

“A deeply learned yet highly accessible exploration of the whole of Merton’s spiritual journey, and most compellingly, the living wellspring of Catholic theological, mystical, and sacramental sources that nourished Merton’s life from conversion to death. Gregory Hillis brings wonderful breadth, humanity, humor, and fresh insight to every facet of the irrepressible mosaic that is Thomas Merton and, yes, his capaciously Catholic theological and apologetic literary genius. Without avoiding critical assessments of its famous subject, *Man of Dialogue* should put to rest every superficial dismissal of Merton’s legacy—and, sadly, they are ‘legion’—that downplays or denies Merton’s extraordinary witness as a Catholic Christian monk and priest of Gethsemani, to the day of his death and well beyond.”

—Christopher Pramuk, University Chair of Ignatian Thought and Imagination, Regis University

“Thomas Merton counted his Catholic faith, along with his monastic vocation and calling to be a writer, as three gifts for which he would be ever grateful. In this exceptionally informative and insightful study, Gregory Hillis illuminates Merton’s Catholic vision and the ways in which it informed his identity, shaped his spirituality, inspired his prophetic witness, and made him, in the words of Pope Francis, a ‘man of dialogue.’ A significant contribution to Merton studies and a must read!”

—Christine M. Bochen, Professor Emerita, Nazareth College, Rochester, New York

“Professor Hillis engages the reader with a compelling introduction to the life and thought of the Trappist who spent his time in prayerful dialogue with God and the world around him. He demonstrates with ease through the lens of Merton’s many published works and personal journals that the great man was from the early days of his conversion totally immersed in and utterly loyal to Catholic thought, tradition, prayer, liturgy and lived this authentically in his monastic vocation and in dialogue with the modern world.”

—Bishop Fintan Monahan, author of *Peace Smiles, Rediscovering Thomas Merton*

“For all that has been written about the fine innerworkings of Merton’s expansive mind, most have missed what Hillis demonstrates as the mainspring—his identification with the priesthood and the universalism of the Eucharist, the principle part of his everyday life.”

—Br. Paul Quenon, Abbey of Gethsemani, author of *How to Live*, and *In Praise of the Useless Life*

“In *Man of Dialogue*, Dr. Gregory Hillis unpacks the gift of Thomas Merton as a true man of dialogue and finds his own faith journey in the life of his subject. While acknowledging Merton’s complexities and fallible experiences, Dr. Hillis seeks to set the record straight about Thomas Merton’s identity throughout his life as a thoroughly and deeply rooted Catholic. This book includes a compelling account of Merton as an active contemplative seeking to be engaged in the joys, sufferings, anguish, and grief of this world and Merton’s rich insights and fascinating encounters with a wide array of individuals. *Man of Dialogue* provides a path that diverges from soundbites and quick solutions to the courageous and intelligent path of dialogue so desperately needed by our world.”

—Most Reverend Joseph E. Kurtz, Archbishop of Louisville

“Beautifully written, this book paints an engaging, instructive, even inspiring picture of a unique twentieth-century American Catholic. And the undertones of its argument reverberate beyond Merton himself. Who indeed is a Catholic? Someone who fits into the tight confines of a group narrowly defined? Or one who senses the presence of God in the truth, beauty, and goodness of other religious traditions, who finds a world of grace in the struggle for justice, who sees the image of God in everyone walking around at Fourth and Walnut? While focused with great insight on Thomas Merton, this book shines helpful light on the current tension about Catholic identity in the church.”

—Elizabeth A. Johnson, CSJ, Distinguished Professor of
Theology Emerita, Fordham University

“Thomas Merton was a faithful Catholic. But his interest in Eastern religions, his challenges to the status quo in the church, and even his ideas about monasticism, have made his Catholicism suspect in some quarters. Greg Hillis’s beautifully written and expertly researched book restores Merton’s Catholicism to where it should be in studies of his remarkable life: at the center.”

—James Martin, SJ, author of *Learning to Pray* and *Jesus: A Pilgrimage*

“His Holiness the Dalai Lama praised Thomas Merton for introducing him to ‘the real meaning of the word “Christian”.’ In *Man of Dialogue*, for the first time, Gregory Hillis comprehensively mines the breadth and depth of Merton’s Catholic Christianity and shows the profound extent of Merton’s embrace and commitment to his Catholic faith, his vocation as a Trappist monk at the Abbey of Gethsemani, and as a priest of the Catholic Church.”

—Paul M. Pearson, Director, Thomas Merton Center

Man of Dialogue

Thomas Merton's Catholic Vision

Gregory K. Hillis



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For Kim

A century ago, at the beginning of the Great War, which Pope Benedict XV termed a “pointless slaughter,” another notable American was born: the Cistercian monk Thomas Merton. He remains a source of spiritual inspiration and a guide for many people. In his autobiography he wrote: “I came into the world. Free by nature, in the image of God, I was nevertheless the prisoner of my own violence and my own selfishness, in the image of the world into which I was born. That world was the picture of Hell, full of men like myself, loving God, and yet hating him; born to love him, living instead in fear of hopeless self-contradictory hungers.” Merton was above all a man of prayer, a thinker who challenged the certitudes of his time and opened new horizons for souls and for the Church. He was also a man of dialogue, a promoter of peace between peoples and religions.

*—Pope Francis, Address to the United States Congress,
September 24, 2015*

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As I was writing this book, two close family members passed away suddenly and unexpectedly—my mother, Jeanne Hillis, and my father-in-law, Wayne Kauffeldt. My mom wore her love for me on her sleeve, and she always went out of her way to tell me how proud she was of me. I wish that she were around to see this book in print. I owe her so much. Wayne always made sure to ask me about what I was working on, and I would have loved to talk to him about this book.

Saints of God, come to their aid! Hasten to meet them, angels of
the Lord!

May Christ, who called them, take them to himself;

May angels lead them to the bosom of Abraham.

Eternal rest, grant unto them, O Lord, and let perpetual light
shine upon them.

May they rest in peace.

Gregory K. Hillis

Louisville, Kentucky

December 10, 2020

Feast of Our Lady of Loreto

52nd anniversary of the death of Thomas Merton

INTRODUCTION

MERTON THE CATHOLIC?

Merton was above all a man of prayer, a thinker who challenged the certitudes of his time and opened new horizons for souls and for the Church. He was also a man of dialogue, a promoter of peace between peoples and religions.

—Pope Francis, Address to the United States Congress,
September 24, 2015

Merton and Me

I have a tattoo of a Thomas Merton drawing on my shoulder. It's a simple ink drawing of a monk with his arms folded together, and I've had it for many years. My kids call it "Tom." I first encountered Merton as a newly married undergraduate student in my early twenties. I was an Evangelical Protestant at the time, still part of the tradition in which I had been raised. After getting married in July 1998, my wife and I moved from Calgary, Alberta, to Waterloo, Ontario, so that I could pursue a second undergraduate degree at the University of Waterloo, my first being from an Evangelical Bible college. We had very little money, we were lonely, and I wasn't enjoying my studies as much as I thought I would. While I had dreamed since high school of becoming an academic, I was suddenly confronted with the possibility that perhaps I wasn't going to pursue this dream. I found myself in a vocational crisis, unsure of what direction my life was going to take.

Looking for something to read over the Christmas break after my first semester at the University of Waterloo, I looked on my shelf and noticed I had a copy of Thomas Merton's 1948 autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. I knew little about Merton, and don't remember exactly how I came to be in possession of the book, but I decided to read it. As he himself acknowledged later in his life, there are issues with *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Merton's youthfulness and exuberance are too frequently on display, and it has some stylistic issues that don't feature as prominently in his later writings. However, despite its shortcomings, *The Seven Storey Mountain* hit me squarely between the eyes. In the book, Merton recounted an unusual childhood that involved extensive travel, little in the way of religious instruction or observance, and the loss of both of his parents. He also described his wrestling with religious faith, his conversion to Catholicism, and his eventual decision to become a monk at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. The book was for me the story of a man finding meaning and a vocation in life, and as someone in the midst of a vocational crisis, it was a godsend.

After what he later described as a "year of riotous living" during which he was rumored to have fathered a child, Merton lost his scholarship from Cambridge University and resumed his studies at Columbia University in New York (Liv, 286: May 1967). It was at Columbia that Merton began to explore Catholicism, influenced by friends, teachers, and by his reading, and in November 1938 he became a Catholic. Not long after his conversion, Merton felt a call to the priesthood, and particularly to become a Franciscan. However, although he was initially accepted to become a novice with the Franciscans, he was soon rejected by them, in large part because he was a recent convert and there was an impediment to anyone entering the Franciscans who hadn't been a practicing Catholic for three years. Immediately after this rejection, he spoke with a particularly bad confessor who, annoyed by Merton's tears, informed him that he most definitely did not have a calling to the priesthood or to religious life. This led him to conclude that his calling was to be a teacher and writer, and he started teaching English composition and literature at St. Bonaventure Col-

lege (now University) in upstate New York. But his sense of calling to the priesthood, and particularly to a contemplative life of prayer and silence, nagged at him, even tortured him. He was in the grip of a crisis of vocation, but when a Franciscan finally assured him that he did indeed have a vocation to the priesthood and religious life, Merton left for the Abbey of Gethsemani, a Trappist monastery in Kentucky.

Although our circumstances were very different, I saw myself in Merton's vocational struggles. My heart raced as I read his description of travelling down the road toward the monastery, of seeing the spire of the Abbey church. And when he entered the monastery and was enclosed in what he described as "the four walls of my new freedom," I experienced both relief in knowing that this man's crisis of vocation had been resolved, as well as hope that perhaps my own crisis would find resolution too (SSM, 372).

When I finished *The Seven Storey Mountain*, I started reading everything I could by Merton, particularly his private journals. These journals, published twenty-five years after his death, reveal him at his most candid and revealing. Even though he knew that they would be published at some point, Merton held little back in his journals. He described various conflicts he was having—including conflicts with his abbot, Dom James Fox—and expounded upon his own theological and spiritual struggles. I devoured these journals, not simply because I learned more about Merton, but because, in reading the journals of this monk, I somehow learned more about myself and about the complexities of the spiritual life. Moreover, in reading these journals and then his other works, I came to understand the depth of Merton's Catholicism, and his life and witness played a significant role in my decision to be received into the Roman Catholic Church. When I was received into the church, I took the name "Benedict" as my confirmation name as a conscious remembrance of the saint whose monastic rule Merton lived under during his life as a monk. It was during this time that I received the tattoo of the Merton drawing. While youthful exuberance is perhaps to blame for this tattoo, I don't regret it. Each day it reminds me of the role Merton has played in shaping me as a Christian and, specifically, as a Catholic.

I graduated from the University of Waterloo, and started graduate school at McMaster University focusing my studies on early Christian theology. As I immersed myself in the world of patristic theology, I drifted away from Merton for lack of time. But he was never far from my thoughts, and as I neared completion of my doctorate and a position opened up at Bellarmine University, the home of the Thomas Merton Center (the official repository for Merton's literary estate), I jumped at the opportunity to apply. My office is now located in a building next to the library where the Thomas Merton Center resides, and I live only an hour's drive from the monastery where Merton lived. I write about Merton, teach a class on Merton, and am fortunate to be a regular visitor to the Abbey of Gethsemani as well as the hermitage where Merton spent the last three years of his life. I can't believe my luck.

The Development of Merton's Thought

Of course, the Merton I've experienced isn't necessarily the same Merton others have experienced. People encounter him in different ways, and this is due not only to the diversity of people and their contexts, but also to the fact that he was someone whose interests evolved throughout his life. Moreover, he wrote voluminously, and because of the sheer volume of his writings and the plethora of topics on which he wrote, as well as his willingness to share so openly in his autobiographical works, private journals, and letters, we are able to trace the development of his thinking and of his self-understanding.

I would suggest that Merton's life and thought can be split into two periods. The first period began in 1941 when Merton entered the monastery and goes roughly to the late 1950s. During this period, Merton's writings focused primarily on autobiography as well as on prayer and contemplation, and in these writings Merton's focus tended to be more insular. He often characterized monastic life and life in the world as diametrically opposed, and tended to describe his entry into the monastery as entering a refuge from the pernicious influences of the world. He obviously understood that monastic life

had something worthwhile to contribute to the world, and as such, he wrote works about the spiritual life intended for a lay audience. But he did not concern himself overmuch with other facets of life in the world during this period.

His focus, however, began to shift in the late 1950s. His private journals during this time reveal that he was turning his gaze in a more sustained way toward the world as well as to other ways of thinking, including to non-Catholic Christian traditions as well as non-Christian religions. He had a profound experience on the corner of Fourth Street and Walnut Street in Louisville on March 18, 1958, during which he “suddenly realized that [he] loved all the people and that none of them were, or, could be totally alien to [him],” and this experience exemplified a change in perspective whereby he came to recognize that he was fundamentally united with, rather than separated from, the rest of humanity in the world (Jiii, 181-182; March 19, 1958). I will have occasion to write about this experience later, but it is enough to say here that his epiphany at the corner of Fourth and Walnut illustrates a change in perspective that is characteristic of the second period of his life. While he did not stop writing about prayer and contemplation, his writings during this second period also focused on social issues such as the threat of nuclear war and the rise of the civil rights movement. He also devoted significant attention to ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. Indeed, he died in 1968 during a trip to Asia where he was engaged in interreligious dialogue.

How Catholic Was Thomas Merton?

Thomas Merton’s life and writings remain well known more than fifty years after his death, but in 2015 he received an added boost from none other than Pope Francis. It was in that year that, during his visit to the United States, Pope Francis surprised many by singling out Thomas Merton during his speech to Congress as one of four great Americans worthy of particular attention. After referring to Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr., and Dorothy Day, Pope Francis said the following about Merton:

A century ago, at the beginning of the Great War, which Pope Benedict XV termed a “pointless slaughter,” another notable American was born: the Cistercian monk Thomas Merton. He remains a source of spiritual inspiration and a guide for many people. In his autobiography he wrote: “I came into the world. Free by nature, in the image of God, I was nevertheless the prisoner of my own violence and my own selfishness, in the image of the world into which I was born. That world was the picture of Hell, full of men like myself, loving God, and yet hating him; born to love him, living instead in fear of hopeless self-contradictory hungers.” Merton was above all a man of prayer, a thinker who challenged the certitudes of his time and opened new horizons for souls and for the Church. He was also a man of dialogue, a promoter of peace between peoples and religions.¹

This was not the first time Merton’s name had resounded throughout the House of Representatives; a prayer he wrote for peace was read in the House by a congressman in 1962. But apart from a brief reference to Merton by Pope St. John Paul II in a 1990 address to commemorate the 25th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*,² this was the first time a pope publicly spoke so highly of the Cistercian monk.

What made Pope Francis’s comments particularly significant is that his references to Merton occurred in the United States, where official recognition of Merton by the American church has been muted, to say the least. In 2006 the US Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) published the *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*, a book that was intended to provide an exploration of the faith for young adults. Each of the chapters of the catechism opens

1. Visit to the Joint Session of the United States Congress: Address of the Holy Father, Vatican website, September 24, 2015, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150924_usa-us-congress.html.

2. Address of His Holiness John Paul II for the 25th Anniversary Celebration of the Declaration “*Nostra Aetate*,” Vatican website, December 6, 1990, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1990/december/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19901206_xxv-nostra-aetate.html.

with a brief story about a prominent Catholic, many of whom are American. While the catechism includes a vignette on Dorothy Day, to whom Pope Francis also referred in his address, there are no references to Thomas Merton. This was a deliberate choice by the editorial board, chaired by then Bishop Donald Wuerl. Merton was originally to be included among those honored in the catechism, but was deleted for two reasons. First, the committee felt that young adults, for whom the book was targeted, had no idea who Thomas Merton was, and second, in the words of Bishop Wuerl, “we don’t know all the details of the searching at the end of his life.”³ In other words, Merton’s exploration of Eastern religions and his time in Asia spooked them.

Even before the catechism was published without the deleted Merton biography, there were those who criticized the committee for even thinking about having someone like Merton included in a book designed to teach the faith. Msgr. Michael J. Wrenn and Kenneth D. Whitehead, two catechetical translators, wrote a scathing critique of the first draft of the catechism, with much of their fury focused on the inclusion of a story about Merton as an exemplary Catholic. While acknowledging that Merton was a “gifted writer,” they described him as a “lapsed monk . . . a one-time professed Catholic religious, who later left his monastery, and, at the end of his life, was actually off wandering in the East, seeking the consolations, apparently, of non-Christian, Eastern spirituality.” They determined that Merton “can scarcely be considered an ‘exemplary Catholic,’” and that the very fact that the editors included Merton in the very first chapter of the catechism “casts doubt on their understanding of Catholic teaching and practice.”⁴

3. “Catholic Bishops Approve National Adult Catechism,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, November 19, 2004, <http://old.post-gazette.com/pg/04324/414174.stm>.

4. Msgr. Michael J. Wrenn and Kenneth D. Whitehead, “The New National Adult Catechism Revisited,” *Catholic World News*, November 1, 2003, <https://www.catholicculture.org/news/features/index.cfm?recnum=26361&repos=4&subrepos=1&searchid=2035765>.

A few others have communicated similar concerns about Merton's Catholic identity. Fr. John Hardon, SJ (1914–2000), a priest and theologian who spent about six months with Merton at Gethsemani at the request of his superior, called into question Merton's orthodoxy. In a recording available on YouTube, Fr. Hardon stated that, in his judgment, "Thomas Merton was not fully converted, intellectually, to the Catholic faith." According to Fr. Hardon, Merton had "so deeply imbibed non-Christian, Oriental mysticism that his concept of God was at best vague, and at worst pantheist." He went on in the recording to argue that Merton was to blame for the rise of the New Age movement.⁵ Anthony E. Clark, associate professor of history at Whitworth University, echoed the concerns of Fr. Hardon when he wrote that Merton's "commitment to orthodox Catholicism appears suspiciously attenuated by the end of his life."⁶ "I think Merton's toying with Asian thought and religion supplanted his Catholic orthodoxy," Clark said in a 2015 interview. Furthermore, he continued, "Merton was a man always in the Church, but one who wrote in his personal journals that he didn't want to be. He seemed to stay in monastic life by default, rather than by commitment."⁷

Merton's reputation has perhaps not been helped by some of his interpreters. For example, Ed Rice, one of Merton's friends from his time at Columbia University, wrote what can best be described as a fanciful and strange book shortly after Merton's death in which he argued that Merton happily left the monastery in 1968 fully in-

5. "Fr. John Hardon On: Thomas Merton," *YouTube*, <https://youtube/1UGyIRE5H68>. Fr. Hardon spoke similarly elsewhere, as evidenced by the transcript of another talk in which he said that Merton "organized a campaign for the movement of what we now call the New Age movement." See "New Age Movement—Q & A Session," *Fr. John A. Hardon, S.J. Archives*, http://www.therealpresence.org/archives/Heresies_Heretics/Heresies_Heretics_004.htm.

6. "Can You Trust Thomas Merton?," *Catholic Answers*, May 1, 2008, <https://www.catholic.com/magazine/print-edition/can-you-trust-thomas-merton>.

7. Jim Graves, "The Complex Spirituality of Thomas Merton," *Our Sunday Visitor*, May 27, 2015, <https://osvnews.com/2015/05/27/the-complex-spirituality-of-thomas-merton/>.

tending never to return, and that he became a Buddhist before his untimely death.⁸ Rice based his conclusions primarily on mediums who claimed to have conversations with the deceased Merton. That said, there are plenty of people, Catholic or otherwise, who would agree with Joan Baez's assessment of Merton that he was "a rebel as a Church person,"⁹ particularly for his engagement with other Christian and non-Christian traditions. While some, particularly Catholics of a more traditionalist bent, dismiss Merton for this apparent rebelliousness, there are many, particularly non-Catholics who dislike or are indifferent to Catholicism, who embrace Merton for this.

However, depicting Merton as a rebel monk who went against his Catholicism is lamentably inaccurate. Those with a limited conception of Catholicism or only a passing familiarity with Merton's writings may perhaps be excused for thinking that the monk was rebelling against his Catholicism when he turned his attention to social issues like the problems of war and racism, as well as when he engaged in study of and dialogue with practitioners of non-Catholic Christian traditions as well as of non-Christian religions. That Merton got in trouble with Catholics in the United States, particularly for his anti-war writings, is a reality. But the Merton whose books were being burned by American Catholics (who were, in reality, more American than Catholic in their proclivities) in Louisville is the same Merton who received the gift of a papal stole from Pope St. John XXIII as what can be best described as an act of papal solidarity with Merton's anti-war, ecumenical, and interreligious impulses. Moreover, the Merton whose Catholicism continues to be questioned is the same Merton whose grave is venerated by pilgrims from around the world, many of whom leave prayers, sobriety medals, rosaries, and other tokens in recognition for what he has meant to them and what he continues to mean to them.

8. Edward Rice, *The Man in the Sycamore Tree: The Good Times and Hard Life of Thomas Merton* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970).

9. "Joan Baez," *Merton By Those Who Knew Him Best*, ed. Paul Wilkes (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 43.

Merton the Catholic

My contention is that we misunderstand Thomas Merton if we see him as someone who felt he had to venture away from his Catholicism in order to speak to issues that became important to him, or as someone who negated or watered down his own Catholicism in order to engage in dialogue with non-Catholic traditions. This book is my attempt to address the question of Merton's Catholicism, to delve into his understanding of himself as a Catholic and his perception of himself within the Roman Catholic Church. I argue that, in order to understand Merton, we need to understand more thoroughly how his thought was intertwined with his identity as a Catholic priest and emerged out of a thorough immersion in the church's liturgical, theological, and spiritual tradition. We shall see that his vision of a church characterized by genuine encounter and dialogue, a church that actively works for justice and peace, is one that developed in conversation with the church's tradition, not against it. Merton did not think he was articulating anything new or revolutionary when he engaged in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, nor when he spoke out for racial justice and against the threat of nuclear war. He studied his own tradition voraciously and taught that tradition to other monks at the monastery as the Abbey's novice master. And he drew upon that tradition when he advocated for dialogue, peace, and when he spoke out against racism. When he travelled to Asia in 1968, he did not do so as a wayward figure looking to jettison his Christianity to adopt Buddhism. He travelled to Asia as a Catholic Christian devoted to the tradition that had molded him, and he was recognized as such by those he encountered.

To make my case about Merton's Catholicism, this book takes the reader through Merton's life and thought, from his path to conversion prior to entering the monastery to his final trip to Asia where he died. While I draw on a number of books he published during his lifetime, I focus most attention on his private journals and his letters to various friends and acquaintances. Merton's private journals, which he stipulated could only be published twenty-five years after his death, show Merton at his most honest and forthright, and

CHAPTER 8

MERTON THE DIALOGIST

For, you see, when “I” enter into a dialogue with “you” and each of us knows who is speaking, it turns out that we are both Christ. This, being seen in a very simple and “natural” light, is the beginning and almost the fullness of everything. Everything is in it somewhere. But it makes most sense in the light of Mass and the Eucharist.

—Thomas Merton to John Harris, January 31, 1959

Introduction: The Pope, Merton, and Dialogue

In his 2013 interview with Fr. Antonio Spadaro shortly after his election, Pope Francis named Peter Faber, SJ (1506–1546), when asked about which Jesuit figures have most influenced him. When asked what it was about Faber that he admired, the pope replied that it was his “dialogue with all, even the most remote and even with his opponents” that most impressed him.¹ In other speeches and writings from early in his papacy, the pope continued to emphasize dialogue, and so set the tone for his papacy. “When leaders in various fields ask me for advice,” he said in a July 2013 speech, “my response is

1. “A Big Heart Open to God: An Interview with Pope Francis,” *America Magazine* website, September 30, 2013, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2013/09/30/big-heart-open-god-interview-pope-francis>.

always the same: dialogue, dialogue, dialogue.”² And in his 2013 apostolic exhortation on evangelization, *Evangelii Gaudium*, the pope referred to dialogue more than fifty times, and exhorted us to walk along “the path of dialogue,” enumerating various ways in which the church and individual Christians could embark on this path.³ His focus on dialogue has continued throughout his pontificate. In his 2015 encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si’*, his 2016 apostolic exhortation on the family, *Amoris Laetitia*, and his 2020 apostolic exhortation on the Amazon, *Querida Amazonia*, Francis referred to dialogue repeatedly. And appeals to dialogue appear over and over again in his speeches, morning homilies, and audiences.

Francis’s emphasis on dialogue has not been appreciated by all Catholics. In October 2015, as the second session of the Extraordinary Synod on the Family was about to begin, a new parody Twitter account emerged—Dr. Dialogue, SJ. The Doctor immediately began tweeting about “dialogue” in ways that demonstrated the anonymous creator’s deep suspicion of it. “Remember, you can’t spell ‘dialogue’ without ‘U’ and ‘I’ but the ‘I’ always has to come first!” he tweeted on October 2. On October 8, after the Synod began, he tweeted, “Join us Saturday at the St. Robert Bellarmine Center for Dialogue and Ecumenism. We’re having a fun-filled celebration of Calvin’s Geneva!” And on October 15, referring to Pope Francis’s repeated condemnation of “doctors of the law,” Dr. Dialogue tweeted, “Don’t be a doctor of the law! Be a doctor of dialogue!”⁴

In an essay for the *National Catholic Register* titled “Dubious About Dialogue,” Msgr. Charles Pope raised questions about Francis’s exhortation to dialogue, arguing that most people who

2. Meeting with Brazil’s Leaders of Society: Address of Pope Francis, Vatican website, July 27, 2013, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/july/documents/papa-francesco_20130727_gmg-classe-dirigente-rio.html.

3. *Evangelii Gaudium*, Vatican website, November 24, 2013, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

4. You can find Dr. Dialogue, SJ’s Twitter account here: <https://twitter.com/DrDialogueSJ>.

advocate dialogue only seek “to avoid a conclusion by steering a conversation or line of reasoning toward uncertainty; a conversation that is not really interested in truly disclosing or sharing the truth.” R. R. Reno at the magazine *First Things* included “dialogue” in a list of what he considered to be embarrassing “buzzwords used at corporate retreats and in human resource departments” that are now being used uncritically in official church documents.⁵

Criticisms of Pope Francis’s calls to dialogue as un-Catholic are significant for our purposes largely because the pope made clear during his 2015 visit to the United States that he views Thomas Merton’s conception of dialogue as being in line with his own. During this visit, Francis referred to the importance of dialogue repeatedly, including during his address to the US bishops at the cathedral in Washington. Telling the bishops that “I cannot ever tire of encouraging you to dialogue fearlessly,” Francis exhorted the bishops—and, frankly, all of us—to be unafraid to articulate our viewpoints boldly and clearly, but to do so from a position of genuine encounter by which we approach others in love. Such encounter means that we affirm others first and foremost as persons, “to realize deep down that the brother or sister we wish to reach and redeem, with the power and the closeness of love, counts more than their positions, distant as they may be from what we hold as true and certain.”⁶ It was therefore significant that Pope Francis referred to Thomas Merton as a “man of dialogue” and drew attention to Merton’s “capacity for dialogue” in his 2015 speech to the joint session of the US Congress. When he did so, he made it clear that he viewed Merton’s example as worthy of emulation.

5. Monsignor Charles Pope, “Dubious about Dialogue,” *National Catholic Register* website, November 6, 2015, <https://www.ncregister.com/blog/msgr-pope/dubious-about-dialogue>; R. R. Reno, “Instrumentum Laboris,” *First Things* website, October 4, 2015, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2015/10/instrumentum-laboris>.

6. Meeting with the Bishops of the United States of America: Address of the Holy Father, Vatican website, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150923_usa-vescovi.html.

Unfortunately, Catholics suspicious of Pope Francis are generally the same Catholics suspicious of Thomas Merton, so the pope's nod to Merton did little to appease those who view Merton as a syncretist whose call to dialogue threatened Catholic tradition and led him away from the church. In this chapter, I'm going to argue that Merton's understanding of the preeminence of dialogue, far from compromising him as a Roman Catholic, was actually rooted in his eucharistic theology and was, in fact, the natural result of his understanding of the implications of the Eucharist. That is, I'm going to posit that Merton's conception of dialogue was rooted deeply in Catholic tradition, and specifically, in an intensely Catholic understanding of the Eucharist. While there is little in Merton's eucharistic theology original to him—thereby showing his rootedness in the tradition—he articulated this theology in a manner that is beautiful, profound, and compelling. And for Merton, the Eucharist demonstrated to him that to be Catholic is necessarily to be called to dialogue.

Merton's Eucharistic Theology: The Sacrament of Love

To explore Merton's eucharistic theology, it is necessary first to examine his account of humanity's creation and fall, which he addressed at length in a book published in 1961 called *The New Man*. Here Merton delved into the Genesis creation stories, reading them poetically for what they tell us about the purpose of human creation. In his interpretation, Merton drew particular attention to Genesis 2:7's reference to God breathing the "breath of life" into the first human, arguing that the "breath of life" is a reference to the Holy Spirit and that this verse points to the idea that humanity "was meant from the very first to live and breathe in unison with God." According to Merton, this means that humans were created to be contemplatives who had the ability, through the indwelling Spirit, "to see things as God saw them, to love them as He loved them" (NM, 53). Such contemplation was to be at the heart of humankind's relationships to God, to one another, and to the created order in that

these relationships “were transfigured by divine insights and by an awareness of the inmost reality and value of everything” (NM, 71). In other words, humans were created to see things *as they really are*, in light of God’s loving union with them.

Merton spelled out the implications of this in his interpretation of the creation of Eve out of Adam’s rib (Gen 2:23-24), which he argued tells us something pivotal about the nature and purpose of human creation. He wrote:

Adam, perfectly whole and isolated in himself, as a person, needs nevertheless to find himself perfected, without division and diminution, by the gift of himself to another. He needs to give himself in order to gain himself. The law of self-renunciation is not merely a consequence of sin, *for charity is the fundamental role of the whole moral universe.* (NM, 90; emphasis mine)

To be created in the image and likeness of God is not to be created as isolated monads. Rather, Merton argued, relationality is at the very heart of human createdness; we were created for one another, to give of ourselves to one another. For we were created to love, to see and love as God sees and loves, “to be moved in all things ecstatically by the Spirit of God” to give of ourselves in love just as God gives of God’s self to us in the breath of life (NM, 53). Merton therefore insisted that, even before the introduction of sin, humans could not be fully themselves as humans created in the image and likeness of God without going out of themselves toward others. To be self-focused would be to be less than human, less than what we were created to be.

And this, according to Merton, is the problem of sin. The story of the fall is a story of humanity’s descent into prideful self-centeredness. “By an act of pure pride,” Merton wrote, “Adam put an abyss between himself and God and other men. He became a little universe enclosed within itself” (NM, 105). He withdrew from God into himself and so became less than what he was created to be. As Merton writes, he “fell *beneath himself* into the multiplicity and confusion of external

things” (NM, 114; emphasis mine). As such he reoriented himself away from the common good and toward his own private good, “which had to be first restricted to itself, entrenched within itself, and then defended against every rival” (NM, 115).

What emerged was what Merton referred to as a “false self,” a self that, contrary to the purposes for which humanity was created, attempts to exist as entirely self-sufficient and private. Merton often used the language of the “true” and “false” self in his writings when talking about spiritual transformation, and he devoted significant attention to these selves in *New Seeds of Contemplation*. Here Merton posited that each of us “is shadowed by an illusory person: a false self.” “My false and private self,” he writes, “is the one who wants to exist outside the reach of God’s will and God’s love” (NSC, 34). This is a self that is self-focused, self-obsessed, and oriented entirely toward maintaining the illusion of its separateness from God. As such, it’s a “self that exists only in my own egocentric desires” (NSC, 35), but it’s a self that has no actual reality, based as it is on premises that are opposed to human createdness (NSC, 47). A humanity focused on self-gratification cannot but be confronted with what Merton called its own “nonentity,” its lack of reality (LB, xiv).

This focus on the self—this living into the non-reality of the false self—not only alienates us from God, but also from one another, thus resulting in the deep fragmentation of a humanity created to exist in unity. All attempts to find my identity in this false self leads inevitably to conflict with others as I seek to find myself by asserting myself—my “desires and ambitions and appetites”—against others and appropriating for myself a private share of the common good (NSC, 47). I thus find my identity by accentuating the differences between myself and others. As Merton wrote, people whose lives are centered on themselves “can only conceive one way of becoming real: cutting themselves off from other people and building a barrier of contrast and distinction between themselves” and others (LB, xiv). The satisfaction of our material needs and desires over and against the other cannot bring happiness or peace, for the pursuit of such things against the other is based on a lie that is opposed to the

purposes of human createdness. However, instead of this compelling us to live differently, we become burdened by what Merton called “an agony of ambivalence,” and we project onto our neighbors our dissatisfaction and self-hatred (LB, xiv). We hate them primarily because we see in them what we see in ourselves, namely “selfishness and impotence, agony, terror and despair” (NSC, 123). We fear and hate others because we recognize in them the same destructive, and ultimately dissatisfying, pursuit of identity in non-reality that we see in ourselves. But, as Merton argued in his famous essay “The Root of War Is Fear,” it is far more satisfying to hate these things in another than to hate these things in ourselves. Fear, distrust, and hatred thus dominate our fragmented societies.

Yet humanity, even in its fragmentation, recognizes the futility of this existence and longs for something more. Merton wrote in his 1956 book on the Eucharist, *The Living Bread*, that “we know in the intimate depths of our being that our life must recover some unity, stability, and meaning. We sense instinctively that these can only come to us from union with God and with one another” (LB, xv). And according to Merton, “the Eucharist is the great means which God has devised for gathering together and unifying” humankind (LB, 156). The purpose of the Eucharist is to transform human beings to become what they were created to be, people who exist in unity with God and one another.

The manner in which the Eucharist transforms us is multifaceted. According to Merton, it reveals to us the very nature of God as love and so reveals to us that we are profoundly loved; it draws us into the love that is God through union with God, thereby transforming us to discover our true selves in God; and in so doing, it transforms us individually and communally to imitate and manifest in concrete ways the love that is God. I shall address each of these points.

The Eucharist Reveals the God Who Is Love

Merton, as did Augustine and others, tied 1 John 4:8’s statement that “God is love” to our conception of God as triune (see LB, 47–51). To understand that God is love in light of the mystery of the

Trinity is to recognize that God exists as three persons who infinitely give of themselves to one another in an eternal embrace of total self-giveness. God is love because God exists eternally loving. We know that God is love through the incarnation of the Son, for through his life and sacrifice, the Son revealed to us the utterly self-giving love that is at the heart of who God is eternally. The intertrinitarian love that characterizes God's self-existence bursts forth and is made known in the incarnation. Christ's sacrifice on the cross is the fullest expression of this self-giving divine love, for in this sacrifice the Son revealed his total love for the Father and for all humankind. The selflessness that is at the heart of God is made manifest in the selfless sacrifice of the Son of God. Thus, in "the death of Jesus on the Cross we see the One Love which is God and we see the Three Divine Persons loving one another" (LB, 52).

The profundity of the Mass is that it makes present this sacrifice to us, manifesting, "in mystery, the *agápe* which is the secret and ineffable essence of God Himself." "What we behold at Mass," Merton wrote, "is the very reality of God's own love" (LB, 53). In the Eucharist, God reveals to us, over and over again, that "God is love," that God's nature is self-giving love, for in the Eucharist God gives of himself fully to us. And to recognize in the Eucharist that God is love is simultaneously to be confronted with the reality that we are ourselves divinely loved. The Eucharist is "the ineffably perfect embodiment" of Christ's love for each one of us (LB, 4), and in the Mass Christ comes to us individually with "a most ardent and personal love for each one of us" (LB, 46). This love is not simply the love that God has for all without exception, but a specific love that reveals Christ to love us as individuals with a love that "reaches out to each one in the inscrutable hiddenness of his own unique individuality" (LB, 70).

Transformation through Union with Christ

This love transforms us, and it does so both by compelling and empowering us to love in return. Merton was clear that we never lose our "natural instincts" to love (LB, xviii). But because we are "pene-

trated through and through by the mystical fire of Christ's charity" (LB, 10) in the Eucharist, our natural instincts to love are awakened by Christ's love (LB, 9). However, Christ's presence in the Eucharist does more than simply awaken these instincts to love. By uniting himself to us fully, Christ "penetrates our whole being, transforming and divinizing us by His power" (LB, 70). Our natural instincts to love are therefore not only awakened, they are elevated and made like God's own love. Merton emphasized that the Eucharist brings about an actual and intimate union with the Word made flesh, "as if He were the soul of our own soul and the being of our own being" (LB, 110). The divine life of Christ himself is thus poured into us, and this divine life is nothing else than the intertrinitarian love that God is. Our love becomes intermingled with the divine love and so transfigured:

The charity that is communicated to us in the Eucharist by the Heart of the Divine Savior is at once the formal and efficient cause of the love which it arouses in our own hearts. And our response of charity is like a flame communicated to us by the Divine Victim burning in the fire of the Holy Spirit. United to him, we are consumed in the glory of one and the same flame. (LB, 111)

Plunged into the very life of God who is love, we enter into the reality of that love. We thus love God in return, and we do so by loving with the love that Christ bestows on us in the Eucharist, the love that God is in God's essence. For in the Eucharist, we are transformed into Christ, becoming that which we consume, and in loving the Father with the same love that Christ has for the Father, we come to know him intimately.

Merton connected the transforming power of the Eucharist to the language of the true and false self that we encountered above. In being transformed to become like Christ, to whom we are united in the Eucharist, we discover our true selves. While the fall is a descent into fragmentary false selves that exist in opposition to God and to others, the "problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem

of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self” (NSC, 31). To discover our true selves is to discover our identities once again in union with God, the God who loves us and transforms us to love him in return. The union is so complete that we discover that “Christ is our own deepest and most intimate ‘self,’ our highest self, our new self as sons of God” (LB, 68), for through his intimate presence in us the false self “is burned away by the fervor of charity” (LB, 119). We discover our true selves by loving God, by returning to the intimacy with our creator that we were intended to have from the beginning. In short, we discover our true selves by being transformed into Christ’s image through union with Christ.

However, the transformation does not occur magically. The sacrament may be objective in its operation, but its grace is not communicated to those not properly disposed (see LH, 79–80). To be drawn into and transformed by the divine love of God embodied in the Eucharist requires our active participation. Merton wrote: “In order for the sacraments and the Mass to achieve their full effects in the hearts of the faithful, each one must make personal and interior efforts to dispose his own heart and bring it into union with the Heart of Christ” (LB, 79). We must strive as far as possible to yield ourselves to the divine action in the Eucharist, to unite ourselves to God’s will made manifest in the Eucharist. And this will is not simply that we love God, but that we live out the love we experience in the Eucharist by loving others.

Individual and Communal Transformation through the Eucharist

Merton insisted that there is more at stake in the Eucharist than the transformation of the individual. As the sacrament of love that awakens and empowers us to love, the Eucharist is also the sacrament of unity that reforges a humanity that had splintered into pieces. There is, therefore, a deep connection between the Eucharist and the church, the Mystical Body of Christ. Merton warned against “the narrow limitations of an individualistic piety which treats Communion as a refuge from the troubles and sorrows of communal liv-

ing and ends by cutting us off, spiritually, from the Mystical Christ” (LB, 85–86). To understand the Eucharist merely as a means of personal consolation apart from loving engagement with our fellow communicants is drastically to misunderstand the very purposes for which Christ instituted the sacrament as well as to misunderstand the nature of the church itself. The church is not only a social organization that provides access to necessary sacraments. It is “principally a Living Mystical Body” (LB, xvi), and through the Eucharist we are absorbed into the Mystical Body of Christ (LB, xviii). Through the sacrament we become united to our sisters and brothers in Christ through a bond of love; Merton described this beautifully as members of the mystical body being welded together “in the flame of an infinite charity” (LB, 44). The conversion to the self-giving love of God that takes place through our individual union with Christ in the Eucharist manifests itself in a self-giving love for our sisters and brothers. We thus go out of ourselves to others, and in so doing we recover the relationality that is part of human createdness. But more than this, in giving ourselves to one another in love, we as a church manifest the relationality that is at the heart of who God is as three in one: “For by selfless charity we reproduce on earth, and in time, the circumincession of the Three Divine Persons, each in the others, which is the glory and the joy of the Blessed in eternity because it is the joy of God Himself” (LB, 132). We love with God’s own love, offering ourselves to one another with the same love by which the Persons of the Trinity give of themselves to one another in its eternal embrace of self-giveness.

Merton was emphatic that the love engendered by the Eucharist is “more than gentleness, kindness, and affability” (LH, 114). Rather, it is love that is concrete in its expression, a love that involves each of us individually going out of ourselves to the other such that we discover our true selves not only in loving God but in living for others in Christ (LB, 149). United in the love that is God, the Mystical Body of Christ thus offers to the world an icon, not only of the intertrinitarian unity of love that characterizes God, but also of a recreated community of love that demonstrates to a fragmented

world another way of existing, one that is more *fully human*. But even more than that, Merton argued that the eucharistic life by its very nature “is oriented towards an apostolate of charity which will effect a visible union of all” humankind (LB, 156). The Eucharist calls the church to unity among her members, but also calls the church to work for the unity of a humanity suffering the consequences of continual fragmentation. There is a continual temptation to reduce the Eucharist to a matter of individualistic piety or to an object of theological speculation, or to focus principally on the liturgy to the neglect of its meaning and purpose. Merton would have none of this. “Of what use is it” Merton asked caustically, “to hold seminars on the doctrine of the Mystical Body and on sacred liturgy, if one is completely unconcerned with the suffering, destitution, sickness, and untimely death of millions of potential members of Christ?” (LH, 117–18). Pointing to Pope John XXIII’s encyclical *Mater et Magistra*, Merton argued that the Eucharist is directed primarily toward the creation of a just society, focused on building the kingdom of God on earth (LH, 127–28). For Merton this meant that our growth in love is characterized also by a growth in vision whereby we are able “to see Christ now not only in our own deep souls, not only in the Psalms, not only in the Mass, but everywhere, shining to the Father in the features of men’s faces” (BW, 92). The Eucharist compels us to recognize in all people the overwhelming love of Christ poured out upon all, to see them as Christ himself sees them, and indeed to see Christ *in* them. And it therefore calls us to work concretely to build a just world.

The Eucharist and Merton’s Fourth-and-Walnut Experience

Merton’s understanding of the implications of the Eucharist was not unique only to him. His references to the Eucharist throughout his writings are punctuated by references to patristic, medieval, and contemporary sources that illustrate the degree to which Merton was steeped in the tradition. What is perhaps unique to Merton was the existential depth of his understanding. Merton did not merely possess an intellectual comprehension of the meaning of the Mass he cele-

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