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## ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS AND THE 20TH CENTURY CONTEMPLATIVE

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To Thomas Merton, contemporary Catholic theologian, contemplative monk, poet and renowned prose writer, the sixteenth century Spanish mystic and poet, San Juan de la Cruz (St. John of the Cross), was unquestionably the greatest contemplative the Roman Catholic Church ever had.<sup>1</sup> Merton taught the Saint's doctrines, not only to contemplatives within the monastery, but to laymen outside the cloister as well. In *Ascent to Truth*, published by the Abbey of Gethsemani, Merton presented a careful exposition of St. John's mystical theology. In *Disputed Questions*, 1960, Merton dedicated one article to the defense of the "hard sayings" of St. John, logically explaining the sound theological base to the Saint's teachings. Merton's *Contemplative Prayer*, 1969, directed to the monastic community, relied also heavily on St. John to teach certain crucial, and difficult, aspects of mysticism. *Saints for Now*, edited by Clare Boothe Luce in 1952, had two articles on St. John, one of which was written by Merton. It is in the *Sign of Jonas*, 1953, a journal kept during the first years of his monastic calling, that one captures glimpses of Merton wrestling with initiation into mysticism, a poignant personal struggle which reveals Merton's first acquaintance with St. John's asceticism and his reliance on the Saint's guidance.

Before publishing *The Sign of Jonas*, monk Father Louis, (Thomas Merton), had already become famous outside the cloister as a best-selling author with his autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain*, a fascinating account of Merton as sinner, peripatetic traveller, "impatient infidel", who has been providentially converted to Roman Catholicism and had entered the Trappist monastery Gethsemani (sic), near Louisville, Kentucky. Once in the monastery, Merton had desired to obliterate any memory of the "old man", the worldly Merton portrayed in the autobiography. His abbot, who has insisted that he finish his autobiography when he entered Gethsemani, had perceived his extraordinary gift for writing as a blessing to be directed toward's God's work. Merton had embarked on a writing career from Gethsemani Abbey reluctantly, at his superior's insistence, yet in great conflict with the monk's own dreams of entering the hermitic life. Ironically, the success which Merton had desired before his conversion, and which had eluded him then, now that he rejected it, was to make him a special commodity in Cistercian circles. Unquestionably, along with writing ability, the monk also possessed the erudite background and brilliance which would lead him to become one of the greatest theologians and writers in the 20th century, achievements which his abbot may have miraculously foreseen even then.

In its name alone, Gethsemani, or "Garden of Agony", refuge sought by Merton from the world, revealed the tone of the emerging contemplative's spiritual trajectory. It was there where he first delved into the Church's teachings on asceticism and contemplative prayer. *Sign of Jonas* begins with Merton's preparation for perpetual

vows, and follows the new monk's thoughts as he advanced to Sacred Orders, the priesthood, to his years as a priest, and finally his appointment as Spiritual Director. At Gethsemani, Cistercian monks take four vows: to poverty, obedience, conversion of manners, and to stability. It is this last vow which binds the monk to one monastic community, to live and die in the monastery of his profession. Merton, eager to pursue his initial dream of becoming a Carthusian hermit, struggled with the vow: "For me, the last vow of stability has been the belly of the whale." (8) (reminiscent of St. John's feelings in his own jail cell). Merton continued: "Jonas was ordered to go to Nineveh, but he had uncontrollable desires to go in the opposite direction...God pointed me one way, and all my ideals pointed me in the other direction." (9) Throughout most of the text, Merton withholds specific details concerning what he terms his "interior development"; yet, even the limited account reveals his difficult spiritual struggle. Repeatedly, he claimed he called on St. Augustine, St. Francis and St. John of the Cross, during the period when he struggled to write *Ascent to Truth*, beseeching God: "...kindle in my heart the love of Christ and teach me to give myself to You in union with His sacrifice" (9) St. John's influence soon began to uplift and mold Merton's new contemplative prayer life:

Every time I pick up a book in that tradition, especially St. John of the Cross, I feel like the Three Wise Men when they came out of Jerusalem and out of the hands of Herod, and once more saw the star. They rejoiced with great joy...They could see the straight road ahead...(25)

At times a mischievous and fun-loving monk, Merton injected some humor into the serious work of studying St. John, as shown in this Palm Sunday note: "If I had kept my resolution about following the Cautelas of St. John, and 'not seen' anything that goes on in the community, I wouldn't have found out by sign language, which of the monks were closeted with the Abbot General for over two hours." (26)

Like St. John, Merton found great joy in hard work, although humorous accounts by other monks claim that his extreme physical clumsiness caused Merton to jeopardize his own life and others' whenever he undertook any manual tasks. (26) Also like St. John, Merton admits being, at times, "disposed to criticize the cloister." He was frequently irked by what he perceived as the Trappists' excessive desire for action and work: "We seem to think that God is not satisfied with a monastery that does not behave like a munitions factory under wartime conditions of production."<sup>2</sup> If the monks were worn out physically, he noticed, then they felt they had done God's will, even if they had worked themselves into difficulties—spiritually and otherwise.

On March 10, 1947, Merton wrote: "Four years ago, I discovered the section of 'The Living Flame', third stanza, where St. John tells about the "deep caverns" and about prayer." (32) Already he claimed that a transformation had been taking place gradually within himself, something at work within his soul of which he had not been aware before. Subsequently, he simply shared the lines from St. John which were inspiring him them: "Oh, cautiverio suave / oh, regalada llaga / oh, mano blanda / que a vida eterna sabe / y toda deuda pagal / Matando, muerte en vida la has trocado." (37) Reading of St. John's mystical union reassured Merton that he was in the right place, in the life of contemplation. Truly certain of his vocation now, he felt

he was gradually dying the sensual life to receive a spiritual one, the death of the "old man", and the Beatific vision, (although he disclosed few details of that gradual development).

During Holy Week, 1949, St. John's *The Dark Night of the Soul* came to life for Merton. Through St. John, he reinforced his belief that mystical union was the end for which he was created. Like the Saint, he acknowledged that the only true joy was becoming one in Christ, and having Him live in us. (38) "There is one thing left to live for," he notes, "the love of God." (38) Soon after, on a day reserved for recollection, during that period when he had been laboring to explain St. John's teachings in *Ascent to Truth*, he discovered his own soul "full of movement and shadows." Anguished, he described feelings: "...crosscurrents of dry wind that stir up the dirt of my human desire. Everywhere I turn I find the stuff I write sticking to me like fly paper." (30) Merton wondered if perhaps not everyone could reach the real intimate presence of God during those special days of recollection, which he defined as: "The unspeakable experience of God's love in us...", where silence must rule, for speech could destroy the experience. He incessantly awaited God, God's silence, God's peace, yet he could see that his own house was not in silence; he was not quite ready; he continued to feel his soul "lacerated" by activity and desires. Now he determined he must no longer wound himself with the thoughts and questions that had so far surrounded him "like thorns" - secret, agonizing thoughts he chose not to reveal in his diary. His primary concern must continue to be to reach a mystical state of recollection, drawing deeply within his soul for stillness, while blocking out external preoccupations:

Secrecy complements a pure intention. If one's spiritual sanctuary, the center of the soul, is not to be violated, one must depend on secrecy. If we find God in our souls, everybody else, including ourselves, has to be left out. (30)

Merton constantly resorted to St. John at this point, certain that he had not yet arrived at the proper spiritual level he strove for. Finally, he concluded that: "Rushing church desiring contemplation is not sufficient. Without God's will it's nothing..." (44-45) Guided by St. John's admonitions on the *nada*, "...gustarlo todo en nada. Venir a lo que no gustar; ir por lo que no gustas...", he continued to pray that God's will be done, and that he could abandon himself to it, relinquishing everything else.

In September, 1948, Merton claimed to have become wrapped up suddenly in "love", a single-word message he repeated in his diary for several lines. Truly enraptured on that Sunday after Pentecost, he did not wish to externalize his marvelous experience by disclosing its details. Just as suddenly, however, the next period in his life became tormented and frightful: he could not write, and his self-expression seemed to "dry up", rendering him "verbally paralyzed." His guilt at having become a famous writer, constantly weighed on his mind. That a Trappist monk, who supposedly had left the material life behind him, should achieve fame and become sought-after because of an autobiography he had been asked to complete at the monastery, signified only defeat to him now. A contemplative monk and a worldly success story at once? Shameful! Also, having only just studied dogma himself, he had suffered immensely over writing a book on theology (*Ascent to Truth*), which had involved



great strain and difficulty for him. In the midst of this spiritual turmoil, a friend sent him the Burgos edition of San Juan de la Cruz in splendid red leather, which cheered him and encouraged him to further study the Saint. What about St. John's glory and fame? Merton's consolation lay in reminding himself that the beauty of St. John's own glory was "the Crown of Christ the King." On November, 1948, rather elaborate preparations were underway at the monastery for Advent celebrations which included talks by a psychiatrist. Soon, Merton, (Father Louis), would take a first step in defense of St. John's works, for as the scheduled talks on psychiatry soon "veered into a discussion as to whether the average novice could read St. John of the Cross with profit and even without harm", Merton angrily reminded everyone that with all the fuss about Advent, who was even interested in reading St. John anyway? (46) Much later he would teach the Saint's doctrines in order to dispel the very type of doubts expressed during that discussion.

Following this period of suffering, when he claimed an inability to write, articulate his thoughts, or even think, culminating in an undisclosed, yet devastating illness, Thomas Merton finally recovered and began to perceive the changes that he must accept for his life:

If I am to be a saint—and there is nothing else that I can think of desiring to be—it seems that I must get there by writing books in a Trappist monastery. If I am to be a saint, I have to be, not only a monk, but I have to put down on paper what I have become. It sounds simple, but it is not an easy vocation. (47)

To do this properly as a true contemplative, he admitted he must "put down" all illusions and attachments left in him. In his need to be frank, he saw a "crucifixion of sorts", although not very dramatic or painful. This honesty he greatly needed, he felt could only come directly from the Holy Spirit. It was then at Conventual Mass, that he reached the state he had desired for so long. Suddenly he found himself: "completely recollected and sunk in Him, protected on all sides by His presence." (109) In this recollected state, he found his memory "was sated with darkness", and his imagination incapable of going anywhere or doing anything. An overwhelming sensation possessed him periodically: "There is a power that keeps seizing my heart in its fist and wringing cries out of me." (108) Day and night thereafter, he continued to experience varying emotions: passion, anguish, high religious exaltation. Occasionally, he claimed to hit periods of calm, "arid times"; yet, more often he was caught in a confrontation between joy and low points of self-hatred: "Denying oneself, we fail and try, again, over and over." (108) Often these reverses tormented him: "There is nothing to live for but God, and I am still full of the orchestras that drown His voice." (108) St. John's poetry brought needed succor at these times: " 'Por toda la hermosura/ nunca yo me perdere.' I read St. John's poem over and over." (227) And again: "I can't read anything except St. John's 'Living Flame': 'rompe la tela de este encuentro.'" (227) As his thoughts constantly returned to the mass and the encounter of his own soul with the living God, his prayer was that more of the curtain be lifted away, and that each day may draw him closer to heaven and God's vision. Celebrating the mass brought him to "the beginning of the journey" of mystical union, during which: "My soul is united to the soul of Christ, the priestly character

impressed upon me in the mass — His soul and my soul as closely and inseparably joined as two rays of light shining together." (234) In a contemplative monastery, priesthood must signify the furnace of purification which brings charity for others, since the contemplative as a rule has no ministry, explains Merton. "I had been raised to a higher and cleaner being - without ceasing to be who I am - I had become Somebody else." (234) Thomas Merton had been purified by the fire of God in solitude.

After ordination, Merton found himself facing a horrifying "mystery", which was beginning to "manifest itself in the depths of my soul and to move me with terror." (234) Although he resisted identifying it solely with physical pain, he found no word to adequately name it, except "suffering". Something deep inside, akin to a "submarine earthquake" was affecting the "surface" of his life, and it was that internal volcano which suggested a battle with joy and fear. He attempted to work on his diary, and wrote pages which he soon discarded, until on April, 1950, he gave up his journal entirely. His deteriorating health now caused him physical suffering during "this abysmal testing and disintegration of my spirit" which lasted eight months. It wasn't until December, 1950, when he suddenly recovered "a spring of new life", plus a "happiness like he had never known before" in the face of a "nameless, interior terror." (235) He had suffered the mystic's *noche oscura del alma* and was soon to face the *nada*: fear, helplessness and isolation in the "invisible God". Soon thereafter, he began to experience constant "happiness in all situations, in the deepest darkness, in all storms." (235) This newfound state meant happiness so complete and profound, that he no longer needed to remind himself to "be" happy. This joy was real, even eternal, he felt, able to penetrate the deepest depths of consciousness. Now, Thomas Merton had achieved the mystical union that St. John had made known to him through his writings. The Cautelas of St. John had worked! Merton rejoiced.

At Gethsemani Abbey, Father Louis continued his writing, intent on writing truth, rather than purely inspirational material. If there was anything which repelled Merton, he claimed it had to be the idea of "making someone break out with an attack of spiritual happiness or pious enthusiasm that said everything is all right with the world." (238) In *Disputed Questions* he produced such truth: a series of essays treating various controversial questions pertaining to mystical doctrine. Merton addressed one common complaint often voiced about St. John of the Cross: that his harshness only helped to shut out hearts to Christ's Grace. Merton's experience had taught him that St. John's seemingly harsh ascetic teachings created misconceptions only in those who did not really understand the Biblical background of the Saint, since St. John's doctrine lay firmly rooted in the New Testament teachings of St. Paul, and on Christ's "Sermon on the Mount." In fact, Jesus himself had uttered many "hard" sayings, Merton reminds us, which, properly understood, certainly do not shut out any hearts to his divine Grace. When Christ commanded that one "hate" one's father and mother, he was not refuting an earlier commandment, but ruling that where there was a choice between earthly father and mother, and heavenly father, the Christian's responsibility was to love God the Father and save his own soul, even if it meant hating his earthly kin. In Merton's view, comprehension of St. John's asceticism also meant distinguishing between choices, comprehensible only

to those who understand the choices the Saint refers to. For instance, St. John's "harsh" teachings on treating companions in a monastery as if they weren't present, meant, not sinning against charity, but only treating one's colleagues with love at a higher, less sentimental and worldly plane. Merton insists that St. John is best understood only within the concept of the "true reality" inherent in mysticism, since he is addressing communities of religious contemplatives who understand the meaning of this inner "reality," what is truly at the very depths of one's soul. St. John teaches tenderness and charity in the treatment of people, as he himself lived that charity, not superficially, but "in the Spirit", the way Christ loves. St. John thus strives for Christ-like harmony between human feelings and those demands of a saintly or divine nature, which Merton deems a true balance "in the Spirit".

Other paradoxical mystical concepts in St. John are carefully explained by Merton in *Disputed Questions*: suffering and joy; darkness and light; sacrifice and love, all of which are united as to appear to be identified with each other. These paradoxes form part of universal mystical teaching, clarified by St. John for the Christian. Many of these appear unduly harsh, yet Merton points out that the Saint simply wants the soul to be free of egoism and spiritual ambition. St. John believes the mystic must be "called" to contemplative prayer, and his teachings are meant to help ease the transition of the "elect" into the mystical state. Merton sees St. John's thought centering around one main concern: that no contemplative waste time and effort laboring over something Christ would later have to undo. Therefore, sanjuanine asceticism must remain an integral part of St. John's mysticism. Does it destroy genius and desire for Grace? Merton, a poet himself, points to the very beauty of the Carmelite Saint's poetry alone, as living proof that asceticism does not destroy, but liberates genius and transforms it to the glory of God.

Merton's final book, *Contemplative Prayer*, was published posthumously in 1969 after his fatal accident in December, 1968, in Bangkok. Now considered Merton's "last testament" to all of us, the book is a general essay on the very nature of monastic prayer, rather than a defense of monastic life. By then a mature monk, Merton wished to communicate to the "less-seasoned monk" a message of renewal that would direct him more deeply into contemplation, easing his withdrawal from worldly life to devote himself totally to repentance, metanoia, conversion, renunciation and prayer. Above all else, the monk's prayer life must be "cleared" by "negative" elements in monastic life: solitude, fasting, obedience, penance, renunciation of property and of ambition. Once these ascetic practices have "cleared off" a space, the monk must fill that void with meditation and contemplation. These are exactly St. John's "negative" or apophatic teachings of "night". Merton explained "night" as our human way, the darkening of our desires. In *Ascent to Truth* Merton had already discussed some of the notions held by critics of the apophatics. One particular misconception "amused" Merton: that the apophatics or Christian mystics of "night" had somehow left Christ "outside the gates of their own contemplative Eden." Again, Merton warned that such notions are only arrived at if one treats St. John's most important doctrines as if they did not exist. The Saint was not a pantheist with a Christian facade, defended Merton. He was not only Christian, but thoroughly Catholic in his doctrine of contemplation nourished by faith in the Incarnation, which is the Mystical Body of Christ. Clearly, Merton showed St. John to be totally apart from



those groups of mystics, which, in theory, hold the great mystics of all regions living together at the summit of their own "Olympus", far above church doctrine and discipline, and all those things deemed "tiresome" which separate the common run of men into religious groups.<sup>3</sup> Have Christian mystics of "night" left Christ outside their gates? Merton launched into the Carmelite creed to show what is basically required to make mystical doctrine Christian, mainly, Christ. The teachings of Carmelites, Cistercians, Franciscans, the Greek fathers, and the mystics of the desert, are not only Catholic, but Christ-centered. Merton indicated that submitting reason to the authority of the Church is the most essential characteristic of St. John's asceticism of reason. The central paradox of apophatic mysticism is that Faith is a vision of God which is essentially obscure. The soul knows Him, not because he beholds Him face to face, but because it is touched by Him in darkness. In *Ascent to Mt. Carmel*, St. John states that faith is as dark as "night" to the understanding. It is, in fact, in the deepest spiritual darkness, and the most profound "night of the unknowing", or, in the "purity of naked faith," that God unites the soul to Himself mystically. (Ironically, it was while Merton attempted to provide this explanation of "night", that he faced his own spiritual agony shown in *Sign of Jonas*.) Merton's chief concern lay in explaining the most difficult of St. John's teachings, which he feared could have disastrous effects if misunderstood. One of these was the paradoxical concept of the *nada*. Merton's down-to-earth imagery made his point as clearly as St. Theresa's commonplace images long before. To convey the meaning of St. John's "light of reason", he employed an easily understood analogy:

One might compare the journey of the soul to mystical union by the way of pure faith, to the journey of a car on a dark highway. The only way the driver can keep to the road is by using his headlights.<sup>4</sup>

The way of faith, he added, is necessarily obscure, and we drive at night; nevertheless, our reason penetrates the darkness just enough, like the headlights, to show a little of the road ahead. It is thus, in the mystical life, that by the light of reason we interpret the signposts along the way and make out the landmarks. He was still addressing those who misunderstand the Saint on this point, who, in Merton's estimation, imagine St. John's way of the *nada* to be analogous to driving a car by night without any headlights whatever.

Commenting further on St. John's asceticism, Merton again repudiates any wrong interpretations, claiming that asceticism does not have to mean strenuous exercises of mortification in spectacular ways, since the best mortification is that seen by God alone. Asceticism, in Merton's view, is sacrifice, and the monk must be generous in accepting it for Christ's sake, for mystical life depends on that sacrifice. Sacrifice for Christ's sake had meant that Father Louis, Trappist monk, must always remain Thomas Merton, the writer, alive to the "world." Through that sacrifice, the Catholic Church, and especially the Cistercian Order, presented to the world a view of monastic life that was to promote a startling rebirth of contemplation, and thus, of the teachings of St. John of the Cross, the "Prince of contemplation" himself. In his own life, Father Louis had exhaustively studied the Saint and had allowed himself to



be guided by his teachings to insure his own life was one of true contemplation. To ease others into that "true" state, Thomas Merton persistently reiterated throughout his writings the same theme he had found in St. John's admonition to would-be contemplatives: "Take heed, therefore, that the light which is in thee be not darkness..."<sup>5</sup>

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, (London: Hollis and Carter, 1953), p. 8. Further references to this work will appear within the text with page numbers.

<sup>2</sup>San Juan de la Cruz, *Vida y Obras de San Juan de la Cruz*, (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1955), p. 1135.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions*, (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Cudahy, 1953), p. 1.

<sup>4</sup>Thomas Merton, *Ascent to Truth*, (New York: The Viking Press, 1951), p. 155.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 162.