

Turning to the Mystics



Thomas Merton: Session 5

with James Finley

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

Greetings, everyone, and welcome to our time here together, which we'll be turning to the teachings of the Christian mystic, Thomas Merton, to help us deepen our experience of and response to God's presence in our lives.

Jim Finley: In two of these previous sessions, we reflected on the passage, Merton, "*My Lord God, I have no idea where I'm going.*" We use this passage as a way to see how Thomas Merton mentors us or models for us experiencing God's presence in reflective prayer. That is, in which we receive, we hear God's words speaking directly into our heart in the word of Scripture, the word of spiritual teaching, and that word that lectio into our heart initiates the kind of meditatio discursive, reflective meditation of thoughts, and images, and insights illumined by faith to deepen our experience and understanding of God's presence in our life.

And so, we can see how fidelity to such prayer as a daily rendezvous with God over time transforms the depths of our mind and heart. That is, little by little, it helps form a kind of an underlying habitual state of discipleship, or a state of Christ consciousness, or a state of this way of being sensitized and tuned into the grace nature of each passing moment of our life.

In this session, we'll be turning to a passage in Merton where he'll be bearing witness to or helping us to understand the ways in which reflective prayer opens out upon a contemplative prayer, like the practice of contemplative prayer.

And so, before I present this passage, first, just a little bit of background for the context of the passage. In the monastery, Thomas Merton was a priest in the community, and at that time, at least, the priests each said a mass in a little alcove or altar somewhere in the monastery. And since he was master of novices, he would celebrate the Eucharist in the small chapel in the novitiate at the monastery. And after mass, after Eucharist, he would then sit in prayer. And sitting there in prayer looking at the altar there in the chapel, he shares with us this prayer, which is this prayer bearing witness to contemplative prayer.

So, I'll read the passage and then we will kind of walk through it together to see what insights we can gain from it. Merton writes, sharing with us this moment of silent prayer, this contemplative prayer:¹

Beauty of the sunlight falling on a tall vase of red and white carnations and green leaves on the altar of the novitiate chapel. The light and dark, the darkness of the fresh crinkled flower, light, warm and red all around the darkness. The flower is the same color as blood, but it is in no sense whatever as 'red as blood,' not at all. It is as red as a carnation, only that. This flower, this light, this moment, this silence = Dominus est. God is eternity. He passes. He remains. We pass in and out. He passes. We remain. We are nothing. We are everything. He is in us. He has gone from us. We are here in him. He is gone from us. He is gone from us. He is not here. We are here in Him. All these things can be said, but why say them? All these things can be said, but why say them?

1 Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Doubleday, 1966) 143

The flower is itself. The light is itself. The silence is itself. I am myself. All perhaps illusion, but no matter. For illusion is the shadow of reality, and reality is the grace and gift that underlies these lights, these colors, this silence underlies: is that true? They are simply real. They themselves are his gift.

So, I'd like then to reflect on this passage. He begins here with the word "beauty." That is, he's very present to the concrete details of the flowers on the altar, the fresh crinkled flower, the light and the dark. He's like deeply present. And in the concrete intricacy of the flowers, he beholds the beauty of the flowers. He beholds the shining forth of the beautiful, a kind of spiritual quality, that shines out from the concreteness of the flower's presence.

And in this way, then, I'd like to suggest—because we're trying to kind of slowly find our way here in understanding the nature of contemplative prayer—and to say first that contemplative prayer is marked by a certain quality of passivity. By "passivity," I mean it's an enrichment of experience that happens to us, like an interior event. We saw this in an earlier reflection on creation, on the world and time, or the dance of the Lord in emptiness, and in turning to see a flock of birds descending or in a child at play, in the presence of the beloved, or a quiet hour at day's end, like the receiving of a gift of an enriched awareness of the presence of God present to us in and as the presence of that to which we are awakened to the presence of God, to the flock of birds descending, to the child, to the beloved, or here to the flowers on the altar of the chapel there.

And so, a contemplative prayer then is marked by a certain quality, a kind of resting wordlessly in the presence of God as a grace intimately received, a quiet kind of enriched enhancement of presence. And so, that's the mark of it; it's the gift of it. But then the active part comes out in which Merton says the flower is the same color as blood, but it is in no sense whatever, quote: "As red as blood, not at all. It is as red as the carnation." Why does he say that? Because to say that it's as red as blood would be to start slipping into reflective consciousness, in which he would be making comparisons where something like, or something similar, or something analogous to as this occurs in reflective prayer, which is important, and it's real. It has its own place. But here is a kind of non-reflective, intimate immediacy of a presence prior to and beyond words, beyond thought, beyond all such reflective considerations.

Jim Finley: So, he sees his mind starting to go there, but then he says, "not at all." And so, what he does, the active part, is he actively protects the delicate subtlety of the intimate immediacy of this communion with God present in the presence of the mystery and the gift of the flowers in this moment of silence. He guards over his heart in a kind of a gentle way. He honors it by staying steadfast in the subtlety of the sense of wordless communion with God.

And then in this wordless communion—and now he's kind of sharing with us a series of paradoxes to help—it's a series of paradoxical statements that are intended to help us not slip off into reflective processes, in reflection. In other words, this might be a series of things that come to him. I'm thinking of Jacob Bohm, the nuclear physicist. There's a fascinating series of audio talks with the mystic Krishnamurti, and Bohm makes this statement, he says in the dialogue with Krishnamurti, he says: "A little truth is a truth in which the opposite is false. A

great truth is a truth in which the opposite is also true.” So, now, as a kind of a litany of paradoxes, of a kind of enriched language that kind of invites or helps sustain this presence.

By the way, I think in the chanting of the Psalms, in the chanting of the Psalms, in the cadences and the rhythmic chanting of the Psalms, you get the same sense of words, in the rhythmic cadences of the words is to invite a sustained, deepening awareness that precedes and transcends reflective considerations.

So, Merton writes this flower, this light, this moment, this silence. God is.” That is, in the presence, in the concrete immediacy of the presence of this flower, the presence of God is realized. Or put in another way, it’s the realization that God is the infinity of the intimate immediacy of the flower’s presence, and the intimate immediacy of the flower’s presence is the presence of God—this flower, this light, this moment, this silence, Dominus est. See, God is eternity.

So, this is a kind of a timeless moment of time in the midst of time, the pleroma, this fullness of enriched timelessness of the death dimension and a moment in the passage of time, like Richard Rohr, as deep time.

And then he starts in the series of paradoxical statements in kind of the eternity of this quiet awareness. Merton says, speaking of God, he remains. God remains, and we pass. Yes, it’s true. God alone remains. It’s like the bookmark of Saint Teresa of Ávila: “Let nothing disturb thee. Let nothing frighten thee. All things are passing. God alone remaineth. Patience obtains all things.”

And so, God eternally remains. It’s a beginning-less, endless, boundaryless, oceanic presence that never, never began or never, never end. And so, God remains, and we pass. It isn’t just that we pass out of this moment of clarity, which we do, it slips away from us, but we all pass away. We pass away into the mystery of death. See, we’re all sitting here moment by moment passing away. We’re all sitting here melting like candles. We perpetually are passing away in the presence of God that never passes away. He passes; He remains. We pass in and out, in and out. Then he passes. God who remains, passes, but how does he pass? He passes from our awareness. That is, he’s right here, the presence of God intimately realized, and then as mysteriously as it arrived, it slips away from us. He passes, and we remain. We’re sitting here empty handed in the presence of ourself now not able to find the presence of God that just a moment ago was holding us in its presence. We remain.

We are nothing. See, we are nothing in the sense in which the infinite presence of God is infinitely presence-ing itself in and as the gift and the miracle of our very presence so that if God would cease loving you, if God would cease loving me into this present moment, at the count of three, at the count of three, we would vanish away for we are nothing. We are absolutely nothing apart from the infinite presence of God that is presence-ing itself as the gift of the miracle of our very presence and are nothingness without God. And in this sense, see, we are nothing. We’ll look at this later in other reflections on dread, and the dark night, and the nothingness.

And, we are nothing; we are everything. How so? We are everything in God whose presence is presence-ing us forth in and as a participatory sharing and communion in the infinite presence of God as our destiny. We are nothing without God. And yet, at the deepest, deepest, deepest sense, we are never without God, for God's sustaining love pours itself out and is giving itself to us as the very reality of our life, each breath, each heartbeat. See, he is in us. The kingdom of heaven is within you. The immanence of God within ourself is in us. And he's gone from us. We can't find him; he's beyond us. He is not here. I look around. I see the chair, I see the walls of the room, I see the table, but I don't see God. In some sense, in ego consciousness, God is not here. And you know that God is not here, we are here in Him. It's not just that God's in us, but we're in God and we are in God hidden with Christ in God before the origins of the universe.

And then Merton says, "All these things can be said, but why say them?" You sit in this litany of riddles, it keeps unraveling, the inability to find a footing in sequential thought. And you could go on and on and on in this way, but why say it? Why say it? You come to this kind of silence.

In the monastery when I was there, the monks were there in silence. They didn't talk to each other. When I was there, you used sign language to communicate. You lived like in communal silence together fostering this presence of God. And on major feast days, one of the monk priests would give a sermon to the community in the chapter room. And Thomas Merton, in one of the talks to the monks in the monastery, he said, "I'm always humbled when I'm asked to speak in this place because everything said here should come out of silence, and everything said here should come out of silence to renew and deepen the silence, the eternal silence of God who's speaking us, and can we become so silent that we can hear God speaking us and all things into being?"

So, all of these things can be said, but why say them—the flower is itself, the light is itself, the silence is itself, I am myself? This is the intimate immediacy of the presence of myself, the flowers, this moment in silence—All perhaps illusion, but no matter. For illusion is the shadow of reality and reality is the grace and the gift that underlies all these lights, these colors, this silence; that is, that there's a kind of a shadowy play of light, the illusory nature of all phenomena and its nothingness without God, that sense.

Then he says, "Underlies, is that true? They are simply real. They themselves are His gift." And what is his gift? It's the gift of Himself. That is the gift. The gift is the gift of God's very presence given to us whole and complete in and as the gift and the miracle of our very presence, the presence of this moment, the presence of the room, the presence of the concreteness of life itself, the sacrament of God.

Now, notice here, I think, notice how subtle this is. This is not ecstasy or rapture. That happens. We'll be speaking about this later in other reflections. There is a rapture where we're kind of like lifted above ourself. This is not a rapture in that kind of rhapsodic sense of the presence of God. It's much closer say to Meister Eckhart's sense of having a virgin mind. It's subtle, subtle, subtle, subtle. And so, a lot of the practice

is I think learning to calibrate our heart to kind of the subtle sensitivity in which we can begin to sense these ever so delicate realizations.

So, I think this, then, is that, I think for me what the lesson is this, is that this contemplative, communal consciousness, it's like it's not hard to find, it's hard to stop running from it. Or it's not hard to find, it's hard to stay childlike in a sustained attentiveness long enough for it to begin to have its way with us. That is, just as it's about to begin, we get up and walk away. And so, how can we learn to befriend the kind of sustained stance that offers the least resistance to such intimate, delicate unfoldings happening in our mind and heart as it's given to us to do so? So, by befriending this, we can ask as we end the meditation, understood in this sense, to ask God for the grace not to break the thread of this awareness as we get up and go through our day.

That is, there's an arc of habituated transformation in which the rhythms and cadences of this delicate sensitivity can begin to manifest itself as if out of the corner of our eye in a chance encounter with someone or looking out the window or opening a door, there's these little glimpses where it becomes a more and more habituated sense of this presence. And in this presence, this unreflective presence then, illumines our reflections and deepens our reflections. This deep silence that is a silence out of which we then speak out of that silence and share it with other people as the prophetic word that touches hearts. And the stillness is the stillness that's incarnate in our acts of helping and serving others, acts of compassionate service in the world.

So, with that then, let's end with meditation. And, again as always here, very briefly to sit in meditation, but if you're so inclined, during the week to sit and listen to this reflection and then do a sit, do a reflection, and continue in the silence, meditative stillness as long as you're inclined to do so as you foster and deepen your own practice, whatever that might be.

So, I invite you then to just sit straight, fold your hands, and bow. Repeat after me.

Be still and know I am God.

Be still and know I am.

Be still and know.

Be still.

Be. [bell sounds]

[bell sounds] And bow. We'll slowly say The Lord's Prayer together:

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

Mary, Mother of contemplatives, pray for us. Meister Eckhart, pray for us. Mechthild Magdeburg, pray for us.

Blessings, until next time.

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