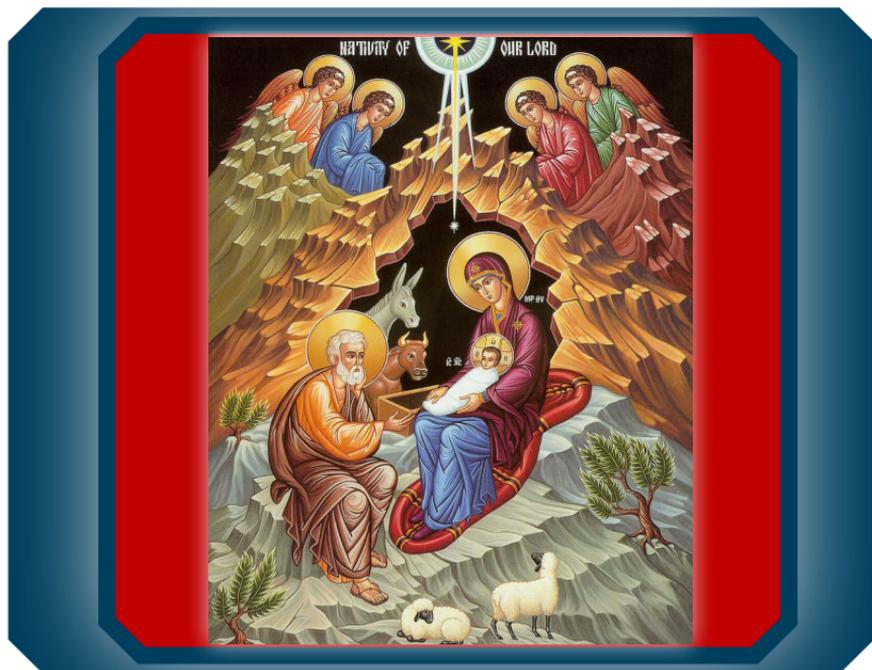


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Icon of the Nativity of Our Lord

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“**T**HE PEOPLE LIVING IN darkness have seen a great light; and on those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned” (Is 9:2)

Thus proclaims the prophet Isaiah, giving the people of the whole earth a burning hope in the power of Jesus to bring light into the darkness of our lives.

When darkness envelopes our own lives, and also the life of our country and of our church, we feel helplessly lost, not sure if we know how to restore the brightness that we seek. Some may fall into despair, believing there is no way out of this morass and give up all hope.

The Christian celebration of Christmas loudly proclaims that Jesus is the light that has dawned on the darkness of our world, that he restores light where there was darkness, giving hope to those who despair, “Who sit in darkness and the shadow of death.”

The liturgy of the Christmas season celebrates the Incarnation of Jesus, God’s coming into the world as one of us. He knows our pain because he too suffered, and he offers us hope in our darkness:

“In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” (Jn 1:1-5)

Edward O'Donnell



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Patrick O'Connell, PhD

The Traditional Sources of Thomas Merton's Environmental Spirituality

Review of Part One

Studies of Thomas Merton's social thought have focused on his growing awareness, during the final years of his life, of the need for environmental responsibility. Merton was influenced during this period by the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins and the Franciscan theologian St. Bonaventure.

Part Two

Greek Fathers' Influence: "Natural Contemplation"

For Merton, an appreciative and responsible integration with the natural world is an essential component of any authentic human life—especially of one that aspires to some sort of contemplative awareness. The natural world in Merton's view is ultimately a source of revelation (DWL 279), a manifestation of the Divine Ground of all created reality, which nevertheless infinitely transcends it. In the development of his own monastic life, and particularly in his growing responsibility for instructing young monks that began shortly after his own ordination to the priesthood in

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1949 and continued until he became a full-time hermit in August 1965, Merton was increasingly influenced by the Greek Fathers of the Church, who provided a third important source for his own environmental spirituality—the contemplation of the created cosmos. That is the traditional second stage of the spiritual journey for many of the Greek Fathers.

Natural Contemplation

The Ascent to Truth, published four years after *Seeds of Contemplation*, is mainly focused on St. John of the Cross. But the opening chapter, entitled “Vision and Illusion,” introduces the Greek patristic concept of “natural contemplation”—*theoria physike* (or *physica* in its Latinized form)—which is described as

“a positive recognition of God as He is manifested in the essences (*logoi*) of all things,... a kind of intuitive perception of God as He is reflected in His creation.”²⁵

Analogous to the illuminative way, the second of the “three ways” more familiar in the West, *theoria physike* follows the *praktike* of ascetic effort and moral transformation and leads to the *theologia* of unmediated encounter with God, imageless contemplation of the Trinity.²⁶ In his discussion of *theoria physike* in *The Ascent to Truth*, Merton may seem to focus more on illusion than on vision, stressing the “instinctive realization of the vanity and illusion of all things as soon as they are considered apart from their right order and reference to God their Creator” (AT 27). He makes clear, however, that a proper appreciation for the created world is

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possible only insofar as one has become detached from creatures as a source of self-centered gratification, as a means to be manipulated for one's own private ends. This requires "the ascetic gift of a discernment, which, in one penetrating glance, apprehends what creatures are, and what they are not" (AT 28).

Such a perspective is essential in safeguarding the natural world from exploitation. Throughout his monastic life Merton, remains aware that a contemplative perception of the created universe is by no means automatic. It can be distorted either by despising the material world and embracing "an exaggerated asceticism that tries to sever the soul entirely from the rest of creation"²⁷ or by demanding more from creation than it can provide—by turning it into an end in itself or a means to glorify the self rather than God. As he had written in *Seeds of Contemplation*:

"The fulfillment belongs to the reality of the created being, a reality that is from God and belongs to God and reflects God. The anguish belongs to the disorder of our desire which looks for a greater reality in the object of our desire than is actually there: a greater fulfillment than it is capable of giving. Instead of worshipping God through His creation, we are always trying to worship ourselves with creatures." (SC 23; cf. NSC 26)

When Merton considers *theoria physike* in *The Inner Experience*, written largely in 1959, he emphasizes that this "natural contemplation" is not "natural" as distinguished from "supernatural." It is natural with respect to its object rather than its origin: a "contemplation of the divine in nature, not contemplation of the

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divine by our natural powers.”²⁸ Again he emphasizes that such an “intuition of divine things in and through the reflection of God in nature” (IE 67) is possible only when one has relinquished the desire to possess and control, the craving to find fulfillment in what cannot ultimately satisfy. Detachment frees one from the illusions of a “distorted” view of reality, so that one “sees straight into the nature of things as they are” (IE 68). Only in this way is creation properly respected and appreciated, and only in this way can it point beyond itself to its divine Source.

Divine Source

In his most extensive discussion of *theoria physike*—the series of conferences on mystical theology he gave to recently ordained monks in the summer of 1961—Merton defines it as

“a contemplation according to nature (*physis*),... a contemplation of God in and through nature, in and through things He has created, in history,... the gnosis that apprehends the wisdom and glory of God, especially His wisdom as Creator and Redeemer.”²⁹

It is an awareness of the inner coherence, the logos, of creatures and of the creation as a whole, a recognition and appreciation of the loving presence of the Logos, the Creative Word of God, in the creature. In the Greek Fathers, Merton discovers a perception analogous to Hopkins' notion of inscape, but one that is thoroughly integrated into a holistic theology of life with God. Attentiveness to the divine shining through created beings is presented by the Greek patristic tradition as a

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fundamental dimension of authentic spiritual development. *Theoria physike* is the transition point between active and contemplative lives, arising from a synergy between human effort and divine gift, providing “penetrating intuitions” (ICM 122) into the intelligibility of all that God has made.

While in his major sources, Evagrius Ponticus and Maximus the Confessor, *theoria physike* culminates in awareness of pure intelligences—the angelic realm—

Merton's focus is above all on the natural world as an epiphany of the divine

Merton's focus is above all on the natural world as an epiphany of the divine and on the development of the capacity to recognize this manifestation of God in creation as an

essential element in spiritual growth. Merton is convinced that the tendency on the part of some spiritual theologians to deemphasize or to skip over completely this encounter with the divine in the created world has been just as harmful to a full and adequate theology of mystical experience as an unwillingness to move beyond the level of images and ideas into the darkness of unknowing. He points out that

“both in the West and in the East there developed a tendency to go directly from the ascetic life to contemplation without forms, without passing through *theoria physike*, in the Middle Ages. This is certainly as meaningful a fact as the separation between spirituality and scientific theology, probably much more meaningful. It is here really that the separation has its most disastrous effect.” (ICM 137)

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By neglecting the sacramentality of creation, both theologians and practitioners tend to devalue the material world and so to miss its revelatory dimension.

Personal Transformation and Creativity

Conversely, an awareness of God's active presence in all that God has made results not simply in insight but in personal transformation:

“Man by *theoria* is able to unite the hidden wisdom of God in things with the hidden light of wisdom in himself. The meeting and marriage of these two brings about a resplendent clarity within man himself, and this clarity is the presence of Divine Wisdom fully recognized and active in him. Thus man becomes a mirror of the divine glory, and is resplendent with divine truth not only in his mind but in his life. He is filled with the light of wisdom which shines forth in him, and thus God is glorified in him.” (ICM 125–126)

This contemplative awareness has a dynamic dimension, then, which leads not only to a perception of creation as a revelation of divine power, wisdom, and love, but to a rediscovery of authentic personal identity as reflecting and participating in the divine likeness and of human activity as a way of sharing in the divine creativity.³⁰ The human person is not merely called to observe the sacramentality of God's works but “exercises a spiritualizing influence in the world by the work of his hands which is in accord with the creative wisdom of God in things and in history” (ICM 126). *Theoria physike* is at the heart of a genuine theology of creativity, which is thus an intrinsic element of the mystical journey to union with God:

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“God Himself hands over to man, when he is thus purified and enlightened, and united with the divine will, a certain creative initiative of his own, in political life, in art, in spiritual life, in worship: man is then endowed with a causality of his own.” (ICM 126)

Thus natural contemplation is an aspect of the redemptive work of Christ by which “all creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God” (Rom 8:19). The restoration of a right relationship with creation as it was meant to be is an anticipation of the ultimate fulfillment of the cosmos in the glorified Christ, the firstborn of the whole creation. As Merton writes in *The New Man*,

“This new creation begins with the Resurrection of the Lord and will be perfected at the end of time.... The recapitulation of the work of creation sublimated and perfected in Christ is a communion in the divine life, an infusion of the life, and glory and power and truth of God not only into man’s spirit but also, ultimately, into all the material creation as well.”³¹

Redeemed humanity is called to participate in this process of extending the effects of Christ’s saving work to the rest of creation:

“If man’s eye is ‘lightsome’ with the spiritual beauty of grace, wisdom, understanding and divine sonship, then light will pass through him to pervade and transfigure the whole of creation...by the creative work of man’s own spirit, a work born out of love for God the Creator and for our fellow man. Work that springs from this creative love is patterned on the truth implanted in our very being, by nature, and in our redeemed spirit by the *Pneuma* (Spirit) who is given us by the Risen Christ.” (SCel 167–168)

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Care for creation is thus a participation in the creative and redemptive work of Christ. Conversely, the absence of this contemplative perception of the material world, a purely instrumental attitude toward nature, Merton declares, leads in practice to a degradation of creation through an

“impersonal, pragmatic, quantitative exploitation and manipulation of things,.... a demonic cult of change, and ‘exchange’—consumption, production, destruction, for their own sakes” (ICM 130).

Hence, an authentically contemplative response to creation is recognized by Merton as having tremendous practical importance in a world increasingly tempted by a “demonic pseudo-contemplation, [a] mystique of technics and production” (ICM 130). The discipline of *theoria physike* includes not only a recognition of the sacred character of the material world but the vocation to respect and nurture that sacredness, to resist any and all efforts to reduce creation to a collection of raw materials to be exploited for purposes of human pride and arrogance.

Divine Wisdom

This early Christian vision of the sacredness of the cosmos is in turn traced by Merton back to the scriptural presentation of wisdom—above all as personified in the eighth chapter of the *Book of Proverbs*—where creation is presented as a primordial cosmic revelation, an epiphany of divine Wisdom “playing before God the Creator in His universe.... The beauty of all creation

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is a reflection of Sophia living and hidden in creation” (WF 4–5).³² It is telling that when Merton revises his discussion of “Things in Their Identity” for *New Seeds of Contemplation*, he immediately follows the statement “Their inscape is their sanctity” with an additional sentence: “It is the imprint of His wisdom and His reality in them,” and goes on to describe the colt’s “clumsy beauty” as “consecrated to God by His own creative wisdom,” where the earlier version had “by His Art” (NSC 30). From this “sophianic” perspective, the cosmos is perceived as a window through which shines the light of the Logos, the Word through which all things came and come to be (cf. Jn 1:2): “God creates things by seeing them in His own Logos” (NSC 291).

Thus Merton recognizes an intrinsic relationship between creation as an epiphany of the divine Word and the Incarnation as the culmination of this revelatory self-disclosure of God, the perfect manifestation of Creator in creation:

“The whole character of the creation was determined by the fact that God was to become man and dwell in the midst of His own creation. Creation is therefore not a preestablished fact into which the Word will come and fit Himself as best He can at the appointed time. Creation is created and sustained in Him and by Him. And when He enters into it, He will simply make clear the fact that He is already, and has always been, the center and the life and the meaning of a universe that exists only by His will.” (NM 137)

Here again Merton seems clearly to be identifying with the Scotist teaching that the Incarnation would

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have taken place even without the Fall.

Concepts and logical explanations are not enough to disclose what Merton called this “epiphany of the cosmic mystery” (LE 104). Such awareness is not available to the detached, “objective” observer but only to one who has what Merton liked to describe as a “sapiential” consciousness, an intuitive, participatory awareness of the “hidden wholeness” (CP 363) of all reality, “a kind of knowledge by identification, an intersubjective knowledge, a communion in cosmic awareness and in nature,...a wisdom based on love” (LE 108).

For those whose inner eye has been opened, the very existence, order, life, and beauty of the universe and of each creature within it reflect and participate in the mystery of the divine Wisdom who made it. As Merton would say from the hermitage, “Up here in the woods is seen the New Testament: that is to say, the wind comes through the trees and you breathe it” (DS 41). An appreciation of wisdom is crucial in recognizing the sacramentality of creation and the need for human stewardship of the world as a participation in divine creativity.³³

Ecological Awareness

It was this sapiential perspective, this perception of the world as sacrament and of human stewardship of creation as a participation in divine creativity, that led Merton to endorse the growing ecological consciousness of the 1960s. He first writes in his journal on Decem-

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ber 11, 1962, of his interest in reading Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, with its revelations of the effects of indiscriminate pesticide use on bird populations. His response to the objection that one should be concerned about people rather than about nonhuman creatures is that it is not a question of either/or but of both/and:

“We are in the world and part of it and we are destroying everything because we are destroying ourselves, spiritually, morally and in every way. It is all part of the same sickness.”³⁴

After reading the book, he wrote an appreciative letter to Carson, linking her analysis of contemporary disregard for the environment to other manifestations of the same technological hubris, particularly the threat of atomic destruction:

“The awful irresponsibility with which we scorn the smallest values is part of the same portentous irresponsibility with which we dare to use our titanic power in a way that threatens not only civilization but life itself.”
(WF 70)

He finds a subconscious hatred of life buried beneath the superficial optimism of an affluent society that utterly fails to satisfy the deepest human desires for interior unity and for a sense of connectedness with all life. The separation from one's own deepest identity results in an alienation from the rest of creation as well:

“The whole world itself, to religious thinkers, has always appeared as a transparent manifestation of the love of God, as a ‘paradise’ of His wisdom, manifested in all His creatures, down to the tiniest, and in the most wonderful interrelationship between them.... That is to say, man is at once a part of nature and he transcends it. In

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maintaining this delicate balance, he must make use of nature wisely.” (WF 71)

But it is this sense of balance that is lost when the unifying vision of wisdom is replaced by the analytic, dominating attitude of scientific and technical control. The vocation of modern humanity, Merton concludes, is to rejoin technics and wisdom, though he is not optimistic about the willingness to do so. Merton thus sees ecological consciousness as an essential part of an authentic contemporary contemplative awareness, a necessary way of being responsive to the revelation of wisdom in creation. The development of “a tradition that opens out in full continuity into a wisdom capable of understanding the mystery of the contemporary world in the light of *theoria*” must include, along with commitment to peace and racial justice, attentiveness to “the great spiritual problem of the profound disturbances of ecology all over the world, the tragic waste and spoilage of natural resources” (TTW 330).

Christian Consciousness

Despite the slowness of the Christian community to respond to this critical issue, Merton does see an awareness of the interconnectedness of all creation and a sense of environmental stewardship as an intrinsic element of an authentic Christian and religious consciousness. Even before encountering Leopold's summons to recognize the “true place” of the human being “as a dependent member of the biotic community” (PAJ 106), Merton had written in his journal for Holy

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Saturday, April 13, 1963, “How absolutely true, and how central a truth, that we are purely and simply part of nature, though,” he adds, “we are the part which recognizes God” (TTW 312). Appreciation of this fact, Merton believes, can have profound consequences for the future of Christianity and the future of the earth. In his response to and articulation of the environmental crisis, Merton emerges as a witness that the Christian tradition contains and provides significant resources for a contemporary effort to defend and promote the integrity of creation.

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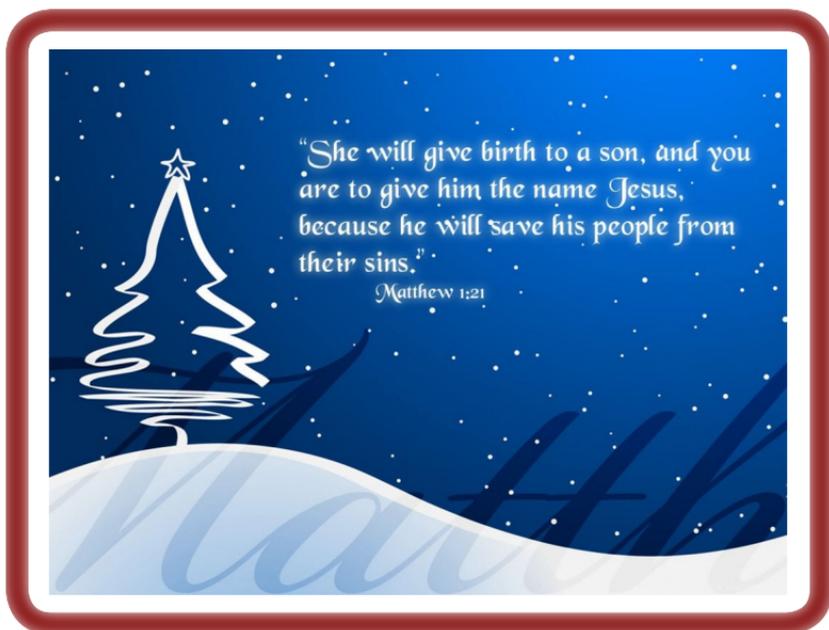
NOTES

25. Thomas Merton, *The Ascent to Truth* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951), p. 27; subsequent references will be cited as “AT” parenthetically in the text.
26. Bishop Kallistos Ware provides a brief, clear overview of the stages of spiritual growth in the Eastern Church in *The Orthodox Way*, rev. ed. (Crestview, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995), pp. 105–132.
27. Thomas Merton, *Seasons of Celebration* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965). p. 136; subsequent references will be cited as “SCel” parenthetically in the text.
28. Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation*, ed. William H. Shannon (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2003), p. 68; subsequent references will be cited as “IE” parenthetically in the text.
29. Thomas Merton, *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* 3, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 2008), p. 122; subsequent references will be cited as “ICM” parenthetically in the text.
30. The perspective here is very similar to that found in Merton's essay “Theology of Creativity” (*Thomas Merton, Literary Essays*, ed. Brother Patrick Hart [New York: New Directions, 1981], pp. 355–370; subsequent references will be cited as “LE” parenthetically in the text), first published as part of a three-part symposium in *The American Benedictine Review*, 11 (Sept–Dec, 1960), pp. 197–213.
31. Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1961), p. 150; subsequent references will be cited as “NM” parenthetically in the text.
32. In his prose poem *Hagia Sophia*, Merton memorably presents the figure of Wisdom as the personification of divine creativity: “Sophia, the feminine child, is playing in the world, obvious and unseen, playing at all times before the Creator. Her delights are to be with the

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children of men. She is their sister. The core of life that exists in all things is tenderness, mercy, virginity, the Light, the Life considered as passive, as received, as given, as taken, as inexhaustibly renewed by the Gift of God. Sophia is Gift, is Spirit, *Donum Dei*. She is God-given and God Himself as Gift" (CP 368). For a comprehensive treatment of Merton's theology of wisdom, particularly in *Hagia Sophia*, and its relation to the sophiology of the Russian Orthodox theologians, see Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Collegetown, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2009).

33. For an overview of the sapiential dimension of Merton's spirituality and its relationship to social responsibility, see Patrick F. O'Connell, "Wisdom and Prophecy: The Two Poles of Thomas Merton's Mature Spirituality," *The American Benedictine Review* 60:3 (September 2009), pp. 276–298.
34. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years*. Journals, vol. 4: 1960–1963, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), p. 274.



A Long Dark Winter's Night

THE SNOW OUTSIDE IS GENTLY FALLING as I sit and begin to write what is in my heart and in my soul. So often here in this seemingly remote corner that we call Alaska, we can pretend that the world outside does not really exist, that it is all just something we watch on CNN, far removed and full of make believe. The current Crisis in the Catholic Church has been slow in coming to us, but then again it takes awhile for things like the mail to reach us. We might have for awhile thanked God above that we lived neither in Boston nor in Dallas, thinking they were the epicenters of deceit and destruction. But if the truth be known, no cold, no ice, no wall of isolation could separate us from the rest of the Church, her sins nor her sufferings.

Now, I am but a simple parish priest, no saint and surely no scholar. Every morning I rise with the expectation of heaven, only to find myself a very long way from paradise. To be a parish priest these days is to be somewhat of a fool. The prudent might wake from this

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nightmare and attempt to flee to higher ground, the sane turn to reason and find yet another way. But the fool will choose to live in the moment, hoping and praying that it is here, only here where God is to be found and grace embraced. I believe that this might be truly the “times that try men’s souls” as Thomas Paine once said, but it is also the time of incredible possibility and opportunity.

There has been recently, and I am sure will continue to be, much written on the current crisis and scandal in the Roman Catholic Church in the United States and throughout the world for the need of reform and restructuring. Prophetic voices shout from the mountain tops of academia and university. They shake their collective fists not just at the heavens above, but at places like Washington D.C. and even Rome itself. They possess both passion and hope in their voices. They conceive intricate plans and blue prints for reform and renewal of the church. And they seem to have all the answers.

Not so for the simple parish priest, who often tends to lack the lofty vantage point of the prophets and scholars, who is constrained and confined to wander among the muck and mire of the mundane and the ordinary. It is often dark here, even as dark as the long arctic nights. This is the darkness that has enveloped the Church with a cloak of doubt and despair, of sin and suffering, of pain and privilege. But it is also here, in the very midst of the darkness, stripped and plucked from the illusions of life and of the church triumphant

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that I, and perhaps others might begin to find the answers that we so sincerely seek.

While I am often haunted by the words of the poet Dylan Thomas, "Do not go gentle into that good night. Rage, Rage against the dying of the light." I also recognize the need not to run away, not to flee from the encroaching night, but to embrace it and to be embraced by it. Yes, its frightening and unsettling in the dark, it is a place unfamiliar to the modern priesthood. Still I wonder, could this be an invitation, engraved not on costly embossed stationary but carved into the flesh of our hearts and of our souls. Is the present crisis in the Roman Catholic Church a summons into a new "passive purgation of that dark night"?

John of the Cross

St. John of the Cross sets out three "signs" for which a person, or perhaps the priesthood itself, could determine if they, if we, are in the dark night? **First he postulates:**

"When a soul finds no pleasure or consolation in the things of God, it also fails to find it in anything created, for God sets the soul in this dark night to the end that He may quench and purge its sensual desire, He allows it not to find attraction or sweetness in anything whatsoever."

Without the worldly rewards of sex and money, what is left to entice and seduce the priesthood of today? Fame and glory perhaps, in the very least, respect and admiration. Gone however are the days when these

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were once lavished upon such mythical figures like Bing Crosby's Fr. O'Malley in *Going My Way*. Worldly respect and societal admiration have now been replaced with the suspicious smirches and scowls of a population that loves to suspect the worse in others, and in the current crisis and scandal have found real cause and reason for their fears. Is it then any wonder that there is a "morale" problem among and within the American Catholic Clergy. Now I have no hard data, no statistics, nor facts—and would probably suspect anyone who claimed to—but what I do know first hand is that it is difficult being a priest these days. There is very little "sweetness in anything whatsoever." The usual joys in life and ministry, both simple and profane, feel a bit empty and hollow.

The second "sign" indicating the presence of this dark night is a little less obvious and incredibly more personal. This sign is not to be found in the obvious places, like plastered on the front page of the *Boston Globe*, but lurking in the inner recesses of the soul and spirit of the Roman Catholic Priesthood. If now stripped of worldly rewards and reputations, the priesthood begins to doubt its very self, fearing the near abandonment of God.

"That the memory is ordinarily centered upon God, with painful care and solicitude, thinking that it is not serving God but is backsliding, because it finds itself without sweetness in the things of God."

St. John calls this an "aridity," leaving the soul "barren, dry, and empty." As a priest I can easily imagine

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hearing the cry of Christ upon the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" I believe that here is a profound sense of sadness, a shared melancholy, a certain malaise in the priesthood of today. It runs far deeper and is far more serious than a simple "morale problem" of the corporate Church. It is the desperation that we all fear, but will never dare to speak

Continuing then yet deeper within the dark night, should we dare, **St. John points to a third and final sign:**

"That the soul can no longer meditate or reflect in the imaginative sphere of sense as it was wont, however much it may of itself endeavor to do so. For God now begins to communicate Himself to it, no longer through sense....but by pure spirit. "

When the road ahead disappears into darkness, and all the familiar signs and symbols to which we have clung to for security and familiarity are denied us, then and only then will we be ready to receive God's self-communication to our souls, and perhaps to the soul of the priesthood Stripped of the worldly or sensual affirmations of the exterior life, seemingly refused the sweet graces of the interior life we stand truly naked before our God.

Terrance Keenan, in his book *St. Nadie in Winter-Zen Encounters with Loneliness*, writes:

"There is nothing to prove and no one to whom it can be proven. No praise, nothing to praise, no one to do the praising. What kind of world is this? It is letting go of the fantasy life of self."

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Different Voices

Here in this place Christ's words echo through the darkness: "For whoever wishes to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for my sake will save it" (Lk 9:24). Throughout this turbulent restless time in the Roman Catholic Church, there have been ample opportunities for many groups to have found their collective voices. First and foremost, the righteous indignation of victims and survivors of sexual abuse at the hands of priests, finally finding a sympathetic hearing; the ecclesiastical proclamations running from plausible deniability to honest heartfelt contrition; secular authorities, now with their hands bound by a demanding populous crying out for justice, expressed now as equitable vengeance.

Psychologists and psychiatrists and scholars of the human mind are ever repeating the refrain, "We told you so"; lawyers, some dubious and some genuine in their representation of another's pain and suffering; scholars and academics who critique the Church with a two edge sword; and a laity stunned to a point almost beyond words, finally trying desperately to be heard.

But in the view of this simple parish priest, there seems to be a significant voice absent from the choir, that of the collective voice of the priests, those left behind to forage in the desert of the spirit. This I sincerely believe is the Roman Catholic Priesthood, at least in the United States, now dwelling deep within the dark night.

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But it would be wrong to surmise that this dark night is void of meaning or of purpose. Nor to believe that this is anything but the divine will of God. St. John continues:

“All this God brings to pass by means of this dark contemplation, wherein the soul not only suffers this emptiness and the suspension of these natural supports and perceptions, which is a most afflictive suffering...but likewise He is purging the soul, annihilating it, emptying it or consuming it, even as fire consumes the mouldiness and rust of metals.”

A New Priesthood

The quest for a new priesthood, or perhaps the discernment of a more actualized priesthood in this dark night, lies not in the disparaging debate between the theologies of *Alter Christus* or *In Personi Christi* but in the lived reality of the suffering and death of Christ, that one, true, and authentic priest from whom and with whom all meaning and purpose and existence of priesthood must necessarily originate.

The cries of those victimized at the hands of those who would pretend to be Christ are in fact the cries of Christ, and therefore the cries of the modern priesthood, “My God, My God why have you abandoned me?” Even more so are the wounds of those brutalized either by sins of the flesh or sins of presumption or sins of just plain indifference *the wounds of Christ*, and therefore are the wounds of the priesthood. This I believe is the grace to be embraced in this long dark night.

A Long Dark Winter's Night

For this but simple parish priest living and working at the very edge of the world, knowing that the long arctic winter's night is barely half spent, the realization of the dark night is not something to flee but to endure, and not just to endure but to embody. Blessed not with the physical stigmata in our hands, our feet, our side, but rather blessed with the spiritual stigmata in our hearts and in our souls, the dark night can finally be seen for what it truly is, a grace—simple and profound.

I suspect like all things in life, in this world and the next, the immediacy of this current crisis and scandal of the Roman Catholic Church in the beginning of the Twenty First Century will finally abate, the faces and names lost in the dusty chapters of ecclesiastical history. But what does remain unclear as of yet is whether or not this dark night transforms the priesthood now and for all eternity. And so as the snow slowly but constantly continues to fall outside my window, there is beauty and there is grace in this long dark night, and I pray that it may always be so.

Fr. Patrick Bergquist is the pastor of St. Raphael Catholic Church in Fairbanks, Alaska. See his book: *The Long Dark Winter's Night: Reflections of a Priest in a Time of Pain and Privilege*.

Make Way

THERE IS AN OLD JEWISH SAYING that says whenever a man or a woman goes out into the street, a group of angels goes before him or her shouting, “*Make way, make way, make way for the image and likeness [of God].*” Imagine how much different this world would be if we all went out into the world and saw every person we passed as the image and likeness of God. That is exactly what Jesus did. As he walked the streets of Palestine, he saw a leper who cried out to him for mercy. But Jesus did not see a leper. He saw the image and likeness of God who was in need of mercy because he had contracted a disease that was so feared that the leper had become an outcast of his own community. So Jesus stretched out his hand and touched a man who was considered to be untouchable, and Jesus cured him of his leprosy. Jesus saw the true person—a man created in the image and likeness of God.

And Jesus saw the image and likeness of God sitting at the table collecting taxes. Others saw this man as a traitor, for, although he was a Jew, he worked for the Romans collecting taxes that helped keep the Romans in power. Jesus saw a man created in the image and

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likeness of God who, if called to goodness, would easily respond. So Jesus called out to him, “Come follow me,” and Matthew got up and followed Jesus and became one of the twelve apostles.

Jesus sat by a well as his disciples went off to get food, and a woman came to draw water from the well. Anyone who saw her approaching the well alone would have known that she was a woman whose morals were in question, otherwise she would not have come alone. She would have been with the other women. But Jesus saw the image and likeness of God coming to draw water, and he spoke to her. Even the woman saw that this was beyond the conventions of society. A man did not speak to a woman who was not a member of his family. And more than that, a Jewish man did not speak to a Samaritan woman. But even beyond these taboos, any man seeing her draw water without other women around knew what type of woman she was. Yet Jesus offered her living water. He offered her the water of love, forgiveness, and healing because he saw through the layers of her sin and the rejection she felt. Jesus saw her as she really was, for she was the image and likeness of God.

Another woman came to Jesus as he was eating with respectable people. It must have been difficult for her to get into that crowded room. There must have been many who tried to keep her from Jesus for she was a prostitute and thus she was despised by respectable people. She went to Jesus weeping, washing his feet with her tears, drying them with her hair, and ask-

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ing him for mercy. Jesus saw past her sins. He saw a beautiful daughter of God created in God's image and likeness. She came to Jesus broken, and he sent her away whole.

Every Person Is an Image of God

It was this great love for the people who came to him that drew others to him. Love allowed Jesus to see each person in the true reality of their personal creation. Each person was and is the image and likeness of God, deserving of respect and love. And that is how God expects us to view each and every person we meet each day.

First, we must see and acknowledge that we are the image and likeness of God. Look in the mirror. That image is a reflection of who you really are. You are the image and likeness of God. Look in the mirror. Contemplate the true wonder of this. Think how much you are loved, for God created you in his image and likeness. You are joy and creativity. You were made to love as God loves. All that is good in you is a minor scale of the wonder and glory of God. Not only should you feel the great love of God, but you should also feel the responsibility that comes with being God's image and likeness. This responsibility is not burdensome. It is the joy of creativity and love.

Now look at the people around you—those you love, your friends and acquaintances, those you work with, the stranger you pass on the street, and even those you

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read about or see in the news programs on TV. Think about those who come into your mind as you go through your day—the poor, the rich, those in need, and those who take from us and the needy. All of them are the image and likeness of God. All of them are loved by God.

Difficulties

I know how difficult this can be to do. How can we love the person who makes our lives difficult or stabs us in the back with gossip or lies? How do we love the person who steals from the poor? And most difficult of all, how do we love the person who through his actions has become a monster? We can only do it by remembering that we are created in the image and likeness of God and then by praying for wisdom, trying to imagine how God in his generous mercy continues to love even the most evil of those whom he created in love.

Remember this: God never stops loving any person, no matter how evil they might become. God's will is that even the most evil person will turn back to him. We are the ones who refuse God's love. We are the ones who put up the walls that keep God's love from reaching us. If we are to love like God, if we are to live as the image and likeness of God, then we must also love in a way that respects each person's freewill. God's love is just but not vengeful. God's love is also compassionate and forgiving. It would truly be a different world if we also lived this way. It would be a different world if we all went down the street with the thought in the back

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of our minds that when ever a man or a woman walks down the street, a group of angels goes before him or her saying, “Make way, make way, make way for the image and likeness of God.”

Cecilia A. LaGasa, MDiv, received her degree from Gonzaga University in Spokane, WA.



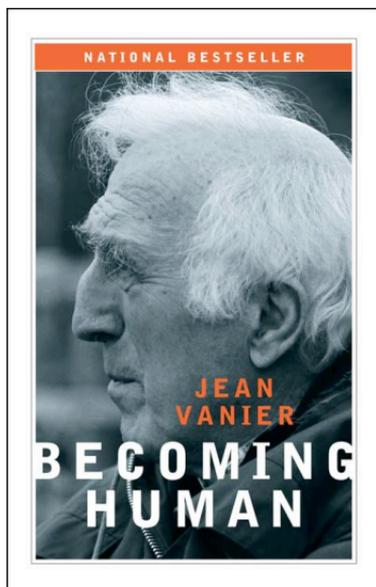
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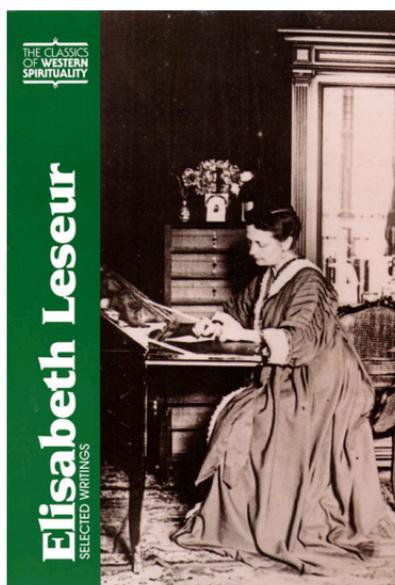
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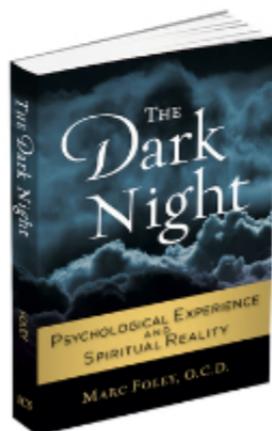


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