

## My Second Conversion

By William H. Shannon

*The following is excerpted from Chapter 2, “Thomas Merton and a New Way of Understanding Prayer,” of William Shannon’s book How to Become a Christian Even If You Already Are One (pages 49-72), edited slightly to regularize punctuation, correct typographical errors and remove one repetitive quotation.*

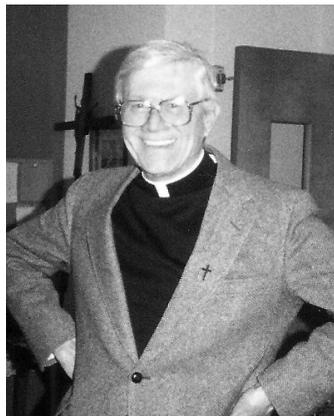
This year, 2010, marks the 42nd anniversary of the death of Thomas Merton. It is also the 62nd anniversary of his best selling autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. In the time stretching between these two events, Merton managed to produce a body of literature staggering in its size and impressive in its prophetic vision. Among other things his writings have helped to charter a new path for American Catholic Spirituality.

Merton hardly thought of this as his role. In an interview given to Thomas P. McDonnell in 1968 Merton insisted on his right not to be turned into a Catholic myth for children in parochial schools. He could not abide the thought that anyone would set him up as an ideal to be honored or as a model to be imitated. That same year a young man wrote to him saying he wanted to come to Gethsemani because he had been strongly attracted to Merton through his writings. Merton’s advice to him was to pray and seek God’s will. But don’t, he said, “build on a mud pile like me! I just don’t have disciples, don’t look for disciples, and don’t think I could be of any use to disciples. My suggestion to you is to be a disciple of Christ, and not of any man.”

Whether he liked it or not Thomas Merton has been the spiritual director of ever so many people who have found that the spirituality they discovered in his writings offered a *new way of life for them*. It reshaped their spirituality.

### Teaching a Course on Thomas Merton

It shaped mine also. The next conversion experience I want to talk about, therefore, is my coming to a new way of thinking about prayer. This experience came through my study, reading, and writing about Thomas Merton. It was from him that the word contemplation came to take on a meaning for me that it had never had before. The way in which I came to this new understanding is worth recording. I was moved to a deeper involvement in Merton’s writings by two students. They were taking a course in Catholic studies that I was teaching at Nazareth College in Rochester, New York. At one point in the course I quoted a brief text from Thomas Merton. These two students came to me and asked that I teach a course on Merton. I was reluctant at first, and then finally gave in to their request. And I was hooked.



The course was given in the summer of 1974. As I prepared to teach this course and as I taught it for them and a dozen other students who had signed up for it, it gradually struck me that Merton had given me this wonderful gift that I have already spoken of, namely a new approach to prayer and spirituality. It's an approach I would like to call "contemplative spirituality." I would say that this was a gift that he gave not only to me (and, hopefully) to the students who took this course (or at least some of them). Indeed it was a gift to the whole Christian community. I say it was his gift not because he invented it, but because he rescued it from the marginal position it had for so long a time occupied in Catholic life. He placed it at the center of our understanding of spirituality. Thomas Merton's greatest achievement, I believe, was to help us understand that contemplation was not just for monks. He made contemplation a household word.

Teaching this course, combined with more and more reading of Merton's books, did indeed open my mind to a completely new way of thinking about what it means to pray. At this time in my life I truly needed to come to such an understanding. I would not have been able to describe my prayer life, or if I did it would have been an understanding of prayer that did not satisfy me. As a young priest I went to a Roman Catholic seminary and I presumed that there I would learn how to pray. After all, I felt that one of the things I would be expected to do as a priest would be to help people to learn how to pray. After the first year of seminary, I had not yet learned how to pray. But I figured it would happen the following year. But it didn't happen then either; and the same fate marked the next four years. So I was ordained a priest and felt somewhat like a phony because I really didn't know how to pray, or at least I didn't think I knew how to pray.

### **An Insight**

But after teaching this course on Merton, I continued reading what Merton had to say about prayer and contemplation. This helped me to understand a text from St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans that had always puzzled me: "The Spirit comes to the aid of our weakness for *we do not know how to pray* as we ought, but the Spirit itself intercedes with inexpressible groaning, and the one who searches hearts knows what is the intention of the Spirit because it intercedes for the holy ones according to God's will" (Romans 8:26-27). I had read this text many times without really understanding what it meant. Suddenly my eyes were opened, and I realized what Paul was saying. In effect he was telling me to let go of my desire to pray and let God pray in me! Just be attentive to and aware of God's presence. The Spirit who lives in me will do the praying. The thunderbolt that hit me was the understanding that I needed to be silent and let prayer happen in me. For so long a time I had thought that I could not pray and all that time prayer had been happening in me! What I needed most was to quiet down and be truly aware of what was going on in me and let it happen. This was a wonderful insight that brought peace to me. I suspect, however, that such an insight might not have come to me if I had not, at the same time, been deeply immersed in what Thomas Merton had to say about prayer (and about a lot of other things too).

### **Experiences That Led to Deeper Involvement**

A number of providential events led to an almost inevitable involvement in further Merton studies. In the very year that I taught this course on Merton, I was traveling with a friend on vacation and the first stop of our vacation was Louisville, Kentucky. My companion, Father Edward Lintz, went there to preside at a wedding ceremony. Since I was not interested in staying for the wedding, I decided to go to the Abbey of Gethsemani which was only about 40 miles away. When I arrived

there I met Brother Patrick Hart who had been Thomas Merton's secretary. He greeted me most cordially and took me to visit Merton's Hermitage. This was the beginning of a friendship that still continues.

The year following my visit to Gethsemani brought me to Indianapolis for a meeting of the College Theology Society. After the meeting I drove to Louisville to examine the Merton collection at Bellarmine College. There began another long-term friendship, this one with the late Robert Daggy, curator of the Merton collection. From that time on, my visits to Gethsemani and to the Merton Center at Bellarmine College became as frequent as I could manage.

The three of us, Brother Patrick, Bob Daggy and I, were very much involved in bringing to birth the International Thomas Merton Society. In the beginning there were 14 members. The first meeting was held in Louisville in 1989 with more than 100 attending. Since then meetings have been held every two years. The society has chapters in many areas of the United States, but also in Europe and the Far East.

### **An Interesting Letter**

Frequently I receive letters from people with a wide variety of backgrounds who tell me that their lives have been profoundly influenced by Merton. For instance, recently I received a letter from a woman in the southwest who told me how Thomas Merton had changed her life. Now in her fiftieth year, she wrote that she had grown up during a period in the church in which lay people were considered second-class members. The spirituality that had guided her (and me too, for all too long) was a devotional spirituality. She wrote: "Thomas Merton was the one who provided a breakthrough for me. It came in a section of *The Seven Storey Mountain* in which he speaks of the contemplative vocation as one to which all are called. It was the first time in my adult life," (she continued) "in which the guilt of not following a religious vocation fell away and I had permission – from my own spirit – to continue my journey to wholeness as a lay person."

Reflect for a moment on what she said about the way in which Merton transformed her understanding of spirituality. *First*, it freed her from a terrible guilt feeling: the feeling that because she had not followed a call to religious life she had deliberately chosen an inferior way of living her Christian vocation. (This was a widespread attitude among most Catholics.)

*Second*, Merton taught her that her real vocation – and indeed that of every Christian – is the vocation to contemplation.

*Third*, and most remarkable, this realization that she was indeed called to contemplation as a lay woman enabled her to stand on her own two feet and make her own decisions of conscience. Notice that the permission came not from Merton or from anybody else but from her own spirit. Contemplation brought her freedom and a sense of personal autonomy in making decisions in her life.

*Finally*, she knew that spiritually she could not stand still. She had to journey on – and the journey was toward a personal wholeness. (This is a good time to recall the introduction to this book that spoke of the conversion experiences we need to undergo.) I would say that some of the convictions she arrived at through her experience of reading Merton are basic ingredients of a new way of thinking that has emerged in the Catholic Church and that has surfaced particularly in the latter half of the twentieth century. It has brought about a radical reshaping of American Catholic spirituality.

### Devotional Spirituality

This notion of the laity as second-class members was based on a spirituality that can be labeled “the spirituality of devotion.” It was this spirituality that motivated not only lay persons; it could also be the spirituality of priests as well. In fact that’s what I meant when I spoke earlier about my inability to pray and my failure to learn how to pray during my seminary years. The woman from the southwest, in the years before the Merton influence struck her, saw specific activities to express her relationship with God.

This spirituality of devotion was the spirituality that I also lived by before *my conversion*. So, I said prayers. I went to confession. I received communion. I prayed the rosary regularly. In doing these practices I was receiving grace. It was a *mediated* spirituality: by this I mean that I did not reach God directly but through the saying of prayers, by receiving the various sacraments. This spirituality simply assumed that any direct experience of God, as God is in Himself, belonged to a future that was beyond this life. It could not be a part of my religious experience in the present.

**Dualism:** This spirituality of devotion was more about doing than about being, more about behavior than about consciousness, more about pleasing God by carrying out God’s commands rather than about experiencing God as God truly is. It was clearly a spirituality of *dualism* which stressed the transcendence of God as God’s separateness from the world and from us. If divine condescension allows us to achieve some kind of communion with God, I must still speak of separateness when I speak of God.

**Verbal:** Devotional spirituality was strongly *verbal*. Words were very important: the words we used to speak of our relationship with God, the words we used to speak with God. Time-honored phrases were preferred because heresy lurked beyond the corner of the careless phrase.

**Speculative:** This approach to spirituality tended almost inevitably to be quite *speculative*. It found its secure moorings in the doctrines of the church, in accepted dogmatic theology. Thinking correctly about God and using the right words were deep concerns. One must for example be precise and accurate in expressing the relationship between God and creation. While we see God as the cause of the world and also as the one who sustains it in existence and guides it by God’s providence, still this approach is careful to avoid any words that might imply any identification of God with the world. Such identification might spell pantheism.

### Contemplative Spirituality

While devotional spirituality tends to be a spirituality of doing, aimed at bettering our behavior to make us more pleasing to God, contemplative spirituality is best seen as a spirituality of being, aimed at deepening our consciousness and bringing us to an appreciation of our oneness with God and in God, of our oneness with one another and with all of creation in God.

The older spirituality was clearly dualistic, separating the sacred from the secular, the supernatural from the natural. It tended to overemphasize the transcendence of God and in doing so seemed to set God apart from creation. While accepting the omnipresence of God, the older spirituality was still inclined to present God as more present in some places than in others; to find the grace of God more available in some settings (the sacred) than in others (the secular). Contemplative spirituality, on the other hand, refuses to identify the transcendence of God with a vision of God guiding and sustaining the universe and the world of people from afar. *In contemplative spirituality God is the mystery that is at the heart of all reality.*

Contemplative spirituality is not primarily about prayer or methods of prayer. It is a spirituality that embraces the totality of our lives. Its first concern is with God. Ruthlessly it destroys the false gods, the idols we build and call god. It takes away from us the god of dualism in whom we had heretofore believed. It demands that we let go of a god who is patriarchal. At worst he – and I use the word “he” advisedly to describe this god, for he is indeed male – is the tyrant god who punishes us relentlessly when we are bad and doles out favors to us when we are good. At best, he is a god who is aloof from us. His abode is heaven and we are on earth where he watches us from afar. He is there, and we are here. This god is a god easily recognizable to so many of us. For he is a god we have worshiped for a long time. Contemplative spirituality says we must give up this god, for he is not the true God.

### **Where Is God?**

A person who wants to pray has to face the question: “Where do I find God?” or, put even simpler, “Where is God?” For those of us who belong to the pre-Vatican-II period in the life of the Roman Catholic Church, the latter way of putting the question will surely send our memories scurrying back to that great museum piece of our past, the Baltimore Catechism; and out of memory’s deep recesses will come the answer indelibly impressed there: “God is everywhere.”

“God is everywhere!” I want to suggest that we pause a moment just to let the stupendous reality of that statement sink into our minds and hearts. Nothing can compare with such an impressive and moving statement. “God is everywhere!” Every time we say it or think about it, we should give ourselves some quiet time to recover from the full impact of this fantastic, fascinating truth. Every day sky writers should write it in the air above us. Countless blimps, like the one that hovers over Super-Bowls, should ride our skies regularly, trailing signs with the wondrous message: “God is everywhere.” And it would be meet and just that this statement be placed on the first page of a 200-page book, leaving the remaining 199 pages blank for people to reflect and recover from reading something so stupendous.

If you go back to the Baltimore Catechism, you will recall that, following this marvelous answer, the Catechism goes on to ask another question. Sadly, it’s the wrong question. It asks: “If God is everywhere, why do we not see Him?” The answer given is: “We cannot see God, because God is a pure spirit and cannot be seen with bodily eyes.” The reason I say that we have here the wrong question and answer is that they don’t take us anywhere. We cannot see God, so the obvious reaction is, “Let’s get on to something else.” It’s a pity. Logically the next question should have been: “If God is everywhere, how can we experience God’s presence?” Now there is a question that really goes somewhere. It is the question that is at the heart of any true spirituality. Answering it is the only way of giving meaning to the life of prayer. It is the way into contemplative prayer.

This magnificent statement “God is everywhere” offers endless possibilities for fruitful reflection. Simply put, it means that, wherever we may be, we are in the presence of God. God is above us, below us, around us, outside of us, inside of us. When we drive our cars, we are in the presence of God. When we play golf or go to a ball game or read a good book or eat a meal or take a drink – we are in the presence of God. As we come together for a meal or a liturgy, we are in the presence of God. God is everywhere. There are no privileged places where God is more present than in others. For God is fully and totally present wherever God is. There may be places more conducive to prayer than others, like a church building or the solitude of your room or a quiet walk in the

woods. But this does not mean that God is more present in these places than in any other place. No, God is fully and totally everywhere.

Let me try to clarify this a bit more. Think of it in this way: you and I because of the wonderful advances in travel capabilities can be anywhere – Europe, China, Australia – you name it. So we can be anywhere, but we cannot be everywhere. We cannot be everywhere, because our very nature as creatures requires that we be somewhere. That is to say, we have to be in some particular place that has limits and boundaries to it. Thus if you take a trip to England, you can go anywhere in England, but, since you can only be in one place at a time, you always have to be somewhere. You can be in Oxford and then in Cambridge. But because Oxford and Cambridge are in different places, you can only be in one or the other. You cannot be in both at the same time. We always, I repeat, have to be somewhere, some place that has limits.

God, on the other hand, is everywhere. Now, everywhere must not be thought of as a lot of “somewheres,” as if you could say: “God sure is in a lot of places.” No, “everywhere” transcends all “somewheres.” There are no limits to God’s presence. That is why God must not be thought of as an Object. For an object – a building, a car, a woman, a man – is always somewhere, in some limited place. An object cannot be everywhere. Therefore, because God is everywhere, we must not think of God as an object. Most of the problems we have about God come from the mistake of thinking of God as an object – as a thing – as one thing alongside of a lot of other things.

### **An Important Difference**

Even when we say that God is in some particular place (which we see as part of “everywhere”), for instance, in the room where you are now, it is not the same as saying that a friend is sitting in a chair in the same room with you. It is true you can make the statement: “God is present in the room,” and the further statement: “My friend is present in the room.” But it is in each case a very different kind of presence. You could be just as truly in that room if your friend were absent; or your friend could leave and you could say “goodbye” to her. Then you would no longer be in the presence of your friend, but you would be no less present in the room because she has departed it. But if God were to leave the room, we would be saying goodbye not just to God but to our very selves. For apart from God’s presence, we simply do not exist. God is the necessary and indispensable setting of my very being.

### **WOW!**

If God is everywhere, that means that we are at all times **in the situation, the setting, that makes prayer possible**. For we are at all times in the presence of the One whom we desire to touch, to reach, in prayer. We don’t have to go looking for God, as if God were somehow missing from our lives. An amusing story illustrates this. One day two young boys were walking down the street and passed a church. One of them said to the other: “Jeez, Mike, I ain’t been to confession in a long time. I think I’ll go now.” They entered the church. Joey went into the confessional. “I want to go to confession, Father,” he said. The priest told him to begin his confession. It had been a long time.

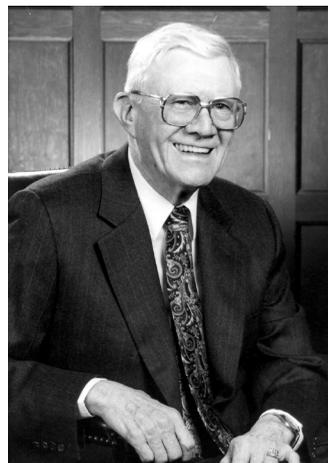
The lad mumbled: “I don’t know how to do it.” The confessor, deciding this boy needed some instruction, began testing his knowledge of the catechism. He asked: “Where is God?” The lad, bewildered, said: “Beg your pardon, Father?” The priest repeated his question more emphatically: “Where is God?” Thereupon the young boy jumped up, ran out of the confessional, grabbed his

friend by the hand, rushing him out of the church: “Mike,” he said in a trembling voice, “we gotta get out of here. God’s missing and they think we’ve got him.”

Okay, it’s a bit corny, but God isn’t missing. We don’t have to search for God. We don’t have to find God. It is not that God is **there** and we are **here**. Rather God is there and here and everywhere. We are, as I say, **always in the setting or situation** of prayer. We might express it this way: God is always in touch with us, because we are always in God’s saving presence. But we are not always in touch with God, because so often we are forgetful of the Presence of God.

### **God Is the Ground and Source of All**

Being in the presence of God is not only the setting in which we work and pray; it is the necessary condition of our existence and of the existence of everything that is. When we say God is everywhere, we don’t mean that God *is just there* in a static sort of way. No, God is, if I may put it this way, effortlessly busy everywhere. God is the *Source* of my being and the *Ground* of Love which enables me to continue in being. And this is true of everyone and everything that exists. Being in the presence of God is not something I choose, as if I were to say: “I guess I’ll spend some time in the presence of God today.” Or, “I’m going on retreat next week. I’ll be able to spend a lot of time in the presence of God.” No, being in God’s presence is not a matter of choice. It is not, for example, like saying: “I think I will go visit my friend in the hospital.” Being in the presence of God is an ontological necessity. The salesman for American Express Cheques used to say: “Don’t go anywhere without them.” But we can, if we so choose. But we can’t go anywhere without God. For “anywhere without God” is simply the realm of non-existence. It is quite literally nowhere.



### **Who Is God?**

The hymn “How Great Thou Art,” which Roman Catholics at one time would have disdainfully dismissed as “Protestant,” has in recent years become very popular in Catholic worship. Some weeks ago a priest friend of mine told me of a non-liturgical setting he has discovered for that hymn: every morning, as he shaves and sees himself in the mirror, the words come spontaneously to his lips: “How great thou art.” Whatever you might want to say about my friend’s need to cultivate a bit more humility, it is important to understand that his extra-liturgical use of this song has drastically changed the meaning of the word “great.” No one, including my boastful friend, is great as God is great. The word “great” applied to God takes on a radically different meaning from that same word applied to humans. Thus, it would be true to say that God is “great,” because something of what we consider “great” in humans is in God; at the same time it would be equally true to say that God is “not great,” because the puny greatness of creatures is as nothing compared to the greatness of God. It isn’t simply that God has a lot more greatness than we could possibly have; rather God’s greatness completely transcends whatever we might call greatness in any human person.

A word from Meister Eckhart, the fourteenth-century Rhenish mystic: with that lucid ambiguity so characteristic of him, he says: “The Divine One is a negation of negations and a denial of denials.”

He goes on to clarify: every creature contains a negative, namely, a denial that it is the other. God contains the denial of denials. God is the One who denies of every other that it is anything except Himself.

If his meaning seems to be eluding you, let me try to clarify his “clarification.” What he is saying is that every creature is finite, which is to say that it is limited in what it is. A particular creature is only “this”; it is not “that.” It is their limited being that distinguishes one creature from another. To say that a house is a house is to deny that it is a horse. This is what Eckhart means when he tells us that every creature contains a negative – a denial that it is the other.

After telling his congregation (these words, I should point out, are from one of his sermons! How would you like to belong to his congregation!) that every creature is a denial that it is anything other than itself, he goes on to speak about God and says that God is a denial of denials. First God is a denial that He is “this” or “that.” Now “this” or “that” represents each and every created reality: a house, a horse, a tree, a flower, a woman, a man, etc., etc. This seems clear enough: because God is God, because God transcends all created reality, God is a denial that He is any thing that we experience in the created world.

God is not to be located among creatures. We can imagine lining up all created objects, things, persons. God could not be one of them, for God transcends all created beings. But Eckhart says more (and now things get really complicated!): God is a denial of denials. In other words, God is a denial that He is *not* “this”; God is a denial that He is *not* “that.” God is a denial that He is *not* any and every creature that exists. Does this sound pretty heavy? Try thinking of it in this way. Eckhart is saying that, while God is not “this” or “that,” there is yet a sense in which God is “this” and “that,” and indeed that **God is every creature that exists – not in any pantheistic way, but in the sense that, apart from God, neither “this” nor “that” nor any creature could exist.** Why? because God is the Source and Ground of each and every creature that is. Every “this,” every “that,” every creature, exists only because it finds its being, identity and uniqueness in God. Apart from God, it simply could not be. [A tip: *Eckhart is saying there are two negatives in God. The first (stating that God is not “this” or “that”) affirms the divine transcendence. The second (stating in a negative way the positive truth that God is the Ground of all that exists) affirms the divine immanence.*] Okay, that’s enough of Eckhart.

### God as Mystery

The God of contemplative spirituality is a God of mystery. God is the unknown and the unknowable. The ancient description of the Tao can be applied to talk about God: “The one who speaks does not know; the one who knows does not speak.” The one who speaks doesn’t know, because the reality of God cannot be expressed in human language – the best we can do is use metaphors. As Meister Eckhart (whoops here he is again) put it in his inimitable blunt way: “One who speaks about God lies.” At the same time, the one who knows does not speak, for the reality of God is too huge a burden for human language to bear. The best speech about the ineffable God therefore, is silence.

Talking about prayer, Merton writes: “To pray is to enter into a mystery. When we do not enter into the unknown we do not pray.” He also says that a real inner life and a life of true freedom begin when we enter into communion with the unknown within us. This, he goes on to say, makes it

possible for us to enter into communion with the same unknown in others.

### **To the Students at Smith College**

In 1967, writing to the students at Smith College and commenting on their reading and sharing of his writings, Merton speaks of his oneness with them and says there is no greater happiness than *the happiness of being at one with everything in that hidden ground of love* for which there can be no explanations. In a letter written about a year later – to a Dr. Weiskopf – Merton once again speaks of the ground of being. Here is what he says. I summarize his statement: the ultimate ground in which all contradictions are united and all comes out right is, for the Christian, personal, that is to say, a ground of freedom and love.

### **To the Novices at Gethsemani**

Speaking to the novices at Gethsemani, Merton speaks clearly and beautifully the mystery about prayer and the mystery of God. He writes: “Prayer is not only the lifting up of the mind and heart to God but it is also the response to God within us. It ultimately leads to the discovery and fulfillment of our own true self in God. We should not therefore, regard prayer as if we are clients seeking an answer from God . . . . He seeks us more than we seek him. If we love him, he has first loved us. But let us recognize, too, that we do not know ourselves and we know him so us. We do not understand their own needs and desires; how can we understand his desires in our regard? Prayer, that is, is always shrouded in mystery. To pray is to enter into mystery. When we do not enter into the unknown, we do not pray. If we want everything in our prayer life to be abundantly clear at all times, we will by that very fact defeat our prayer life. Prayer is an expression of our complete dependence on a hidden and mysterious God. It is therefore nourished by humility and a sense of indignance, and by compunction.

“We should never seek to reach some supposed summit of prayer out of spiritual ambition, for this would be a sure way to frustrate his own intentions. We should not seek to enter deeply into the life of prayer in order to glory in it as an achievement, however spiritual, but because in this way we can come close to the Lord . . . who seeks to give us a strong dose of his love.”

### **A Friend**

There is a person to whom I have been giving spiritual direction for some time. Gradually I have encouraged her to do less thinking and less discursive reasoning in her private prayer and to spend more time in wordless prayer. On one occasion she said to me, “I used to think of prayer as friendly conversation with God. I imagined God at my side and myself speaking with God as I would with a friend. Now, while I know that that is a legitimate metaphor for prayer and there are times when I still find it useful, more and more in my private prayer, I feel the need of going beyond images and words. Strangely, as I have let myself be drawn more and more in this direction, I have found that God has become more and more a mystery to me. Yet unaccountably I feel there is more depth in my prayer. I really experience that I am touching God, or perhaps better, that I am being touched by God.”

In a letter, written in 1966 to John Hunt, who was then senior editor of the *Saturday Evening Post*, Merton said much the same thing: “A true inner life of freedom (surely one way of viewing prayer) begins when we enter into communion with the unknown within us.” Then he adds a further observation, namely, that such communion with the unknown in ourselves makes it possible for us “to enter into communion with the same unknown in others.”

### **Are You Disappointed?**

At this point, dear reader, you may be disappointed that I started out to answer for you the question “Who is God?” and I seem to be suggesting that there really isn’t any answer. Maybe the reason for your reaction, if that has been your reaction, is that you think of mystery as something that must be solved. But I would want to say that calling God mystery amounts to extending an invitation to probe ever more deeply into the reality of God, though with the realization that one will never be able to exhaust the meaningfulness of God. To call God mystery is to remind ourselves that all the knowledge we have of God comes from some human experience of God. The words we possess are able to express only the human experience, not the divine reality experienced. *That is why all the language we use about God is metaphorical.* When we speak about God we are always using analogies. We have no divine language, only human.

Think of the many names of God that we find in the Bible: our Savior, our Redeemer and Deliverer, our Refuge, our Helper, our Shepherd, our Ruler, our Mother, our Father, our Lover, etc. If we reflect on them, we note that they are all *relational*: we relate to God as the One who is our Source and Sustainer, the One who cares for us and provides for us. *This is to say that we are talking about a God who loves us.*

### **God Is Love**

When the scriptures say that “God is Love,” they are drawing on a human experience: all of us, hopefully, love and are loved. Now love is the deepest of all human mysteries. We can experience it, but we cannot adequately explain what it is we are experiencing. Hence, when we say “God is Love,” we are not resolving the mystery of God; rather we are touching the mystery of God with another mystery. Love is as incomprehensible as God. Still we have experiences of love in our lives and these experiences can help us to understand a little more clearly who God is.

In one of his reading notebooks, Merton quotes a saying of Allah attributed to the prophet Mohammed: “My earth and heaven cannot contain me, but the heart of my believing servant contains me.” Merton comments: “The heart only is capable of knowing God.” The heart is the only place strong enough to bear the divine secret; and the divine secret is that the Ground of Being, which sustains all that is, is the Hidden Ground of Love. To know God as the Hidden Ground of Love is to know that we are loved.

In *Contemplative Prayer*, Merton writes: “Our knowledge of God is paradoxically a knowledge not of Him as the object of our scrutiny, but of ourselves as utterly dependent on His saving and merciful knowledge of us.” In a letter to Etta Gullick, a friend in England who confided to him her desire to love God more than everything that exists, Merton readily identifies with this desire; yet he adds: “Beyond all is a love of God in and through all that exists. We must not hold them apart one from another. But he must be One in all, and Is.”

So, my friends, let us sing “How Great Thou Art,” preferably in liturgy rather than into a shaving mirror. But remember that no words or images of ours can ever probe the meaning of God’s greatness. Only love can know. Or in Pascal’s words: “The heart has its reasons which reason does not know.”

### **Awareness of God’s Presence**

Consider the following parable. A wife and husband are sitting in their living room. She is knitting; he is devouring the sports’ page of the paper. All at once she says to him, with quiet

sarcasm: “You can stop saying ‘Yes, dear,’ every five minutes. I stopped talking to you a half hour ago.” The parable describes a breakdown of communication and probably an unhealthy relationship: a husband talking perfunctorily to his wife, yet not really aware of her presence. Suppose we read the parable in the light of our relationship with God. We are always in the presence of God. Yet we can pray to God in a distracted, perfunctory way, without really being aware of God’s presence. Now the husband in our parable could go on saying, “Yes, dear,” even after his wife had gotten up and left the room. Nothing much would change except that she wouldn’t be there. The situation would be quite different with us, if we were talking to God and all at once God decided to leave. Since the presence of God is the necessary condition of our very existence, we could not, if God were to leave us, go on mechanically saying our prayers. For if God removed the divine presence from us, we would simply cease to be.

### **Always in the Presence of God**

We cannot be without the presence of God. But we can be without being aware of God’s presence. Yet to live without awareness of God is to live in a world of illusion. It is to be out of touch with the real world. **The Great Fact** of our lives is that we are always in the presence of God. **The Great Problem** of our lives is that we are so often unaware of God’s presence. We can go for days without ever advertent to that presence. We can be unaware of God’s Presence, even when we pray, as for instance when we pray and our awareness is on a hundred other things. We can also be unaware of God in prayer, if we pray to a God who is distant from us, as if we were here and God there. No, God is closer to us than our inmost self. In fact, there is a sense in which God is my inmost self; or, if that way of putting it might seem to border on the unorthodox, let me say it this way: when I find my deepest self, I shall discover God, because God is the Ground of Love in which I exist.

### **What Will Heaven Mean?**

Let me make this very concrete by saying: *Each of us, right now, at this very moment is as fully in the presence of God as we shall ever be.* Even in heaven we shall not be any more fully in the presence of God than we are at this moment. The enormous difference heaven will make is that in heaven we shall be *fully and always aware* that we are in the presence of God. This calls for a rethinking of our notion of heaven. Too often we picture heaven as a kind of Hawaiian InterContinental Hotel which initially is empty and then gradually fills up, as guests arrive who have the proper reservations. Actually, heaven isn’t a place we go to. Rather it is Someone we go to. That is what heaven really is. It is, quite simply, becoming ourselves fully and totally. This will happen, not when God becomes more fully present to us, but when we are *always fully aware that we are in God’s presence.*

If you reflect on this for half a second, you will realize the amazing truth that all along we have been in paradise. But we don’t know it. If we were fully aware, we would know that we are in paradise. For paradise, heaven, is simply God’s Presence possessed in full and total attentiveness.