

# THOMAS MERTON & SEXUAL WHOLENESS

by **Robert Nugent**, S.D.S.

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Thomas Merton wrote about sexuality. He even wrote a bit about homosexuality though, at one time, his favorite word for homosexual people was “fairy.” In this he was shaped and influenced, like all of us, by the language and concepts of his time. This was the case when he discussed homosexuality or any of the many other topics about which he thought, spoke, and wrote so extensively — if not compulsively — at times.

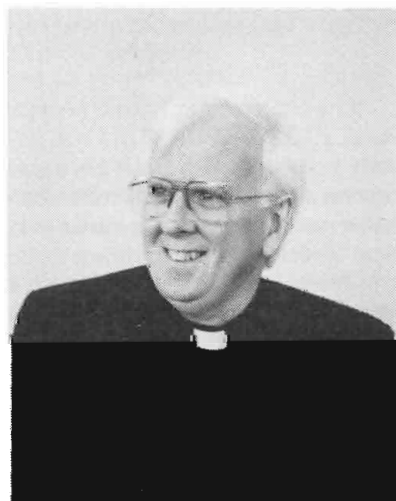
In many ways Merton was a man ahead of his time, especially in his analyses of personal and social violence, peacemaking, monastic reform and in his attempts to build a bridge through study and dialogue between Eastern and Western spirituality and monasticity. Even in his approach to sexuality, especially late in his life, he managed to break through some of the theological and psychological approaches which marked his own earlier understanding of the dynamics of human sexuality.

Merton neither wrote nor spoke extensively or in any systematic way about sexuality. There are, I would suggest, several reasons for this. First, he had his own inner conflicts or unsettledness in this area. Secondly, he had strong natural instincts for privacy, and finally, from an academic viewpoint, as he once said himself, he simply did not feel competent because he could not keep up on the literature. He did, however, from time to time and in various settings deal with sexual issues. He wrote and spoke, for example, about marriage, virginity, chastity, celibacy, purity, contraception, and even homosexuality. This article will deal only with this last question and will prove more interesting for historical and biographical reasons than for any original or even striking contribution Merton might have made to the ongoing discussion.

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As with so many other issues, one can only wonder how Merton would have reacted to the contemporary and continuing ferment in Christian circles about gay rights, homosexual marriages and ecclesiastical sanctions against individuals and groups perceived as not enthusiastically embracing the official doctrine of particular church bodies. Merton died in 1968 before the turning point of the gay liberation movement, usually dated from the Stonewall Rebellion in New York City's Greenwich Village (an area where he himself had once lived). It is difficult to imagine his not becoming involved somehow in this issue had he lived. It is safe to say, I think, that Merton would certainly have been comfortable defending human and civil rights. And I imagine he would have done so publicly because of his own tendency (perhaps from his own experience of homelessness) to identify with the oppressed and marginalized in our society where today, he once said, the real contemplative could be found.

It is also true that his understanding of human sexuality involved an essential and fundamental belief in male-female complementarity. Speaking about the relationship of men and women in marriage he once said: "... as man and woman they complete one another to make 'one' . . . . [T]he unity of marriage is quite different from the interpersonal relationship between a man and another man, however deep their friendship may be." These beliefs probably would have prevented him from any wholesale public endorsement of homosexual relationships. His deep pastoral instincts, however, could probably have allowed him to support exceptional pastoral accommodations for certain situations. When he wrote of birth control, for example, in the mid-1960s, he still described it as "abnormal," but he thought it could be allowed in certain cases and should not be considered forbidden or sinful. Merton's thinking was always in a constant state of flux as new information and, especially, new experiences came to him.

But what did Merton actually think about homosexuality from the records we have as opposed to conjectures of what he might have thought or said? And what were some of the influences that, from what we know now, might have contributed to his understanding of homosexuality? It is in response to these two questions that I would like to devote the remainder of these reflections.

## CHILDHOOD

It has come to light that Merton's father, Owen, a painter from New Zealand, was probably bisexual, and that young Tom was living with him in Bermuda during the period when Owen was sexually involved with both a woman and a man. Merton's mother, Ruth Jenkins Merton, was a US citizen and died in 1921 when he was six years old. In October of the following year his father took the young boy to Bermuda and whatever happened there was not a happy experience for Merton to recall later in life.

Owen and Evelyn Scott, a novelist, some of whose works are thinly disguised descriptions of her own circle of friends and lovers, probably became lovers late in 1921. Evelyn was involved in a common law marriage with Owen's friend, Cyril Kay Scott, and the relationship between Owen and Evelyn was strongly opposed by the young Thomas Merton whom Evelyn once described as "morbid and possessive." In all of Merton's autobiographical writings he never once mentions her by name. Whether he actually understood at that young age the full implications of the *menage* is impossible to know for sure from materials available to the general researcher. But it was a critical time for the young boy still coping with his mother's death, his strong attachments to his bohemian father, and his feelings of jealousy towards a woman (and

a man?) threatening to replace him in his father's affection.

Monica Furlong, writing of Merton's early school days at Oakham, describes him as enthusiastically heterosexual and natural and uninhibited about all things sexual. Although all the examples she offers are heterosexual in nature, it would be difficult to believe that a sensitive observer of the human condition like Merton could have been unaware of the homosexual environment and affection often part of the youthful idealism so common in the English public schools of that period. If he was aware, he made no mention of it either in his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, or in any of his later writings. His silence about homosexuality was not out of a desire to protect the school system. In other places he had some harsh criticisms, bordering at times on the selfrighteous, about some features of the British educational system, state religion and general culture of the time which he found objectionable.

In 1965 Merton wrote in his journal that he had not used sex maturely and that he had given it up "without having come to terms with it." He reminisced about his relationships with women and then recalled one particular incident during his student days at Cambridge. It occurred at Clare college's boathouse. This was a place apparently where Merton was in the habit of meeting female companions when he was prevented from inviting them to his rooms. He described himself as a damned fool, sitting with a girlfriend on the steps of the boathouse late one night. Then "the two fairies came down expecting to get in the boathouse, saw us there, turned and hurried away."

Following his return to the United States in 1934 at the age of nineteen and his graduation from Columbia University in 1938, Merton lived for some time in Greenwich Village while preparing to continue his studies. Even then the Village was a magnet for a certain percentage of homosexual men, including all kinds of artists. Merton's close friends, as far as we know during this period, all seem to have been heterosexual men and women. At least he makes no references in his journals and other writings to any friends or acquaintances who might have been homosexual or even of his awareness of homosexual presence in the Village.

In 1940 he was reading Garcia Lorca's "Ode to Walt Whitman," and keeping, as was his usual custom, a journal for this period of his life. In what was later published as *The Secular Journal*, he expressed sympathy with Garcia Lorca's defense of Whitman "against evil talk," and noted that in this case there is none of the rasping and embarrassing bitterness you might expect to find in such a defense because "cleanliness is even part of the subject."

## NOVICE MASTER

Merton became a Catholic in 1938 after a gradual attraction to Catholicism and several moving spiritual experiences. In the 1950s he became Master of Scholastics and later Master of Novices. In some of his writings and talks of this period Merton manifests what he later termed a "crude theology" he had learned as a novice which made a clean-cut division of life into natural and supernatural, God and the world, sacred and secular. It is interesting to note, however, that in his teaching of the Book of Genesis he indicates that even then he was aware of the scholarly opinion that inhospitality was a part of the "sin" of Sodom. Merton told his students that for the Israelites the "crime" would represent the climax of evil not merely because of the "perverseness of the vice against nature," but "because of the violation of the duty of hospitality."

Much of Merton's thinking about homosexuality can be garnered indirectly from his talks as Novice Master on chastity and on what were termed in religious communities of the period "particular friendships." Merton's approach to sexuality in his teaching and writings as he

matured in religious life became more positive and balanced. He told the students that the purpose of the vows, including chastity, was to help them grow in love and that love means loving people, not just God, and that this love of other people involves the body.

In September 1968, he said that St. Aelred who wrote so passionately on the value of friendships (and whom many today believe to have been homosexual himself), was considered “dangerous” in certain monasteries. His books not long ago, Merton remarked, were kept under lock and key and out of the hands of the monks lest they be “troubled by their insights.” Yet Merton also believed that Aelred, who has been dubbed “the patron saint of the Christian gay community,” had gone to the “very heart” of the monastic vocation in his *Theology of Friendship*.

In describing unhealthy friendships characterized by possessiveness, exclusiveness and compulsiveness, Merton called them imitations or counterfeits of the real thing. In one conference he spoke about a dyad that can occur when a younger monk seeking affection employs what Merton called a “feminine” tactic of “yielding” to the attentions of an older monk out of a need to be cared for by another. But in these discussions Merton was not necessarily always talking about homosexual individuals, and even when he was, he was quick to point out to his listeners that they were “not that kind” since it was his job to keep those people out of the monastery.

Only rarely did Merton actually use the word “homosexuality” or “homosexual” in speaking or writing. When he did he warned the students against making snap judgments about someone else who simply might happen to have an overly affectionate personality. Even he meant homosexuality, he said that if that is the issue in the friendship, then there was really no “problem” (in the sense of something that can be solved within the given situation) because the individual simply had to leave. “There is no place in the monastery for an active homosexual,” he said quite clearly in one talk.

## FREUDIAN

Merton could not be fairly described as “homophobic,” though his understanding of homosexuality, I think, came mostly from his academic study and reading in classical Freudian psychoanalysis and its revisionist authors, such as Jung and Horney. How much of the orthodox psychoanalytic account of the etiology of homosexual orientation he accepted is hard to determine. In his copy of Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents*, for example, Merton marked as significant this paragraph which criticizes a standard that demands a sexual life identical for all: “It pays no heed to the disparities of the inborn and acquired sexual constitutions of individuals and cuts off a considerable number of them from sexual enjoyment, thus becoming a cause of grievous injustice.” And again, Merton marked this paragraph in the same book: “If we assume the fact that each individual has male and female desires which need satisfaction in his sexual life, we shall be prepared for the possibility that these needs will not both be gratified by the same object, and that they will interfere with each other if they cannot be kept apart so that each impulse flows into a special channel suited for it.”

Several literary figures for whom Merton either expressed admiration or, in some cases, had written critical essays about homosexuals themselves. Again, however, there is no indication that he was aware of this except in the case of Oscar Wilde. (In the winter 1987 issue of *The Merton Seasonal*, Brother John Albert draws some interesting parallels between Merton and Wilde as literary figures in “poetic sympathy” with each other.) Other writers included James Baldwin, Julien Greene, Andre Gide, W. H. Auden, and Gerard Manley Hopkins.

Merton was also familiar with the American Allen Ginsberg, the poet of the “Beat generation” who sometimes — in what were considered rather flamboyant ways — acknowledged his own homosexuality. Merton, apparently, was “not impressed with Ginsberg as a writer.” Yet, he was unwilling to write him off simply as an exhibitionist just because, as he said, Ginsberg made things public that others think should be kept hidden. An elementary sense of charity, Merton thought, prevents us from using a handy label like “fairy” to decide Ginsberg’s case.

## CLOSE FRIENDSHIPS

In his own personal life Merton was not afraid of close friendships in the monastery even in the days when fear of homosexuality associated with “particular friendships” was still all pervasive. Although he had a lifelong need to “keep clear” of emotional involvements with others, probably related to early childhood traumas and disappointments, he was warm and outgoing and needed people very much, even as a hermit. He knew where he stood in terms of his own sexuality, says Michael Mott. His own early heterosexual exploits with women, Merton candidly admitted later in his life, were a cover for his inability to trust another person completely.

His two closest friends at Gethsemani seem to have been Fr. John of the Cross Wasserman, a younger priest and former student, and Ernesto Cardenal, the Nicaraguan, who was a novice under Merton. Cardenal eventually left the monastery, but his friendship and correspondence with Merton continued for several years. During this time they fantasized about starting an experimental community in Nicaragua. Ironically, during this same period (ca. 1959), there were rumors of the famous Trappist author having left the monastery to marry a woman and an assumption by Merton’s abbot, Dom James Fox, that his “intimate” relationship with Cardenal was a “particular friendship.” As a result, the abbot returned Cardenal’s “conscience matter” letters to Merton unopened with the suggestion that Cardenal find another spiritual director since Father Louis (Merton’s religious name) was much too busy to undertake the task.

Several years later in January 1967, Merton wrote to the same abbot offering advice in formulating some ground rules for the hermit life. Due in some part at least to Merton’s tireless lobbying, the hermit life was finally gaining official and popular acceptance in the Cistercian Order. In a lengthy letter Merton advised that the ordinary monks should not be permitted to visit the hermits in their hermitages. Only the superiors and officers and those who for reasons of work had to go there should be permitted. The “chief danger” for the hermits, said Merton, came not from women, “but from people of the same sex.” Then, a bit defensively, I think, he added in parenthesis: “This has no reference to myself; I am not so inclined.”

## GOD IS MERCY

In that same year Merton wrote to an unidentified individual who had written to him seeking counsel about homosexuality. Merton’s reply in dated “January 9th 1967” and is included in *The Road to Joy: Letters to New & Old Friends*. The writer, presumably a male, asked if Merton knew of any “proven homosexual” who had saved his soul. Merton addressed the individual as “Dear Friend” in a sensitive realization that the response would no doubt be preserved among his thousands of letters and that the anonymity of the writer need to be respected. Merton says the name that comes to mind is Oscar Wilde and that he believes Wilde “suffered greatly” and

was certainly “sincere.” While Merton confesses that he doesn’t know any of the details of Wilde’s later years, he does think that “he went through them with a martyr’s nobility.” He can, he says, think of “others whom I think did the same” but he is not sure if they were Christian.”

Then Merton offers “all the usual things” which were part of the standard pastoral and psychological advice of the period: homosexuality is not a more “unforgiveable sin” than any other; do the best you can; try to fight it; be sorry and avoid the occasions. He advises the correspondent that while he might not always succeed in all these efforts, God takes good will into account and that he should trust God’s mercy and keep trying. Along with “all the spiritual aids available,” Merton also suggests that maybe “psychiatric help would be of use.” Then, in what I suspect comes more from his personal reading than from any real, firsthand counseling experience in this area, Merton launches into a puzzling digression about a “masochism” that gets built into “this pattern of inversion.” He describes it as a despair that robs the individual of the urge to fight back and suggests it is probably psychological in its roots. He confesses that he doesn’t know why the need to “fold up” and “give up resistance” has to be handled, but he thinks that is the real issue.

The concluding section is undoubtedly the soundest and most practical advice Merton has to offer from contemporary perspectives. He says that God will surely understand the person’s good intentions, that God is on his side and that he ought to have courage and not give up. “And don’t waste energy hating yourself. You need that energy for better purposes.” What exactly these purposes were Merton did not elaborate. Merton’s letter, not surprisingly, contains no new insights or creative pastoral approaches on homosexuality. Yet it is his own personal attempt at compassion and support within the bounds of his own limitations and he cannot be faulted for that.

#### A PURE ACT

Merton’s letter, perhaps, should be read in conjunction with his 1966 essay on “Purity” which echoes the approach of many contemporary moralists in evaluating morally good sexual expression. Merton says in that essay (initially titled “Sex and Religion”) that the concept and word “purity” has been distorted by a denigration of the body when an individual trying to be “pure” attempts to have no sexual reactions at all or to downplay and minimize even legitimate sexual pleasure. This can happen either when the body is put on the market as a compound of dangerous evils (as in some religious approaches) or when the body is seen simply as a desirable package of commodities and pleasures — the modern day temptation. Both distortions degrade the sexual instinct and are far more “impure” than the normal expression of erotic love.

For Merton an act is “pure” not when you remove the sensuous or material element, but when you give a rightful place to the body, senses and emotions and all that is called for “by the unique relationship between the two lovers and what is demanded by the situation in which they find themselves.” It is not a question of legality, but of liberating an authentic capacity for love and its authentic expression. Crucial here, he says, is the “personal conscience and decision in the light of grace and the providential demands of one’s love.” Merton echoes the primacy of many moralists today on the interpersonal dimensions of sexuality as opposed to a preoccupation with the particular physical acts. For Merton the emphasis is on love and not on law; not so much on what happens to nature or to the part of the body as on what develops in the person — though for him these are manifestly inseparable. For Merton the act of sexual love should be “joyous and unconstrained, alive, leisurely, inventive and full of a special delight.” In some ways this

approach anticipates the 1977 report of the (US) Catholic Theological Society of America which highlighted such values in sexual expression as self-liberating, joyous, life-serving and other-enriching.

The context of the discussion of purity for Merton is married, heterosexual love. There is no explicit indication that he would have applied his approach to other forms of sexual expression as did the CTSA report. It is interesting to note, however, that he wrote this essay in the midst of his own passionate love relationship with the nurse. At one point Merton described his love (and perhaps some physical expressions of it) as “pure” because they really did “belong to each other in our love.” Yet he added immediately “bad argument — could justify anything.”

Merton was aware that even within the context of married love his emphasis could “shock and scandalize conventional minds,” but he thought it would also meet a profoundly authentic and spiritual demand for inner purity and wholeness. And he also warned that subjective freedom alone can be arbitrary and lead to as appalling truncations of sexuality as can the legalistic approach.

#### CONCLUSION

Merton was a person who was not afraid of the risks involved in a continued search for inner wholeness and, at least in the area of sexuality, it seems that he did not find it until almost the end of his life. In a very passionate and almost overpowering relationship with another person he finally came to tap his own capacity to integrate love and intimacy, to trust another person totally and to have a certain emptiness in his life filled and healed.

In the same essay on purity he has written: “The mark of love is its respect for reality and truth and a deep concern for the values it must foster.” Authentic love, he said, “is not compatible with fantasy, wiffulness or the neglect of the rights and needs of other people.” His own struggles to respect his particular “reality and truth,” and the rights and needs of another person ultimately led him to a deeper and more authentic commitment to his monastic vocation and to his continued search for union with God as a celibate.

The continuing influence and wide appeal of Thomas Merton today are usually attributed to his ability to articulate his own journey in ways that resonate so familiarly and powerfully in the life stories of the thousands of people who read him for the first time and re-read him again and again. And I think this is no less true in the sexual journey of Thomas Merton which is far from fully documented or even adequately appreciated. His insights and failures, his honesty and self-delusions, his openness to new truth and his willingness to revise his opinions continue to challenge and support us in our own struggles to accept and integrate eros which he once described as a talent to be traded, a “sacred gift” that required the “confident and abandoned acceptance of a child.”