

APRIL 12, 2022

Thomas Merton: “Do not look for rest in any pleasure, because you were not created for pleasure: you were created for spiritual joy. And if you do not know the difference between pleasure and spiritual joy, you have not yet begun to live.”

The topic for today’s devotion comes from Chapter 35 of a book that Thomas Merton first published in 1961 entitled New Seeds for Contemplation. It is a favorite of mine, a source of thirty-nine daily devotions. Consisting of thirty-nine relatively short essays, the random number generator on my iPhone is set to generate a number between 1 and 39, and I do believe that the Holy Spirit drives the selection.

The title of the chapter from which today’s devotion is drawn is “Renunciation” - a word that doesn't appear too often in normal discourse. Except perhaps during Lent. ‘Renounce’ is a strong verb. According to Lexico.com, to renounce something is to “formally declare one's abandonment of (a claim, right, or possession).”

How often do we make “formal declarations”? I suspect those reading this do at some point during Lent. And it needn't be to become a recluse, a modern desert mother or father. Christ Jesus doesn't ask of us more than we can bear. Merton writes the following in the second paragraph of the essay. We may forgive Merton’s use of exclusively masculine language.

Christ, Who came on earth to form contemplatives and teach men the ways of sanctity and prayer, could easily have surrounded himself with ascetics who starved themselves to death and terrified the people with strange trances. But His Apostles were workmen, fishermen, publicans who made themselves conspicuous only by their disregard for most of the intricate network of devotions and ceremonial practices and moral gymnastics of the professionally holy (Merton, Thomas. New Seeds of Contemplation.) Freed from alienation from the Divine, we are empowered to bring the light of the Living One to others so that they too may raise holy sparks. Being one with the Living One is about doing the work appropriate to a citizen of the divine Realm.

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Later, Merton speaks to all of us.

The issue on which all sanctity depends is renunciation, detachment, self-denial. But self-denial does not end when we have given up all our deliberate faults and imperfections. To keep yourself out of obvious sins; to avoid the things that are evidently wrong because they shame and degrade your nature; to perform acts that are universally respected because they are demanded by our very dignity as human beings: all that is not yet sanctity. To avoid sin and practice virtue is not to be a saint, it is only to be a man [see above], a human being. This is only the beginning of what God wants of you. But it is a necessary beginning because you cannot have supernatural perfection unless you have first (by God’s grace) perfected your own nature on its own level. Before you can be a saint you have got to become human. An animal cannot be a contemplative. However, it is relatively simple to get rid of faults that we recognize as faults—although that too can be terribly hard. But the

crucial problem of perfection and interior purity is in the renunciation and uprooting of all our unconscious attachments to created things and to our own will and desires (Ibid.).

And how do we know if we are being honest with the Divine? According to Merton, it is when, in prayer, we can admit to ourselves that we haven't fully grasped the difference between pleasure and spiritual joy. We have not yet begun to live in the fullness of Christ Jesus. But, insofar as we are true to the guidance of the Spirit of truth, the Holy Spirit, we are on the right path. The Gospel of Thomas puts it in succinct words.

If you are searching, you must not stop until you find. When you find, however, you will become troubled. Your confusion will give way to wonder. In wonder you will reign over all things. Your sovereignty will be your rest.

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Rabbi David Cooper wrote that every particle in our physical universe, every structure, and every human being is a shell that contains the sparks of holiness. Our task is to release each spark from its shell or husk and raise it up through acts of loving-kindness, of being in harmony with the universe, and through higher awareness (Cooper, David. 1997. God Is A Verb. Riverhead Books.)

Our opportunities to raise holy sparks are endless. Doing what is right in the eyes of Christ Jesus is right for ourselves and for humanity, and the universe. We are co-creators of Reality, and we should commit to raising holy sparks until all three of the preceding are blazing with undivided wholeness sealed by love.

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