

# Thomas Merton

When we think of saints, names like Francis, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas come to mind. But that is not how St. Paul thought of sainthood. In addressing the Christian community in Rome he writes:

[T]o all the beloved of God in Rome, called to be holy.

**Romans 1:7 (NAB)**

The same Greek words can also be translated:

To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints:

**Romans 1:7 (RSV)**

St. Paul is illustrating a belief of our Church emphasized in the Catechism: we are all called to holiness, all called to be saints.

But what does that mean? Tonight I'd like to say a few words about Thomas Merton, who dedicated his life to helping others recognize the spiritual element of holiness in their lives. Merton was born in 1915. His mother died when he was 6, his father when he was 15. The Encyclopedia of Catholicism sums up the first part of his life:

“A precocious and undisciplined youth with no religious education, he proclaimed himself an atheist and pursued a hedonistic life-style. After an academically and morally disastrous year at Cambridge University, Merton attended Columbia University in New York. He toyed with communism but became progressively attracted to Catholicism through reading and discussion. Baptized a Catholic in 1938, he astonished his friends by entering the Cistercian (Trappist) Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky three years later. As a young monk he wrote a dramatic autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, which became a bestseller and a classic. It made Merton a religious figure of international prominence and established him as a Catholic writer. During the next twenty years he wrote prolifically on a vast range of topics.”

Thomas Merton believed the teaching of St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:

“[N]o one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the holy Spirit. There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; there are different forms of service but the same Lord; there are different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit.”

Merton's writings were aimed at helping us recognize the gifts we have been given by the Holy Spirit. He guides us in developing our spiritual lives so that the actions of our day

to day lives can be guided by the Spirit - as were the lives of those the Church officially recognizes as Saints.

His writings teach us how to use prayer and contemplation to remind us of the teachings of our faith and how our faith helps us to deal with the ups and downs of life as well as to guide our personal and public choices and actions.

Prior to Merton, “spirituality” was seen as the exclusive preserve of the consecrated religious. Merton, who experienced first-hand an undisciplined, hedonistic lifestyle, was able to convey the spirituality that saved his life convincingly to ordinary people.

Thomas Merton was also controversial in some of his writings. He emphasized Christian social responsibility with respect to race relations, violence, war (opposing the Vietnam War), and economic injustice. His ecumenical efforts included positive interpretations of Eastern religions, especially their contemplative traditions, to Catholic readers. As a result, there are extremist groups, Catholic and otherwise, that present him as theologically unsound. Merton died in 1968 at a religious conference in Bangkok as the result of accidental electrical shock. His writings remain extremely popular and have never gone out of print.

I recommend the following works as particularly helpful and illuminating:

*Thoughts In Solitude* (1958)

*New Seeds of Contemplation* (1961)

*The Way of Chuang Tzu* (1965)

*Opening the Bible* (1967, published posthumously in 1986)

*Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (1968)

I will conclude with a short sample of his writing, a prayer expressing his trust in God:

MY LORD GOD, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end.

Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it.

Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.