

Dear brothers and sisters

You may know that at Gethsemani we bury our brothers without caskets. To my knowledge, there has only been one exception. A monk named Fr. Louis Merton managed to die so far away from the Abbey that he is the only monk in our cemetery to be buried in a casket. He just had to be different. But getting back to our point, we usually bury our brothers without caskets. The deceased brother is met at the back door by the whole community. He is dressed in his cowl, his face uncovered. Singing, we carry him into the church in a bier and place him right in the middle of choir. We pray the psalms over him, in teams of two, for 24 hours. We carry him up to the mass area for the funeral service, then we carry him out to the graveside. The six pallbearers lift him off the bier by straps attached to a sling. They lower him, by the straps, into the grave. We all participate at this point by holding our breath. Will one of the straps tear? Will one of brothers slip or lose his grip? But, at least since I've been there, we've always managed to get our brother to his final resting place without major accident. The main point, though, is that the whole funeral and burial process is very much a community affair.

In today's Gospel, the paralytic is something like our deceased brother. While not perhaps as completely helpless, the paralytic cannot move by himself, incapable of standing, let alone walking. He depends entirely on others to move from one place to another. Fortunately, he has friends who are kind and generous enough to do this for him. When they hear that Jesus

is nearby, they carry him there in the hope that Jesus might cure him. But, once they arrive, they still can't get near Jesus because of the crowd. Then they have the brilliant idea to climb up to the roof and lower him through it. Once they got up there, though, they may have thought that the idea was not so brilliant after all. They must have had some of the same worries we have as our brother is being lowered into the grave. Would the ropes hold? Would one of them lose his grip or slip? The poor guy on the stretcher was completely dependent on these friends. He had to trust in them completely. He was helpless. Fortunately, the plan worked and he safely reached the feet of Jesus. His friends supplied what he lacked, they did for him what he could not do for himself. He needed them to reach Jesus. He needed the support of a community to find Christ.

Just like the paralytic in the Gospel, we all need community in order to find Jesus. Community is often missing in today's world. Our culture prizes independence and individual accomplishments. We admire the rugged individual, the "self-made" man or woman. We are encouraged to stand on our own two feet, make our own destiny, not to depend on others. We often define ourselves by our differences from others, by which political party we support, by which religion we belong to, by our cultural backgrounds, and so on. We even risk branding others as our enemies because of their difference from us: they are from a different country, they worship in a different religion or denomination, they belong to the other political party. Our differences make true community impossible. But

human beings are communal creatures by nature, made that way by God. We need others in order to be fully human. At a very deep level we know this. We cram into cities, driven by our need to be near others, but we often fail to connect. Even in a crowd we can feel isolated and lonely, unseen and unwanted, cut off from others. Community is no longer automatically provided for many of us by our families, our co-workers, or our neighbours. We have first to recognize our need for it, then to consciously seek it out. But we must seek out community if we are to be fully human.

Thomas Merton did not write much, as far as I know, about the need for community, at least explicitly. But his life and, implicitly his writings, show how important it was to him. When he was at Columbia, he gathered people around him who would be his friends for the rest of his life: Robert Lax, Ed Rice, Ad Reinhardt, and others. Only three years after he graduated from Columbia, he entered Gethsemani, on this very day, the 10<sup>th</sup> of December, 77 years ago. From his journals, it is clear that, after a pink cloud period, he often had problems with his community. Yet he was a good community member, very conscientious about attending choir, and obedient, though sometimes murmuring about it, to his abbots. But the community provided him with the opportunity to write, it gave him a solid perspective from which to see the world from slightly outside the world, and it eventually constructed his hermitage for him. In the meantime, he was forming a larger community through his correspondence with a varied

group of people from all over the world and from many religious backgrounds. His community helped him to find Christ.

Through his writing, Thomas Merton has touched many people. He seems to have been able to articulate what they have known deep inside themselves, but have been unable to express. He has helped many people to see their own true face. In one of his most famous pieces, he describes seeing ordinary people going about their business on an ordinary day in an ordinary town as “walking around, shining like the sun.” He says, “It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation.” He saw himself and others as they truly were, fellow members “of a race in which God Himself became incarnate.” This has been his gift to many, many people, to show them who they truly are, to show them the face of Christ in themselves and each other.

What strikes me as so important, though, about the effect he has had on others, is that people want to share what Merton has meant to them, what Merton has done for them. Those who have been touched by Merton do not simply hold him close to their hearts as a private treasure. He makes people seek others out, to form various kinds of community. We have only to look around this very church to see this. Most of those gathered here this evening are here because they want to bear witness to how Merton has changed their lives, with other people who have felt the same way. As a monk of Gethsemani, I am perhaps better situated to notice these kinds of communities than some. Whenever a big event happens, like the

International Thomas Merton Society meeting a few years ago, Gethsemani plays host to busloads. There is a long-standing Merton group that meets there monthly, with Brother Paul. Smaller groups from many religious traditions have also met there, sometimes taking the opportunity to go up to the hermitage for discussion. There are also informal meetings, often again hosted by Brother Paul, at which I have met several of you. Some Buddhist communities have visited because of Merton's friendship with the Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama himself has been to Gethsemani to take part in a conference of interreligious dialogue, a cause for which Merton was a pioneer. Through Thomas Merton, thousands have found that the way to Christ is through other people, by a kind of spontaneous community building. In a world where the very idea of community is being lost, Thomas Merton continues to create community. Like the paralytic, these people, perhaps you people, have been able to get to the feet of Christ only through the help of their friends, through the help of community.

Thomas Merton died 50 years ago today, far from his home community, but surrounded by a different community, a community of Cistercians and Benedictines from all over the world. He was shipped back to the United States in a military coffin, one of those being used to ship casualties home from the Vietnam war. The coffin was heavy. It took eight brothers instead of the usual six to carry him from the church to his grave. Fr. Alan was one of the pallbearers and he remembers that his arm was sore the next day. And at the grave, surrounded by his community, many of

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whom had entered because of his writings, and accompanied by the prayers of thousands whom he had touched in that wider community from all over the world, eight of his brothers lowered him, like the paralytic, to his final resting place. We might pray that Thomas Merton, Father Louis, like the paralytic, came to rest at the feet of Jesus.

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