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Christ in the House of Martha and Mary by Johannes Vermeer (c. 1655)

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MEMORIES OF MY FAMILY have been flooding my mind recently. I suspect this is so because of a visit from my cousins Mary Ann and Mike, during which we reminisced about our family in Boston. Also, my brother Bill died around this time of year some years ago, and I have been thinking about him. He was my eldest brother, but the first of us to die. These recollections could be morbid, but they are not. Thinking of the past and of all the friends and family have made me grateful for their presence in my life. They stay alive in my memories of them.

Memories also play an important role in our life of faith, especially in the Eucharist. *Anamnesis*—from the Greek meaning “reminiscence”—is a liturgical statement referring to the memorial character of the Eucharist: “Do this in memory of me” (Luke 22:19). Eucharistic Prayer I states:

“Therefore, O Lord, as we celebrate the memorial of the blessed Passion, the Resurrection from the dead, and the glorious Ascension into heaven of Christ, your Son, our Lord....”

Our lives are influenced by the lives of others, living and dead. Memories put us in touch with them and make them present to us today. As it is with our friends and families, so it is with Jesus. The Eucharist brings us into union with Christ and his saving actions, nourishing us and giving us new life.

Edward O'Donnell

Thérèse of Lisieux and “The Wisdom to Know The Difference”

OVER THE YEARS, I have encountered many people with sour hearts. These are good people who have tried to do what they felt they should do. They wanted to be unselfish, to be good, and to do what they thought was the right thing to do. Maybe they acted out of a sense of guilt, of duty, or of how others would see them. Whatever their motivation, they discovered within themselves bitterness, resentment, and a feeling of being used. In particular, one of the results of burnout—an overextension in service—is that people begin to resent those they are serving.

I believe we have all experienced times when we have said “Yes” and then discovered ourselves to be less loving rather than more loving. Attempting to imitate the heroic example of the saints, we may have gone “ahead of grace” in our own lives. What is the true path to finding God’s will, to becoming persons who love God with all our hearts, all our minds, all our souls, and all our strength, and our neighbor as ourselves?

The Wisdom to Know the Difference

Learning from Thérèse

Thérèse of Lisieux is a saint who welcomed opportunities to suffer. She wanted to be a victim, a holocaust of Divine Love.¹ Thérèse united her sufferings with the suffering of Jesus to save souls. She didn't want "one little sacrifice to escape, not one look, one word, profiting by all the smallest things and doing them through love."² Did Thérèse just accept passively as God's will whatever happened to her? Did she only "suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" or did she ever "take arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing, end them"?³

Does Thérèse have any wisdom to offer to sincere seekers who find themselves with sour hearts? Can she offer any guidance for following the *Serenity Prayer's* petition:

"God, give me the serenity to accept what I cannot change, the courage to change what I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

Can Thérèse offer any guidance to those who believe with Gandhi and Martin Luther King that noncooperation with evil is a moral duty and that in the face of injustice, silence usually helps the oppressor? Dorothy Day, a strong advocate for social justice, found inspiration in Thérèse. How can the little way help us find "the wisdom to know the difference"?

The Wisdom to Know the Difference

Self-Knowledge

First, Thérèse had great self-knowledge. Her great desire for truth helped free her from self-delusion: “Are my measureless desires only but a dream, a folly? Ah, if this be so, Jesus, then enlighten me, for You know I am seeking only the truth.”⁴ She was aware of her true motivation. For Thérèse, suffering was not a bargaining with God. She did not accept suffering as a means of obtaining some definite goal she wanted, so she was not disappointed when this objective was not achieved.

Neither was suffering something Thérèse felt she had to accept in order to “be good.” The assurance that Father Alexis Prou gave her in a retreat that

her faults caused God no pain filled Thérèse with joy. She didn’t accept suffering because she feared to resist it: “My nature was such that fear made me recoil; with *love* not only did I advance, I actually *flew*”

(p. 174). Thérèse knew she was beloved of God, not because of anything she did, including suffering, but because God is Love: “I am far from being on the way of fear; I always find a way to be happy and to profit from my miseries” (p. 173).

**I always find
a way to be
happy and to
profit from my
miseries**

The Wisdom to Know the Difference

Wisdom and Acceptance

Because she knew herself, Thérèse had the wisdom to know when the best she could do was to get out of the situation: “Dear Mother, I have already told you that my last means of not being defeated in combats is desertion” (p. 223). Thérèse could tell by sensing what it did to her heart whether to struggle or retreat, whether to continue or to rest. She could tell when a response would destroy her peace of soul. She didn’t judge by an exterior “should” but by an interior “being in touch with her heart”: “I believe that it was much better for me not to expose myself to combat when there was certain defeat facing me” (p. 224).

In addition, when Thérèse did fail, she didn’t dwell on her failure or give it power over her. She simply accepted her failing as part of her weakness and need for Jesus, a weakness that she knew attracted Jesus’ loving assistance. She was not driven by an ego ideal to feel good about herself:

“Now I am astonished at nothing. I am not disturbed at seeing myself *weakness* itself. On the contrary, it is in my weakness that I glory, and I expect each day to discover new imperfections in myself. Remembering that ‘*charity covers a multitude of sins,*’ I draw from this rich mine that Jesus has opened before me.” (p. 224)

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Because of her ability to let go of false expectations of herself, she could live “one day at a time,” in the present moment.

Powerlessness

Because she experienced her own motivation and actions being misjudged by some of her sisters in Carmel, Thérèse knew one can never really know what is in the interior of another. Accepting her own weakness with peace, Thérèse was also able to accept the weakness of others with equanimity. Thérèse was very sensitive to human imperfection, her own and others: “Nothing escapes my eyes; I am frequently astonished at seeing so clearly” (p. 239). At the same time, she judged that certain “moral infirmities” of persons, such as lack of judgment, good manners, and touchiness—all the things that don’t make life very agreeable—are chronic, that there is no hope for a cure (p. 246).

Thérèse knew her powerlessness and did not try explicitly to change these people, “for I know I should soon become discouraged; a word I shall say with the best intention will perhaps be interpreted wrongly” (p. 246). Rather than pointing out their chronic failings, Thérèse determined to treat these persons with love, seeking them out, offering a word of kindness and encouragement, an amiable smile (p. 246).

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Respect

With other annoyances, she took the creative course of paying close attention rather than trying to ignore or avoid. In this way, she was able to respect—*re-spicere*, “to look again at”—the event and find union with Jesus within this very annoyance (pp. 249–250).

When Thérèse did confront, it was in the manner of an adherent of nonviolence. She did not act to conquer or punish but to convert. She relied on the force of truth and of love, rather than personal power.

Thérèse relied on the force of truth and of love, rather than personal power

Thérèse spoke the truth with love. At fifteen, when she felt she had to confront her companion novice, Thérèse told her “with tears in my voice everything I was thinking about her, but I did this with such tender expressions and showed her such a great affection that very soon her tears were mingled with mine” (p. 236).

She confronted her prioress with boldness, presenting her freedom to speak as the result of the union of their souls as a child with her mother (pp. 205–206). Thérèse was able to express a confronting truth and a loving closeness at the same time.

As assistant novice mistress, she saw clearly that the novices must be able to say what they think to

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her—the good and the bad—so that they might be led on the way of love and not fear (p. 243). She saw the necessity of letting go of her own likings and personal conceptions in order to guide them “along the road which Jesus has traced out for them without trying to make them walk one’s own way” (p. 238). At the same time, she confronted what needed to be confronted and corrected what needed to be corrected, even if these actions seemed severe. Even then, she relied more on prayer and sacrifices than on words.

Surrender

At other times Thérèse chose not to speak. Her silence was not a cooperation with evil but a conscious choice to bear suffering in a way that increased her love of Jesus and of other people. Her heart did not become sour or bitter but expanded with ever deepening love. Thérèse’s surrender was neither a self-betrayal nor a resignation to evil that should be resisted.

The surrender that Thérèse made to suffering had the characteristics of authentic spiritual surrender as enumerated by Gerald May, which decrease the likelihood of surrender turning destructive. Authentic spiritual surrender is conscious—one is wide awake and aware. It is intentional, a free

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choice. It is responsible for the choice and for the consequences of the choice.

There is no blaming of another. The surrender is not surrender to anything or any person. It is surrender in a concrete situation of life to the true God, existing beyond all knowledge. The surrender is the “giving of one’s own mysterious soul to the Ultimate Mystery that created it, energized and sustained it, and calls it forth.”⁵ Finally, it is a “willingness to engage the fullness of life with the fullness of oneself.” It is a “Yes” to Life rather than a “No.” Thérèse experienced that her authentic spiritual surrender to suffering in her life, far from making her bitter, expanded her heart and increased her union with Jesus and love for others.

**Thérèse
wanted to
surrender
always to
God’s will**

Thérèse’s surrender was a “Yes” to life. She believed that not only her sacrifices but also her joys offered to Jesus captivated him.⁶ Her sufferings, borne with a smile in union with the sufferings of Jesus for the salvation of souls, brought her special joy.

Thérèse wanted to surrender always to God’s will. Sometimes this meant surrendering in simple acceptance. Sometimes this meant surrendering to the necessity to confront or seek to change. Some-

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times this meant surrendering to the necessity to run away from the situation. Her guide was always what she had to do to keep her peace of heart that she might continue to love and to act with love. She always sought to bring others to love Jesus just as she brought herself to him: by acting in Love, with Love, and through Love.

“Attend to what your choice does to your heart.”

This is the wisdom Thérèse offers us—the wisdom to know the difference.

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Words of Pope Francis

Before all else, the Gospel invites us to respond to the God of love who saves us, to see God in others and to go forth from ourselves to seek the good of others. Under no circumstance can this invitation be obscured! All of the virtues are at the service of this response of love. If this invitation does not radiate forcefully and attractively, the edifice of the Church’s moral teaching risks becoming a house of cards, and this is our greatest risk. It would mean that it is not the Gospel which is being preached, but certain doctrinal or moral points based on specific ideological options. The message will run the risk of losing its freshness and will cease to have “the fragrance of the Gospel.” (11/24/13)

Answering the Call to Contemplation

AS CHILDREN, WE LEARN about our faith from seeing pictures in the Bible, hearing the church choir, smelling incense and burning candles, touching the crucifix, and receiving communion. Later we may be instructed to use our imagination to meditate on scenes from the life of Jesus or to picture the everyday events portrayed in each mystery of the Rosary. In the adulthood of the spiritual life, these images must be drawn into what St. John of the Cross calls the “darkness of faith.” On this point, he believes, as does the Apostle Paul, that, “Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, what God has in store for those who love him” (Rom 7:18–27).

Imagination

Since our imagination is dependent on external stimuli—on what eyes have seen and on what ears have heard—it can at most compose *resemblances* of what has been beheld or touched or tasted. However, what is an imaginary palace of pearl or a mountain of gold compared to one real bead or one gleaming nugget? The imagination can picture

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this or that reality, but no image can capture the uncreated majesty of God. As St. John says in his masterpiece *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*,

“All imaginings fashioned out of their similarities are incapable of serving as proximate means toward union with him.” (Book II:12)

For example, a person may despise God as “father” because he or she projects onto the Divine Mystery an image of a human father who was perhaps abusive, stern, and unforgiving. This “god” has to disappear so that the true God, beyond all images, may reveal himself to one’s soul. Those who imagine God under the guise of any humanly fashioned figure are, in St. John’s words, “very far from him.”

That being said, images, methods, and techniques that aid meditation can be helpful to beginners on the path to deeper prayer. God uses these means to “woo” the soul to himself, to set the stage for spiritual awakening. In this sense, St. John refers to them as “remote means” to attain union with God. They pave the way but do not in themselves provide spiritual repose. The danger is that the spiritually awakened may mistake a signpost for their destination, resting in these means and ceasing to advance to the goal of union with God. The way up, so to speak, is the way down to the deepest foundations of faith where one both clings to the

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God who consoles and ceases to rely on the consolations of God.

Rely on God

The source of this relationship is not a labor of our imagination but a gift of God to us. Our role is to remain in quiet and repose by means of a general, pure act of love rather than hammering out particular acts with our imagination or phantasy. In this work of contemplation, God takes the lead.

From the point or view of God's initiative at this stage of contemplative prayer, St. John insists that we do nothing. The more we try of our own efforts to heed this call, the more aridity we feel. The more we persist in acts of discursive meditation, the further we drag our souls away from spiritual peace. In fact, says the saint, we resemble fools who abandon great treasures for lesser goods.

St. John's advice to sincerely-seeking souls can be expressed in a series of imperatives:

- Learn to abide in quietude with loving attentiveness to God.
- Pay no heed to the imagination and its work.
- Let your faculties (intellect, memory, and will) remain in a state of rest.
- Passively receive divine direction rather than actively doing something to attain it.

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- If you must put your faculties to work, do not make use of excessive efforts or studious reasonings.
- Whatever you do, do so with gentleness of love, moved more by God than by your own efforts.

Signs

In Chapters 13 to 15 of Book Two of *The Ascent*, St. John identifies “signs” by which we can verify the interior movements of the Spirit. He invites us to discontinue reasoning and imagining and to dwell in loving attentiveness on the presence of God in our heart and in our world. He instructs us in regard to how we should suspend discursive meditation, at least for a while, and pass on to a Spirit-initiated state of contemplation.

The three signs a discerning heart needs to recognize are: 1) the realization that one cannot make discursive meditation nor receive satisfaction from it as before; 2) that one is disinclined to fix his or her imagination or sense faculties upon particular objects, be they exterior or interior; 3) and that a person likes to remain alone in loving awareness of God, without particular considerations, in interior peace and quiet and repose, and without the acts and exercises of the intellect, memory, and will.

St. John observes that these three signs must be at work *together*. If one experienced the first sign

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only, it could be that his or her inability to imagine and meditate might be due to dissipation of mind or lack of diligence. The cause of both dissipation and disinclination could be low grade depression or mood swings. That is why St. John insists on the presence of the third sign, loving awareness of God. At this juncture of the spiritual life, the less we understand the further we may penetrate into the night of the spirit, passing through it to a union with God beyond all knowing. Paradoxically, the purer this general knowledge is, the darker it seems to the perceiving intellect.

An hour may seem like a minute, so lost in awe and wonder is the soul. However long the prayer of simple presence may last, it seems of brief duration, for union with pure knowledge is, according to St. John of the Cross, independent of time. However short, it pierces the heavens. Yet its effects are unmistakable. Consider these stanzas from *The Spiritual Canticle*:

My beloved, the mountains, / and lonely wooded
valleys,

strange islands, / and resounding rivers,
the whistling of love-stirring / breezes,

the tranquil night / at the time of the rising dawn,
silent music, sounding solitude,
the supper that refreshes, and deepens love.

—Stanzas 13–15

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To behold the symphony of natural beauty that surrounds us is to move from the pressures of the work-a-day world to the quiet joy of contemplating creation.

Silence, like beautiful music, opens our senses to the harmony of the spheres. Mountains and valleys, rivers and breezes blend into one chorus praising the grandeur, wisdom, and beauty of God. This heavenly hymn comes to a crescendo for us Christians in the Eucharistic supper, which refreshes and deepens love. The longing we feel to please God matches our commitment to share his goodness with others.

Living Prayer

Since contemplative prayer is to the spirit what breath is to the body, St. John advises us not merely to say prayers once in a while—after all, we breathe in and out all the time, even when we sleep—but to become living prayer. At one and the same time, we can live a life of prayer and be of service to the world. We can sense the Lord's coming among us while we are waking and sleeping, working and eating. There is no moment when we see ourselves apart from our Beloved since he is nearer to us than we are to ourselves.

When we become living prayer, the world for us is not a place where people strive only to attain power,

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pleasure, and possession but a house of prayer in which solitude becomes the deepest ground of our togetherness.

Since God is now the soul's one and only guide, God speaks to her heart without any undue interference. In silence and solitude, she finds the way to rejoice in her Beloved and to practice the sacrament of the present moment, freed from every alien satisfaction, comfort, and support. Only now does she experience liberty of spirit. Only now does she reach union with the Divine Word, a practice that silences useless worry and leads her to contemplate God's presence in the peaks and valleys of everyday life.

The contemplation of creation draws us to such paradoxes as "silent music" and "sounding solitude." Alone or with others, we begin to appreciate what it means to live at the intersection of contemplation and action. We know from experience that stillness is not a luxury for an elite few but a necessity in the unreflective chaos that life can become. Silence is the key to growing in receptivity to God amidst the demanding tasks we must complete. The time we spend in helping our neighbor may not be noticed, but what results are not impetuous actions but the ability to attend to whatever God asks of us.

**Silence is
the key to
growing in
receptivity
to God**

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“Sounding Solitude”

We are never so busy that our zeal for serving the Beloved grows cold. The lesson that St. John wants us to learn every day is that “sounding solitude” must be the harbor from which we set sail and the port to which we return on this churning sea of change and challenge. The waves may crash and the winds may blow, but we cling to Christ who is our rock. With prayers for protection and courage on our lips, we follow him from this earthly existence to the lasting supper that refreshes and deepens love in time and eternity.

While the utilitarian-functional mind might label such experiences a “waste of time,” St. John has another opinion. Work with the senses, he says, may be idled for now, but on another plane a profound transformation is taking place since the higher and more sublime the divine light, the darker it is to our intellect.

St. John believes that this light is never lacking to the soul. It is God’s greatest gift to us but our fallen condition prevents the light from streaming into our interiority. To those walking this path of love, St. John says, in effect, “Don’t worry.” If you cannot meditate for all the reasons given, then simply remain in God’s presence with loving attention and a tranquil mind. Even if it seems to you that you are idle, trust that a deeper stirring is at work in you.

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Little by little, you will be enveloped in a divine calm and peace. A wondrous, sublime knowledge of God will be infused into your soul.

Don't interfere with what is occurring. Don't clutter your inner room with discursive meditations. Wait upon your Divine Guest as he waits upon you. Let nothing disturb you, nothing disquiet you. Let nothing draw you out of this blessed state of peaceful receptivity to the guidance of God.

Susan Muto, PhD, is dean of the Epiphany Academy of Formative Spirituality in Pittsburgh, PA. A renowned author, teacher, and professor of literature and spiritual formation, she received the 2014 Aggiornamento award presented by the Catholic Library Association in recognition of her outstanding contribution made to the ministry of renewal modeled by Pope St. John XXIII. Dr. Muto is a single laywoman living her vocation in the world and doing full-time, Church-related ministry in the Epiphany Association. This article draws upon insights found in her book *Words of Wisdom for Our World: The Precautions and Counsels of St. John of the Cross*.

Words of Pope Francis

Every day we are all called to become a "caress of God" for those who perhaps have forgotten their first caresses, or perhaps who never have felt a caress in their life. (10/31/13)

Theo-Poetics, Merton, and Mary: The Center Holds

“My ideas are always changing, always moving around one center, and I am always seeing that center from somewhere else. Hence I will always be accused of inconsistency, but I will not be there to hear the accusation.”

Thomas Merton, *A Vow of Conversion*, January 25, 1964

IT IS NOT SURPRISING THAT, throughout the Catholic life of the contemporary mystic and writer Thomas Merton, the person and persona of the Virgin Mary acted like a magnet for his spirituality. On a psychological level—orphaned young, left motherless even younger—Merton’s lifelong search for the feminine and, even more, the maternal is seen as a compensatory drive by many authors. Aesthetically, as the son of two artists, he saw the face of the Mother of God in diverse icons, cathedral windows, and European sculptures that haunted his early impressionable days.

Spiritually, in his religious call, he was ultimately drawn to the Trappists, a branch of the Cistercians whose ecclesial history is marked by devotion to the Mother of God. Historically, their early dedication to her has been viewed as the impetus for the spread of her devotion from isolated locales and

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shrines to general medieval European practice. She it was, it is said, who inspired the white of their habit with her purity, the title of their houses with her names, the content of their prayer with mysteries of her life.¹

Merton himself testifies to the power of God's mother in his early vocational life, stating that on his first visit to the Abbey of the Gethsemani, he beheld his new-found home as "the Court of the Queen of Heaven," filling the pages of description of her with the most exalted of titles.² Later in his autobiography he will confess:

"I realized truly whose house that was, O glorious Mother of God! ...It is very true the Cistercian Order is your special territory and that those monks in white cowls are your special servants."³

Therefore, it is not surprising that, when his poetic heart turned to express his spirituality in this form, the Mother of God should be at the center of his themes. Across his literary career, Thomas Merton wrote twenty-seven poems honoring Mary, some totally devoted to the Virgin and others with a Marian aspect: twenty-five between 1940 and 1949, one between 1950 and 1959, and one other between 1960 and 1968. He dedicated two of his earliest publications of poetry to his patroness: *Thirty Poems* in 1944, "To the Virgin Mary, queen of poets, always the most holy Mother of God"; and in 1946 in *A Man*

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in the Divided Sea, again to “*Poetarium Reginae*, Mistress of Monks, Mother of the Savior.”

Merton’s Marian poetry, much like most of his writing, naturally tends to fall into three periods. While some critics see these as sharp divides, mirroring what they describe as the inconsistencies of his life, other more perceptive commentators consider them hallmarks of a life lived in transition, touchstones along the way of conversion, within revisioning, within transformation. Kramer traces this evolution as a

“record of his [Merton’s] learning to cease being overly concerned with himself or even with how others perceived him...toward a contemplative awareness of God and thereby a celebration of all other persons.”⁴

In an even more extensive and thoroughgoing analysis, Poks sees Merton’s life as one of “surprising consistency,” which seems to move in terms of “broadening perspectives” from an early “ornate ‘poetry of the choir,’ and somewhat later the more ascetic ‘poetry of the desert’ being largely replaced by the prosaic anti-poetry” of his final years.⁵

Theo-Poetics

While these authors and others have made a case for Merton’s omnibus of writing in general and his

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body of poetry in particular as providing a mirror into the heart, mind, and spirit of this contemporary writer/contemplative, a look into his Marian poetry and what it can tell readers has not yet been offered. One view that can offer such a look is that of theo-poetics. Theo-poetics has been defined as a “theological stance, an artful way of working with language and worldview. The theo-poet uses the occasion of the poem to creatively suggest, ambiguously hint, generously intimate in ways that create space for the reader or the public to face the unknown, engage Mystery, to dream and be transformed.”⁶

“To create space..., engage Mystery, to dream and be transformed”: these words capture who/what/Who lie at the core of Merton’s poetry in all its forms. Since a sensibility within theo-poetics is to move from language that obfuscates and manipulates to a renewal of the power of language to breathe new and creative meaning, the heart of Merton would beat to its rhythm. As Poks emphasizes, across all three periods, “For Merton..., what mattered most was the experience, the illumination, the clarification of life that each poem brought.”⁷ In order to apply theo-poetic insight to Merton’s Marian poetry, the remainder of this article will look through this particular lens at three of his well-known Marian poems, each representative of one of the three peri-

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ods of his writing: from the early choir poetry comes “Evening of the Visitation,” contained in *Thirty Poems* (1944); from his desert poetry, the sole poem of that period, “The Annunciation,” dated 1957; and finally, his prose or anti-poem, “Hagia Sophia” in 1963. In a true theo-poetic approach, each consideration of the poems will look both at the world of the one who wrote them and the words that were written for the truth, the spirituality, and the theology they reveal.⁸

Merton’s Early Period

In terms of Marian theology, the world of the 1940s mirrored in many ways the global situation. In this war-ravaged, pre-Vatican II climate, a major movement in Catholic thought was toward the dogmatic definition for the Marian title “Mediatrix of All Graces,” with theologians, cardinals, and even papal support for Mary’s place as an associate with her Son in both the redemption and the distribution of graces.⁹ That Merton held views similar to those of many in this movement seems evident, with his bordering on some of the excessive attribution to her of almost peership with her Son. In his autobiography he writes:

“People do not realize the tremendous power of the Blessed Virgin. They do not know who she is: that it is through her hands all graces come

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because God willed that she thus participate in his work for the salvation of men.... She is the Mother of the supernatural life in us. Sanctity comes to us through her intercession. God has willed that there be no other way.”¹⁰

At this same time, Merton personally was moving into that part of his life that can be described as lyrical. From his refuge behind Gethsemani’s walls, he could look outward but, in a sense, not touch the world he had deliberately left behind. Kramer describes the poetry contained in *Thirty Poems* (1944) as ones in which

“he remains very much present while he celebrates his newfound but rather narrow monastic happiness.... Often highly compressed, the poems expand outward toward the contemporary world, but seldom with compassion.”¹¹

Reflecting this spirit of contentment at home are such themes as the natural world as a mirror of the good, awe, and wonder in its simplicity and an almost euphoric reverence: “Look, I’ve discovered Christ and his mysteries.” One of the mysteries most loved by Merton and celebrated in two of the poems of this period is that of the Mary’s visitation to her cousin Elizabeth.¹² In the poem “The Evening of the Visitation,” all of this, along with his attitude toward the Mother of God, emerges. The setting, as the title indicates, is the close of the day

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with the “full moon, wise queen” moving toward the “hills of heaven” (l. 2, 3). All within the poem is in motion but in a quiet, almost hushed, movement. The “shocks of wheat” bow as anchorites (l. 9), “sheaves” raise “evensong” chants with “sweet” voice (l. 11), and the same moon and stars offer “gentle benedictions” (ll. 21–22). But it is Mary herself on her journey to “the house of Zachary” who fulfills the most sacred role of consecration (l. 5). She “with far subtler and more holy influence” touches all aspects of home, of life (l. 23).

All within the poem is in motion but in a quiet, almost hushed, movement

The spirit of this poem sounds projective in its almost Browning-esque tone. All is right with the world, sings Merton, for all in this time of peace within his monastic realm is right with him. Gone are the thunders of the Blitzkrieg, the struggles of the Oxford playboy, the confusion of the new convert. Home has been found. A major symbol for home within Merton’s poetry is the barn.

Mark van Doren, in his introduction to Merton’s *Selected Poems*, shares the significance this rural structure held for the poet. Reflecting on two that he watched burn, Merton says, “So, burning barns are for me great mysteries that are important. They turn out to be the whole world, and it is the Last Judgment.”¹³ Such is the vision of a more mature

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Merton, that of the writer of *The Evening of the Visitation* is of a different nature. In this poem “all our barns are happy with the peace of cattle gone to rest” (l. 8). The idyllic, the almost too- perfect landscape is the reflection of his Marian blessed world in which he, one of her “sleeping children” (l. 27), can rest assured for “Our lovely Mother in heaven” will let nothing disturb (l. 28).

Period of Experiences

By the time of his next poetic period, that of “The Annunciation” in 1957, Merton has changed radically in several ways. In terms of his understanding of Mary and her place within salvation history and the Church, what he once viewed as existentially overt, profound, and glorified has muted to an inward goodness. His testimony, published in 1961 in his *New Seeds of Contemplation* and published even today as the “Understanding of Devotion to Mary,” has already been forged within his soul. He writes of the Virgin Mother’s holiness as “the most hidden of sanctities...whose true character and quality of her sanctity seem more hidden” with every new revelation.¹⁴ What had occurred to the man and the monk Merton was multitude. He had taught his scholastics and begun guiding the novices; walking through the silent stalls, desks, and rooms; keeping his night watch solitudes; and growing in his

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connectedness. He had experienced his epiphany on the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville in which his heart reached out from his solitary haven to all of humankind with such compassion that he would write:

“If only they [people] could all see themselves as they really are.... I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other.”¹⁵

In connection with his maturing love of the Mother of God, he would add:

“At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusions, a point of pure truth.”¹⁶

The poem “The Annunciation” comes from a subset of poems or “billet” written for the Carmel in New York as a sort of song for Christmas time for the Sisters.¹⁷ The opening lines sound a little like a Noel carol: “Ashes of paper, ashes of a world/wandering, when fire is done” (ll. 1–2). While the words lack the elated lilt of his choir poems, they portend far more compassion. As a protection for all from “times...too criminal” (l. 33) and “the beast that has pursued” (35), it is “her tenderness” (l. 31) that “heats the dead world”(l. 32), and we —“you, me, and Adam” (l. 36) find ourselves “cured and recollected” (l. 38) in God’s green world.

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The setting has become both simpler and more complex. Nature is less detailed, less fecund, more threatened. The perspective is internal—the inner room, the inner scriptural world, the inner personal core. The girl, the Mary figure, sits praying framed by “lamp and the chair” (l. 16) yet also held within “Wisdom’s house, and Ark, and Tower” (l. 20). Even more significantly, she sits as the receptive one, the house herself who waits to welcome the one who “comes, Who walks unseen / Even in elements we have destroyed” (ll. 4–5).

In the words Merton pens in his *New Seeds*, he states that the Virgin’s “chief glory now is in her nothingness, in the fact of loving submission,” her poverty, her closeness to humanity.¹⁸ The Mary of his middle-stage devotion is the mother of the Savior and, for him, her very existence is proof of God’s love for all and for Thomas Merton. So, he can conclude his poem in a celebration of his own worth that speaks of God’s embrace of all: “The hidden wholeness of the self which will unite him with others.”¹⁹ His closing exults:

“And here my heart, a purchased outlaw,
Prays in her possession
Until her Jesus makes my heart
Smile like a flower in her blameless hand.” (II.
42–45)

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Mature Vision of Life

Not long after the publication of “The Annunciation” and contemporary with *New Seeds of Contemplation*, the final of Merton’s Marian poems, “Hagia Sophia,” was published in 1963. One of his anti-poems, “Sophia” actually was born out of a question that a friend of Merton posed to him some four years earlier. Victor Hammer, an artist and typographer, had created a painting depicting Christ as a child being crowned by the Virgin Mary, and yet the artist could not explain the action that formed the center of the art. On May 14, 1959, Merton wrote that the woman represented Hagia Sophia, the ancient persona of Wisdom, the eternal “feminine principle in the divine,” who is at the same time Mary,

“the one created being who in herself realizes perfectly all that is hidden in Sophia. She is a kind of personal manifestation of Sophia.”²⁰

By Pentecost of 1961, the letter had morphed into a prose poem, and other “personal thoughts about Sophia had found their way into the elucidation.”²¹ The setting, as in the first poem discussed, is that of the Visitation. While “The Evening of the Visitation” recalls Mary’s own journey to the home of her cousin Elizabeth, the opening of this poem-prayer of the *Hours* establishes the journey to be that of the speaker, a man. The man, Merton himself as he

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states, lies weakened and ill, just awakened to his nurse's, to Wisdom's, to the Virgin Mother's call to a new-born reality (see Section I: *Dawn*).

The reality that is Merton's world has again undergone major change in a few short years. He stands as witness, prophet, and protestor to the ravages of two major American events that will tear at his soul: the Vietnam war and its protests, and the racial injustice of the late 50s and early 60s. He will announce in his *Preface* to the Japanese edition of his autobiography (1966) his emerging position as contra violence, social injustice, and inhumanity of every kind:

“It is my intention to make my entire life a rejection of, a protest against the crimes and the injustices of war and political tyranny which threaten to destroy the whole [human] race...and the world with [it]. By my monastic life and vows I am saying NO to all the concentration camps, the aerial bombardments, the staged political trials, the judicial murders, the racial injustices, the economic tyrannies and the whole socio-economic apparatus which seems geared for nothing but global destruction in spite of all its fair words in favour of peace.”²²

Gone is the young monastic of his first autobiographical issue, spitting on the corrupt cities of the world. Yet the Merton who stands on the margins

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of society to envision this world is no stranger to its corruption. He knows “the city of rapacious men” (Section IV: Sunset, l. 17). He has witnessed and testified to the social unrest brought by segregation and a country’s division over it. He has witnessed and testified to the horrors of a guerilla war, of a war with napalm dropped on civilians, of young men coming home devastated and destroyed. How can Merton live and write from this “belly of a paradox traveling toward his destiny”?²³

The answer comes in the major influences that have transformed the life of Merton at this point of his life. They emanate from the depth in contemplation and regard for silence and solitude fashioned in the crucible of Eastern spirituality. This interest, that had taken root in Merton’s college years, rekindled and grew through his association with “a postulant who had received training in a Zen monastery”²⁴ and, according to Pok, the teachings of Chinese Taoism out of the wisdom and words of the Chinese poet and philosopher Chuang Tzu.²⁵ Not surprising then that the ancient figure of Wisdom—in Greek antiquity, Sophia, who moves through the Judeo-Christian Scriptures, the Eastern Orthodox Divine Logos, the emptiness of the Buddha—translates for Merton into all of these but significantly into the figure of the Blessed Virgin.

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The Marian Image of Wisdom

The section of the “Hagia Sophia” that focuses on the Marian image of Wisdom comes naturally with sunset and the *Hour of Compline*. As the monks of Gethsemani would, on this the Visitation’s “feast of Wisdom” (I: Dawn, l. 18), turn toward a single light playing on the window of the Virgin in the abbey chapel,²⁶ Merton looks through the dark of his final period to his “perfect expression of wisdom in mercy” (IV: Sunset, ll. 9-10). She it is who can hold the opposites of the world in balance and peace and who “in sadness and joy with full awareness of what she is doing” (IV: Sunset, ll. 11-12) sets upon her Son’s head the incarnational crown. The full awareness that is her gift, which forms the composition of the crown, is alive with the qualities of emptiness, nirvana, potential receptivity: “weakness, nothingness, poverty” (IV: Sunset, l. 20). Merton can only live with a world in flames and its people in peril because his Sophia Mary can send her Jesus out “in His inexpressible mercy to die for us on the Cross” (IV: Sunset, ll. 22–23).

The dogma of the Assumption was iterated by Pius XII some years before, and Merton had celebrated his Queen’s heavenly birthday in his “Canticle of the Blessed Virgin,” but herein lies his ultimate crowning of her with her Son. She lives in silent wonder; she is his silent wonder. She is the “cen-

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ter and significance of light” (III: Tierce, ll. 36–37) that will hold against all the chaos and confusion of Merton’s world, internal and external. As he acknowledges in the quote that opens this article, while his perspectives and ideas may change, while his positions may shift, his center remains.

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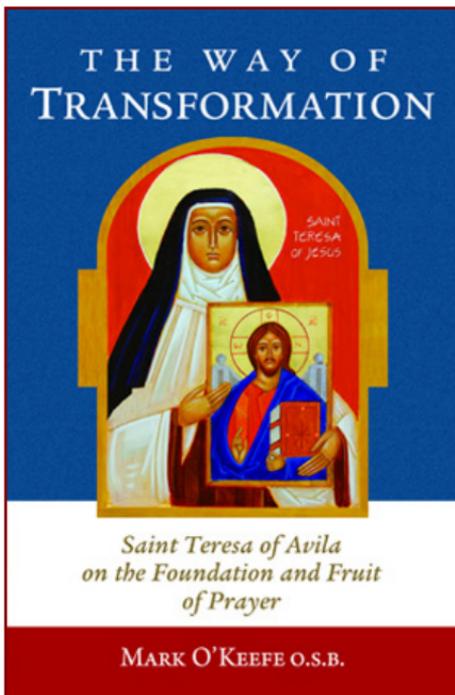
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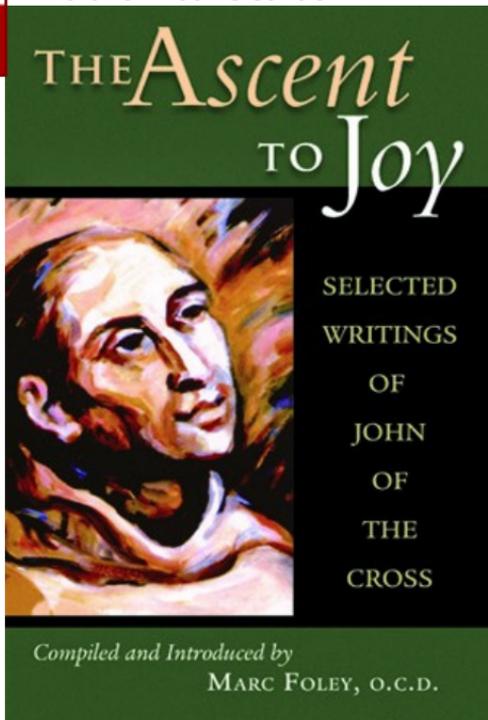
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