

Thomas Merton and Fulton Sheen: Roots in the Past with Messages for Eternity

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I have the distinction of being what might be called a “semi-academic.” I have taught undergraduates for nearly twenty-five years at another fine Jesuit institution, Spring Hill College, but really make my living as a journalist who works in and on television. Communication, rather than theology, is my specialty and has been for more than forty years; a desire to foster effective communication through the use of modern technology is simply in my DNA. So, I approach the subject of Thomas Merton from a different perspective, I suppose, from most in this room.

In light of my interest in communication, I have chosen to consider closely the lives and legacies of Thomas Merton and the former Archbishop of Rochester, New York, Fulton J. Sheen. Clearly, these are two distinctive personalities. However, each was Catholic; each was blessed with a first-class intellect; each spoke out about the problems of his day; each attracted millions of followers; each got into trouble with Church authorities, and each was vindicated in God’s time. One may well become a saint someday; the other will probably never be *declared* one. One is still much loved by those who consider themselves Catholic conservatives, and the other is the darling of liberals. While they were contemporaries, their lives touched only tangentially. It could be said that their lives were lived for “God Alone,” with brief stops in Times Square with their names up in lights, as psychiatrist Gregory Zilboorg might have put it. I want to discuss these two highly respected communicators of the twentieth century, and assess their ability to continue to touch readers in the twenty-first. Let me begin with some context.

Born Peter John Sheen in 1895 – later adopting his mother’s maiden name as his first – Fulton Sheen grew up in a family of four intellectually gifted boys with deep Illinois roots. His father was a fairly successful farmer in the Peoria area, and his mother a hardworking Midwestern farm wife. The family placed great value on two things:

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their Catholic faith, and education. Sheen more than lived up to his parents' expectations, being ordained at the age of 24, and receiving a tremendously prestigious "super doctorate" from the University of Louvain.

Beginning in 1930, Fulton J. Sheen was a fixture on the airways, first with a Sunday radio program, and then, beginning in 1951, on television, as one of the earliest televangelists. His show, *Life Is Worth Living*, proved immensely popular, and Sheen won an Emmy in 1952, thanking his writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Twenty years younger than Sheen, Thomas Merton – as most of you know – was born in France to artist parents, the New Zealand-born Owen and American-born Ruth Jenkins Merton. His childhood was unsettled, with no particular religious affiliation, though he was baptized into the Church of England. Merton had lost both of his parents by the age of 16. He attended European boarding schools and Clare College Cambridge, where, it can be said, his approach to university education differed greatly from that of Fulton Sheen. After moving to the States, he enrolled in Columbia University, and it was during this time that he first began thinking *seriously* about Catholicism. Later, after earning an M.A. from Columbia, and while teaching at St. Bonaventure College in upstate New York, he went on a retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Fulton J. Sheen – whose successful radio show had been on the air for nearly 20 years at the time – lent a helping hand to Merton by endorsing *The Seven Storey Mountain*, calling it a modern-day version of the *Confessions* of St. Augustine. But, as far as I can determine, this endorsement did not mark the beginning of a collaboration of two great writers or even a casual friendship. In fact, after Sheen's death, friends confirmed that Sheen *disliked* Merton.¹

What, then, was behind Sheen's endorsement of *The Seven Storey Mountain*? Merton's last secretary, Brother Patrick Hart of the Abbey of Gethsemani, believes it was simply a sign of extremely shrewd marketing by Merton's college friend and publisher, Robert Giroux. Brother Patrick wrote, "As far as I know Fr. Louis never had direct contact by mail with Fulton Sheen. He was involved in 1948 or spring of '49 with the 100th anniversary of Gethsemani's foundation. . . . But as for the blurb on the back of THE SEVEN STOREY MT, I'm quite sure it was Bob Giroux of Harcourt Brace, the publisher, who contacted him and Clare Boothe Luce for comments or blurbs as they are called today."² Brother Patrick was correct, as confirmed by Giroux himself in his introduction to the fiftieth-anniversary edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain*.³ (The editor of *The Merton Seasonal*, Patrick F. O'Connell, has discovered an earlier, hitherto unknown connection between Merton and Sheen, when then-Monsignor Sheen praised the English translation of *The Life and Kingdom of Jesus in Christian Souls: A Treatise on Christian Perfection for Use by Clergy or Laity*, by St. John Eudes, the first of a six-volume set of the seventeenth-century French saint's selected works. Sheen praised the English version by "A Trappist Father in the

Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani” as “so ably translated.” The “Trappist Father” turned out to be Thomas Merton, who was at the time still three years away from ordination.⁴⁾

There was at least one brief meeting between Merton and Sheen, on January 18, 1966, when Sheen was guiding an 8-day retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani. As Merton noted in his private journal entry from that day, “Guess who comes today to preach the retreat: Bishop Sheen! But I am not expected to come to conferences.”⁵ At the Abbot’s urging, they did, however, meet. Later that day, Merton wrote:

Saw Bishop Sheen after dinner. We had a good conversation. No matter how people may disparage all his TV work and so on, he is an extraordinary person and has done immense good and is also very intelligent, widely read, articulate. I suppose people dismiss him with a shrug just because he is popular and effective (a lot of them probably do the same for me!). But that is childish. One has to respect him. . . . The community is being a bit supercilious about the fact that he’s retreat master. That is not so much because of him as because of the abbot, who is trying to create an effect, of course failing. Those tapes in the guesthouse certainly have got people tired of Bishop Sheen too! (LL 9)

One can only wish there were a recording available of the meeting of these two extraordinary men, considering the enormous impact that each had on mid-twentieth-century culture.

Sheen not only had access to television, but also was ON television with an audience of millions, and lived in the media capital of the world, New York City. Merton left New York City for Olean and St. Bonaventure and finally the knobs of Kentucky, where, at least for a time, he turned his back on the world. And when Merton did receive news from outside the walls of the Abbey, it was filtered or skewed by the particular interests of his friends. Patrick Hart writes, “His [Merton’s] publishers, especially J. Laughlin and friends like Ping Ferry of the Center for Democratic Institutions at Santa Barbara filled him in regarding the evils of technology. Then there was later John Howard Griffin who kept him abreast of the civil rights struggle in the south. There were friends like the Hammers in Lexington who came frequently and kept him informed in other ways. But no, he did not receive a copy of the [Louisville] *Courier-Journal*, except on very special occasions.”⁶ So, here was Merton viewing the world through a keyhole, but able to see clearly with a vision that stretched into the future. Was it despite his lack of access to information, or because of it? Was Merton able to see both the forest and the trees? Merton decried technology, including the loud farm equipment that disturbed his peace and quiet – though he didn’t shy away from blaring music from his stereo or even experimenting with a very primitive form of word processor. One can only imagine what he might have done with a MacBook Air or an iPad!

I must admit that as I initially read Merton, I cringed at his criticism of my medium – TV – with which he had little or no direct contact. In *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton wrote, “I am certainly no judge of television, since I have never watched it. All I know is that there is a sufficiently general agreement, among men whose judgment I respect, that commercial television is degraded, meretricious and absurd.”⁷ I was pleased and relieved to see he eventually acknowledged the contribution that television made in exposing the evils of segregation as reporters covered the American civil rights movement, though he remained wary of the medium.

Neither Merton nor Sheen shied away from commenting on controversial, topical issues of the day. Merton voiced his opinion on civil rights, war in general, and the Vietnam War in particular. As a result, he attracted the attention of the U.S. State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, just to name a few, as I noted in my essay, “Washington Watches the Monk,” in a 1986 issue of *The Merton Seasonal*.⁸ Sheen spent much of his television career criticizing the godlessness of Communism, thus making many friends in the Church hierarchy; it is largely for this reason that he is usually thought of as being firmly on the right of the political spectrum. It is, therefore, surprising to some to find that Sheen spoke out strongly against racism and anti-Semitism, decades ahead of most, and worked tirelessly for the poor. He gave away at least ten million dollars of his own money, funding, among other things, a hospital and churches for poor black residents of Alabama. Like Merton, he strongly opposed the Vietnam War, ruffling many conservative feathers in the process.

Despite their success and fame, or maybe because of it, both Sheen and Merton faced struggles with authority; Merton’s tug-of-war with his order’s censors and religious superiors might be well known to those of us in the room, but it is not widely known that Sheen also faced his own difficulties with Church hierarchy. Sheen was in charge of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, which raised money to spread the mission of the Church around the world. The abundant flow of cash caught the attention of the Archbishop of New York, Francis Cardinal Spellman. When Spellman tried to divert funds from Sheen’s control, a battle ensued that went all the way to the Pope himself. Sheen won a Pyrrhic victory; while the Pope sided with him, Cardinal Spellman eventually enacted his revenge by, in effect, exiling Sheen from New York City to Rochester when Sheen was 71 years old – an age when most bishops were winding down their ecclesiastical careers.

Not unlike Merton’s reception of a Papal stole from Pope John XXIII, Sheen received a public acknowledgement of papal approval when Pope John Paul II embraced him during the Pope’s appearance at St. Patrick’s Cathedral, shortly before Sheen’s death. However, Cardinal Spellman was no longer alive to witness this sign of papal favor; ironically, Spellman and Sheen now lie in the same crypt beneath the main altar at St. Patrick’s, just as Merton and his superior, Dom James Fox, are now neighbors in the cemetery outside

the main church at Gethsemani; those in the Community say Fox is eternally keeping an eye on Merton.

Though it was clear that he was the victim of ecclesiastical pettiness, Sheen was not one to make the dispute public. This brings up the touchy subject of obedience, a concept that has fallen into disfavor in recent years. As much as Merton complained and chafed at times against the rules of his abbot and his other superiors, he eventually obeyed their orders, acknowledging that their counter-balance was needed to keep him on course. Sheen, likewise, could have rebelled against his exile at the whim of Cardinal Spellman, but chose to obey, as difficult and unjust as it must have seemed at the time, saying at a joint news conference with Spellman, “The general has told me to go to Rochester and I love it.”⁹ The daily prayer that was integral to the lives of both men must certainly have helped them cope with injustices, real or perceived; as a monk, Merton had considerably more time available for reflection than Sheen, whose co-workers said he seemed to work 24 hours a day.

Two very different lives, taking very different paths toward the same end of serving God and getting their messages to God’s people; to put it in media terms, each knew how to reach his demographic. I believe Merton was effective because he was using a medium that was widespread and accessible (print), had a unique ability to interact with his readers (as evidenced by the mail he received and the correspondence he maintained), and possessed a rare and truly God-given talent to inspire. It is a striking tribute to Merton’s vision that his books remain in print, despite his very limited access to information about current events while writing, his low profile in media other than print, and the fact that outside of friends and colleagues, very few people had actually seen him. They had no face to put with the prophetic voice. What accounts for Merton’s enduring message? To paraphrase Merton who paraphrased a Tibetan lama, Merton had the courage to stand on his own two feet.¹⁰ He was his own man. Unlike writers who tailor their message by looking to focus groups to find what will “sell” or bow to political correctness, Merton looked to his own convictions to say what needed to be said. And after all, as he noted in *A Vow of Conversation*, “My ideas are always changing, always moving around one center, and I am always seeing that center from somewhere else. Hence, I will always be accused of inconsistency. But I will no longer be there to hear the accusation.”¹¹ He was open to the growth all of us wish we could allow, but sometimes feel too shackled by our routine obligations to attempt. Merton spoke with antique courage.

Sheen’s access to and use of media was, clearly, more extensive than Merton’s; he expertly embraced both print (through books as well as newspaper columns) and the still-young medium of television, using to full advantage his ability to connect with viewers with his mesmerizing eyes. Fulton J. Sheen is still finding an audience today – albeit generally different from the one seated here tonight. His TV show *Life Is Worth Living* is rebroadcast on EWTN and is available on DVD; hundreds of his talks are on MP3 and audiotapes; his

books are for sale and many of his writings, sermons and speeches are available – free – on fultonsheen.com. In 2002, the cause for his canonization was undertaken, and just a few weeks ago, on May 25, the official position paper, or “*positio*,” listing the reasons that his cause should go forward, was presented to the Pope (who worked with Sheen on a Second Vatican Council commission.)

While audiotapes of Merton’s instruction exist, giving us a look into his wit, intelligence and ability to communicate, imagine his impact today if videotape had been available to him . . . and if he had chosen to use it. Unlike Sheen, I doubt that we will – at least in our lifetimes – see a groundswell of support to canonize Merton. As Kenneth Woodward noted in his book, *Making Saints*, “the more conventional a Catholic thinker is, the more likely is he or she to be canonized.”¹² In fact, Woodward believes that intellectuals are disadvantaged as candidates for canonization because they often explore deeper understandings and fresh interpretations of the faith. The more an intellectual publishes, the more risk he or she takes. It is interesting that, though Sheen voiced concerns about many of the same social issues as did Merton, it is Merton who is seen by some as radical, while Sheen is viewed as a safe and comfortable relic of mid-century American Catholicism.

Those of us in this room must continue to work diligently and not allow Merton’s light to remain hidden under a bushel basket. It must shine from a global lamp-stand. Merton’s message is clearly worth preserving and sharing, especially during this time in which faith, and not just Catholic faith, is being challenged. Should Merton’s message fail to be spread around the world, “the fault . . . is not in our stars, / But in ourselves,” as Shakespeare said in *Julius Caesar*.¹³ To paraphrase a twentieth-century writer, Marshall McLuhan, in Merton’s case, the message needs the medium.

I want to charge members of the International Thomas Merton Society and those who are avid admirers of Merton with the challenge of attracting, cultivating and reaching the next generation of Merton readers: a generation that, research shows, prefers text messages to e-mails, and tweets (140-character messages) to texts. How can the wisdom of Thomas Merton, who wrote more than 60 books and thousands of letters, fit in a tweet? How can it be communicated effectively to those who thirst for knowledge, but are addicted to the “dopamine-squirt” they receive when communicating on a brief and superficial level using the various electronic devices available today? Can you imagine what Merton would have thought about today’s severely shortened attention spans and the fact that fewer than half of adolescents and young adults read books for pleasure?¹⁴ My answer is, we had better try to attract new readers to Merton’s work, or the volumes that we love and cherish will enrich and nourish only storage mites. Keep in mind, Amazon is now selling more e-books than those printed on paper.

Thankfully, because of the work of the Merton Legacy Trust, the Abbey, and various publishers, we are seeing more and more of Merton’s work appear as e-books, available

on Amazon’s Kindle, Apple’s iBook and Barnes & Noble’s Nook. But before Merton’s work can appear on Kindles, iPads and Nooks, *we must reach the new Mertonians not where we believe they should be, but where they are now*. To borrow Merton’s famous reflection upon seeing the Buddha in Ceylon, we, as a Society, must be “forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things” (*AJ* 233). Our mission is not simply to talk amongst ourselves, as enjoyable as it is, or only to provide another outlet for those who must “publish or perish,” as important as that is. Our mission statement calls for all of us to promote an understanding and appreciation of Thomas Merton – to everyone! When it comes to the spiritual treasure embodied in the work of Thomas Merton, *we must be the global lamp-stand*.

As the theme description of this General Meeting states,

In *The Sign of Jonas* Merton wrote, “This is the land where you have given me roots in eternity, O God of heaven and earth. This is the burning promised land, the house of God, the gate of heaven, the place of peace, the place of silence, the place of wrestling with the angel.” The monastic life provided Merton with the spirituality and the structure to produce some of the great spiritual texts of our time. Merton’s exploration of spirituality and monasticism and its relevance for the modern world transformed monasticism and influenced innumerable people around the world, as he became a prophetic critic of contemporary urban crises and an agent of social transformation.

Merton’s work has roots in eternity; it is our responsibility to make sure it flourishes today and into tomorrow by exploiting the new media that exist and will continue to evolve exponentially in the future. Surely we who cherish the work of Thomas Merton can find ways to spread his message as effectively as those who revere the life and works of Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen. We need Merton’s guidance here in the city and the countryside, to provide a source of life to guide us through our spiritual desert, and we all must feel an obligation to guide others toward the wisdom that has enriched, and we hope will continue to enrich, millions of readers throughout the world.

1. Telephone interview with Fr. Jasper Pennington [July 5, 2000], Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Raynor Memorial Libraries, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI.
2. E-mail from Brother Patrick Hart [March 7, 2011].
3. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Fiftieth Anniversary Edition (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1998) xv-xvi.
4. William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O’Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002) 259.
5. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 8; subsequent references will be cited as “LL” parenthetically in the text.

6. E-mail from Brother Patrick Hart [March 4, 2011].
7. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 86.
8. Robert Grip, "The Merton Files: Washington Watches the Monk," *The Merton Seasonal* 11.1 (Winter 1986) 5-7.
9. Thomas C. Reeves, *America's Bishop: The Life and Times of Fulton J. Sheen* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2001) 289.
10. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 338; subsequent references will be cited as "AJ" parenthetically in the text.
11. Thomas Merton, *A Vow of Conversation: Journals 1964-1965*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1988) 19.
12. Kenneth L. Woodward, *Making Saints: How the Catholic Church Determines Who Becomes a Saint, Who Doesn't, and Why* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990) 399.
13. William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar* I.ii.140-41.
14. National Endowment for the Arts, *To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence* (Washington: National Endowment for the Arts, 2007).