the "false self" of man as a usurper on the throne of God. Christ, the second Adam, restored the original order of things intended by God in creation by "... the perfect use of his freedom and obedience to the Truth." By this perfect use of the capacity to love that is the divine image in man, the God-Man restored the integrity of that orientation to union. And so in Christ

Man was once again able to drink from the inexhaustible spring of truth which God had hidden in the depths of man's own nature at the point where the created image opens out into the uncreated Image of the eternal reality of the Word of God.

Precisely because the agent of that restoration was divine, the meaning of the mystery of Christ is more than a simple matter of restoration. In retracing Adam's step back through man's inner self and out once more to the discovery of the true self in God the second person of the Trinity accomplished the elevation of human nature as well as its restoration. Christ not only restored the integrity of the image within man, as a personal revelation of the way God loves he became also the agent by which that created image in man would grow into supernatural likeness to God. By the power of the Spirit which he freely shares with man, Christ makes a new creature since "He is the source and principle of a life that is heavenly, that is to say, divine."59

By incorporation into Christ man becomes a sharer in His Spirit, living "... a mystery equal to that of the Incarnation."60 In the Incarnation Christ truly identified himself with man. This identification, however, was with man's true self. In doing so, Christ has so identified Himself with man that the inner self of Christ, His Holy Spirit, the bond of love shared with the Father, has become one with the true, inner hidden self of man. Thus it is that by identification with Christ man comes to experience the very inner life of God. This union is ontological, not merely moral or psychological. Merton calls it "... a mystical union in which Christ himself becomes the source and principle of divine life in me."61

59Ibid., p. 88.
60Merton, New Seeds of Contemplation, p. 158.
61Ibid., p. 159.
Consequently, the true self spoken of above is found only in Christ. Indeed, the true self is intimately involved with the self of Christ:

If my true identity is found in my identification with Christ, then to know myself fully, I must know Christ. I must know the Father for Christ is the Image of the Father. The "identity" which begins to make itself known and felt within me, under the action of the Holy Spirit, is the identity of a son of the Father: a son who is re-created in the likeness of the only son, Who is the perfect Image of the Father. The beginning of self-realization in the fullest Christian sense is therefore a sharing in the orientation which directs Christ as Word entirely to His Father. And here we truly enter into the deep mystery of God.62

It is this understanding of the mystery of man that enabled Merton to write in The Inner Experience:

Since our immost "I" is the perfect image of God, then when that "I" awakens, he finds within himself the Presence of Him Whose image he is. And, by a paradox beyond all human expression, God and the soul seem to have but one single "I." They are (by divine grace) as now one single person. They breathe and live and act as one.63

It is in this way that the created image in man opens out into the uncreated image of the Son of God.

It is this common breath or spirit that is the active principle of the ontological identification of the true self with Christ. It is in this context that Merton, standing solidly in the tradition of the Fathers, speaks of the "divinization" of man in Christ:

62Merton, The New Man, p. 100.

63Merton, "The Inner Experience," p. 16.
The Holy Spirit is given to us as a true and literal gift of God: Donum Dei altissimi. He is truly, as St. Thomas says, our possession which means to say that He becomes, as it were, our own spirit, speaking within our own being. It is He that becomes, as it were, our spiritual and divine self, and by virtue of His presence and inspirations we are and we act as other Christs.  

And again:

Just as a man knows himself by the testimony of his own inmost self, his own spirit, so God reveals Himself in the love of His Spirit. And this spirit of God, dwelling in us, given to us to be as it were our own Spirit, enables us to know and experience, in a mysterious manner, the reality and presence of the divine mercy in ourselves. So the Holy Spirit is intimately united to our own inmost self, and His presence in us makes our "I" the "I" of Christ and of God.  

Man, however, cannot remain absolutely passive to the initiative of God's grace. God wants one thing of man and that is his true inmost self. His will for man in general and His will for every individual man is the realization, and actualization of the true self in Christ. Merton puts it this way:

We have the choice of two identities: the external mask which seems to be real and which lives by a shadowy autonomy for the brief moment of earthly existence, and the hidden inner person who seems to us to be nothing, but who can give himself eternally to the truth in whom he subsists. It is this inner self that is taken up into the mystery of Christ, by His love, by the Holy Spirit, so that in secret we live "in Christ."  

What, then, does Merton see as the dynamic of man's response to God's call to union? It is precisely the exercise of freedom in faith and love. The freedom to consent, to open oneself up to the initiative
of God's grace, receiving it with loving faith and a faithful love; this is what constitutes man's spiritual union with God in Christ in terms of the action of man.

In a word, the whole Christian life consists in seeking the will of God by loving faith in carrying out that will by faithful love.67

The connection between faith and love in man's response to God is a vital one. Merton recognizes that faith is an intellectual assent to revealed truth, but he is quick to point out that it must necessarily be much more than just that. He does this when he writes:

It has to be something more than an assent of the mind. It is also a grasp, a contact, a communion of wills, "the substance of things to be hoped for." By faith one assents to God Himself, one receives God. One says "yes" not merely to a statement about God, but to the Invisible, Infinite God Himself.68

In the act of faith the intellect is committed in freedom to know God by loving Him. In "The Inner Experience," Merton writes:

In St. John's terms we have to become the sons of God, and in order to become the sons of God we have to receive Christ, and how do we receive Christ? The answer is, by faith: and this means not simply by an intellectual assent to certain authoritative dogmatic propositions, but more than that by the commitment of our whole self and of our whole life to the reality of the presence of Christ in the world. This act of total surrender is not simply a fantastic intellectual and mystical gamble; it is something much more serious: it is an act of love for this unseen Person, who, in the very gift of love by which we surrender ourselves to His reality, also makes Himself present to us.69


68Merton, New Seeds of Contemplation, p. 128.

For Merton, as for St. Bernard, man's freedom is the uniquely constitutive element of this divine image. It is the free consent of the whole man that is needed in order that the action of grace may open out the created image into the vital union with the uncreated Image. The *raison d'être* for the free, lived-out commitment of faith in Christ then is not a matter of gaining knowledge, but rather a matter of ontological growth in realization. "By faith I find my true being in God." This identification with Christ in faith ontologically grounds man in the divine act of obedience that was the life of Christ. It is this identification with the obedience of the "New Adam" that brings man to know his true self which was lost in the self-assertion of the first Adam.

Until a man yields himself to God in a consent of total belief, he must inevitably remain a stranger to himself, in exile from himself, because he is excluded from the most meaningful depths of his own being.

Thus it is that by participating in the mystery of Christ, man finds an answer to the inmost longing, the ontological call addressed to him by God in the heart of his being, the call to be united with Him in love and in faith. In so doing man fulfills his destiny and his purpose in existence. Christ is central because it is He who reveals to man how

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70 Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*, p. 113.

to love God by revealing how God has loved man. Christ has revealed to us in this way the inner subjectivity of God. The realization of this is something into which man grows. Faith and love are not a single event in the life of the believer, but the very way in which life oriented to union with God is lived. The rebirth by water and the Spirit in an on-going reality:

The rebirth of which Christ speaks is not a single event but a continuous dynamic of inner renewal. Certainly, sacramental baptism, the "birth by water" can be given only once. But birth in the Spirit happens many times in a man's life, as he passes through successive stages of spiritual development. True Christianity is growth in the life of the Spirit, a deepening of the new life, a continuous rebirth, in which the exterior and superficial life of the ego-self is discarded like an old snake skin and the mysterious, invisible self of the Spirit becomes more present and more active. The true Christian rebirth is a renewed transformation, a "passover" in which man is progressively liberated from selfishness and not only grows in love but in some sense "becomes love." The perfection of the new birth is reached when there is no more selfishness, there is only love, when there is no more ego-self; there is only Christ. To become completely transparent and allow Love to shine by itself is the maturity of the "New Man." 72

This "maturity" means that man must grow into greater and greater likeness to God by being assimilated more and more completely into Christ, the perfect Image of the Father. By faith in Christ man is drawn into and elevated by the communion of love that is the very life of the Triune God. Merton writes:

Faith is not just one moment of the spiritual life. It is that acceptance of God which is the very climate of all spiritual living. It is the beginning of communion. As faith deepens and as communion deepens with it, it becomes more and more intrinsic and at

72Merton, "Rebirth and the New Man," p. 239.
the same time reaches out to affect everything else we think and do. 73

This maturity in perfect likeness to Christ, like every other kind of maturity, is not an easy matter. Growth always demands change. And so it is here. The free decision of commitment to identification with Christ in loving faith must continually grow if it is to exist at all. Faith and incorporation into Christ is not a single spot on a linear line of development that culminates in union with God. The way to union is not linear, but rather a type of spiral in which the free commitment of loving faith is ever renewed and deepened. The image of God in man is an ontological call to union in love. Love is its inception and the fullness of love is its end. The image must grow into an ever increasing likeness. The dynamic of this growth will be examined next.

CHAPTER V

UNION: GROWTH INTO LIKENESS

By the grace of Baptism the uncreated image of God in the soul of man opens out into and is elevated by the Image of God, Jesus Christ. This opening and elevation gives every baptized person the potential of being perfectly assimilated into the mystery of Christ. For Merton every man is called to this union with God in Christ by virtue of creation and by virtue of the re-creation of redemption. The image of God in man is destined to grow into an ever clearer and distinct likeness to its Exemplar. The image is the "seed," the likeness, the "harvest," for as was said earlier, the image is the "potency," the likeness, the "act." The real tragedy of human existence is that this "seed" fails to reach fruition in so many lives:

The seeds of this sublime life are planted in every Christian soul 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 sons of God, and are not aware of their identity. Instead of seeking to know themselves and their dignity, they struggle miserably to impersonate the alienated characters whose "greatness" rests on violence, craftiness, lust and greed.74

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74Merton, "The Inner Experience," p. 46. Merton makes this same point in another passage from "The Inner Experience" (p. 39): "Of course, Christ has taken possession of our souls and bodies, and we are already divinized, in the roots of our being, by Baptism. But this divine life remains hidden and dormant within us unless it is more fully developed by a life of asceticism and charity and, on a higher level, of contemplation." See also Life and Holiness, pp. 13 and 34.
Such men fail to realize the full purpose of their lives, which is to grow into greater and greater spiritual maturity by attaining to an ever greater likeness to Christ. The image of God in them remains a static capacity or potency, although it is given to man to be the principle which constantly urges him on toward union with God. As Merton put it:

The concept of the image is dynamic, not static. It is the capacity to move towards union, a disposition to seek union. . . . The image of God implanted in man's nature is not simply set there as a static reflection. It comes from God and tends to God.75

The "image" in man, therefore, is a permanent tendency to transcendence. This growing identification with Christ takes place in the order of grace. Consequently the action of God is primary. But it is part of the mystery of salvation that God has desired man to take an active part in his own salvation. What is the part man has to play in his sanctification? To answer this question we must back up a bit and review what has been considered thus far. As has been shown, because of sin man's nature has been turned inside out. He is beset with illusions about himself, his relationship to God and to the universe. His self-centeredness, that has created the illusion of the "false self," must be broken through. While man is, in baptism, ontologically established in Christ it is necessary for him to persevere in stripping away the illusions that remain keeping him from growth into perfect

identification with Christ. This calls for a life of self-denial and detachment. Man must, supported by the grace of Christ, go "... into the desert to vomit up the interior phantom, the doubter, the double."\textsuperscript{76}

Merton gives his understanding of what asceticism is in these words:

What do I mean by asceticism? I mean the active self-purification by which the soul, inspired and fortified by grace, takes itself in hand and makes itself undergo a rigorous spiritual training in self-denial and in the process of virtue. My stress is on the word active. The initiative is left to us. God merely suggests and inspires the things that are to be done. We either accept or refuse his suggestions.\textsuperscript{77}

This "active self-purification" is undertaken to produce the conditions favorable to the awakening of the awareness of the true self, made for union with God. Merton writes:

Cistercian asceticism, and indeed all the asceticism of the monastic Fathers, is simply the recovery of our true self, man's true "nature" created for union with God. It is the purification and liberation of the divine image in man, hidden under layers of "unlikeness." Our true self is the person we are meant to be—a man who is free and upright, in the image and likeness of God. The work of recovery of this lost likeness is effected by stripping away all that is alien and foreign to our true selves—shedding the "double garment" of hypocrisy and illusion by which we try to conceal the truth of our misery from ourselves, our brethren and from God.\textsuperscript{78}

Asceticism, for Merton, is a practice intended to clarify, not a morbid will to destroy the body and our human nature as well. He clearly

\textsuperscript{76}Merton, \textit{Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander}, p. 338.

\textsuperscript{77}Merton, \textit{The Ascent to Truth}, p. 158.

\textsuperscript{78}Merton, \textit{The Silent Life}, p. 32. See \textit{The Ascent to Truth}, p. 174: "The purpose of mortification is to liberate the spirit and make it plastic in the hands of God."
rejected the grim asceticism taught by the Trappists of De Rance's school, seeing at the heart of this reformer's doctrine a "dramatic and insatiable appetite for the extreme." He clearly spells out what kind of asceticism is alien to the Christian tradition and destructive to the very nature of man in this passage from *The Ascent to Truth*:

> The kind of asceticism that literally seeks to destroy what is human in man in order to reduce the spirit to an innate element that is purely divine is founded on a grave metaphysical error. The gravity of that error ought to be immediately apparent from the very fact that man's spiritual and psychological health depends on the right order and balance of his whole being--body and soul.

Nor is there any Manichaean rejection of the body in Merton's ideal of asceticism, as is clear from this passage:

> The whole man, his body and soul, what is within him and what is without has to belong to God.

This is not to say that Merton's ascetical ideas were watered down to the point of offering no challenge whatsoever. He considered self-denial and self-sacrifice as "absolutely essential to the life of prayer." He regarded the way of Christian holiness as "hard and austere," noting that "we must fast and pray," and that it was necessary to "embrace hardship and sacrifice for the love of Christ." He noted,

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81 Ibid., pp. 112-113.


ironically, that

This is one of the chief contradictions that sin has brought into our souls: we have to do violence to ourselves to keep from laboring uselessly for what is bitter and without joy, and we have to compel ourselves to take what is easy and full of happiness as though it were against our interest.84

Merton saw self-denial as absolutely necessary for growth in the spiritual life in order to overcome the illusory, sensual, selfish and compulsive self. Training ourselves, under the impulse of the grace of God, to choose against this "false self," the "old man" in St. Paul's terms, we can hope to reach the point where such denial becomes habitual and the illusory self falls away. As Merton points out:

... the "death of the old man" is not the destruction of personality but the dissipation of an illusion, and the discovery of the new man is the realization of what was there all along, at least as a radical possibility, by reason of the fact that man is the image of God.85

Thus the ultimate aim of all asceticism is the growth in awareness and the liberation of the true self created for union with God and in which God Himself is to be found.

The real function of asceticism is, then, to liberate us from our desires that debase and enslave our souls made for union with God in pure love and even in contemplation. The real purpose of self-denial is to turn over the faculties of our soul and body to the Holy Spirit in order that He may work in us the work of transformation which is His masterpiece.86


Self-denial is an identifying mark of the follower of Christ simply because it is the negative side of the basic predisposition to charity that is the identifying mark for the Christian. As Merton says:

We have to deny ourselves because, in practice, love that is centered in ourselves is stolen from God and from other men. Love can only live by giving. When it steals and is stolen, it dies, because it is no longer free.87

Freedom, then, is what is at issue here, as in all of man's spiritual growth, since it is freedom that actuates the divine image in man. When the false self is denied existence, the true, inner self springs into man's awareness. It brings about a transformation of consciousness. In this transformation of consciousness we see who we really are, we see

... our interior, simple self, our God-like self, the image of God, "Christ in us," and we become able to love God with spiritual liberty and make Him, in all simplicity, the gift that he asks of us.88

This is the freedom of humility, the greatest freedom of all. Without this grace of being free to see the true self in God, one is doomed to defend the ersatz "truth" of the illusory self. There is no peace to be found in that, for "There is no joy in things that do not exist."89

This humility, resulting from the ritual practice of self-denial and detachment, quiets the "demons" in our inner house, the illusions


89Merton, New Seeds of Contemplation, p. 57.
that preoccupy our souls and take our attention away from the call of God within. This quiet, this docility of the soul is the proper end toward which ascetic discipline tends. This is its proper and realistic end.

All that we can do with any spiritual discipline is produce within ourselves something of the silence, the humility, the detachment, the purity of heart and the indifference which are required if the inner self is to make some shy unpredictable manifestation of his presence.90

For in the end,

Real self-conquest is the conquest not by ourselves but by the Holy Spirit. Self-conquest is really self-surrender.91

It is important to keep in mind, however, that for Merton genuine Christian holiness is not simply a matter of "ethical perfection." Sanctity is constituted primarily by "ontological union with God in Christ."92 Good works and virtues are important, but the primary focus, considering the elements of individual salvation, should be upon the "new being" achieved in Christ.

If then we are to be holy, Christ must be holy in us. If we are to be saints," He must be our sanctity.93

This is the end toward which all human life is structured, this is the end to which every man is "ontologically called." It is the "transforming union" of the soul in Christ. Merton describes it as

91Merton, Thoughts in Solitude, p. 31.
93Ibid., p. 147.
the perfect coalescence of the uncreated Image of God with our created image not only in a perfect identification of minds and wills in knowledge and love but also above all knowledge and all love in perfect communion. "I live, now not I, but Christ liveth in me!" 94

In order to understand all that is implied in Merton's concept of the supernatural transforming union of the created and uncreated image it is helpful to understand how he understands the dynamics of love. This is so because the very image of which we speak can be described as man's innate capacity for disinterested love actuated and elevated in the love of Christ.

For Merton, real love cannot be reduced to what he calls "the mere disposition of a subject-object relationship." 95 As long as the one loved is seen to be just an "object," that is to say, a "thing," there is no real love. Love is determined in its authenticity by the quality of the relationship itself. Love is possible only between persons. The other must only be seen as "person," not as "thing" or "object." Merton writes:

"... my relationship to you is not merely the relation of a subject to an object, but it is analogous to my relationship to myself. It is, so to speak, a relationship of a subject to a subject. 96"

This is not to deny the objective reality of the other, but rather

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94 Merton, The New Man, p. 85.


96 Ibid., p. 6.
to affirm that objectivity in the most authentic and thorough way possible. "Love brings us into a relationship with an objectively existing reality; but because it is love it is able to bridge the gap between subject and object and commune in the subjectivity of the one loved."  

When we love another as an object or thing we do not get into the real spiritual substance of the other. However, when the other is loved as a person, as a subject to a subject, he is loved for what he is in himself not for what he can give or do for us. As Merton points out, this kind of love is not possible unless it is able to "transform" us in a sense into the other person, "... making us able to see things as he sees them, love what he loves, experience the deeper realities of his own life as if they were our own." This kind of transforming love does not come easily, it demands self-denial, and sacrifice, the sacrifice of the illusion that is a worldview entirely centered upon the ego. Yet this kind of love is the only thing that renders man capable of truly human existence. And we are capable of this kind of love precisely because we are made according to the "image of God." Merton writes

... this capacity is the key to our divine sonship also. For it is above all in our relationship with God that love, considered as a subject-object relationship is utterly out of the question.  

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97 Ibid.
98 Ibid., p. 7.
99 Ibid.
To love God in this way is to violate in the deepest possible sense the first commandment of the Decalogue, and the commandment Jesus pointed out as being the first and most important in the Law, to love God with our whole being.

In fact, most of the thinking we do about God treats God as an "object." We confront him "... in concepts which present him objectively to us." But we are called to a much deeper kind of knowledge than this. We only really come to know God when we love him as a subject to a subject, by the grace of "connaturality." Sacrifice is needed here as well, as Merton points out:

Only a sacrificial love which enables us to let go of our selves completely and empty ourselves of our own will can enable us to find Christ in the place formerly occupied by our own selfhood. And in this sacrifice we cease, in a certain manner, to be the subject of an act of knowing and become the one we know by love.

This is the incredible reality to which all other things in creation are ordered: we are called by God to love Him in such a way that we love Him as a subject to a subject. God has revealed to man His own personal inner subjectivity in Christ. He has done this in order to make such a love relationship possible. In coming to love Christ in this way we actually come to be transformed into God, so that in the end man loves God with the very love with which God loves Himself. In this love we are enabled to see things as God sees them, love as God

100 Ibid.

101 Ibid.
loves, and most wonderful of all, we are enabled to share in the actual inner life of God. We are enabled to experience the inner reality of God's life as God Himself experiences it, as if it were our own experience.

This perfect communion with God as "subject to a subject" is the complete possession of our being by Christ.

What is He doing in our lives? He is gradually taking over everything that we have and everything that we are, in order to gain complete possession of our souls, bodies and all our faculties. ... He is substituting His life for our own life, His thoughts are our thoughts, His will for our will. This process of transformation leads to the end for which we were created, perfect union with God.¹⁰²

This is the full actualization of the image of God within man, a full realization of likeness to God in the inner subjectivity of the Word. This union is the supreme manifestation of man's innate freedom or capacity for God. It is the marriage of the soul with the Word of God in free consent.

It is a union of wills in which the soul becomes "equal" to Him by loving Him as it is loved by Him. Identity in perfect union of wills, oneness in charity makes us "one Spirit" with God, so that we live by His life and love with His love rather than our own. This union is full of all joy, because it means that the soul is constantly moved and guided by God Himself, is never separated from the Word and is enlightened and directed by His Spirit in all things.¹⁰³


¹⁰³ Thomas Merton, The Last of the Fathers; Saint Bernard of Clairvaux and the Encyclical Letter, Doctor Mellifluus (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1964), p. 150. See also The New Man, p. 95 and "In the Monastic Community" from A Thomas Merton Reader, p. 150.
This "marriage" of subjectivities draws man into participation in the very inner life of the Trinity, so that the image that impels man ever onward into assimilation and identification with Christ shows itself also to be an image of the Trinity in man. Merton writes:

The Christian life is a return to the Father, the Source, the Ground of all existence, through the Son, the Splendor and the Image of the Father, in the Holy Spirit, the Love of the Father and the Son. And this return is only possible by detachment and "death" in the exterior self, so that the inner self, purified and renewed, can fulfill this function as image of the Divine Trinity.

Christianity is life and wisdom in Christ. It is a return to the Father in Christ. It is a return to the infinite abyss of pure reality in which our own reality is grounded, and in which we exist. It is a return to the inmost springs of life and joy. It is a rediscovery of paradise within our own spirit, by self-forgetfulness. And, because of our oneness with Christ, it is the recognition of ourselves as other Christs. It is the awareness of strength and love imparted to us by the miraculous presence of the Nameless and Hidden One Whom we call the Holy Spirit.104

The union into which man is drawn by the grace of Christ is not just a moral union. It is ontological and it is mystical, involving

104 Merton, "The Inner Experience," p. 35. In one of his infrequent really speculative moments Merton pondered the role of the Holy Spirit in man's progress toward union with God in this intriguing passage taken also from the manuscript of "The Inner Experience," pp. 35-36: "The Father is a Holy Spirit, but He is named Father. The Son is a Holy Spirit, but He is named Son. The Holy Spirit has a Name which is known only to the Father and the Son. But can it be that when He takes us to Himself, and unites us to the Father through the Son, He takes upon Himself, in us, our own secret name? Is it possible that His inef-fable Name becomes our own? Is it possible that we can come to know, for ourselves, the name of the Holy Spirit when we receive from Him the revelation of our identity in Him? I can ask these questions, but not answer them."
a transformation and elevation of the very being of man. Fully incorporated into Christ, the image having attained complete likeness, man lives now with God's life and loves with God's love. To put it another way, the image, man's innate capacity for disinterested love, is now actualized and man loves God for Himself, as "a subject to a subject."

Jesus is saying that those who reach perfect union with God in Himself will be as much One with God by grace as He is One with the Father by Nature. This is the most tremendous and central mystery of Christianity.105

This total absorption into God does not mean that the unique individual human nature is destroyed. Merton makes this clear in the following passage from one of his earliest published works, What Are These Wounds?:

... Though the union is so perfect that two wills, two loves have merged into one and the same love, nevertheless the two whose wills are united, the human soul and God, remain ever really and absolutely distinct.106

In actual fact this union is the highest actualization of man's true potentialities. United with God in Christ man is now more truly man than in any other condition. The glory of God indeed is man fully alive, but it is the word "fully" in this statement that is most important. It has a meaning far beyond man's wildest expectations. The fullness of life, eternal life, is found in union with God in Christ. It is the

actual shared life of the Trinity.

This is the goal of the Christian life for Thomas Merton. Every man should desire it and seek it, since every man is ontologically oriented to this end by virtue of the divine image in which he was made. All the more is this the case for those who have been renewed and recreated in Christ. As Merton puts it, "To be a Christian then is to be committed to a deeply mystical life, for Christianity is the greatest of all mystical religions."107 The highest level of union with God is not something reserved for a special few; it is, in a certain sense, the birthright of every Christian who has been baptized.

Merton sees the mystical life of Christian perfection in union with God as something that is the normal end of the ordinary system of graces offered by God for human salvation. In agreement with Garrigou-Lagrange, Merton views the mystical life as "... something that is arrived at according to the ordinary laws of normal spiritual development."108 He goes on to clarify,

... there is a general remote call to every Christian in the state of grace. The mere fact that you are a Christian and are in a state of grace should mean, according to this theory, that by corresponding to grace you may quite normally enter the mystical life.109

107Merton, "Christ the Way."
109Ibid.
It is important to note that while Merton states that all men are called to the mystical life, he refrains from asserting that all men are called to the graces of actual mystical prayer. Actual mystical prayer is a special vocation. Yet, all men are called to a life of ever-deepening union with God that includes some experience of this kind of prayer.

The mystical life is essentially the normal way of Christian perfection. The mystic life is one to which all Christians, in general, receive a remote call. On the other hand, manifest mystical prayer, infused contemplation in the strict sense of the word, may perhaps be listed, though normal, as a special vocation. It is not for all in the same sense that the mystical life is for all. However, the mystical life, by its very nature, includes at least an element of infused prayer, and the call to the mystical life implies a call at least to masked contemplation.\textsuperscript{110}

These then are the constitutive elements in the theological anthropology of Thomas Merton. Man is created with an ontological capacity for union with God. This "call" is essentially man's freedom to give himself disinterestedly to another in love. This innate capacity for disinterested love is what Merton calls the divine image in man. It is given to man in his creation and constitutes therefore a kind of "natural" orientation to God in the very being of man. God, however, has desired from the beginning to draw man to himself in a perfect likeness formed in love. To accomplish this God has sent his Son into the world to

\textsuperscript{110}Ibid.
restore and re-create the fallen nature of man, in which man had perverted his innate freedom to love by making himself the sole object of that ontological drive and orientation. Christ has given man the ability to restore his proper inner orientation, and in so doing has elevated it so that man is now able, by grace, to share in the very freedom of God, living a shared life with God in the Spirit. This ontological re-creation in Christ is ordered to perfection. Man is called by God to a union of love, brought about by the perfection of the image into a perfect likeness. When man removes the remaining impediments to this growth in likeness by a life of cooperation with grace, prayer, detachment and self-denial, he is brought to perfection by the power of Christ in the Holy Spirit. His innate capacity for disinterested love is now elevated, actuated and transfigured in an unfathomable way. Man begins to love God with the love with which God loves Himself, since the transformation of the image into a perfect likeness of Christ makes the "I" of man in some mysterious way the "I" of Christ. Thus man shares the same spirit with Christ and is drawn into the very life of the Triune God, becoming an actual participant in the eternal Trinitarian perichoresis, the never-ending "dance of love" of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Merton's theological anthropology is a radically theocentric anthropology. For him, man can only be understood in terms of his
relationship to God and his destiny in God. Man finds his meaning in the good news of Jesus Christ in which he is offered the possibility of "returning to paradise," i.e. to a condition of inner integrity and of union with God that even Adam did not experience. Man is destined and called to a perfect union with God in love. Everything in man's nature and in the nature of the universe is ordered to that reality. It is a breath-taking, awe-inspiring perspective, leaving one with the wonderful words of Isaiah the prophet lingering in the mind, "Who could believe what we have heard?" (Isaiah 53:1).
CHAPTER VI

THE NEW MAN: A MAN FOR OTHERS

The decade of the 1960s saw a significant shift in the focus of Thomas Merton's published works. As that turbulent decade wore on Merton increasingly assumed the role of social critic, commenting with the zeal and insight of an Old Testament prophet on the social and political realities of the day. The Civil Rights movement, the struggle of the emerging nations, the attempts at nuclear disarmament, the heartbreaking national tragedy of the war in Viet Nam: all of these and many other matters became the object of his eloquent and perceptive attention. What gave his commentary on these issues its unique power was the peculiar frame of reference from which Merton spoke. When he addressed himself to these matters he did so from the perspective of a deeply personal faith; faith in God certainly, but more precisely here faith in man as God had made him. It was Merton's theological anthropology that constituted the crucial underpinnings of his social criticism. It was his understanding of man in relation to God that gave his social thought the sharp edge with which he cut through the collective illusions of the day.

In sin the image of God in man has become a caricature of God. Man's inner, ontological orientation to love and his ability to realize
a genuine self-identity in that love was twisted and turned in upon itself. Man had made himself a "god" and consequently became entangled in illusions about his own self, his God and the world around him. He was cut off from his true identity, an identity that in a mysterious way is involved in the very identity of God. Refusing the love to which this identity drew him, man became incapable of loving as God loves, as he was meant to. In this way the proud self-assertion of sin cut man off not only from God but from his fellow man as well. The love of God is diffusive. The illusory self-assertion of man in sin is a cramping, restrictive, excluding phenomenon. In the situation of sin man understands and articulates his own identity by way of self-assertion, by "pushing against" the self of the other. Thus the self of the other is not treated as a subject, but an object, something "out there" over against which I define my own reality. In the situation of sin the "other" could only be viewed as a "threat," an "object" against which I must push and struggle in order to define and assert my own illusory self. It is in light of this that Merton asserts:

The basic sin of Christianity is rejecting others in order to choose one's self, deciding against others and deciding for one's self. Why is this sin so basic? Because the idea that you can choose yourself, approve yourself and then offer yourself (fully "chosen" and "approved") to God applies the assertion of yourself over against God. 111

In this perspective man is hateful to himself and identifies

111Merton, Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, pp. 174-175.
other men with this own interior self-hatred. Stranded in illusion, the sinful man deals only with the illusory false selves of other men, and thus is built the whole elaborate network of lies and illusions which can be called the collective false self. Alienated from his own innermost reality, man is also alienated from the innermost reality of his corporate existence. He is incapable of loving as he was made to love. The greatest evil is always the perversion of the greatest good.

The grace of Christ liberates man from this condition of alienation from God, from self and from his fellow man. In Christ the image of God in man, his innate capacity for disinterested love is actuated. Man is re-created, made a "new man." This newness stems from the fact that by the grace of Christ and the power of His Spirit man is elevated so that he takes on an ever increasing likeness to Christ and thus actually comes to partake in the life of God. This divine life which man shares is love, since love is the essential nature of God.

What God has done in Christ is to reveal His own inner subjectivity to man. He has done this precisely to enable man to love Him truly once again. The love that man shares with God in Christ is basically an exchange of interiorities between man and God. By responding in faith and love to this divine self-exposure man begins to love God as God loves Himself. He now relates to God as "a subject to a subject," sharing the actual interiority of God. Consequently, to the degree that
man cooperates with the grace of Christ he begins to see reality as God sees it, that is to say, he begins to see reality as it is, with all self-made illusions dispelled. No longer laboring under the network of lies created by the alienation of sin man becomes capable of loving as God loves. He knows and loves himself as he is, and he is now free to love other men as they really are. By growing in identification with Christ man becomes aware of the real meaning of what it means to love. Merton describes this condition of the "new man" in this way:

... in his dealings with others he has no need to identify them with their sins and condemn them for their actions: for he is able, in them also, to see below the surface and guess at the presence of the inner and innocent self that is the image of God.  

This is what Merton terms "loving men in God." He distinguishes it as the uniquely contemplative perspective on charity vis-à-vis the "active" perspective of "loving God in men." The difference is not one of substance but of focus. For the contemplative the focus is always on God. By growing in the love of God man becomes more able to love other men. "The more we are plunged in Him, the better we can recognize Him wherever He is to be found: and the readier we are to see Him in other men." Love is one. Consequently it is impossible to say that the one perspective of love is better than the other in any

112Merton, "The Inner Experience," p. 52.

113Merton, No Man Is An Island, p. 133.

114Ibid., p. 134.
general way. It is the difference between the perspectives of Martha and Mary. The important point is that it is precisely the contemplative perspective that gives Merton's approach such depth, incisiveness and vitality.

Again, Merton's approach here is profoundly Christocentric. Love means an interior and spiritual identification between the lover and the beloved. It is in Christ that the pivotal restoration of a real love between God and man is accomplished. Man must first discover his true self in identification with Christ before he is capable of genuine love for his brothers and sisters. In discovering this intrinsic unity of one's true self with Christ one also discovers one's essential unity with all other men in Christ.

The more I become identified with God, the more will I be identified with Him. His Love will live in all of us. His Spirit will be our One Life. And we shall love one another in God with the same love with which He loves us and Himself. This love is God Himself. 115

This identification with Christ is total, both individually and collectively. "The new Adam is not only Christ, the Head of the Mystical Body, but also those who, having the likeness of God restored in their souls, are His Mystical Body." 116 In a certain and real sense we are the "Second Adam." We are Christ. Just as there is because of sin a collective false self, so in Christ there is a collective image of God,

116 Merton, The New Man, p. 95.
a collective true self. Just as the individual soul restored and elevated by grace becomes a sharer in the inner life of the Triune God, so too there is a collective participation in the Trinitarian "dance." This is an awe-inspiring vision. It is a vision that endows man individually and collectively with undreamt of worth and dignity.

The Mystical Body of Christ is the Body of those who are united with one another and with the Father and the Son by a union of charity so close that it is analogous to the circumincession in which the Father dwells in the Son and the Son in the Father. Indeed, our status as sons of God depends on the fact that our unity with Christ makes the Father dwell in us as He dwells in the Son, while we dwell in the Father as does the Son. These theological expressions strive to express the most perfect possible unity. The man, therefore, who, enlightened by the Spirit of God, discovers in himself this union with the Father in the Son and with all men in Christ, is at the same time unified in the highest degree within himself and perfectly united with all men who are in Christ.117

It is his profound grasp of this tremendous destiny, the seeds of which lie in every man, that empowers Merton's social criticism. Once this tremendous reality of man created in the image of God, destined for union with Him and all men, is truly grasped how vividly and perfectly the folly and illusions of the present world situation stand out! Once the totality of the vision of Merton's theological anthropology is understood, the intensity and passion of Merton's social criticism is perfectly comprehensible.

117Ibid., pp. 110-111.
Man is created with an ontological orientation to union with God in selfless love. He is to achieve this both individually and collectively. In Christ this capacity is actuated and elevated to an actual share in the life and love of God, again to be realized both individually and corporately. The entire universe is being drawn into unity by Christ so that in the end God will be "all in all." This is the power behind Merton's social criticism. It is the power of the Good News of Jesus Christ. The words of Merton which opened this study come to mind once more:

Whatever I have written, I think, can be reduced in the end to this one truth: that God calls human persons to union with Himself and with one another in Christ.118

118 Merton, "Concerning the Collection in the Bellarmine College Library," p. 18.
CHAPTER VII

A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF MERTON'S THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

IN THE LIGHT OF CONTEMPORARY SPIRITUALITY

The primary concern of any spirituality is the question of how a person can live a life integrally dedicated and committed to the person of Jesus Christ and his teachings in the world today. The answer to this perennial question presupposes certain beliefs about the nature of God and the nature of man as he is related to this God. If these two reciprocal elements are not clearly thought out and understood, the spirituality which depends on them would be at best vague and inconsistent. For a spirituality to be vital and livable it must rest upon a definite, clearly understood conceptual foundation, which addresses itself to the question of the nature of God and the nature of man in relationship to his God. Providing just such a conceptual foundation is the task of theological anthropology. This is so inasmuch as the proper object of this field of inquiry is the nature of man in relationship to God. There is no viable spirituality without the intellectual underpinnings of a theological anthropology.

What are the questions and problems which the people of today bring to a Christian spirituality? Certainly there are as many questions and problems as there are people who bring them up. But it seems that
the universal, underlying questions beneath a plethora of other questions are concerned with these three basic things: 1. What it means to be a human person, 2. What it means to love as a human person, and 3. What it means to be a human person and to love as a human person committed to the person and teachings of Jesus Christ in the world today. All of these, of course, are reciprocal questions feeding into one another, and increasing the depths of each individual inquiry. Any spirituality, if it is to be a vital reality, must deal with these fundamental human inquiries and problems in terms of a solid, conceptual foundation. If the spirituality fails to do this, it will inevitably meet the fate of the house built on sand. The question that now must be asked is whether or not Merton's theological anthropology provides such a firm conceptual foundation for a contemporary spirituality.

The single most distinctive characteristic of Merton's theological anthropology is its essentially ontological character and orientation. Employing the vehicle used by so many monastic theologians, of the divine image in man, Merton takes great pains in all of his works to demonstrate that the fundamental meaning of human existence can be answered only in terms of being rather than doing. Man is constituted ontologically as man by the presence deep within his being of the image of God. This image is an openness, a potency, a dynamic capacity for union in love with God. The image is present within man from the moment of creation, constituting a "natural" orientation to the Absolute. The grace of
redemption in Jesus Christ actuates this potency so that the image begins to grow into an ever greater likeness to its Exemplar. The priority of the ontological in Merton's thought is the central element to which all other concepts concerning human meaning are oriented. It is this orientation that makes the spirituality that would be structured on this conceptual foundation uniquely qualified to answer the problems and questions of contemporary man.

It follows from this basic ontological orientation that, in this kind of a spirituality, silence and solitude would be highly valued. If the basic meaning of human existence is to be found within man, then conditions must be suitable for the "journey" inward. Silence is a basic presupposition of this journey. Only when noise, both interior and exterior, has ceased is a man capable of focusing the power of attention at his command on his own inward reality. Solitude, too, is a necessary condition for the journey within. It is in a certain sense the necessary complement of silence. For a man to come face to face with his own inner reality a degree of actual physical solitude is necessary. It is necessary to be silent and alone if one is to come face to face with the nothingness and the image of God beneath that nothingness which are both within man.

There is nothing modern man fears more than genuine silence and real solitude. He fears them because they force him either to face his
own inner reality as it is, or to escape into the oblivion of insanity. This fear is witnessed to by the almost complete absence of silence in contemporary society. This goes so far that there are even companies in business today which provide taped "muzak" for chapels and churches. Television, radio and all the elements of the mass media serve to increase modern man's fear of solitude and silence. Their function is to keep man from reflecting on the sometimes terrifying realities within. They act as a kind of drug to prevent the authenticity and self-knowledge that is demanded by life if it is to be genuine human life at all.

Thomas Merton's theological anthropology, concerned as it is with the ontological reality of man, provides the foundation of a spirituality which can successfully counter this flight from meaning and reality. Centered as it is on man's innermost reality as image of God, it provides a conceptual basis for coming to grips with the deep need of man for silence and solitude. It opens the way to personal authenticity and unmasksthe illusory personhood foisted on contemporary society by that society's dreadful fear of its own inner truth.

This quest for the truth of man's inner reality provides a conceptual basis for the kind of asceticism and detachment which would be palatable to modern man. Reacting to the excesses of spiritualities based on an almost Manichaean view of matter, modern man has very little
interest in asceticism. This, however, does not do away with the deep ontological need for asceticism and detachment consistent with the deep ontological need for inner integrity and authenticity. Based on the conceptual foundation of the divine image in man the proper task of asceticism emerges as a task of clarification. Its purpose is to help man break free from the illusions that enmesh him, most particularly the illusion of the false self. Consequently, asceticism is not to dehumanize mankind, but rather to lead man to the realization of what it really means to live as a human being created for union with God. Instead of leading to a denigration of human life, asceticism leads rather to the fullness of human life. Viewed in this light ascetical practices, not the least of which are silence and solitude, can be properly understood. At the same time the excesses of the past are avoided precisely because of the clear conceptual foundation offered for the practice of asceticism: the concept of the image of God in man.

Merton's theological anthropology also provides a firm conceptual basis for the problem of the natural and the supernatural in a spirituality. His use of the concept of the divine image in man presents a harmonization of these two elements that corresponds to the whole life experience of contemporary man. The image of God in man is part of man's being from the first moment of creation. This gives to man a tremendous ontological worth and dignity from the very beginning. He is a
being made for an intimate sharing in the life of God. He is humanly structured so that he is capable of such a union in love. This of course remains a potentiality until it is actuated by the grace of Christ. The most significant factor here, though, is the broad scope of Merton's anthropology. The supernatural in his anthropology does not enter into or affect human existence in any way that is destructive of humanness. On the contrary, grace brings the fulfillment, the only real fulfillment possible, of human nature. Merton provides in his theological anthropology an integrated, wholistic view of the relationship between the natural and the supernatural. He presents a genuinely optimistic view of human nature that is at the same time thoroughly realistic in its appraisal of the human situation.

It is this optimism, in its understanding of man as a being ontologically capable of union with the Absolute, that sparked and fed the flame of Merton's interest in Zen Buddhism. Certainly there should be no doubt from what has been considered in these pages that Merton's theological anthropology is thoroughly Christian. What he found in Zen, however, was a possible way of enriching the traditions of the West and this ontological approach to human reality. In his excellent book on Merton's theology of prayer, Fr. John J. Higgins writes concerning this interest in Zen:

It is this overwhelming urge in man to lose himself in God (or to be found by Him) that prompted Merton's interest in the Eastern
religions and especially Zen Buddhism, which he saw as an enrichment to Christianity. In his view Zen sought enlightenment as to the ground of its own being, not primarily as a religion, but as a way of life. And so, a Christian, Merton felt, could enter such thought without compromising his own beliefs. He recognized that both his own teaching on contemplative prayer as well as the teaching of Zen brought man to an authentic confrontation with himself, with reality and with his fellow man.119

Does all this concern with ontology and interiority lead to a kind of spirituality excessively concerned with the self? On the contrary, Merton's concept of the divine image in man gives his theological anthropology a real element of dynamism that is designed to transcend and overcome this self. Merton's ontology views man as an openness, a capacity, a being-in-dependence on God. The way that the self is to be transcended is in the transforming union of unselfish love. So much is this the case that the degree of genuine humanness a person can achieve is dependent upon the degree to which a person can love. Only when a person loves can he achieve a proper sense of his own true identity.

This proper sense of identity achieved only in loving is an awareness of the ontological orientation to union existent deep within one's being. It is the discovery of the presence of God within us, reflected in the "mirror" of our being. It is an awareness of the presence within us of the uncreated image of God. Christ is central to the theological anthropology of Merton. This is so because the key concept of that anthropology is the presence within man of the capability of loving God as

He desires to be loved. The actuation of this capability is totally dependent upon the revelation of Christ in whom man comes to understand the love with which God loves and the love with which God desires to be loved. Without Christ it is impossible for man to be truly human because without Christ it is impossible for man to love truly. Without Christ the image of God in the soul can never grow into a perfect likeness.

Even Merton's understanding of love is determined by his essentially ontological approach to the meaning of man. He sees genuine love as an exchange of interiorities in which the self of the lover is mysteriously transformed by sacrificial self-giving love into the self of the beloved. The image of God in which man is created holds the seeds of this kind of love between God and man. Thus it is that in loving God man's true self must come in some mysterious way to be the self of Christ, the definitive revelation of God's own inner subjectivity.

This theological anthropology can and does provide an effective alternative to the tendency which would reduce Christianity to a social service agency. The essence of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ does not lie in the love of neighbor exclusively. It is necessary to love God first in order to love our neighbor genuinely. This is so inasmuch as in loving God, i.e. being transformed into Christ, one takes on the view of reality that is God's view. Man really loves his
neighbor only when he loves him with the love with which God loves him. Complete identification with Christ is the prerequisite for complete love.

Certainly love of God and love of neighbor are each not possible without the other. In the actual human situation there is an almost indistinguishable mixture of these two. The value of Merton's position, however, is to illustrate a certain logical and ontological priority of the love of God. This is so precisely because love demands complete identification with Christ. Taking on Christ's view of things is an essentially incarnational attitude. In fact it is only through the eyes of God-made-man that our fellow man and all of creation are seen in their proper perspective and reality. And that reality is suffused with the glory of a Deus absconditus, a God whom we can never grasp but whose presence or absence can be intuitively sensed and realized.

This is the conceptual structure that Merton offers in his theological anthropology to modern man. It more than adequately deals with each of the universal questions which man must ask in the formulation of any spirituality. The meaning of what it is to be human is found in the fact that man is made in the image of God, that is to say, that man's being is ordered from the beginning of his existence to be united to God in love. The proper end of the creature reveals the meaning of that creature. What it means to love as a human person and what it means to
be and to love as a human person committed to the person and teachings of Jesus Christ are questions which lead to one single answer. To love as a fully human person means to love as God loves, by becoming totally identified with the reality of Jesus Christ, the uncreated Image, who can be found at the depths of our own being. This ontological approach has much to offer to modern man as he searches for a viable contemporary spirituality. It avoids the dangers of a totally active orientation to religion and redirects Christian man to the much neglected task of looking inward, discovering at one and the same time both genuine human authenticity and the actual presence of God. It has much to offer man as a solid conceptual framework for a contemporary spirituality.
CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

When one studies the writings of Thomas Merton it does not take long to realize that what gave his thought such power was that he always spoke from the perspective of human experience. He lived the realities about which he wrote. In doing so he brought to the American Catholic Church a renewed awareness and sensitivity to the crucial tasks of our Christian lives: coming to love God truly and thus truly love all of reality. He helped a great many modern Catholics, so thoroughly absorbed in the pragmatic activist atmosphere of America, come to realize that the crucial task and meaning of life resides within, in the inner experience. (It is quite fitting that this is the title he chose for his last manuscript). He was a spiritual teacher in the tradition of the desert Fathers, teaching others the perils of the inner terrain, a terrain he knew well from his own personal journey. In prospect, he will probably become one of the most significant figures in the life of the American Church in this century, and perhaps beyond this century. His thought on the nature of man is central to his contribution since all the rest of his thought springs from and depends upon it. His thought on the nature of man is vitally needed today because we must now somehow come to know that even in our most blind and stupid moments we are good. We are made for love.
Our real journey in life is interior; it is a matter of growth, of deepening, and of an ever greater surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts. Never was it more necessary for us to respond to that Action. 120

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