

Thomas Merton and Nature Homily by Bill Graves delivered May 7, 2006,
accompanied in presentation by visual and sound images of birds referenced

Today we celebrate in our traditional flower communion gifts of the natural world around us. I couldn't think of a better way to introduce that than through the eyes of Thomas Merton, who described himself as a spiritual brother of Henry David Thoreau and John Muir. From 1942 until his death in 1968, Fr. Merton was a contemplative, Trappist Monk at a monastery called Gethsemani located in rural Kentucky. Merton authored over 65 publications before he died at the age of 53. He was clearly one of the most prolific as well as influential theologians and social critics of the 20th century.

One of the least well known areas of Merton's work is the one I will focus on; That is, his nature writings. I am also an admirer of another Catholic priest, Thomas Berry, whose central message is that "the great work", of this era is the development of a new sense of the sacredness of the natural world. In 2002, Berry paid tribute to Merton by identifying him as one of the earliest theologians to recognize this imperative.¹

I would invite you to become comfortable now, and to go on a voyage with me. It is an experience of the natural world through the eyes of the mystic which I know not all of us are, but I invite you to enter into Merton's world for a few moments.

To Merton there was no dualistic separation between the spiritual and the material world; never an image of God as "something out there", something separate from the natural world. Merton writes:

We do not see the Blinding One in black emptiness. [S]He speaks to us gently in ten thousand things, in which [Her] light is one fullness and one

¹ Forward to: When the Trees Say Nothing, Writings on Nature, Thomas Merton by Thomas Merton, edited with an introduction by Kathleen Deignan, (Notre Dame: Sorin Books, 2003) 16.

Wisdom. Thus [s]he shines not on them but from within them. Such is the loving-kindness of Wisdom.²

The gender change in the foregoing passage is mine but I trust Merton wouldn't mind that liberty.

As you may know a corner of the natural world that my lovely assistant, Frances, and I are particularly fond of is wild birds. They are the jewels or flowers of the animal world. Merton shared that passion. They were literally his beloved family and neighbors at his hermitage in the forest outside of the walls of the monastery where Merton was permitted to live as a hermit after 1958.

The life of a more typical monk at Gethsemani was rigorous and included a ritual called "lauds" which I understand to be the chanting of psalms in praise of the lord done at around 4:00am. For Merton experiencing birds at the breaking of morning was a worship experience as profound as any in the abbey church. Here is a 1960 journal entry:

The other day (Thursday)---the *full meaning* of lauds said against the background of waking birds and sunrise.

At 2:30---no sounds except sometimes a bullfrog. Some mornings, he says *Om*---some days he is silent. The whippoorwill who begins his mysterious whoop about 3 o'clock is not always near....

The first chirps of the waking birds---"le point vierge" of the dawn, a moment of awe and inexpressible innocence, when the Father in silence opens their eyes and they speak to Him, wondering if it is time to "be"? He tells them, "Yes." Then they one by one wake and begin to sing. First, the catbirds and cardinals and some others I do not recognize. Later the song sparrows, wrens, etc. Last of all doves, crows.

With my hair almost on end and eyes of my soul wide open I am present, without knowing it at all, in this unspeakable Paradise and I behold this secret, this wide open secret which is there for everyone, free, and no one pays any attention ("One to his farm, another to his merchandise"). Not even monks shut up under fluorescent lights, face to face with the big Books and the black notes and with one another, perhaps no longer seeing or Hearing anything in the course of festive Lauds.³ [end quote]

² Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master by Thomas Merton, edited with an introduction by Lawrence S. Cunningham (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press) 261.

In many of his writings Merton speaks of a “hidden wholeness” of all things, which he called “Wisdom,... the gift of my Creator’s Thought and Art”⁴ He felt this sacred essence best in creatures operating in an uncorrupted, wild, state. Here is an example:

Yesterday I was sitting in the woodshed reading and a little Carolina Wren suddenly hopped on to my shoulder and then on to the corner of the book I was reading and paused a second to take a look at me before flying away.... There is something you cannot know about a wren by cutting it up in a laboratory and which you can only know if it remains fully and completely a wren, itself, and hops on your shoulder if it feels like it.

People who watch birds and animals are already wise in their way.

I want not only to observe but to know living things, and this implies a dimension of primordial familiarity which is simple and primitive and religious and poor. This is the reality I need, the vestige of God in H[er] creatures. And the Light of God in my own soul.⁵ [end quote]

I always thought there was something spiritual about bird watching. Merton saw incarnate in birds nothing less than pure revelation from sacred scriptures. Again from his journal:

The warblers are coming through now....Watching one which I took to be a Tennessee warbler. A beautiful, neat, prim little thing—seeing this beautiful thing which people do not usually see, looking into this world of birds, which is not concerned with us or with our problems. Watching those birds was a food for meditation or a mystical reading. Perhaps better.⁶ [end quote]

The following passage about another warbler species gives a sense of what is meant by the mystical, or contemplative experience:

³ Ibid., 157.

⁴ From “Hagia Sophia” a prose-poem by Thomas Merton published: Lawrence S. Cunningham, Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master, (New York: Paulist Press: 1992) 258.

⁵ A Search for Solitude: The Journals of Thomas Merton, Vol. Three 1952-1960, by Thomas Merton and edited by Lawrence S. Cunningham, (New York: HarperCollins, 1996) 189-190.

⁶ The Intimate Merton; His Life from His Journals, 117

In the afternoon, lots of pretty little myrtle warblers were playing and diving for insects in the low pine branches over my head, so close I could almost touch them, I was awed at their loveliness, their quick flight, their hissings and chirpings, the yellow spot on the back revealed in flight, etc. Sense of total kinship with them as if they and I were of the same nature, and as if that nature were nothing but love. And what else but love keeps us all together in being.⁷

Merton found in birds a constant source of spiritual renewal. At a time when he was despairing about events happening in the peace movement, he has this encounter:

While I was standing there [Bob Whites] began to whistle all over the field and in the wood. I...thought sure they were all dead for there have been hunters everywhere. No, there they are! Signs of life, of gentleness, of helplessness, of providence, of love. They just keep on existing and loving and making more quails and whistling in the bushes.⁸

Here are a few more of Merton's neighbors as described by him:

An indigo bunting flies down and grasps the long, swinging stem of a tiger lily and reaches out, from them, to eat the dry seed on top of a stalk of grass. A Chinese painting!⁹

[W]anting to read and think but not being able to because of the sweetness and fullness of time which is too good to lose....The sun, the summer tanager (I finally connected the song with the bird), the clear morning, the trees, the quiet....¹⁰

Meadowlark sitting quietly on a fence post in the dawn sun, his Gold vest—bright in the light of the east, his black bib tidy, Turning his head this way, that way. This is a Zen quietness Without comment.¹¹

It is called Steller's Jay. Does the jay know whose bird he is? I doubt it. A marvelous blue.

⁷ Dancing in the Water of Life: The Journals of Thomas Merton, Vol. Three 1952-1960, by Thomas Merton and edited by Robert E. Daggy, (New York: HarperCollins, 1997) 162.

⁸ Hart and Montaldo, The Intimate Merton: His life from His Journals, 262.

⁹ Turning Toward the World: The Journals of Thomas Merton, Vol. Four 1960-1963, by Thomas Merton and edited by Victor A. Kramer, (New York: HarperCollins, 1996) 228.

¹⁰ Hart and Montaldo, The Intimate Merton: His life from His Journals, 208.

¹¹ Ibid., 222.

Merton's reflections on nature often mirror situations preoccupying his mind.

Although a cloistered monk, Merton was hardly immune from romantic fantasies. Ask me later and I'll tell you what was on his mind when he described himself "surrounded by lovemaking bumblebees", and:

Today I saw this male [cardinal] sitting beautifully on a fence post post singing joyfully—but at first no female. Then I saw her flying in and out of a big rosebush in the hedge, where the new nest is, and was happy.¹²

A year earlier at a time when his journal was focusing on SAC planes and the bomb, he describes crows as: "[V]ociferous and self-justifying, like humans. They are not two, they are many. They fight each other and the other birds, in a constant state of war."¹³

In his final years seeds of ecological outrage were growing in Merton. Hear his angst upon realizing that poison he put out to deter ants killed some Tufted Titmice:

The other day there was a beautiful whistling of titmice—and now [some] lay dead on the grass under the house, which may well have been some fault of mine....What a miserable bundle of foolish idiots we are! We kill everything around us even when we think we love and respect nature and life. I hope I at least can learn, but in the light of Holy Week I see, again, all my own internal contradictions....¹⁴

I will close with the following excerpt from Merton's journal:

Sermon to the birds, "Esteemed friends, birds of noble lineage, I have no message to you except this: Be what you are: be *birds*. Thus you will be your own sermon to yourselves!"¹⁵

¹² Ibid., 278.

¹³ Ibid., 242-243.

¹⁴ When the Trees Say Nothing, Writings on Nature, Thomas Merton by Thomas Merton, edited with an introduction by Kathleen Deignan, 47.

¹⁵ Hart and Montaldo, The Intimate Merton: His life from His Journals, 246.