

Turning to the Mystics



Thomas Merton: Session 8

with James Finley

Jim Finley: [music] Greetings. I'm Jim Finley. Welcome to Turning to the Mystics. [bell]

Greetings, everyone. Welcome to our time here together, turning to the teachings of the Christian mystic Thomas Merton, who help us deepen our experience and response to God's presence in our lives. This session actually is to be our last session on Thomas Merton. And as I understand it, there's an opportunity for you to submit questions around these reflections on Merton we've been sharing here together, and my responses to those questions will then be posted. You have access to those.

Our next series of eight sessions, or so, we'll be turning in a very similar way to the teachings of St. Teresa of Ávila on *The Interior Castle*. There'll be a chance to ask questions, and we'll go from there. Next mystic will probably be St. John of the Cross, and so on.

In this session, what I want to do is I'd like to go back and review our explorations of Thomas Merton by singling out seminal themes or seminal aspects of his teachings. I think this is significant because, by singling out these themes, as we go from one mystic to the next, we'll see how these same themes are found in all the mystic teachers in the Christian tradition, and really, in all of the mystic teachers of all the world's great religions, where they're the themes of contemplative consciousness itself. That is, it experientially opens up to us the spiritual worldview and the path that worldview illumines, how we might follow it and live it and share it with others day by day.

Therefore, to the extent, then, this worldview, these teachings, rings true to you, that is, insofar as it speaks to you or you feel drawn towards it, it bears witness, then, the extent to which you're already on this path. You're already being invited to follow this ancient lineage of intimate awakening to this oneness with God, one with us in life itself, day by day.

And so, as our first theme kind of implied, I thought I would actually like to add another quote here from Merton. This is from *Merton's Palace of Nowhere*, page 40¹. And the first theme is that this is always grounded in life itself. That is, it's not a method or a theory, but it's a way of speaking of, or entering into, an enriched understanding of the intimacy of our own life, as opening out upon the intimacy of God given to us as life itself. So, here's the passage in Merton, page 40¹, *Merton's Palace of Nowhere*. Merton writes:

Very often the inertia and repugnance which characterize the so-called spiritual life of many Christians could perhaps be cured by simple respect for the concrete realities of everyday life, for nature, for the body, for one's work, one's friends, one's surroundings, et cetera. A false supernaturalism which imagines that the supernatural is a kind of Platonic realm of abstract essences, totally apart from and opposed to the concrete world of nature, offers no real support to a genuine life of meditation and prayer. Meditation has no point and no reality unless it is firmly rooted in life. Without such roots, it can produce nothing but the ashen fruits of disgust, acedia, and even morbid and degenerate introversion.

Jim Finley: And acedia is this word we see in the Desert Fathers and Desert Mothers. It's a sense of deep discontent in the spiritual life, and that the cure for the discontent is to reground oneself in the concrete realities of our life, or our body, our mind, our emotions, the people we live with and who love us, and we love them, in our daily work, our service—life, life, life, life—

1 This is found on Page 18 in the latest edition, published in 2017

the divinity of the concrete immediacy of life itself.

A second text associated with the same thing about grounding oneself and finding God's presence in life itself. This is page 92² of Merton's *Palace*. Merton writes:

We should not look for a method or system, but cultivate an attitude, an outlook, faith, openness, attention, reverence, expectation, supplication, trust, joy. All these finally permeate our being with love insofar as our living faith tells us that we are in the presence of God, that we are living in Christ, that in the spirit of God we see God our Father without seeing. We know him in unknowing. Faith is the bond that unites us to him in the spirit who gives us light and love.

And so, the path, then, is this perpetual metanoia, this perpetual conversion of the fundamental attitudes of our heart, in these stance[s] of humility, patience, gratitude, humility, and so forth, until we become ever more habituated and stabilized in these ways of living our life and being in the world is the contemplative way.

This, then, go on from there, the grounding this in life. There is a theme of creation. It was the passage of *New Seeds of Contemplation*: “*The world and time are the dance of the Lord in emptiness. The silence of the spheres is the music of a wedding feast.*” And so, it is the theme of the already perfectly holy nature of life itself, that the infinite presence of God is presence-ing itself, is pouring itself out and giving itself away in and as the intimate immediacy of your very presence, the presence of others, and the presence of all things. It bears witness, then, to the holiness of the manifested order of reality itself, All things visible and invisible, and our nothingness without God. That is, it's not to say that we are God. To the contrary, it is simultaneously to affirm our absolute nothingness without God, but it is that nothingness without God that makes our very presence to be the presence of God; so, too, with everyone around us, with the world itself.

The next theme that Merton invites us to sit with, or to be attentive to ,or to quietly listen to our heart, is to realize there are certain moments we're graced with the realization of this divinity—turning to see a flock of birds descending, seeing children in the moment they're really children, knowing love in our own heart—that in these moments, we're subtly quickened from within, with the divinity of the infinite intimate immediacy of this present moment, just as it is.

Jim Finley: And so, the question then becomes, as these moments dissipate as mysteriously as they come, not to break faith with our awakened heart, that in my most childlike hour, in the hour of the arms of the beloved, or an hour of sadness, or sorrow, or loss, an hour alone in the midst of nature, and service to the community, that in the very midst of life, my heart was quickened and I was graced with an awareness of that without which I know my life will be forever incomplete. I will not play the cynic. I won't break faith with my awakened heart.

This, then, leads to the next truth of how these quickenings can begin to bring about in us, a certain longing to abide in the depths of fleetingly glimpsed. That is, I'm not content to have these serendipitous fleeting glimpses of this oneness that alone is real, but what is the path, the way of life, along which I might move into an evermore habitual, evermore deep, and broad, and abiding, habituated state of this divinity of the intimate immediacy of myself,

2 This is found on page 64 in the latest edition, published in 2017

others, and all things. And this is the path, that it is a path, then, of unconsummated longings.

Where can I find someone well-seasoned in such things who can offer trustworthy guidance of how I may be so stabilized, so habituated? Now, for us, in our tradition, in this Christ consciousness, let the mind that was in Chris Jesus, also be in you. This mind of the divinity, of the concrete immediacy of the invincible preciousness of ourself in our fragility, in all our wayward ways.

And here's where Thomas Merton comes in, and these mystics. The mystics are men and women who have been in a mystical experience, a moment of oneness, or a series of mystical experiences, and have been transformed in such a way that they mystically experience everything that they experience. They bear witness that it is possible to live in this abiding consciousness, this awareness. Shunryū Suzuki saying that the primary task of the teacher in these traditions is to give witness to the seeker that what the seeker seeks is real. The very presence of the teacher bears witness that your heart has not deceived you, that it is possible to live in this abiding consciousness, because the presence of the teacher bears witness that it is possible, and the teacher bears witness that it is possible for you, because if it wasn't already beginning to happen to you, you wouldn't even be empowered to recognize the teacher.

So, what is the path? And this is the path that Merton follows us on. This is the path of the cultivation of these attitudes, these transformations, this humility, this patience, and so on. This is the path. This is the way.

The next theme, then, is we see the importance in our meditation and prayer; that is, there is the importance of a daily rendezvous with a God, a setting aside a quiet time where there's no agenda but love alone, so that in that unguarded vulnerability and devotional sincerity of prayer and meditation, we might anchor our heart in this awareness and then ask God for the grace as we go through the day not to break the thread of that awareness, so that little by little by little by little, we live in an ever more habituated state of the divinity of every moment of our life, each person that we meet, and so on.

Jim Finley: The next theme is that this prayer and reflection can be seen as moving into two different phases. One is the phase of reflective prayer, or the phase of *lectio divina*. So, the Merton passage, "*My Lord God, I have no idea where I'm going. I do not see the road ahead of me,*" it's a reflective process. And so, we open the Scriptures this way. There is a word, the *lectio*, the stance of a *lectio*, where the beauty of the words resonate with our heart, and in that reflective process of taking in that word, then the *meditatio*, the meditation, is that we then reflect upon it; that is, we engage in an intimate dialogue with God on how the beauty of this word that God has just spoken in our heart is active in us. How is it true for me that-- How is it true for you that I don't see the road ahead of me; I don't know where it will end, and so on?

And then in this unknowability of all that lies ahead is this kind of quiet confidence that God has begun this work in us and will bring it to completion, and so on. It's a kind of a reflective process. So, the *lectio* is the taking in of the word heard. The

meditatio is reflective, engaged, interactive dialogue, which awakens the prayer, which is the desire of the heart, “*Help me with this. Out of the depths, I cry unto thee, oh Lord,*” from the heart center.

We can see, as we go on in this way, it ripens into contemplation. So, the contemplation is like a wordlessly resting in the presence of God resting in us, a kind of a oneness beyond thoughts, and words, and images. So, we saw this in the meditation with Merton, as he was sitting there in the chapel, the novitiate chapel at the monastery, about the beauty of the red and white carnations on the altar of the novitiate chapel, light, warm, and red all around the darkness. He bears witness to a kind of quiet beholding, or a kind of quiet resting, in the immediacy of this oneness, this kind of a non-reflective contemplative, communal oneness of contemplation.

And as this deepens—and we saw, too—that it deepens into a state where our very identity, that is, our very self, our customary sense of our separate self going through the day, and so on, which in its own way is real, it’s important, yields and gives way to a kind of a trans-subjective communion, so that my deepest self, by the generosity of God, opens out upon the depths of God’s own identity given to me, breath by breath, heartbeat by heartbeat. And I rest in that oneness, which is a kind of obscure foreshadowing of my eternal destiny and passing through the veil of death. Because in this contemplative moment, it is a kind of a death. It’s a kind of a sweet death to identifying to anything less than an infinite union with the infinite love of God, giving itself to me as the reality of every moment of my life.

And we see, then, how this, the grounding place, it comes full circle for Merton, because although it’s a light that transcends the darkness of this world, that it calls us constantly back whenever we start to lose our way, it calls us constantly back to our own body, to our own mind, to the people we live with, to the concreteness of the situation. When we get disheartened about the tenacity of our wayward ways, to know that this is where the divine mercy sustains us, where the divine mercy sustains us and takes us to itself as invincibly precious in all our wayward ways, which is the mystery of the cross, the mystery of experiential salvation, the mystery of placing our confidence not in ourself, not in our ability to live up to anything, but handing ourself over in a confidence in the love that loves us so in our inability to live up to this, it takes us to itself. I’ll try to explain, that we can attain it, but it attains us in our inability to attain it.

So, with this, then, with these reflections, hopefully, if you’re so inclined, as you sit with this each day, or you just sit with the eloquence or the beauty of Merton’s words, to put words to such things that are so hard to talk about, you might be moved and inspired to turn to the writings of Thomas Merton. Take the *Thoughts in Solitude*, or *No Man is an Island*, or *Disputed Questions*, or *New Seeds of Contemplation*, or his other writings, and that you might, then, sit with these teachings about this contemplative way and how this contemplative way endlessly circles back upon the concreteness of life itself, on the concreteness of our daily life in the world, as a contemplative man or woman in the midst of the world.

So, it is with this sense, then, that we’ll end here with meditation. I invite you, then,

sit straight, fold your hands in prayer, and bow. Repeat after me.

Be still and know I am God.

Be still and know I am.

Be still and know.

Be still.

Be. [three bell sounds before period of silence]

[bell sound] And bow. Slowly say the Lord's Prayer together:

Our Father Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name; Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, now and forever. Amen.

Mary, mother of contemplatives, pray for us. Thomas Merton, pray for us. Mother Teresa of Calcutta, pray for us.

In kind of sitting and reflecting during the quiet time of the meditation, it occurred to me to suggest something you might find helpful. We just kind of sat for a few minutes in the felt sense of just being present to this way of living our life. But if you would find it helpful, if you're so inclined, you might start a journal, like a contemplative prayer journal, and what you could do is to write out these themes that I've mentioned here, with the associated passages connected with them, with Merton. And you might also, then, write a reflection on where you are with each of those themes.

What I suggest to people, is that what you could do, as you start a prayer journal, is you would take a passage by Merton, say, one of the passages that we've looked at here, and write it out longhand, if it would help you to do that. I'll outline it: Roman numeral I, what's the topic sentence of the paragraph? Capital letter "A," capital letter "B," like that, because in order to outline, you have to read it, and you get the infrastructure of the passage that Merton wrote it, see, and you can see there's a certain inner order to the passage. It's not random happenchance.

After you've outlined it, which is a certain way of sitting with the passage, put a box on the page of the journal. And if you were to say it in your own words, if you were to paraphrase it in your words, how would you say it? How would you take one aspect of that passage? How would you say it? Maybe you'd be blanking, you don't know how you'd say it, but if you were to say it as it's given to you, what would you say?

Next, put another box on the page under that that's how have you or are you experiencing the truth that the passage invites you to consider? So, you look back at your life, moments of your life, where you are right now, how have you, or how are you now experiencing that?

Third box, the next box down. It's, what's this asking out of you? That is, how is your

deepening consciousness of this spiritual truth, what's it asking out of you, and where are you in asking God for the grace to live in this obediential fidelity to this circuitous path, this day-by-day patient opening up of yourself along this blessed path of following this way, this ancient way, this intimate way of union with God, one with us in all things? Because I think what you'd find, if you're inclined to do that, you could then take those very same themes like I suggested so when we start Teresa of Ávila, you'll be able to fill in, and so on, so there'll be this kind of layered familiarity with the mystics, a kind of a comfort in learning to live in their company and learning to be faithful to this contemplative mystical depths of our own Christian tradition.

Again, I think just as Merton was one of these great teachers in our own age, in a monastery, speaks to all of us out here, I think my affinity with the Living School, with that teachings of Richard Rohr and the teachers of the Living School is, what Merton did in the Cistercian Order in the monastery, [music starts] Richard Rohr's doing the Franciscan Order out here in the midst of the world, like contemplative church, contemplative church, and how contemplative church spills over into the corporal works of mercy, into social justice, and to the Christ-like service to the world, day by day.

So, with that, then, until next time, God bless us all.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you for listening to this episode of Turning to the Mystics, a podcast created by the Center for Action and Contemplation. We're planning to do episodes that answer your questions. So, if you have a question, please email us at podcasts@cac.org, or send us a voicemail at cac.org/voicemails. All of this information can be found in the show notes. We'll "see" you again soon.