

“Merton’s last book, *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*, is the climax of a lifetime spent in both the practice and the theory of prayer. Its particular benefit is that it takes as its focus the negative experiences that sometimes come to people who pray regularly, the ennui, the confusion, the anxiety, the dread. He tackles these difficulties head on and seeks to find a response to them in the wisdom of monastic tradition.

“Fifty years after it was written the book retains a surprising relevance with solid teaching expressed in Merton’s typically relevant language. It will come as a revelation to many readers.”

—Michael Casey, OCSO
Tarrawarra Abbey
Author of *Seventy-Four Tools for Good Living*

“How many different faces Merton reveals—here, the serious scholar of monasticism. This process of grounding his identity enabled him to enter deep within, thus to better engage with the outer world. While some may miss his ‘snarky usurper of status quo’ face, a few glimmers appear: his condemnation of sacrifice that’s ‘infantile self-dramatization’ or prayer that disintegrates into ‘operatic self-display.’ In this book, Merton addresses those simply trying to keep themselves together, to maintain interior silence and spiritual freedom in a dizzying world. He aptly names the dread of being untrue to our best self, and of standing alone before God in naked need. His counsel: rest in God, find ourselves rooted in concrete experience as well as in God’s truth. His words hold a mirror to our times. No gimmicks nor shortcuts on this path, an invitation to an inner sanctuary and the springs of silence, without which there is no wisdom.”

—Kathy Coffey
Author of *When the Saints Came Marching In*

“The ‘climate’ of monastic prayer, Merton says, is the desert, the monastic community, but this wonderful book, from his last years, is for *all* of us. Merton shows us something he pushed for from the start—that prayer is our breathing, not just close to our life and experience, but totally wound up with every moment of our consciousness, every minute of everyday existence. This is a rich feast for us today, not recipes, but a kind of counseling on prayer’s omnipresence that we need to hear.”

—Michael Plekon
Professor Emeritus of The City University of New York
Author of *The World as Sacrament*

“We live in turbulent times and our lives sometimes feel overwhelming. Yet Merton would remind us that the Divine is in our midst and prayer is as much an attitude as something we do. Merton weaves texts from our rich spiritual heritage with his insights on a stance of continuous prayer. Merton’s path serves to ground his followers in the present moment and attend to the Divine in our midst. I highly recommend this for our *lectio*.”

—Laura Swan, OSB
Associate editor of *Magistra*

“There is no better contemporary guide to the Benedictine tradition of prayer than Thomas Merton! Drawing on the classic image of the desert, Merton invites all women and men to pursue a practice of personal prayer in the hopes of overcoming our tendency toward falsity in order to discover our true selves in God.”

—Daniel P. Horan, OFM
Catholic Theological Union, Chicago

Thomas Merton

**THE CLIMATE
OF MONASTIC PRAYER**

Foreword by
Sarah Coakley



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WITH DEEP AFFECTION
AND
SINCERE RESPECT
THE EDITORS
DEDICATE
THIS HIS LAST BOOK TO
LOUIS THOMAS MERTON
1915–1968
“. . . & more to come.”

“He who walks in darkness, to whom no light appears, let him trust in the Name of Yahweh, let him rely upon his God.”

—Isaiah 50:10

“I will give them a heart to understand that I am Yahweh, and they shall be my people and I will be their God when they return to me with all their heart.”

—Jeremiah 24:7

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FOREWORD

This is a timely and important moment to reconsider the significance of Thomas Merton's *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*, here republished fifty years on from its original preparation for publication in 1968.

This was the last manuscript that Merton put together, and he completed the work only just before his famous "Asian journey" of 1968, which ended in his untimely accidental death by electrocution in a hotel in Bangkok on December 10 of that year. The manuscript was, it seems, sent to the editors of the new Cistercian Studies series in Kalamazoo not long before Merton's departure for the East. It was also to be published by Herder and Herder under a different title (*Contemplative Prayer*), and was under consideration for some final editorial ameliorations there at the time of Merton's sudden death—to make it more accessible to a non-monastic readership. As it was, both publishers went ahead in 1969 with the manuscript as it had been delivered, with a modest added dedication to

Merton's memory on the title page of the Cistercian Studies version (which is here once more reproduced).¹ Added to both publications was a striking foreword by Merton's Quaker friend, Douglas V. Steere, which brilliantly captures the heart of the book's insights on the *costliness* of contemplation.

In all the furore and post-mortem accolades that followed Merton's death, however, the significance of this little gem of a book perhaps met with less fulsome comprehension than it deserved. Especially under the title *Contemplative Prayer*, it could mislead the reader as to its contents: for it is neither a beginner's manual on prayer, nor a handy potted history of the various traditions of Christian contemplation. Indeed, it was, as it happens, pasted together from more than one earlier manuscript,² and its contents were probably not originally designed for the monks in the novitiate (as is often presumed), but for a somewhat more mature monastic audience. But throughout, the final amalgam bears the marks of Merton's very *particular* and *personal* assimilation of the Christian monastic traditions, both East and West: it involves a historical sweep, to be sure, but with a selective, synthesizing originality imposed upon it. Succinct reflections on key figures in the monastic tradition are combined with passing allusions to everything Merton had

learned in the past—and was still learning—from modern existentialist philosophy, psychoanalytic theory, and various traditions of Buddhist meditation. Moreover, a stern insistence chimes throughout the book that contemplation is no escape from social or political life into individual interiority, but drives one precisely into the uncomfortable maelstrom of political decision. And further: the necessary alignment of *liturgy* and contemplation marks, for Merton, the only true place where the Church can resist both the blandishments of the world and the more subtle dangers of its own self-satisfaction. The closing paragraphs of this book are amongst the most prophetic ever penned by Merton: they represent his last clarion call to the “pure charity” and authentic “emptiness” of the contemplative disposition, and to a fearless willingness to endure all the sacrificial ambiguity of that calling for the sake of the “Kingdom of God.”

Merton was, by his own admission and many others’ telling, a complex, difficult, and often-tortured personality, who in his last few years at Gethsemani passed through the most severe emotional and institutional trials of his monastic life. Many have commented on a certain breakthrough into greater peace that was finally vouchsafed to him after he had come through the appalling tempest of his affair with a

young nurse in 1966–67;³ and it is tempting to search in this, his last volume on prayer, for signs of such a maturation. But we must recall that this book was largely put together from earlier writings, such that we look in vain in it for any explicit autobiographical allusions to recent events. Even so, a profound new spiritual maturity seems to emerge in these pages, especially towards the end—though there is no obvious sign of the erotic paroxysm Merton has recently undergone. In particular, the treatment of the two “nights” in John of the Cross is of a quality striking in its authenticity, and repeatedly returns to the central Mertonian theme of *dread*: “the naked dread” that is “indefinite” because it seems to bespeak a complete “emptiness” (p. 126), and yet—according to John of the Cross’s rendition—is the only condition in which the divine fire and light can finally consume the soul into its own commanding love. Merton had written a book on John of the Cross much earlier in his life,⁴ inspired mainly by his friendship and exchanges with Jacques Maritain; but somehow, in its relative immaturity, it demonstrably failed to capture John of the Cross’s teaching from inside. Here, in his last volume, he writes unmistakably as one who has encountered the second “night of spirit” in all its searing agony, and yet has glimpsed what lies in and through it: not

an escape to some otherworldly realm, but a willingness to “bear”—as Douglas V. Steere so aptly puts it, quoting William Blake—“the beams of love” in a stricken world.

Merton admits in the last chapter of this book that “real contemplatives will always be rare and few” (p. 151). But immediately he adds that the Church must nonetheless *always* be “predominantly contemplative” in all its teaching, activity, and prayer. And that is why this book remains a book for everyone. To be sure, it was spawned within the “climate of monastic prayer”; but Merton’s gaze was always just as surely turned to the restless yearnings of the world as to the realm of his monastic brethren. In this one little book, let me suggest, is distilled whatever wisdom Merton had found, over the years, in the monastic tradition that he had taught and tried—often so waveringly—to live. But this is *his* distillation; and as such it represents a unique, idiosyncratic, and highly personal late-twentieth-century rendition of the call to contemplation, yet as fresh and challenging now as when it was first compiled.

Sarah Coakley
Cambridge and Ely, Lent 2018

Notes

1. As explained by Basil Pennington, the “& more to come” refers to the last informal communication from Merton before his death.

2. On this point, see the invaluable information provided by Robert Faricy, in “Thomas Merton and Zen,” *The Merton Annual* 9 (1996): 142–51, who tells us—guided by Basil Pennington, he says—that chaps. 6–10, 12, 13, 15, and 19 of this book originally come from an earlier unpublished manuscript of 1959 (*Prayer as Worship and Experience*); whereas chaps. 1–5, 11, 14, and 16–18 originally made up an earlier manuscript entitled *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* and circulated privately. The extent of final modification as Merton put the two collections together remains, however, obscure.

3. See *Learning to Love: The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 6 (1966–67).

4. *The Ascent to Truth: A Study of St John of the Cross* (1951).

INTRODUCTION

THE MONK is a Christian who has responded to a special call from God, and has withdrawn from the more active concerns of a worldly life, in order to devote himself completely to repentance, “conversion,” *metanoia*, renunciation and prayer. In positive terms, we must understand the monastic life above all as a life of prayer. The negative elements, solitude, fasting, obedience, penance, renunciation of property and of ambition, are all intended to clear the way so that prayer, meditation and contemplation may fill the space created by the abandonment of other concerns.

What is written about prayer in these pages is written primarily for monks. However, just as a book about psychoanalysis by an analyst and primarily for analysts may also (if it is not too technical) appeal to a layman interested in these matters, so a practical non-academic study of monastic prayer should be

2 *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*

of interest to all Christians, since every Christian is bound to be in some sense a man of prayer. Though few have either the desire for solitude or the vocation to monastic life, all Christians ought, theoretically at least, to have enough interest in prayer to be able to read and make use of what is here said for monks, adapting it to the circumstances of their own vocation. Certainly, in the pressures of modern urban life, many will face the need for a certain interior silence and discipline simply to keep themselves together, to maintain their human and Christian identity and their spiritual freedom. To promote this they may often look for moments of retreat and prayer in which to deepen their meditative life. These pages discuss prayer in its very nature, rather than special restricted techniques. What is said here is therefore applicable to the prayer of any Christian, though perhaps with a little less emphasis on the intensity of certain trials which are proper to life in solitude.

Monastic prayer is, first of all, essentially simple. In primitive monasticism prayer was not necessarily liturgical, though liturgy soon came to be regarded as a specialty of monks and canons. Actually, the first monks in Egypt and Syria had only the most rudimentary liturgy, and their personal prayer was direct and uncomplicated. For example, we read in

the sayings of the Desert Fathers¹ that a monk asked St. Macarius how to pray. The latter replied: "It is not necessary to use many words. Only stretch out your arms and say: Lord, have pity on me as you desire and as you well know how! And if the enemy presses you hard, say: Lord, come to my aid!" In John Cassian's *Conferences on Prayer*² we see great stress laid by the early monks on simple prayer made up of short phrases drawn from the Psalms or other parts of Scripture. One of the most frequently used was *Deus in adiutorium meum intende*, "O God, come to my aid!"³

At first sight one might wonder what such simple prayers would have to do with a life of "contemplation." The Desert Fathers did not imagine themselves, in the first place, to be mystics, though in fact they often were. They were careful not to go looking for extraordinary experiences, and contented themselves with the struggle for "purity of heart" and for control of their thoughts, to keep their minds and hearts empty of care and concern, so that they might altogether forget themselves and apply themselves entirely to the love and service of God.

This love expressed itself first of all in love for God's Word. Prayer was drawn from the Scriptures, especially from the Psalms. The first monks looked upon the Psalter not only as a kind of compendium of

all the other books of the Bible, but as a book of special efficacy for the ascetic life, in that it revealed the secret movements of the heart in its struggle against the forces of darkness.⁴ The “battle Psalms” were all interpreted as referring to the inner war with passion and with the demons. Meditation was above all *meditatio scripturarum*.⁵ But we must not imagine the early monks applying themselves to a very intellectual and analytical “meditation” of the Bible. Meditation for them consisted in making the words of the Bible their own by memorizing them and repeating them, with deep and simple concentration, “from the heart.” Therefore the “heart” comes to play a central role in this primitive form of monastic prayer.

St. Macarius was asked to explain a phrase of a Psalm: “The meditation of my heart is in your sight.” He proceeded to give one of the earliest descriptions of that “prayer of the heart” which consisted in invoking the name of Christ, with profound attention, in the very ground of one’s being, that is to say in “the heart” considered as the root and source of all one’s own inner truth. To invoke the name of Christ “in one’s heart” was equivalent to calling upon him with the deepest and most earnest intensity of faith, manifested by the concentration of one’s entire being upon a prayer stripped of all non-essentials and reduced to

nothing but the invocation of his name with a simple petition for help. Macarius said: "There is no other perfect meditation than the saving and blessed Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ dwelling without interruption in you, as it is written: 'I will cry out like the swallow and I will meditate like the turtledove!' This is what is done by the devout man who perseveres in invoking the saving Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ."⁶

The monks of the Oriental Churches in Greece and Russia have for centuries used a handbook of prayer called the *Philokalia*. This is an anthology of quotations from Eastern monastic Fathers from the third century to the Middle Ages, all concerned with this "prayer of the heart" or "prayer of Jesus." In the school of hesychastic contemplation which flourished in the monastic centers of Sinai and Mount Athos, this type of prayer was elaborated into a special, almost esoteric, technique. In the present study we will not go into the details of this technique which has at times (rather irresponsibly) been compared to yoga. We will only emphasize the essential simplicity of monastic prayer in the primitive "prayer of the heart" which consisted in interior recollection, the abandonment of distracting thoughts and the humble invocation of the Lord Jesus with words from the Bible in a spirit of intense faith. This simple practice is considered

to be of crucial importance in the monastic prayer of the Eastern Church, since the sacramental power of the Name of Jesus is believed to bring the Holy Spirit into the heart of the praying monk. A typical traditional text says:

A man is enriched by the faith, and if you will by the hope and humility, with which he calls on the most sweet Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ; and he is enriched also by peace and love. For these are truly a three-stemmed life-giving tree planted by God. A man touching it in due time and eating of it, as is fitting, shall gather unending and eternal life, instead of death, like Adam. . . . Our glorious teachers . . . in whom liveth the Holy Spirit, wisely teach us all, especially those who have wished to embrace the field of divine silence (i.e. monks) and consecrate themselves to God, having renounced the world, to practice hesychasm with wisdom, and to prefer his mercy with undaunted hope. Such men would have, as their constant practice, and occupation, the invoking of his holy and most sweet Name, bearing it always in the mind, in the heart and on the lips . . .⁷

The practice of keeping the Name of Jesus ever present in the ground of one's being was, for the an-

cient monks, the secret of the “control of thoughts,” and of victory over temptation. It accompanied all the other activities of the monastic life imbuing them with prayer. It was the essence of monastic meditation, a special form of that practice of the presence of God which St. Benedict in turn made the cornerstone of monastic life and monastic meditation. This basic and simple practice could of course be expanded to include the thought of the passion, death and resurrection of Christ, which St. Athanasius was among the first to associate with the different canonical hours of prayer.⁸

However, in the interests of simplicity, we will concentrate upon the most elementary form of monastic meditation, and will discuss prayer of the heart as a way of keeping oneself in the presence of God and of reality, rooted in one’s own inner truth. We will appeal to ancient texts on occasion, but our development of the theme will be essentially modern.

After all, some of the basic themes of the existentialism of Heidegger, laying stress as they do on the ineluctable fact of death, on man’s need for authenticity, and on a kind of spiritual liberation, can remind us that the climate in which monastic prayer flourished is not altogether absent from our modern world. Quite the contrary: this is an age that, by its very nature

as a time of crisis, of revolution, of struggle, calls for the special searching and questioning which are the work of the monk in his meditation and prayer. For the monk searches not only his own heart: he plunges deep into the heart of that world of which he remains a part although he seems to have "left" it. In reality the monk abandons the world only in order to listen more intently to the deepest and most neglected voices that proceed from its inner depth.

This is why the term "contemplation" is both insufficient and ambiguous when it is applied to the highest forms of Christian prayer. Nothing is more foreign to authentic monastic and "contemplative" (e.g. Carmelite) tradition in the Church than a kind of gnosticism which would elevate the contemplative above the ordinary Christian by initiating him into a realm of esoteric knowledge and experience, delivering him from the ordinary struggles and sufferings of human existence, and elevating him to a privileged state among the spiritually pure, as if he were almost an angel, untouched by matter and passion, and no longer familiar with the economy of sacraments, charity and the Cross. The way of monastic prayer is not a subtle escape from the Christian economy of incarnation and redemption. It is a special way of following Christ, of sharing in his passion and resur-

rection and in his redemption of the world. For that very reason the dimensions of prayer in solitude are those of man's ordinary anguish, his self-searching, his moments of nausea at his own vanity, falsity and capacity for betrayal. Far from establishing one in unassailable narcissistic security, the way of prayer brings us face to face with the sham and indignity of the false self that seeks to live for itself alone and to enjoy the "consolation of prayer" for its own sake. This "self" is pure illusion, and ultimately he who lives for and by such an illusion must end either in disgust or in madness.

On the other hand, we must admit that social life, so-called "worldly life," in its own way promotes this illusory and narcissistic existence to the very limit. The curious state of alienation and confusion of man in modern society is perhaps more "bearable" because it is lived in common, with a multitude of distractions and escapes—and also with opportunities for fruitful action and genuine Christian self-forgetfulness. But underlying all life is the ground of doubt and self-questioning which sooner or later must bring us face to face with the ultimate meaning of our life. This self-questioning can never be without a certain existential "dread"—a sense of insecurity, of "lostness," of exile, of sin. A sense that one has somehow been untrue not

so much to abstract moral or social norms but to one's own inmost truth. "Dread" in this sense is not simply a childish fear of retribution, or a naive guilt, a fear of violating taboos. It is the profound awareness that one is capable of ultimate bad faith with himself and with others: that one is living a lie.

The peculiar *monastic* dimension of this struggle lies in the fact that society itself, institutional life, organization, the "approved way," may in fact be encouraging us in falsity and illusion. The deep root of monastic "dread" is the inner conflict which makes us guess that in order to be true to God and to ourselves we must break with the familiar, established and secure norms and go off into the unknown. "Unless a man hate father and mother. . . ." These words of Christ give some indication of the deep conflict which underlies all Christian conversion—the turning to a freedom based no longer on social approval and relative alienation, but on direct dependence on an invisible and inscrutable God, in pure faith.

It must be said at once that this struggle does not end at the gate of a monastery, and often it may come to light again in a conflict over one's monastic vocation. The purpose of monastic renewal and reform is to find ways in which monks and sisters can remain true to their vocation by deepening and developing

it in new ways, not merely sacrificing their lives to bolster up antique structures, but channeling their efforts into the creation of new forms of monastic life, new areas of contemplative experience.

This is precisely the monk's chief service to the world: this silence, this listening, this questioning, this humble and courageous exposure to what the world ignores about itself—both good and evil. If, in the latter part of this study, we speak frequently of the concept of "dread," it will be in this existential sense.

The monk who is truly a man of prayer and who seriously faces the challenge of his vocation in all its depth is by that very fact exposed to existential dread. He experiences in himself the emptiness, the lack of authenticity, the quest for fidelity, the "lostness" of modern man, but he experiences all this in an altogether different and deeper way than does man in the modern world, to whom this disconcerting awareness of himself and of his world comes rather as an experience of boredom and of spiritual disorientation. The monk confronts his own humanity and that of his world at the deepest and most central point where the void seems to open out into black despair. The monk confronts this serious possibility, and rejects it, as Camusian man confronts "the absurd" and transcends it by his freedom. The option of absolute

despair is turned into perfect hope by the pure and humble supplication of monastic prayer. The monk faces the worst, and discovers in it the hope of the best. From the darkness comes light. From death, life. From the abyss there comes, unaccountably, the mysterious gift of the Spirit sent by God to make all things new, to transform the created and redeemed world, and to re-establish all things in Christ.

This is the creative and healing work of the monk, accomplished in silence, in nakedness of spirit, in emptiness, in humility. It is a participation in the saving death and resurrection of Christ. Therefore every Christian may, if he so desires, enter into communion with this silence of the praying and meditating Church, which is the Church of the Desert.