

## Pentecost 2011

Closing Homily of the ITMS Twelfth General Meeting  
June 12, 2011

By **James Conner, OCSO**

For the past days we have been hearing many presentations on the writings and thought of Thomas Merton. As might be expected, the topics have been quite varied, just as his own thinking was. It has gone between the two extremes of “Desert” and “City”; and yet the origin of it all both in Merton and in the various presenters has been that it comes from Eternity and leads to Eternity.

The liturgy itself indicates this source. Christ Jesus came from eternity and has now returned to eternity. He did this precisely in order to lead us on the same path. And He empowers us to follow on this path by the gift of His very own Spirit, whom we celebrate today as Pentecost. Left to ourselves, we could only flounder on this path. But He promised: “I will not leave you orphans. . . . The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you” (Jn. 14:18, 26). And when He gave that Spirit to the disciples by breathing on them on the evening of the Resurrection, He told them: “Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven” (Jn. 20:22-23).

The work of spreading the message of Jesus Christ is first and foremost that of forgiving sin, which Paul expresses as the work of reconciliation. But it is not just the work of the apostles. Every Christian believer is to continue this work of Jesus. And this is a large part of the message of Thomas Merton. Merton was zealous in the cause of peace and inveighed against war, nuclear armaments, racism, prejudice and hatred first and foremost because he was a man of the Spirit. He heard the message of Jesus that no one can claim to love God and hate his brother or sister. No one can seek forgiveness for our own sins unless we are willing to forgive all others who have sinned, whether against ourselves or against others.

Thomas Merton shows us, as Jesus did, that what is needed in the world of today is letting down our own guard in order to truly love as Christ loved, even to the point of laying down our life for the other. This love comes from the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit within us. It has been said that



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the early Merton was more centered on spirituality, whereas the later Merton centered more on openness to the world and the needs of the world. I would suggest, however, that the movement was almost the reverse. It was precisely as he entered more deeply into the Mystery of Christ and the divine life that He offers to us that Merton opened up more and more to the needs of his brothers and sisters. St. Paul tells us in the second reading today that we are all one Body and members of one another. This became a central point for Merton in all of his writings and teachings. His experience at Fourth and Walnut is a manifestation of this. And his experience at Polonnaruwa is a confirmation of the same: “Everything is emptiness; everything is compassion.” The emptiness is filled with the glory of God and the compassion expresses the compassion of God for all creation.

If we are led by the Spirit, we will inevitably discover the same thing. The greatness of Merton resides in the fact that he points the way for us. He shows us that God is truly Love and all creation is an expression of His Love. And what we are called on to do is imitate the early disciples who joined together in that upper room, with Mary the Mother of Jesus, to await the coming of the Spirit.

Recently we had a meeting at our monastery to discuss the issue of vocations. Our Abbot, Fr. Elias, remarked that what concerns him about the phenomenon of Merton and Gethsemani is the fact that most younger vocations today come from evangelical Catholics or conservative Catholics. These people seem to have no interest in Merton. It is only the liberal Catholics who latch onto Merton and make of him what they want to. To the extent that this may be true, it is incumbent on us as a Merton Society to make sure that we present the True Merton – the Merton who is immersed in God and there discovers his oneness with all peoples and all creation. We do this not only by study and reflection, but particularly by living out the message of Merton of the extent to which we are one in Christ and one with all peoples in Christ.

Thomas Merton stands as a beacon to call us into the Mystery of Christ, to be open to that Holy Spirit who comes today in a special way. That Spirit is given to us anew here in this Eucharist. And in Him we find all of humanity of all times, and are led to accept our own inner emptiness in order to be filled with the fullness of God and our oneness with all peoples. This will engender that compassion which led Merton to seek for peace, to seek for justice, to seek for oneness with all peoples.

Pope John XXIII prayed for a “New Pentecost” as a result of Vatican II. It is uncertain to what extent that “new Pentecost” has come. Even the Church today is racked by dissention and divergent interpretations of what the Spirit is doing in the Church today. Merton calls us to go beyond such dissention in order to realize the full extent of our deep oneness in God through the Holy Spirit. May that Spirit fill us today and bring us to that which Merton truly discovered in Christ – that we are already One in Him and hence called to live in harmony with all peoples, all races, all religions, all times.

I will close with the words of Thomas Merton, which we heard so powerfully last evening and which express the power of this Pentecost:

Go tell the earth to shake  
With marching feet  
Of messengers of peace.  
Proclaim my Law of Love  
To every nation – every race.  
There shall be no more hate  
And no more oppression.  
The old wrongs are done.  
My people shall be One!