

Curating the Pastor's Heart: A Prescription for Renewal Through the Contemplative

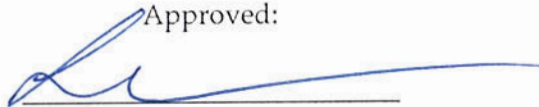
Lens of Thomas Merton

by

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Date: 4/24/19

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry  
in the Divinity School of Duke University

2019

ABSTRACT

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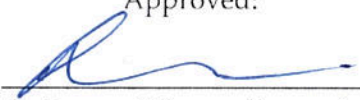
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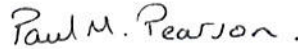
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## **Abstract**

“Curating the Pastor’s Heart: A Prescription for Renewal Through the Contemplative Lens of Thomas Merton” argues that one of the most significant problems faced by parish pastors today is that they lead complex volunteer organizations that are shaped by the surrounding culture as much, if not more, than any New Testament paradigm. Pastors are pulled in various directions by the expectations of a culture and members that call for relevance, popularity, and power in ways similar to secular organizations and leaders. These expectations are rooted more in power and acquisitiveness than in the self-emptying Gospel of Jesus Christ. How can parish pastors remain rooted in their relationship with God while facing these demands? Drawing on the work of the philosopher James K.A. Smith, this thesis argues that parish pastors are desiring creatures whose love is formed by their habits, and that parish pastors to rise to the occasion of today’s leadership challenge must cultivate habits that draw them into deep relationship with God. The contemplative tradition explicitly seeks direct experience of God and provides rich resources for the parish pastor of the twenty-first century. “Curating the Pastor’s Heart” then draws on a limited selection from the corpus of the writings of Thomas Merton on contemplation to construct a thematic paradigm of discipleship practice as a resource of hope and renewal for parish ministry. The result is a paradigm that defines contemplation and calls the parish pastor to pursue a contemplative life of integrity, solitude, prayer, discipline and gratitude leading to hope and flourishing in challenging times.

## Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to those parish pastors who continue work to tirelessly for the kingdom of God; to my wife, Tracy, and my children, Addison, Will, and Lainey, who inspire me and encourage me to be the best that I can be; to my brother, Steve Griffin, who has always been there for me, and my friend, Reynie Rutledge, whose support and encouragement have been essential to me completing this project; to the churches I have served for what they have taught me and the forgiveness they have extended over the years; and to the precious memory of my parents, Ruben and Virginia

Griffin. *Soli Deo Gloria!*

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I also want to express my gratitude to the clergy, staff, and parishioners of Russellville First United Methodist Church. They were gracious in giving time and support for me to complete this project. To my wife and family, I cannot thank them enough for loving and supporting me throughout this journey. It has truly been a labor of love.



# Introduction

## *I. Statement of the Problem*

Being a parish pastor is not for the faint of heart. The expectations of various constituencies pull parish pastors in numerous directions threatening pastoral integrity. Pressure comes from denominational structures that call for work outside the parish. Constituencies among members demand attention. Is there adequate budget for youth outings? Is there appropriate transportation available for senior adult day trips? Is there adequate space for the bridge club, the scouting group, the knitting club, reading groups, tutoring? The list seems inexhaustible. Pastors lead complex, politically-charged volunteer organizations that often function more in tune with North American consumerism and politics than any New Testament paradigm. Such is the nature of parish ministry in twenty-first century North America.

I am writing to parish pastors in general, but I write from the perspective of an ordained elder in The United Methodist Church. Among the ordained orders of ministry in The United Methodist Church, the elder is ordained “to a *lifetime* ministry of Word, Sacrament, Order, and Service.”<sup>1</sup> Though not always, an elder most often exercises her or his leadership in a local church. Elders, “by authority given in their ordination....are authorized to preach and teach the Word of God, to provide pastoral care and counsel, to administer the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion, and to order the life of

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<sup>1</sup> *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 2016* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), 264. Emphasis mine.

the Church for service in mission and ministry.”<sup>2</sup> Elders not only face the pressures of parish ministry noted above, but the cultural milieu of the twenty-first century impacts parish pastors in ways in which they may not be aware. Henri J.M. Nouwen in his little book, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*, offers three powerful, subtle temptations for parish pastors: to be relevant, to be spectacular (or popular), and to be powerful.<sup>3</sup> These temptations lure parish pastors away from the true source of life for parish ministry, which is Jesus Christ. How are we to survive a lifetime of parish ministry in the midst of these challenges? The purpose of this thesis is to construct a thematic paradigm of discipleship practice for the parish pastor rooted in the work of Thomas Merton that seeks a direct experience of God and offers hope, renewal, and a spiritual compass in complicated times. There should be no higher desire for the parish pastor than to have a direct experience of God through Jesus Christ and to lead others toward a similar experience. The paradigm is “thematic” because Merton is not so much a “how to” writer as much as a reflective and creative practitioner of the contemplative life. Before constructing this thematic paradigm, we turn to consider our contemporary cultural milieu and some current thinking on how disciples are formed.

## ***A. The Contemporary North American Cultural Milieu***

### ***1. Misunderstanding the Nature of What It Means to Be Human***

To better understand how disciples are formed and how powerful the culture is in usurping those efforts, I draw upon the work of James K.A. Smith. His argument is a

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid..

<sup>3</sup> Henri J.M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1989), 7-8.

backdrop to the need for the parish pastor to have personal formational practices that curate the pastor's heart and cultivate the opportunity for direct experience of God, which should be the ultimate desire of the parish pastor. In his book, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, Smith argues that imbedded within the practices of a community is an assumed philosophical anthropology.<sup>4</sup> Borrowing from the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, Smith argues that human beings are "desiring creatures."<sup>5</sup> He elaborates saying,

We are, ultimately, *liturgical animals* because we are fundamentally desiring creatures. We are what we love, and our love is shaped, primed, and aimed by liturgical practices that take hold of our gut and aim our heart to certain ends. So we are not primarily *homo rationale* or *homo faber* or *homo economicus*; we are not even generically *homo religiosus*. We are more concretely *homo liturgicus*; humans are those animals that are religious animals not because we are primarily believing animals but because we are liturgical animals – embodied, practicing creatures whose love/desire is aimed at something ultimate.<sup>6</sup>

Smith's argument is in the context of calling for a distinctively Christian form of higher education in what he calls "'ecclesial colleges' ...institutions intimately linked to the church and thus an extension of its practices."<sup>7</sup> In the process of arguing his case he paints a picture of North American culture as supremely effective at forming consumers, demonstrates how the surrounding culture has impacted the church, and explains why this impact should not be ignored.<sup>8</sup> Parishioners are in danger of becoming sanctified consumers rather than self-emptying disciples. Parish pastors are in danger of

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<sup>4</sup> James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 37.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

pandering to the perceived needs of these sanctified consumers and thus to the temptations of being perceived as relevant, spectacular, and powerful.

Smith sets himself against Enlightenment philosophers such as Descartes who define humans primarily as “thinkers” or “believers.”<sup>9</sup> He describes the “thinker” and “believer” models as “reductionistic;” by that he means “that they fail to honor the complexity and richness of human persons and instead reduce...[humans] and...[their] core identities to something less than they should be.”<sup>10</sup> He contrasts these views with what he calls an “Augustinian...nonreductionistic understanding of human persons as embodied agents of desire or love.”<sup>11</sup> He convincingly depicts humans as “dynamic,”<sup>12</sup> “*teleological* creatures,”<sup>13</sup> that aim their desires toward imbedded visions of the “good life.”<sup>14</sup> According to Smith,

The *telos* to which our love is aimed is not a list of ideas or propositions or doctrines; it is not a list of abstract, disembodied concepts or values. Rather, the reason that this vision of the good life moves us is because it is a more affective, sensible, even aesthetic *picture* of what the good life looks like. A vision of the good life captures our hearts and imaginations not by providing a set of rules or ideas, but by painting a picture of what it looks like for us to flourish and live well.<sup>15</sup>

Human beings are not primarily “thinking” or “believing” creatures as much as they are desiring creatures.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 41-43.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

Smith describes the “good life” as a “precognitive”<sup>16</sup> or “noncognitive”<sup>17</sup> disposition that is shaped by habits. He states, “Because we are affective before we are cognitive (and even *while* we are cognitive), visions of the good get inscribed in us by means that are commensurate with our primarily affective, imaginative nature,” and a person’s habits shape her or his precognitive disposition toward life.<sup>18</sup>

According to Smith, habits are a “second nature” of sorts, that aim a person’s heart (loves, desires) in a particular direction.<sup>19</sup> They are the “almost automatic disposition[s] that incline us to act in certain ways without having to kick into a mode of reflection.”<sup>20</sup> These dispositions are made, not “hard-wired,” but function at a precognitive level to make a human being the person she or he is.

Smith articulates that embodied “practices” form the precognitive dispositions to view and act in life in particular ways.<sup>21</sup> As he writes, “habits are inscribed in our heart through bodily practices and rituals that train the heart...to desire certain ends. This is a noncognitive sort of training, a kind of education that is shaping us often without our reflection...The senses are portals to the heart, and thus the body is a channel to our core dispositions and identity.”<sup>22</sup> If Smith is correct, this has profound implications for forming Christian disciples, and for those who lead those formative efforts.

## ***2. Implications for Discipleship and Parish Leadership***

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 58-59.

Yet, the contemporary church approaches the formation of Christian disciples more from an Enlightenment perspective than from what might be referred to as Smith's Augustinian view. Moreover, if "the medium [is indeed] the message,"<sup>23</sup> then many contemporary tools of discipleship formation may, indeed, be furthering consumerist tendencies that are antithetical to the Gospel. (For example, if television programming was created to deliver the messages of advertisers rather than for programming itself, then close attention must be paid to how the church uses such media given the implicit bias in the medium itself. While, further development of this topic on the use of media goes beyond the scope of this thesis, a more nuanced anthropology of the human person requires the church to exegete its habits. A church might examine the ways its use of media during a worship service contradicts the message of the gospel. Educating for the mind rather than the entire person falls short of the holistic life called forth by the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Smith states his argument regarding the formation of disciples another way in

*You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit:*

Jesus doesn't encounter Matthew and John – or you and me – and ask, 'What do you know?' He doesn't even ask, 'What do you believe?' He asks, 'What do you want?' This is the most incisive, piercing question Jesus can ask of us precisely because we *are* what we want. Our wants and longings and desires are at the core of our identity, the wellspring from which our actions and behavior flow. Our wants reverberate from our heart, the epicenter of the human person. Thus Scripture counsels, 'Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it' (Prov. 4:23). Discipleship, we might say, is a way to curate your heart, to be attentive to and intentional about what you love.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 7-21.

<sup>24</sup> James K.A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016), 1-2.

So how should the parish pastor curate her or his heart to best lead the local parish in the twenty-first century? This question takes us to the rich writings of Thomas Merton.

## *I. Why Thomas Merton?*

### *A. The Significance of Spiritual Practice*

Thomas Merton is a valuable resource for constructing a thematic paradigm for holistic spiritual formation given that his writings come from the perspective of a person imbedded in a monastic tradition that holistically shaped his life. This holistic approach to discipleship undergirds his pursuit of direct experience of God through the gift of contemplation. As Lawrence S. Cunningham argues in *Thomas Merton & the Monastic Vision*, Thomas Merton cannot be properly understood without the understanding that he is a monk imbedded in a particular monastic tradition with certain practices that shape his life, i.e., the Benedictine Rule of Life as lived among Cistercians which includes worshipping, eating, and working in community, praying the monastic office, manual labor, and vows of poverty and conversion.<sup>25</sup> In other words, in order to understand the work of Thomas Merton, one must understand the practices, the *habits* Smith would say, that aimed his affections toward God. These practices curated the monastic heart of Thomas Merton. In much the same way, this thesis assumes that a right understanding of the work of the parish pastor is only grasped when considered in light of that pastor's foundational rule of life prescribed by her tradition. In order to take advantage of Merton's thoughts on contemplation a parish pastor must live according to

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<sup>25</sup> Lawrence S. Cunningham, *Thomas Merton & the Monastic Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 16-17.

a rule of life that has that pastor participating in the means of grace, i.e., living out the baptismal and ordination vows, participating in worship, the sacraments, the reading of Scripture, and daily prayer, and offering pastoral care, among other things. For a Christian in general, and a parish pastor in particular, the worship life of the church forms the center of the pastor's existence. These practices curate the heart of the parish pastor. Thomas Merton's thoughts on contemplation can enrich these practices and provide thematic direction in forming a parish pastor for ministry.

Thomas Merton has written reams of books, essays, journals, letters, and poetry that draw readers deeply into the practices and themes that cultivate a contemplative disposition toward life. His work is unparalleled when it comes to describing contemplation in a modern voice. This makes Thomas Merton a unique and powerful resource for helping the parish pastor curate her heart for the demands parish ministry. Moreover, his work helps the parish pastor remain completely centered upon direct experience of God, which then has the potential to transform the demands of parish life into a means of grace.

### ***B. The Merton Corpus***

The argument of this thesis draws upon Thomas Merton's work in *Seeds of Contemplation*,<sup>26</sup> *No Man Is an Island*,<sup>27</sup> *Thoughts in Solitude*,<sup>28</sup> *New Seeds of Contemplation*,<sup>29</sup> *Contemplative Prayer*,<sup>30</sup> and *Contemplation in a World of Action*.<sup>31</sup> Merton indicates in the

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<sup>26</sup> Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: A New Directions Book, 1949).

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2005).

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 1993).

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: A New Directions Book, 1961).

<sup>30</sup> Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: An Image Book, 1996).



Preface to *Seeds of Contemplation* that it is written in the tradition of St. John of the Cross as a book of “more or less disconnected thoughts and ideas and aphorisms about the interior life....nothing more than a collection of notes and personal reflections.”<sup>32</sup> These “thoughts and ideas and aphorisms” form a solid foundation for Merton’s early thoughts on contemplation.<sup>33</sup>

Representative of middle Merton is *No Man Is an Island* and *Thoughts in Solitude*. “Leaving system to others,” Merton in *No Man Is an Island* offers thoughts in numbered paragraphs grouped in particular subjects by chapter.<sup>34</sup> *Thoughts in Solitude* contains his reflections and thoughts resulting from opportunities for greater solitude and meditation at the Abbey of Gethsemani during 1953 and 1954.<sup>35</sup> Stylistically both of these titles are written in the same vein as *Seeds of Contemplation*. Not only are these titles distillations of key thoughts of Merton’s regarding solitude and other topics and their role in the contemplative life, but they are also tools for contemplation themselves as each title has sections styled as possible meditations for the reader.

Some of Merton’s more developed thoughts on the contemplative life are drawn from *New Seeds of Contemplation*, *Contemplative Prayer*, and *Contemplation in a World of Action*. As the title suggests, *New Seeds of Contemplation* is Merton’s recognition of the deficiencies he perceived in his earlier work, *Seeds of Contemplation*. The first half of *New Seeds of Contemplation* consists of efforts to describe contemplation, while the remainder

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<sup>31</sup> Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998).

<sup>32</sup> Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, 13.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Merton, *No Man Is an Island*, ix.

<sup>35</sup> Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*, vii.

of the book focuses on brief meditative chapters pertaining to the contemplative life. Twelve years passed between the writing of *Seeds of Contemplation* and *New Seeds of Contemplation* and accordingly Merton shares the wisdom of those years in *New Seeds*. Merton's *Contemplative Prayer* is, according to Lawrence Cunningham, "an elaboration of arguments Merton made in *New Seeds of Contemplation* but now written in a more explicitly monastic context."<sup>36</sup> These elaborations further "flesh out" Merton's mature thought on contemplation. Similarly, *Contemplation in a World of Action* is a collection of essays by Merton published posthumously, post-Vatican II.<sup>37</sup> These works taken collectively offer an excellent view onto Merton's mature thought on contemplation and renewal of monastic life.

### ***C. The Telos of Experiencing God***

The *telos* of contemplation for Thomas Merton is quite simply direct experience of God. The desire for a direct experience of God should be the hallmark of parish leadership. It is that experience that forms and transforms the parish pastor's life to meet the demands of leadership in parish ministry. Merton offers the following partial definition of contemplation in *New Seeds of Contemplation*:

Contemplation is the highest expression of man's intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is a spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is gratitude for life, for awareness and for being. It is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant Source. Contemplation is, above all, awareness of the reality of that

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<sup>36</sup> Cunningham, 122.

<sup>37</sup> Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998).

Source. It *knows* that Source, obscurely, inexplicably, but with a certitude that goes both beyond reason and beyond simple faith.<sup>38</sup>

Faith that cultivates a contemplative disposition is the faith that will guide and sustain the work of parish ministry. Creating a paradigm to pursue that disposition for the parish pastor is the goal of this thesis.

## ***II. Potential Problems Using Thomas Merton***

### ***A. Context***

Yet, using Thomas Merton as a guide for parish ministry in the contemporary North American context has its problems. First, there is the distance of place and time. Thomas Merton was born in Prades, France on January 31, 1915 to Owen Merton, an expatriate painter from New Zealand, and Ruth Jenkins Merton, an American reared in the Midwest with a Quaker background.<sup>39</sup> Merton's mother died of stomach cancer in 1921 leaving Merton and his younger brother with their maternal grandparents while their father traveled looking for work.<sup>40</sup> Before long Merton began accompanying his father on his travels including significant time in Cape Cod and Bermuda.<sup>41</sup> At age ten, Merton moved with his father to St. Antonin, France. His time in France included a dispiriting tenure at a boarding school in Montauban, France, where he became fluent in French. Merton left France with his father for England at age thirteen and, tragically, his father died of a brain tumor "eleven days short of his sixteenth birthday."<sup>42</sup> Even so,

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<sup>38</sup> Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 1.

<sup>39</sup> Cunningham, 4-5.

<sup>40</sup> Jim Forest, *Living With Wisdom: A Life of Thomas Merton* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 8-9.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

Merton was able to continue his education with the financial support of his maternal grandparents. He finished secondary school and one year of university in England living a bohemian existence. He eventually returned to the United States to finish college obtaining both bachelor and masters of arts degrees in literature at Columbia University. He later taught literature at St. Bonaventure University, and entered the monastery in 1941 after a failed attempt to join the Franciscans.<sup>43</sup> Merton's brother, John Paul, died in Lent of 1943 after his bomber was shot down over the North Sea.<sup>44</sup> There is, no doubt, distance between the twenty-first century North American parish pastor and the experience of Thomas in terms of place and time.

Second, not only was Merton's upbringing unique, but he also lived the communal life of the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance (also known as "Cistercians" or "Trappists"). The Cistercian life is known to be an austere life ordered by the Rule of Saint Benedict. At the time when Merton entered Cistercian life at the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1941, this would have certainly been true. As Cunningham notes, "Almost everyone who speaks or writes of the Abbey of Gethsemani, located just south of Bardstown, Kentucky, where Thomas Merton became a monk in 1941, describes the life there as 'medieval.'"<sup>45</sup> Merton's life at Gethsemani in many ways was a world away from the surrounding culture. It was a life structured by the liturgical observances, daily prayer, manual labor, and monastic discipline of the Cistercians of that time. Cunningham observes,

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<sup>43</sup> Cunningham, 6-13.

<sup>44</sup> Forest, 84-85.

<sup>45</sup> Cunningham, 19.

The life in a Trappist monastery was self-consciously rigorous and penitential. The diet was vegetarian, with meat provided only for the elderly or the sick. Dom Frederic [Merton's first Abbot] was a Trappist formed in the old style. It was said of Dom Frederic, half humorously, that he had two basic rules for the community: 'Do what you are told' and 'Do what you are told.' When he became abbot, among his first acts was to abolish the Easter morning 'treat' of two fried eggs as needlessly extravagant!<sup>46</sup>

To say this was outside the normal experience of most is a profound understatement.

Yet, Merton can connect with a contemporary North American audience about the spiritual life in a way that transcends, time, culture, and language.

### ***B. Active Versus Contemplative***

When arguing for the significance of contemplation in an active vocation such as parish ministry it is necessary to confront the perceived tension of contemplation and action. Indeed, the title of Merton's essay collection, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, suggests as much. Throughout Christian history contemplation has been perceived as antithetical to an active Christian life. But should that be the case?

True, the contemplative life suggests a certain level of withdrawal from the frenetic energy of the surrounding culture. The church throughout history has suggested the need for solitude and withdrawal to pursue prayer. Perhaps the most significant example is Jesus' need to withdraw for prayer depicted in the Gospels.<sup>47</sup> Withdrawal is indispensable to the contemplative life.

Yet, discipleship includes action even for those who identify as contemplative. This is certainly true in Merton's case. He was engaged in manual labor as an aspect of

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>47</sup>Some examples include Matthew 14:23, Mark 1:35, Luke 6:12, and Luke 9:28-29.

his life of prayer. You could also say that Merton was one of the “loudest” and active contemplative monks in history given his prolific literary, teaching, and artistic output. A contrast between more active endeavors in the Christian life with those that are more contemplative is reasonable. However, to perceive this contrast as a strict dichotomy is unreasonable. As noted in the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, “St. Augustine maintained that there is a contemplative element (namely faith) and a practical element (morals) in every Christian life.”<sup>48</sup> Needless to say, the same is true for the parish pastor. Merton states, “Both [contemplation and action] are, in fact, demanded by charity, since man is commanded to love both God and his neighbor. Both must be combined in any earthly vocation, whether it be in the life of the pastor of souls or of the contemplative monk.”<sup>49</sup>

### *C. Thinking/Experiencing and Constructing/Deconstructing*

As noted above, James K.A. Smith, building on the work of Alistair MacIntyre, describes human beings as “desiring animals,” and argues that the habits or practices of humans are more important for determining their image of “the good life” than descriptions of their thinking. So is not writing a thesis just another exercise in “thinking” that may or may not prove helpful in shaping the practices that curate the heart of a person? After all, contemplation is often thought of as an exercise in apophatic theology as opposed to cataphatic theology. The *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, describes apophatic theology as “[a] negative theology, a way of approaching God by denying that any of

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<sup>48</sup> E.A. Livingstone, *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, Third Edition* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997), 409.

<sup>49</sup> Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 52.

our concepts can properly be affirmed of Him.”<sup>50</sup> That being the case, one could argue that it is counterproductive to attempt to construct a theological paradigm out of an experience that is apophatic. All theology is analogic and that ultimately our metaphors about God prove inadequate. Nevertheless, reflecting on practices that help shape one’s social imaginary is crucial for shaping our desires as disciples. Words are a means of reflecting on our habits. While contemplation is concerned with a direct experience of God, which is an experience beyond language, words are the only tool we have to reflect on this topic. We should not be deterred working to draw closer to God and one another, and working to describe such experiences. Therefore, we are left to utter about the unutterable.

### *III. The Way Forward*

In the work ahead, the following topics and themes in Merton’s work will be examined to construct an appropriate thematic paradigm of discipleship practice for the parish pastor. This thesis argues that these themes in particular get to the monastic heart of Thomas Merton and, therefore, form an appropriate paradigm to ground the parish pastor’s life and work. The parish pastor can then use these themes to shape her discipleship practices to curate a desire for God. Chapter 1 will address the question, “Why contemplation?” Chapter 2 will speak to the theme, “The Call to Integrity.” Chapter 3 will discuss “The Need for Solitude.” Chapter 4 will address, “A Life of Discipline and A Heart of Gratitude.” The goal of the conclusion is to bring these themes

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<sup>50</sup> Livingstone, 88.

together as a constructive paradigm for hope and renewal for parish pastors. Now we turn to the question, why is contemplation important for the work of the parish pastor?



# Chapter 1 Why Contemplation?

For Thou hast made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee.

St. Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*<sup>1</sup>

## 1.1 *The Focal Point of Worship*

The need for a contemplative thematic paradigm for parish pastors is rooted in humankind's need for an experience of God. This is not adding one more superfluous activity to the life of the parish pastor. Rather, it is explicating critical themes to cultivate habits necessary to keep the gift of God's grace, and our need to respond in love to that gift, central to all of life. The many demands of parish ministry, rooted in the demands of the culture and the marginalization of faith in public life, have created for parish pastors an existential sense of dread about the demise of the institutional church and "burnout." Parish pastors bear the weight of leading one of the most complex volunteer organizations in the world.<sup>2</sup> They need not only to manage the organization, but also to serve as a model of Christian life. To do this, a parish pastor must keep her relationship with God first and foremost.

Yet, pastors often get lost in the rigors of the daily "to do list," the challenges of interpersonal conflict among parishioners, and the call to innovate. There is also the seduction of appearing culturally relevant, popular, and powerful, when the Gospel is counter-cultural and rooted in the self-emptying love of Jesus Christ. It is easy to lose one's way. It is not that these issues are not important. But they can become distractions

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*. Trans. F.J. Sheed (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 2006), 3.

<sup>2</sup> I admit that using the phrase "volunteer organization" is freighted with distinctly "one-third world" or "first world" baggage. Regardless, this description is apt in the North American context. The parish pastor is charged with forming and leading people without the benefits of an employment relationship and its built-in accountability mechanisms.

if the purpose sharing the good news of the Gospel and forming disciples gets lost in the busyness. When that happens pastors become weary and often lose sight of the fact that ministry is a gift of God's grace. Pastors get lost in questions like, what new discipleship paradigm is needed? What new technology is needed? What new thing will engage worshipers? What new evangelism program will work in this increasingly post-Christian age? How can I woo my people to reach out to the community? How do I get them to agree on the paint for the bathroom, or carpet for the sanctuary? How do I change my parishioners' perspective that the church is yet another venue for them to craft something suitable for their perceived needs, i.e., how do I combat the pervasive formation of consumers rather than disciples? The truth of the matter is that essential to a pastor negotiating her way through the perceived need to be relevant, popular, and powerful is to recognize that pastors need to be grounded in who they have been called to be throughout Christian history.

Creating an appropriate thematic paradigm for the parish pastor involves theological ontology and Christian ethics. We must consider who we are, and what we are called to do. Where are the resources for such an endeavor? The primary resource is the worship life of the church throughout the ages. Worship scholar, Lawrence Hull Stookey, states that all Christians suffer from "spiritual amnesia. We forget what God has done for each of us and promised to us."<sup>3</sup> The heart of the solution resides in Christian worship.

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<sup>3</sup> Lawrence Hull Stookey, *Baptism: Christ's Act in the Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1982), 13.

How is this endeavor ontological and ethical? Through baptism Christians receive a new identity as child of God. We receive strength and guidance for new life through the power of the Holy Spirit. This is a new way of being and acting that is counter to surrounding culture. But the formative efforts of the culture often far outweigh the efforts of the church. Madison Avenue's formative efforts are enticing and ubiquitous whether they involve viewing millions of Internet banners or billboards, or constantly connecting to smart phones. The counter-formative efforts of the church to shape Christian disciples often pales in comparison to the affective power of the surrounding culture. We face a new and challenging leadership context.

### ***1.1.1 The Contemporary North American Cultural Milieu***

The tools to create a paradigm for God-focused ministry may not be new, but the contemporary context is for this generation of leaders. Explicating Charles Taylor's tome, *A Secular Age*,<sup>4</sup> James K.A. Smith argues that Christianity now lives in a "cross-pressured" culture.<sup>5</sup> This is an age where "Your neighbors inhabit what Charles Taylor calls an 'immanent frame'; they are no longer bothered by 'the God question' as a question because they are devotees of 'exclusive humanism' – a way of being-in-the-world that offers significance without transcendence. They don't feel like anything is missing."<sup>6</sup> This is an age of numerous competing narratives in which Christianity is just one among many. Many, if not most, do not feel the need for anything transcendent.

There is a sense that most have what they need to live in the present in their "immanent

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<sup>4</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Belkap Press, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> James K.A. Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2014), x.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, viii.

frame.” Even so, there is still the sense of being “cross-pressured....suspended between the malaise of immanence and the memory of transcendence.”<sup>7</sup> Smith describes this as being “haunted.”<sup>8</sup> He argues:

Taylor names and identifies what some of our best novelists, poets, and artists attest to: that our age is haunted. On the one hand, we live under a brass heaven, ensconced in immanence. We live in the twilight of both gods and idols. But their ghosts have refused to depart, and every once in a while we might be surprised to find ourselves tempted by belief, by intimations of transcendence. Even what Taylor calls the “immanent frame” is haunted. On the other hand, even as faith endures in our secular age, believing doesn’t come easy. Faith is fraught; confession is haunted by an inescapable sense of its contestability. We don’t believe instead of doubting; we believe *while* doubting. We’re all Thomas now.

We live in an age where “our agnosticism and our devotion are mutually haunted and haunting.”<sup>9</sup>

To remain faithful in this cross-pressured age the parish pastor must be grounded in the worship life of the church which can be simply expressed through the church’s *ordo*, i.e., key ways that the church orders or patterns its life. The church’s *ordo* is “bath, Word, prayer, and Table,”<sup>10</sup> i.e., baptism, proclamation of God’s Word, prayer, and Holy Communion or Eucharist. These practices are essential to the story of the church and help to describe who God’s people are and what they do.

### **1.1.2 People of Bath, Word, Prayer, Table<sup>11</sup>**

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., x.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>10</sup> Dirk G. Lange and Dwight W. Vogel, eds., *Bath, Word, Prayer, Table: A Liturgical Primer in Honor of Gordon W. Lathrop* (Akron, OH: OSL Publications, 2005). This phrase was taken from the book’s title.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

### **1.1.2.1 Baptism**

We must remember that being a pastor is an odd thing and this odd life is rooted in Christian baptism. The pastoral scholar and theologian, William H. Willimon, speaks helpfully about the connections between baptism and ministry in *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry, Revised Edition*.<sup>12</sup> Whereas Merton is an excellent guide for anyone pursuing contemplation, and Smith for understanding our current context and the work of formation, so Willimon is an excellent guide for anyone wanting to better understand and grow in the practical work of being a parish pastor. He will be continually referred to throughout this work as a helpful mentor for the work of parish pastor. Willimon states, “Take a Christian, a follower of Jesus by virtue of baptism. Put a stole around the neck of this Christian and you are on your way to making a pastor...by the world’s standards, having a yoke hung around your neck is an odd way to begin a job.”<sup>13</sup> According to Willimon, “Ministry is a gift of baptism” and at its heart is service.<sup>14</sup>

At first glance, baptism may not seem that significant; however, after closer inspection it is perhaps the most radical act a person can undertake. It is the Christian’s naming, claiming, initiation, and commissioning into ministry in the church. The Christian baptismal covenant has at its heart the renunciation and rejection of the ways of the world. It is an about-face from allegiance to the gods of the culture to new allegiance to the kingdom of the living God in Jesus Christ, and the reception of the seal

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<sup>12</sup> William H. Willimon, *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry, Revised Edition* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2016). I highly recommend this book for anyone seeking to grow in his or her work as a parish pastor.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

of the Holy Spirit for new life. It is a life of repentance and faith. The call to ministry begins in baptism and at the heart of this call is the life-giving grace of God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit that gives strength and guidance for new life. It is an ontological change in that the Christian receives a new identity in Christ as God's beloved child. Moreover, it is an ethical change in that the Christian has expressed allegiance to the kingdom of God, rather than to the gods of the culture.

Now let turn to Thomas Merton who is a rich resource in regard to baptism and its importance for the contemplative life. Baptism as an ontological and ethical change is foundational for Merton. Indeed, God's salvation is symbolized and enacted through baptism. It is the recognition of one's true identity in Christ as a child of God. Moreover, baptism is an ethical reorientation - a paradigm for living that enacts and woos the Christian into daily dying to sin, rising to new life in Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. As Stookey states, "Those who experience the new life in Christ turn from sin and rebellion to trust in the righteousness and sufficiency of God."<sup>15</sup> This ontological and ethical understanding undergirds all Christian endeavors for Merton.

Merton references baptism many times throughout his corpus. In his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain: An Autobiography of Faith*, Merton, in reference to his ascent to relationship with God states, "The essential thing was to begin the climb. Baptism was that beginning, and a most generous one, on the part of God."<sup>16</sup> Merton describes his call through baptism as a call "to the Promised Land which is participation in [God's] own life – that lovely and fertile country which is the life of grace and glory,

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<sup>15</sup> Stookey, 31.

<sup>16</sup> Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain: An Autobiography of Faith*, 242.

the interior life, the mystical life."<sup>17</sup> Merton expresses in his autobiography that this call is at once a gift of grace, and a profound responsibility, an ontological change and an ethical change.<sup>18</sup> For Merton, baptism is the central call and commission into ministry with Jesus Christ.

This perspective is reaffirmed in several ways in other Merton works. In *Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton argues,

In order to know and love God as He is, we must have God dwelling in us in a new and special way. And so God bridges the infinite distances between Himself and the spirits created to love Him, by supernatural missions of His own Life. The Father, dwelling in the depths of all things and in my own depths, communicates to me His Word and His Spirit, and in these missions I am drawn into His own life and know God in His own love. My discovery of my identity begins and is perfected in these missions, because it is in them that God Himself, bearing in Himself the secret of who I am, begins to live in me not only as my Creator but as my other and true self....These missions begin at Baptism.<sup>19</sup>

Merton conveys the same concept in *New Seeds of Contemplation* with increased attention to God's "gratuitous mercy" and the gift of freedom that God gives humankind to consent to God's grace and engage in "conscious acts of love."<sup>20</sup> He continues, "From then on our life becomes a series of choices between the fiction of our false self, whom we feed with the illusions of passion and selfish appetite, and our loving consent to the purely gratuitous mercy of God."<sup>21</sup> In *Contemplation in a World of Action*, Merton states, "The idea of 'rebirth' and of life as 'a new man in Christ, in the Spirit,' of a 'risen life' in the Mystery of Christ or in the Kingdom of God, is fundamental to Christian theology

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 247.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 247-248.

<sup>19</sup> Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, 33.

<sup>20</sup> Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 41.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

and practice – it is, after all, the whole meaning of baptism.”<sup>22</sup> Merton sees baptism as a means of grace and a paradigm for life with Jesus Christ.

To survive and thrive in parish ministry, the pastor must know her identity as child of God. This unconditional love and acceptance by God provides peace and the power for joyful response in living the call to parish ministry, a call to share the good news of the Gospel and shepherd God’s people into deeper discipleship. The values of the surrounding culture will constantly seek to distract pastors and distort this identity and call. But baptism reminds the pastor that she is a child of God, named, claimed, called, and commissioned into ministry in the life of the church, and all of this is God’s gracious gift to be received. It is a call to participate in God’s kingdom that was, and is, and is yet to come. This remembrance allows pastors not only to survive, but to thrive. Now we turn to the Word as an essential part of the church’s *ordo*.

#### **1.1.2.2 Word**

The Word is essential to what it means to be the church. The biblical narrative shapes the Christian world, and the proclamation of God’s Word is at the center of parish leadership. For Christians, the study of the Bible is not merely a literary endeavor. Rather, it is engagement with a sacred text considered a primary source for Christian life. It is a “text that both creates and critiques the church.”<sup>23</sup> As it is proclaimed in Christian community, the Bible sustains the church.

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<sup>22</sup> Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 201.

<sup>23</sup> Willimon, 113.



The parish pastor interprets and preaches the Bible for the church and, in the words of William H. Willimon, the church is, “a people subservient to the Word.”<sup>24</sup> The parish pastor must not forget that, “The Christian submission to scripture is...countercultural, provocative, strange.... Pastors assist congregations in reading carefully in order to align ourselves to a text, bending ourselves to the complex redescription of reality that is scripture.”<sup>25</sup> This is, indeed, a strange task. Yet, engaging scripture is another life-giving tool for the parish pastor’s contemplative lens.

Parish pastors often lead a fairly isolated existence. The biblical account finds itself more often than not at odds with the surrounding culture’s claims for what constitutes “real life.” In a sense, it is the biblical account that places the church in exile over and against the surrounding culture. Yet at the same time, it is the biblical account that nourishes the pastor’s ministry. Willimon, drawing upon the work of Walter Brueggemann, reminds us

that most of Israel’s scripture was written by a community either in exile or coming out of exile...Only exilic literature could adequately express the pain and loss felt by disestablished, relinquished Israel in the catastrophe of exile. Yet some of Israel’s most assertive, visionary, hopeful, pushy poetry and prose was also written in exile – testimony to Israel’s faith in a resourceful God who is determined to have a people.<sup>26</sup>

This should serve as a paradoxical reminder for the parish pastor of the power of scripture to renew and sustain the church while at the same time separating it from the surrounding context. Could such isolation be turned into a means of grace? Could

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 112.

isolation be viewed as an opportunity for solitude? The parish pastor must find herself grounded in the biblical text to survive parish ministry.

The grounding narrative of Merton's work is scripture. In *Contemplative Prayer*, Merton observes that the goal of early monastics was to "forget themselves and apply themselves entirely to the love and service of God."<sup>27</sup> He states this as a goal of early monasticism in an effort to recover and reinforce that goal among contemporary monastics. He further states, "This love expressed itself first of all in love for God's Word."<sup>28</sup> Merton's life as a monk in the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance was a life rooted in scripture according to the pattern of daily praise and prayer. In Merton's early monastic experience,

The monks began their first service of Matins at 2:00 in the morning, breaking some hours later for a quiet interval and a time for the priests to say Mass. Services then punctuated the rest of the day: Lauds at dawn; Prime at the first hour; Tierce at the third; Sext at the sixth; None at the ninth. Vespers were celebrated in the late afternoon and Compline just before retiring.<sup>29</sup>

Each of these opportunities for worship and prayer would have included the extensive reading and singing (?) of scripture.

Merton notes in *Thoughts in Solitude* that "The Psalms are the true garden of the solitary and the Scriptures are his Paradise."<sup>30</sup> He further states, "[in order] to learn the inner secrets of the Scriptures we must make them our true daily bread, find God in them when we are in greatest need – and usually we can find Him nowhere else and

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<sup>27</sup> Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 20.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>29</sup> Cunningham, *Thomas Merton & the Monastic Vision*, 21-22.

<sup>30</sup> Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*, 140.

have nowhere else to look!”<sup>31</sup> Yet, Merton also warns of using scripture for self-deception: “The devil is not afraid to preach the will of God provided he can preach it in his own way.”<sup>32</sup> Similarly, William H. Willimon states, “Scripture teaches us to be particularly suspicious when our ministry appears to be successful in bypassing Calvary.”<sup>33</sup> Scripture is at the heart of the Christian life. It is the heart of the parish pastor and the contemplative alike. We now turn to the role of prayer in the church’s *ordo*.

### **1.1.2.3 Prayer**

Prayer is critical for the work of the parish pastor. Willimon declares that the “first duty [of the parish pastor] is to work. Our second duty is to pray daily that God will give us what we need to fulfill the vocation to which God has called us. Work and pray. *Labor et Orans*. We work under the prayerful conviction that God is able to provide what God demands.”<sup>34</sup> In the Benedictine tradition it is *Ora et Labora*, to work is to pray. Indeed, the call is to pray such that work is prayer, and prayer is work, i.e., maintaining the disposition that all the parish pastor offers in life is a prayer to God who has the power to transform the pastor’s work into something more than she could ever imagine. This should be the prayerful disposition of the pastor’s work, providing light and hope.

The parish pastor not only should live a life of prayer, but also should model that life through public prayer. Some form of daily praise and prayer such as the daily office

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 140-141.

<sup>32</sup> Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 94.

<sup>33</sup> Willimon, 24.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 25.

is essential to help the parish pastor remain grounded in scripture and prayer.<sup>35</sup>

Moreover, William H. Willimon argues, “whereas prayer is the church’s speech to God and not to the congregation, it is undeniable that the pastor teaches the congregation in the pastor’s leadership of the Sunday prayers.”<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, Willimon states: “The pastor’s ministry of public prayer will be based in great part on the pastor’s own prayer life, the pastor’s continual practice of the presence of God in prayer. In prayer, the pastor does most explicitly and publicly what a pastor does throughout the week – lift the congregation and its needs, the world and its needs, before the throne of God.”<sup>37</sup> In order to model the life of prayer, one must live the life of prayer.

For Thomas Merton the essence of monastic life is prayer. Merton states this succinctly in the Introduction to *Contemplative Prayer*:

The monk is a Christian who has responded to a special call from God, and has withdrawn from the more active concerns of a worldly life, in order to devote himself completely to repentance, ‘conversion,’ *metanoia*, renunciation and prayer. In positive terms, we must understand the monastic life above all as a life of prayer.<sup>38</sup>

I will elaborate on this topic below in the sections, “What Contemplation Is,” and “What Contemplation Is Not.” Let us first turn to another essential component of this paradigm, the Table.

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<sup>35</sup> Prayer in the monastic tradition includes the reading and singing of scripture daily in community. Often the work of the parish pastor is solitary but for Sunday worship. Regardless, the parish pastor should recognize her or his connectedness with the whole of Christendom and the need to pray with the community at set times of the day even when alone. There are many excellent resources for this endeavor. However, this work should not be as rigorous as in the monastic context given the parish pastor’s more active vocation. Possible resources include various breviaries, *The Book of Common Prayer*, orders for daily praise and prayer in *The United Methodist Hymnal: Book of United Methodist Worship* or *Chalice Worship*.

<sup>36</sup> Willimon, *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry, Revised Edition*, 83.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 19.

#### 1.1.2.4 Table

While baptism names, claims, and commissions the pastor for ministry, Holy Communion is sustenance for the life of discipleship. The parish pastor must keep Holy Communion central in her life and the life of the congregation. The Great Thanksgiving during the celebration of Holy Communion is a moment of commemoration and anticipation. It is a moment when the people of God, God's *ekklesia*, reenact what God has done, is doing, and promises yet to do through the whole of God's salvific work. It is a figurative and literal re-membering of the body of Christ and it is an anticipation of the heavenly banquet yet to come. This is the anchor of the historic pattern of worship found in Word and Table.

This remembering and anticipation should be an anchor of renewal and hope for the parish pastor. As she leads the congregation in its collective prayer, the actions of "taking, blessing, breaking, and giving" shape daily living, providing an opportunity to transform the ordinary into the extraordinary by offering every aspect of life to God. In the words of Willimon,

Wondrous transformation is God's gift at the Eucharist. The gifts of God – bread and wine – are transformed as signs of Christ's real presence. The church – ordinary people of flesh and blood – is changed into the body of Christ. Women and men are transformed into Christ's ministers in the world. A meal of only bread and wine becomes a stunning victory banquet for God's triumphant kingdom.<sup>39</sup>

The pattern is for the pastor to allow her life to be taken, blessed, broken, and given such that she can be transformed into the real presence of Jesus Christ for those who come

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<sup>39</sup> Willimon, 87.

into contact with her. The pattern of the Eucharist is the pattern of life for the parish pastor.

The Eucharist is at the heart of who Thomas Merton was and what he did. In *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton states, “A contemplative priest will have a deep and absorbing sense of union with Christ as priest and as offering in the Eucharistic sacrifice – so much so that his Mass will be going on within him not only when he is at the altar but when he is away from it, and at many different moments during the day.”<sup>40</sup> Merton describes “the liturgical sacrifice of the Church” as both individually and collectively “mystical” as well as “cosmic.”<sup>41</sup> He continues,

The communion of the faithful in the Body and Blood of the Saviour not only really joins them to Him in a sacramentally mystical union but also unites them to one another in Christian charity and in the Holy Spirit. In signifying this union, the sacrifice also produces, by Christ’s grace, what it signifies. The cosmic aspect of the sacrifice is suggested by the very nature of the gifts offered to God. Bread and wine, the produce of the earth and of man’s toil, are transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ. Thus the whole creation as well as the labor of man in all his legitimate natural aspirations are in some way elevated, consecrated and transformed. The whole world enters into a hymn of glory in honor of the Creator and Savior. This is the perfect sacrifice.<sup>42</sup>

The call is to frame all of Christian life in the gift of the Eucharist. This is a powerful means of grace that holds the potential to transform the suffering of all Christians, including the work of the parish pastor. The waters of baptism confer identity and issue a call to ministry. God’s Word gives shape to the Christian world and its proclamation is central to parish ministry. Prayer is the air that gives life to Christian faith, and Holy Communion is the food for the journey. These practices are essential to

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<sup>40</sup> Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 161.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 165-166.

the contemplative life. Baptism provides the foundation for contemplation. Scripture points beyond the limits of human intellect and experience to a mystery beyond imagination. Prayer prepares the heart to move toward that mystery. Holy Communion continually reorients us to the deep mystery of love and grace. These resources are there for pastors, but they often fail to live into to their power. To flourish, pastors must avail themselves of this power.

#### ***1.1.2.5 Excursus: The Sacramental Power of Christian Marriage and Family Life***

This thesis would be incomplete without mention of the sacramental power of marriage and family life. Many pastors are married and have children. One cannot underestimate the power of the marriage covenant and the covenant of Christian parents with their children as opportunities to experience God.

The covenant of marriage involves God and the spouses. The covenant was established by God and is intended as an expression of praise to God. The marital covenant is rooted in God's grace and redemption wrought through Jesus Christ and should be governed by the power of God's Holy Spirit. The mission of marriage is to demonstrate God's life-giving love to one another and to be a means of grace allowing each person to grow into her or his true self for service to God and God's kingdom.

To be a Christian parent is to seek to model the love of God through parenting one's children. A good Christian parent helps the child develop into her or his identity as a child of God and disciple of Jesus Christ. This takes Christ-like love, sacrifice, and nurture.

The point is this: married pastors must not seek the contemplative life to the detriment of serving one's spouse and children. Many aspects of this thesis are prescriptive regarding the contemplative life. A pastor's pursuit of these practices must not interfere with the quest to experience God through one's marriage and parenting. Rather, pastors should see marriage and parenting as an opportunity to see God at work in one's life, not unlike the contemplative life itself. Marriage and parenting are sacramental when one remains fully present to one's spouse and children and the pursuit of God's will through those relationships. In fact, Merton states in *No Man Is an Island*: "We would be better able to understand the beauty of the religious vocation if we remembered that marriage too is a vocation...The ordinary way to holiness and to the fullness of Christian life is marriage."<sup>43</sup> He continues,

In marriage, God's love is made known and shared under the sacramentalized veils of human affection. The vocation to marriage is a vocation to a supernatural union which sanctifies and propagates human life and extends the Kingdom of God in the world by bringing forth children who will be members of the Mystical Christ. All that is most human and instinctive, all that is best in man's natural affections is here consecrated and an occasion of divine grace.<sup>44</sup>

## **1.2 What Is Contemplation?**

In some ways the larger existential question of this thesis is how an examination of contemplation in the work of Thomas Merton might address the contemporary dread of many pastors, which includes the perceived public marginalization of the church and their personal "burnout." This dread is exacerbated as pastors fall prey to cultural paradigms of success. Is it possible for the contemplative life to offer a paradigm for

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<sup>43</sup> Merton, *No Man Is an Island*, 160.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.



hope and renewal for the parish pastor? The answer is “yes,” but to further understand that process one must better understand Merton’s view of the contemplative life and contemplation itself.

Merton does not offer a “how to” account of contemplation. Rather, Merton accounts for the contemplative life experientially and thematically, and he does so as an invitation and warning. It is an invitation in the sense that humanity is meant to live in relationship with God. It is a warning in the sense that direct experience with God is life-altering.

As the title of Merton’s 1949 book *Seeds of Contemplation* implies, his hope is to provide some insight regarding “the interior life and contemplation” given that in his opinion these are “things we most of all need” and “have a great hunger for in our time.”<sup>45</sup> He describes *Seeds of Contemplation* as a “volume of more or less disconnected thoughts and ideas and aphorisms about the interior life...a collection of notes and personal reflections.”<sup>46</sup> *Seeds of Contemplation* provides rich images that help the disciple tap God’s grace. Themes like the holiness of all creation and the importance of identity and self-discovery help the disciple remain grounded in the grace of God. He reminds the disciple that life teems with paradoxes inviting us to experience the mysterious love of God. Merton calls the believer to experience real life in God through death to self and freedom through humility and self-emptying. Merton opens the reader’s mind to the notion that solitude speaks more about God’s truth than the noise of the surrounding culture.

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<sup>45</sup> Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, 13.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

In *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton amends and revises these themes, and describes life as full of opportunity for the contemplative. According to Merton, often the “word of God” is limited to the proclamation of the Gospel. This should not be the case. He continues,

every expression of the will of God is in some sense a ‘word’ of God and therefore a ‘seed’ of new life. The ever-changing reality in the midst of which we live should awaken us to the possibility of an uninterrupted dialogue with God. By this I do not mean continuous ‘talk,’ or a frivolously conversational form of affective prayer which is sometimes cultivated in convents, but a dialogue of love and of choice. A dialogue of deep wills.<sup>47</sup>

According to Merton, God’s invitation is one of “personal love,” not “a dictate of impersonal law.”<sup>48</sup>

Merton’s thoughts sharpen regarding the contemplative life in *New Seeds of Contemplation*. An excellent example is the following definition of contemplation:

Contemplation is the highest expression of man’s intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is a spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is gratitude for life, for awareness and for being. It is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant Source. Contemplation is, above all, awareness of the reality of that Source. It *knows* that Source, obscurely, inexplicably, but with a certitude that goes both beyond reason and beyond simple faith.<sup>49</sup>

Quite simply, the *telos* of contemplation is direct experience of God. Merton further states, “contemplation is a kind of spiritual vision to which both reason and faith aspire, by their very nature, because without it they must always remain incomplete.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 14.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

As quickly as Merton assigns language to this experience, he immediately warns that contemplation

is not vision because it sees “without seeing” and knows “without knowing.” It is more a profound depth of faith, a knowledge too deep to be grasped in images, in words or even clear concepts. It can be suggested by words, by symbols, but in the very moment of trying to indicate what it knows the contemplative mind takes back what it has said, and denies what it has affirmed. For in contemplation we know by “unknowing.” Or, better, we know *beyond* all knowing or “unknowing.”<sup>51</sup>

Herein lies the challenge of apophatic theology of which contemplation is an expression.

As shared in the introduction apophatic theology is a negative theology, a cancelling of concepts regarding God given that God is beyond our ability to conceptualize. That being the case, one could argue that it is counterproductive to attempt to construct a theological paradigm out of an experience that is apophatic. Even so, we know that work of theology is by analogy and that ultimately our metaphors about God prove inadequate. Regardless, that should not deter us from working to draw closer to God and one another by cultivating contemplative practices.

Merton notes that perhaps the language of poetry and art come closest to offering description for contemplative experience, yet it “is beyond aesthetic intuition, beyond art, beyond poetry.”<sup>52</sup> Indeed, contemplation is beyond all language or paradigms of intellect.<sup>53</sup> Contemplation at once “resumes, transcends and fulfills them all, and yet at the same time it seems, in a certain way, to supersede and to deny them all.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 1-2.

<sup>52</sup> Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 2.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

Regardless, Merton notes that even though contemplation supersedes all paradigms of intellect and experience, "This rejection is of course only apparent."<sup>55</sup> In fact, "Contemplation is and must be compatible with all these things, for it is their highest fulfillment. But in the actual experience of contemplation all other experiences are momentarily lost. They 'die' to be born again on a higher level of life."<sup>56</sup> Putting it another way, Merton says, "contemplation reaches out to the knowledge and even to the experience of the transcendent and inexpressible God."<sup>57</sup> Contemplation "knows God by seeming to touch Him. Or rather it knows Him as if it had been invisibly touched by Him."<sup>58</sup> Contemplation

is a sudden gift of awareness, an awakening to the Real within all that is real. A vivid awareness of infinite Being at the roots of our own limited being. An awareness of our contingent reality as received, as a present from God, as a free gift of love. This is the existential contact of which we speak when we use the metaphor of being "touched by God."<sup>59</sup>

Yet Merton also describes contemplation as a "response to a call."<sup>60</sup> For Merton, God is at once inscrutable, while at the same time closer than a friend, or brother, or oneself.

Contemplation is a call "from Him Who has no voice, and yet Who speaks in everything that is, and Who, most of all, speaks in the depths of our own being: for we ourselves are words of His."<sup>61</sup> He depicts humankind as words that are meant to "respond" to God, "to echo Him, and even in some way to contain Him and signify Him. Contemplation is

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 2-3.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

this echo. It is a deep resonance in the inmost center of our spirit in which our very life loses its separate voice and re-sounds with the majesty and the mercy of the Hidden and Living One.”<sup>62</sup> It is at once an existential question and an answer as God reveals Godself in humankind’s inmost being.<sup>63</sup> We find unity with God in contemplation.

Merton describes contemplation as “two levels of awareness”, an “awareness of the question” and “of the answer.”<sup>64</sup> According to Merton, it is not a philosophical proposition. Rather, it is “an experience: ‘I AM.’”<sup>65</sup> It is pure gift.<sup>66</sup> It is an awakening, an awareness, an enlightenment. Merton states, “Contemplation is the awareness and realization, even in some sense *experience*, of what each Christian obscurely believes: ‘It is now no longer I that live but Christ lives in me.’”<sup>67</sup> It is inexplicable unity with God.

### **1.3 What Contemplation Is Not**

Given the apophatic nature of contemplation, Merton feels compelled to describe to some degree what contemplation is not. He does this most clearly in chapter two of *New Seeds of Contemplation*.<sup>68</sup> Merton warns that anything said about contemplation to some extent will be misleading.<sup>69</sup> He states,

The only way to get rid of misconceptions about contemplation is to experience it...For contemplation cannot be taught. It cannot even be clearly explained. It can only be hinted at, suggested, pointed to, symbolized. The more objectively and scientifically one tries to analyze it, the more he empties it of its real content, for this experience is beyond the reach of verbalization and of rationalization.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>68</sup> Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 6-13.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

Language cannot adequately contain contemplation.

Furthermore, science cannot adequately contain contemplation. To describe contemplation in terms of “reactions” and “feelings” is “to situate contemplation where it is not found, in the superficial consciousness where it can be observed by reflection... This reflection and this consciousness are precisely part of that external self which ‘dies’ and is cast aside like a soiled garment in the genuine awakening of the contemplative.”<sup>71</sup>

Merton then makes a distinction between the “superficial ‘I’” and an encounter with the “I AM.”<sup>72</sup> Merton describes the “superficial ‘I’” as something other than the “real self.”<sup>73</sup> It is what Merton calls “our ‘individuality’” or “empirical self”, but “not truly the hidden and mysterious person in whom we subsist before the eyes of God.”<sup>74</sup> This “empirical self” or “false self” is the “I” that “talks about itself” and observes itself.<sup>75</sup> For Merton, “Contemplation is precisely the awareness that this ‘I’ is really ‘not I’ and the awakening of the unknown ‘I’ that is beyond observation and reflection and is incapable of commenting upon itself.”<sup>76</sup>

Merton also declares that “Nothing could be more alien to contemplation than the *cogito ergo sum* of Descartes.”<sup>77</sup> Further clarifying, he states: “For the contemplative there is no *cogito* (‘I think’) and no *ergo* (‘therefore’) but only *SUM*, I AM. Not in the

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 6-7.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 7-9.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

sense of a futile assertion of our individuality as ultimately real, but in the humble realization of our mysterious being as persons in whom God dwells, with infinite sweetness and inalienable power.”<sup>78</sup> Nor is contemplation “trace or ecstasy,”<sup>79</sup> or “prophecy”<sup>80</sup> or an “escape”.<sup>81</sup> God is not a “what” or “a thing”, but a “Who” in Whom “our inmost ‘I’ springs into awareness.”<sup>82</sup> Contemplation is beyond explanation.

## **1.4 Conclusion**

Why is contemplation a powerful resource for the renewal of parish ministry? Contemplation is direct experience of God, which is the ultimate purpose of the Christian life. It is work in theological ontology and Christian ethics. We must be grounded in who we are and what we do if we are to further the kingdom of God in the twenty-first century.

The context for parish ministry in the twenty-first century has changed. This is a time in the life of the church where it is easier than ever for the parish pastor to lose her or his identity and mission. This is an age of competing narratives – a time when the Christian is one of many competing narratives for ultimate reality. It is a time where many do not feel a need for transcendence in their lives. Yet, humankind remains “haunted” by the need for belief and transcendence. There remains a deep desire for a sense of ultimate reality.

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 11-12.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 13.

To anchor renewal we must turn to the foundational resources of Christian worship. Through baptism Christians are initiated into the church. They receive their identity, call, and commissioning through baptism and the same is true for the parish pastor. The biblical narrative gives shape to the Christian world and is the source of proclamation for the parish pastor. Prayer is communication with God and is essential for the work of parish ministry. Indeed, prayer should give direction to the pastor's work, and the pastor's work in turn should itself be an offering of prayer. The anchor of Word and Table is the Eucharist, which allows for all of the pastor's life to be transformed as it is taken, blessed, broken, and given for the sake of the world. Worship is the foundation for the contemplative life.

So what is contemplation? Quite simply, direct experience of God. It is experiencing the fullness of God who is ultimate revelation. It is losing ourselves in God, and thus being transformed into our true selves - God's good and perfect creation - and thereby being drawn into the mystery that is God. It is a sense of being one's full and best self in God, yet much more. It is gratitude, hope, and new life. It is a profound awareness of the source of life. It is a knowing, yet a knowledge of something beyond knowing. It is also rest in the faith that God's grace is entirely sufficient. This is contemplation. Yet, even as one begins to give definition to contemplation Merton warns the reader to take care in her efforts because contemplation is beyond explanation.

Regardless, the life goal of a parish pastor should be to cultivate receptivity to God's gift of the contemplative experience. What might such a life look like? To begin that discussion we now turn to "the call to integrity."



## Chapter 2 The Call to Integrity

To say that I am made in the image of God is to say that love is the reason for my existence, for God is love. Love is my true identity. Selflessness is my true self. Love is my name.

Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*<sup>1</sup>

### 2.1 Defining Integrity

With a basic understanding of how worship forms the foundation of the contemplative life and a sense of what contemplation is, this thesis now turns to how the contemplative life is a call to integrity. But before delving into Thomas Merton's thoughts on integrity, it would be wise to work on a basic definition of integrity.

According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, integrity at its simplest "is a synonym for honesty. But integrity is frequently connected with the more complicated notion of a wholeness or harmony of the self, associated with a proper conception of oneself as someone whose life would lose its unity, or be violated by doing various things."<sup>2</sup>

Stephen L. Carter in *Integrity* writes:

The word *integrity* comes from the same Latin root as *integer* and historically has been understood to carry much the same sense, the sense of *wholeness*: a person of integrity, like a whole number, is a whole person, a person somehow undivided. The word conveys not so much a singlemindedness as a completeness; not the frenzy of a fanatic who wants to remake all the world in a single mold but the serenity of a person who is confident in the knowledge that he or she is living rightly.<sup>3</sup>

For purposes of this thesis a notion of Christian integrity must be considered to combat the fractured existence of pastors driven by the demands of the surrounding culture.

Contemporary pastors are goaded by the cultural definitions of success that call them to

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<sup>1</sup> Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 60.

<sup>2</sup> Simon Blackburn, *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy, Second Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 188.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen L. Carter, *Integrity* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishing, 1996), 7.

pander to increased attendance detached from any sense of forming disciples; the drive to present self-help advice to a society that wants a quick fix; and a need for ever increasing budgets to demonstrate significance. These issues and more, keep pastors distracted and fragmented. Pastors must cultivate a sense of wholeness as a disciple of Jesus Christ to remain grounded in parish ministry, and to thrive in leading the church in culturally difficult days. Integrity is essential.

So what is integrity for the Christian? Christian integrity is a unity or wholeness found in relationship with Jesus Christ. The preeminent sign-act of God's grace at work in a disciple is holy baptism. The baptismal covenant reminds the disciple who she is, and to whom she belongs. A Christian, by the grace of God, is initiated, named, claimed, and commissioned into ministry through the waters of holy baptism. The disciple is reminded that God has made a covenant with humankind and adopted her into the church through grace and called her to live a life of response through faith and love. When Christians live the covenant made through baptism, the life of Christian integrity is maintained. It is a life of unity and wholeness through living in response to God's grace – a life of loving God and loving neighbor. Even though God maintains God's covenant, humankind often fails to keep its end of the deal. It is a covenant that disciples must renew time and again. The world has a way marring the image of God. Recalling the cleansing waters of baptism helps the Christian disciple remember her true self created by God. Living the baptismal covenant is the Christian's path to wholeness.

Yet, one should not assume that a life of Christian integrity assures that all will go well in this life according to worldly standards. Indeed, the baptismal covenant woos

disciples to come and die, as Jesus Christ emptied himself and died on a cross for love of humankind. This is a love that upends the kingdoms of the world. In fact, a disciple should expect difficulty. Even so, that difficulty can be transformed and transforming through God's grace.

Similarly, the "food for the journey" of Christian discipleship is holy communion. Henri J.M. Nouwen in *Can You Drink the Cup?* uses holy communion as a metaphor for the Christian spiritual life.<sup>4</sup> He states:

When Jesus asks his friends James and John, the sons of Zebedee, 'Can you drink the cup that I am going to drink?' he poses the question that goes right to the heart of my priesthood and my life as a human being...Can you drink the cup? Can you empty it to the dregs? Can you taste all the sorrows and joys? Can you live your life to the full whatever it will bring?<sup>5</sup>

In this short book, the question for Nouwen is, will the disciple allow all of her life (the good, the bad, and the otherwise) to be taken, blessed, broken, given, and thereby changed into the real presence of Jesus Christ? Will the disciple give herself fully to God such that it is the power of the Trinity living in and through the disciple? This is at the heart of Merton's view of integrity.

In his chapters entitled "Integrity" in both *Seeds* and *New Seeds*, Merton speaks of integrity as finding one's true self. He states: "Many poets are not poets for the same reason that many religious men are not saints: they never succeed in being themselves."<sup>6</sup> By this he means that many artists and religious persons never arrive at true integrity because they spend their time not in discovering who it is that God has created them to

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<sup>4</sup> Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Can You Drink the Cup?* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1996), 19.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 19-20.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

be. Rather, they spend their time imitating others. "They wear out their minds and bodies in a hopeless endeavor to have somebody else's experiences or write somebody else's poems or possess somebody else's spirituality."<sup>7</sup> Crucial to integrity is an understanding of "who I am" and "what I am called to do," i.e., a sense of vocation. Merton speaks of integrity in numerous ways, but this thesis gives close attention to vocation and the call to self-forgetfulness.

## **2.2 Vocation**

### **2.2.1 Who I Am**

To live with integrity one must understand one's identity. One's true identity is revealed in Christian baptism. It is in and through baptism that a person is awakened to the reality that she is a child of God. Each child of God possesses unique gifts and graces to be employed in the furtherance of God's kingdom. Speaking of vocation Merton writes,

Each one of us has some kind of vocation. We are all called by God to share in His life and in His Kingdom. Each one of us is called to a special place in the Kingdom. If we find that place we will be happy. If we do not find it, we can never be completely happy. For each one of us, there is only one thing necessary: to fulfill our own destiny, according to God's will, to be what God wants us to be.<sup>8</sup>

For some in parish ministry, these words will be disquieting. It is not unusual to question one's call in the practice of parish ministry. Given the ups and downs of parish ministry, pastors often question their value and calling. Yet, vocation is less a certainty than it is series of commitments and a "living into." It is a journey of learning what it

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Merton, *No Man Is An Island*, 138.

means to live as someone tasked with ordering the life of the church, preaching God's Word, and administering the sacraments. One must continue to cultivate awareness of oneself and of God's wooing to a greater understanding of one's identity and call.

According to Merton, vocation is worked out in the freedom of God to equip and call disciples, and in the disciple's freedom to love God. It is a relationship of love, for "our freedom is a gift of God....in order that He may be able to love us more perfectly, and be loved by us more perfectly in return."<sup>9</sup> Merton continues, "Every man has a vocation to *be* someone: but he must understand clearly that in order to fulfill this vocation he can only be one person: himself."<sup>10</sup> Therefore, each disciple must engage in the quest for the "true self" with faith as the foundation when pursuing integrity.

### **2.2.1.1      *The Foundation of Faith***

The call to integrity requires understanding the foundation that allows for the true self to be revealed. This foundation is faith. Merton believes that one cannot pursue contemplation without a proper understanding of the nature of faith.<sup>11</sup> For Merton, faith is not an emotion.<sup>12</sup> The whole range of human emotions may be attendant to faith, but faith itself is not an emotion. Nor is it an opinion, or "a conviction based on rational analysis...You can only believe what you do not know. As soon as you know it, you no longer believe it, at least not in the same way as you know it."<sup>13</sup> So what is faith?

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>11</sup> Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 126.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

Merton states that "Faith is first of all an intellectual assent. It perfects the mind, it does not destroy it."<sup>14</sup> He describes faith as a different mode of knowing.<sup>15</sup> Faith is not an abstract principle. Rather, it is a relationship, a means of "vital contact with a God Who is alive...But the assent of faith is not based on the intrinsic evidence of a visible object. The act of belief unites two members of a proposition which have no connection in our natural experience."<sup>16</sup> It is an assent to the revelation of God.<sup>17</sup> Faith does not wholly satisfy the intellect, but

leaves it suspended in obscurity, without light proper to its own mode of knowing. Yet it does not frustrate the intellect, or deny it, or destroy it. It pacifies it with a conviction which it knows it can accept quite rationally under the guidance of love. For the act of faith is an act in which the intellect is content to know God by *loving* Him and accepting His statements about Himself on His own terms.<sup>18</sup>

For Merton faith is rational given that God is fully autonomous and free.<sup>19</sup> Faith is "primarily an intellectual assent," but it is more.<sup>20</sup> "It is also a grasp, a contact, a communion of wills, 'the substance of things to be hoped for.' It is not only an assent to "propositions revealed by God," but reception of God.<sup>21</sup> Faith is ultimately communion with God.

How then should propositions about Christian faith be understood? Merton sees propositions about God as problematic when they serve to distract from communion

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 127-128.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

with God.<sup>22</sup> He elaborates by saying, “the propositions which faith accepts on the divine authority are simply media through which one passes in order to reach the divine Truth. Faith terminates not in a statement, not in a formula of words, but *in* God.”<sup>23</sup> One should not be surprised with misunderstandings regarding faith if Christians rest into propositions, rather than “resting in God by faith.”<sup>24</sup> This does not mean that theological propositions are inappropriate or unnecessary for faith. Indeed, they are necessary. But Merton clarifies, “Faith goes beyond words and formulas and brings us the light of God Himself.”<sup>25</sup> Intellectual propositions of faith serve as “windows” through which God communicates.<sup>26</sup> Creed is important, but “above all, faith is the opening of an inward eye, the eye of the heart, to be filled with the presence of Divine light...Ultimately faith is the only key to the universe.” Faith is foundational for pursuing the true self, which in turn is necessary to embody integrity.<sup>27</sup>

### **2.2.1.2      *The True Self***

Integrity requires asking the question, “Who am I?” This question must absolutely be asked and answered by the parish pastor. But it must be asked in a way that avoids a simple reference to how one’s tradition might define the role. That is not to say that definitions of that sort are not useful. Indeed, such definitions are crucial scaffolding for a pastor’s identity and tasks. Yet, that scaffolding is at serious risk of collapse if the appropriate foundation is not laid.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 128-129.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 129-130.

The appropriate self-understanding of a Christian and, thus, a parish pastor, is as a child of God created in God's own image. But the challenge of the surrounding culture is the many alternative identities it would have a pastor claim. As argued earlier in this thesis, humans are what they worship. Thus, the question is not, will humans worship, but what will they worship? For many pastors, labels such as "leader", "manager", "expedient", "efficient", and "effective", are more often sought than living into the identity of "child of God." Yet, the essential identity of a disciple of Jesus Christ is child of God created in God's own image.

Merton speaks of identity in a number of different ways. Perhaps at its simplest Merton calls Christians to recognize their essential nature as children of God and take joy in that reality. In *Seeds of Contemplation* and *New Seeds of Contemplation* Merton writes, "A tree gives glory to God first of all by being a tree. For in being what God means it to be, it is imitating an idea which is in God and which is not distinct from the essence of God, and therefore a tree imitates God by being a tree."<sup>28</sup> He also speaks of individual differences as "part of the perfection of each created thing."<sup>29</sup> This is true for all of creation as "Their inscape is their sanctity. It is the imprint of His wisdom and His reality in them", i.e., it is their uniqueness or particularity. In this sense, all of creation gives glory to God.

But what about humankind? Merton clarifies with the following:

Unlike animals and the trees, it is not enough for us to be what our nature intends. It is not enough for us to be individual men. For us, holiness is more than humanity. If we are never anything but men, never anything but people, we

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<sup>28</sup> Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, 29.

<sup>29</sup> Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 24.



will not be saints and we will not be able to offer to God the worship of our imitation, which is sanctity....For me to be a saint means to be myself. Therefore the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self.<sup>30</sup>

For Merton, God has given humankind the gift of freedom. Vocation is a creative process between the disciple and God. A person can be who God has created her to be, or she can pursue a false self. But there are consequences to living falsely.

For Merton, pursuit of the "true self" is a dialectical process where identity informs action and action informs identity as vocation is worked out between the disciple and God. Merton says, "Actions are the doors and windows of being...we cannot find the depths of our being by renouncing all activity."<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, he states:

Our vocation is not simply to *be*, but to work together with God in the creation of our own life, our own identity, our own destiny. We are free beings and sons of God. This means to say that we should not passively exist, but actively participate in His creative freedom, in our own lives, and in the lives of others, by choosing the truth. To put it better, we are even called to share with God the work of *creating* the truth of our identity.<sup>32</sup>

The disciple must work to find her essence in the essence of God. It is at once self-discovery and self-negation. According to Merton,

To work out our own identity in God, which the Bible calls 'working out our own salvation,' is a labor that requires sacrifice and anguish, risk and many tears. It demands close attention to reality at every moment, and great fidelity to God as He reveals Himself, obscurely, in the mystery of each new situation.<sup>33</sup>

The secret of the disciple's true self is hidden in the essence of God. The objective is to pursue one's identity in God, but one must work to achieve this identity. This pursuit

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas Merton, *Thoughts In Solitude*, 134.

<sup>32</sup> Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 32.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

will never be complete within this lifetime. The true self is a gift of God, but it requires work in order for the disciple to find that identity in God. Merton describes the effort as follows: "The way of doing it is a secret I can learn from no one else but Him. There is no way of attaining to the secret without faith. But contemplation is the greater and more precious gift, for it enables me to see and understand the work that He wants done."<sup>34</sup>

For Merton the existential angst of the disciple is a consequence of failing to yield to the true self. He states,

*The seeds that are planted in my liberty at every moment, by God's will, are the seeds of my own identity, my own reality, my own happiness, my own sanctity. To refuse them is to refuse everything; it is the refusal of my own existence and being: of my identity, my very self. Not to accept and love and do God's will is to refuse the fullness of my existence.*<sup>35</sup>

If one remains attached to one's own passions, pursuing the masks of the surrounding culture, then one destines oneself to self-contradiction, i.e., one yields to the false self and integrity is destroyed.<sup>36</sup>

### **2.2.1.3      *The False Self***

Sin prevents the pursuit and realization of integrity. Merton equates the false self with original sin. He elaborates, "To say I was born in sin is to say I came into the world with a false self. I was born in a mask. I came into existence under a sign of contradiction, being someone that I was never intended to be and therefore a denial of what I am supposed to be."<sup>37</sup> The many masks imposed by culture are a profound danger to pastors and have the power to subvert the cause of Christ in the local parish.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 33-34.

Living as a false self is a type of sin that permeates existence and threatens the efficacy of the ministry of the parish pastor.

Merton puts it this way: "Every one of us is shadowed by an illusory person: a false self. This is the man that I want myself to be but who cannot exist, because God does not know anything about him. And to be unknown of God is altogether too much privacy."<sup>38</sup> He further elaborates, "My false and private self is the one who wants to exist outside the reach of God's will and God's love – outside of reality and outside of life. And such a self cannot help but be an illusion."<sup>39</sup> Yet, most do not recognize the false self. Indeed, for most, the false self is reality. But it is a subjective reality that "cannot exist."<sup>40</sup> It is a life committed to "a shadow" and it is a "life of sin."<sup>41</sup>

The false self is a life rooted in one's own "egocentric desires."<sup>42</sup> The false self is seductive and insidious in that it orders life around these self-serving desires and it does so unbeknownst to the one being seduced.<sup>43</sup> Merton describes it as

wind[ing] experiences around myself and cover[ing] myself with pleasures and glory like bandages in order to make myself perceptible to myself and to the world, as if I were an invisible body that could only become visible when something visible covered its surface.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

For the disciple, the secret of her or his identity “is hidden in the love and mercy of God.” To discover that ultimate reality and move toward greater integrity requires receptivity and action.<sup>45</sup>

## **2.2.2 What I Am Called to Do**

### **2.2.2.1 Self-Discovery**

Integrity is impossible without self-discovery. A counselor, therapist, or spiritual director can be invaluable in this regard. To avoid falling prey to the false self, one must return again and again to self-discovery through prayer in communion with God. One must continually discern the true motives at work in all relationships. Self-deception is the most powerful weapon of the false self. So how does one pursue self-discovery?

In regard to self-discovery, Merton declares,

There exists some point at which I can meet God in a real and experimental contact with His infinite actuality. This is the “place” of God, His sanctuary – it is the point where my contingent being depends upon His love. Within myself is a metaphorical apex of existence at which I am held in being by my Creator.<sup>46</sup>

This is the place where the disciple finds herself one with God. Merton makes an analogy to speech: “God utters me like a word containing a partial thought of Himself.

A word will never be able to comprehend the voice that utters it.”<sup>47</sup> Self-discovery in God for Merton is salvation. He elaborates,

[Salvation] connotes a deep respect for the fundamental metaphysical reality of man. It reflects God’s own infinite concern for man, God’s love and care for man’s inmost being, God’s love for all that is His own in man, His son. It is not only human nature that is “saved” by the divine mercy, but above all the human

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

*person*. The object of salvation is that which is unique, irreplaceable, incommunicable – that which is myself alone. This true inner self must be drawn up like a jewel from the bottom of the sea, rescued from confusion, the nondescript, the trivial, the sordid, the evanescent.<sup>48</sup>

Self-discovery in God leads to salvation from the many disguises the culture offers the disciple.

In a sense, for Merton, self-discovery is “Finding God.”<sup>49</sup> But he continues, “‘Finding God’ means much more than just abandoning all things that are not God, and emptying oneself of images and desires...Our discovery of God is, in a way, God’s discovery of us.”<sup>50</sup> God condescends to humankind and

looks at us from the depths of His own infinite actuality, which is everywhere, and His seeing us gives us a new being and a new mind in which we also discover Him. We only know Him in so far as we are known by Him, and our contemplation of Him is a participation in His contemplation of Himself. [But] in order to know and love God as He is, we must have God dwelling in us in a new way, not only in His creative power but in His mercy, not only in His greatness but in His littleness, by which He empties Himself and comes down to us to be empty in our emptiness, and so fill us in His fullness.<sup>51</sup>

Real life is found in the self-emptying love of God – something that is nonsensical to the surrounding culture. The self-emptying love of God is nonsense because the surrounding culture sees value in what one can gain or acquire or in the exercise of power over others rather than in what one can give away through service and selflessness.

For real life, the disciple must become who she is in God. Merton says, “In order to become myself I must cease to be what I always thought I wanted to be, and in order

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 39-40.

to find myself I must go out of myself, and in order to live I have to die.”<sup>52</sup> For most, identity is built around distinctions rather than commonalities. Pursuit of the true self is “sought not in division but in unity, for we are ‘members of one another.’”<sup>53</sup> Efforts to distinguish oneself from others often leads to the sin of pride which steals real life.<sup>54</sup>

Merton believes this is particularly dangerous for religious professionals. He warns,

As soon as they have done something which they know to be good in the eyes of God, they tend to take its reality to themselves and to make it their own. They tend to destroy their virtues by claiming them for themselves and clothing their own private illusion of themselves with values that belong to God. Who can escape the secret desire to breathe a different atmosphere from the rest of men? Who can do good things without seeking to taste in them some sweet distinction from the common run of sinners in this world?<sup>55</sup>

Pride is at its worst when masquerading as humility.<sup>56</sup> “When a proud man thinks he is humble his case is hopeless.”<sup>57</sup> One who has worked hard for the Kingdom of God can often slip into complacency. Merton puts it this way: “It is reasonable that his conscience should be at peace. But before he realizes it, the clean peace of a will united with God becomes the complacency of a will that loves its own excellence.”<sup>58</sup> The danger of this pride is its self-satisfaction. As Merton describes it, “The sweet warmth of pleasure becomes the criterion of all his works.”<sup>59</sup> The disciple’s self-perceived sainthood leads to

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 50.

a self-righteous martyrdom.<sup>60</sup> Integrity is not only an individual pursuit. The work of self-discovery must be in Christian community to guard against the dangers of pride.<sup>61</sup>

The complacency that Merton describes is particularly dangerous for pastors. The introvert can hide out in her study safely pursuing those things that bring pleasures to the introverted pastor (e.g., Bible study, sermon preparation, and the like), vice versa for the extrovert. This is not problematic in and of itself, but it is a problem if it keeps the pastor from being present to the congregation in ways that challenge the pastor. The pastor must live in the tension of being so given to the will of God that she is challenged and strengthened to face those things that lie beyond her comfort zone. This requires self-knowledge in order to combat complacency.

Accepting the praise of one's congregation is a satisfying and good thing. But it also puts a pastor at risk of owning that praise as something personal rather than something that belongs to God. It is not wrong to rest into the peace that God provides through living one's calling well. However, a pastor must take care not to so relish in that self-satisfaction that it leads to false humility and destructive pride. Pastors must beware of staying in the "sweet warmth" that this self-satisfaction supplies. Indeed, such "sweet warmth" should be an alarm bell to return to prayer and to look for the place of growth that the Holy Spirit might be revealing.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 50-51.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 51. This concept is addressed in more detail in Chapter 4, Section 4.1.4.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 50

### 2.2.2.2 *The Goal of Self-Forgetfulness*

The ultimate indication of finding oneself in God and the surest sign of integrity is self-forgetfulness. If the disciple is a “word” uttered by God and, therefore, a partial thought of God, then what does it mean to be one’s true self? Merton states, “if I am true to the thought of Him I was meant to embody, I shall be full of His actuality and find myself nowhere. I shall be lost in Him: that is, I shall find myself. I shall be ‘saved.’”<sup>63</sup>

Paradoxically, the fullness of God is found in emptiness.<sup>64</sup> God empties God’s self through Jesus Christ. Merton states, “The Father, dwelling in the depths of all things and in my own depths, communicates to me His Word and His Spirit. Receiving them I am drawn into His own life and know God in His own Love, being one with Him in His own Son.”<sup>65</sup> Merton describes these efforts to connect with humankind as the “supernatural missions” of God.<sup>66</sup> Merton declares, “My discovery of my identity begins and is perfected in these missions, because it is in them that God Himself, bearing in Himself the secret of who I am, begins to live in me not only as my Creator but as my other and true self. *Vivo, iam non ego, vivit vero in me Christus* (‘I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me’).”<sup>67</sup>

Disciples of Jesus Christ must empty themselves of selfish desires. Merton confesses,

Even when I try to please God, I tend to please my own ambition, His enemy.  
There can be imperfection even in the ardent love of great perfection, even in the

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 40-41.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 41.



desire of virtue, of sanctity. Even the desire of contemplation can be impure, when we forget that true contemplation means complete destruction of all selfishness – the most pure poverty and cleanness of heart.<sup>68</sup>

This self-emptying is life giving as one is being made whole in the fullness of God. The masks are removed and the disciple finds herself, or loses herself, in God who offers true life. In the final chapter of *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton reminds the disciple that God did not create the world to “judge it” or to “dominate it.”<sup>69</sup> Merton elaborates, “The world was not made as a prison for fallen spirits who were rejected by God...The world was made as a temple, a paradise, into which God Himself would descend to dwell familiarly with the spirits He had placed there to tend it for Him.”<sup>70</sup> God is at work to make it impossible for anyone to be God’s enemy.<sup>71</sup> The invitation of God is “to forget ourselves on purpose, cast our awful solemnity to the winds and join the general dance.”<sup>72</sup>

While cultivating one’s gifts and graces for the glory of God and the building of God’s Kingdom is life-giving, it is not always easy. Merton wants Christ’s disciples to live in the absolute joy that service to God brings, but to recognize the insidious nature of the human ego and its selfishness. Frederick Buechner’s well-known words resonate with Merton’s when he says, “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”<sup>73</sup> It is a life filled with joys and challenges.

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 290.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 293.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 297.

<sup>73</sup> Mark R. Schwehn and Dorothy C. Bass, ed. *Leading Lives That Matter: What We Should Do and Who We Should Be* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006), 112.

In the words of Buechner, “Neither the hair shirt nor the soft berth will do.”<sup>74</sup> Yet discovering one’s true vocation should lead to self-forgetfulness. Integrity is being lost in the unity of God.

### **2.2.2.3      *The Priestly Vocation***

The vocation of parish pastor finds its integrity in being subsumed in the unity of God.<sup>75</sup> Merton gives voice to that in *No Man Is an Island*, where he states:

The priest is called to be another Christ in a far more particular and intimate sense than the ordinary Christian or the monk. He must keep alive in the world the sacramental presence and action of the Risen Savior. He is a visible human instrument of the Christ Who reigns in Heaven, Who teaches and sanctifies and governs the Church through His anointed priests. The words of the priest are not to be merely his own words or his own doctrine. They should always be the doctrine of the One Who sent him. The action of the priest upon souls should come from something more than his own poor human power to advise and to console. Human though his acts may be, poor and deficient in themselves, they must be supported by the sacramental action of Jesus Christ and vivified by the hidden working of the Divine Spirit.<sup>76</sup>

Merton’s view is highly sacramental, not only in the sense that the parish pastor presides over the sacramental ministry of the church, but most profoundly in the sense that the parish pastor is a sacrament herself, i.e., a visible sign of an invisible grace, a participant in the mystery of God’s love through Jesus Christ. Being one in God, finding unity or integrity in God, is the call to be another Christ.

Merton views the priestly vocation as a gift from God both to the priest and the church. Through practicing this vocation the parish pastor is “as much sanctified by the actions he performs in the course of his sacred ministry as are those souls for whom he

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Throughout this section “priest” and “parish pastor” will be used interchangeably.

<sup>76</sup> Merton, *No Man Is an Island*, 149-150.

performs them.”<sup>77</sup> While the vocation of the parish priest is a high calling, it is a calling given and vivified through the gift of God’s grace. Merton declares, “This explains at once the beauty and the terror of the priestly vocation.”<sup>78</sup> Merton describes this existential crisis as follows:

A man, weak as other men, imperfect as they are, perhaps less well endowed than many of those to whom he is sent, perhaps even less inclined to be virtuous than some of them, finds himself caught, without possibility of escape, between the infinite mercy of Christ and the almost infinite dreadfulness of man’s sin.<sup>79</sup>

Given the call and roll of the parish pastor, she cannot help but experience the profundity of God’s compassion for humankind and the love of God that drives such compassion. Yet, the parish pastor is human and subject to the sinful condition of humankind. This intensifies the parish pastor’s sense of sin and its destructiveness.<sup>80</sup> As Merton says, “All that [the parish pastor] hates becomes more hateful to him, by reason of his close union with Christ.”<sup>81</sup> Therefore, the existential crisis of beauty and terror is intensified in the vocation of parish pastor.

When explained this way, should it come as a surprise to the parish pastor the struggle that she often endures in fulfilling her vocation? Yet in many ways, living in the struggle is exactly where she belongs. Integrity is both process and disposition. The regular duties of writing sermons, offering pastoral care, managing staff and volunteers, teaching, and the like, become opportunities to live into this liminal state. Writing a sermon can be a form of *lectio Divina*. Pastoral care can be an extension of the care and

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

love that Jesus Christ offers to humankind. Staff and volunteers can be transformed by viewing their work as helping the children of God live into the vocation that God has given them. The same can be said for teaching and imparting sound doctrine to the body of Christ, the church. Even conflict is an opportunity to demonstrate the love and reconciling power of Jesus Christ.

Yet pastors also know that parish work is hard work that requires substantial time and effort, and leads to what we commonly call “burnout.” But, William H. Willimon is not fond of the term “burnout.” According to Willimon,

“Burnout” implies that our problem is a lack of energy...From what I observe, our pastoral problem of constancy is more a matter of “blackout” or “brownout,” the gradual dissipation of meaning in ministry, a blurring of vision, the inability to keep the theological rationale for ministry that is necessary to enliven our imagination. We wake up one day and no longer have a purpose for doing the things that the church expects us to do.<sup>82</sup>

A primary goal of this thesis is to provide a means to reviving meaning in parish ministry through contemplation and the contemplative life. But what this thesis should not do is drive a pastor toward simply adding more to her workload. The hope is that the themes and practices contained herein will offer the parish pastor discernment for what is really important in the course of her day. For example, relationship is indispensable to the vocation of parish pastor. Viewing life through a contemplative lens can help a parish pastor understand each opportunity for relationship as an opportunity for an encounter with God. Each human being is a child of God made in God’s own image. Seeking relationship with other human beings and helping parishioners be in

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<sup>82</sup> Willimon, *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry, Revised Edition*, 328-329.

healthy relationship with one another in their joint pursuit of the expansion of God's kingdom is an opportunity to encounter God. This opportunity must not be forgotten in the heat of conflict. Rather, it should keep the parish pastor listening and looking for those opportunities throughout the course of interacting with parishioners and the surrounding community no matter what the occasion.

### **2.3 Conclusion**

Regardless of one's vocation, the call to Christian discipleship is a call to integrity, a call to wholeness in God through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. The pursuit of integrity is a must for the parish pastor, which requires that she seek to understand God's call. This pursuit takes place in the context of the baptismal covenant. The cleansing waters of baptism help to uncover the true self made in the image of God.

Yet, pursuing Christian integrity should not be confused with peace as the world defines it, namely, as the absence of conflict. Rather, the disciple must let the good, the bad, and the otherwise of life be taken, blessed, returned, broken, and given as living bread to those with whom she comes into contact. She must let the power of the Trinity reign in her life as she gives herself away for the cause of Christ. This is at the heart of Merton's view of integrity.

The parish pastor should be who God has created her to be. This requires looking inward to answer the question of vocation. She must ask, "Who am I," and "What am I called to do?" At the heart of the baptismal covenant is the disciple's identity as a child of God. It is this self-understanding in faith that forms the foundation to pursue the gift of God's calling. The challenge to this pursuit is the many different identities that the

culture imposes upon a parish pastor. Merton speaks of identity in a number of different ways, but at its simplest he calls for the recognition of oneself as child of God. However, the gift and the struggle for humankind is freedom. One must find one's essence in the essence of God. For Merton, pursuit of the true self is a dialectical process where identity informs action and action informs identity as vocation is worked out between the disciple and God. Contemplation is the greatest gift to unlocking this mystery in God because it is participation in the mystery itself. In the experience of contemplation no more explanations are needed. There is no more groping in darkness. There is no more struggling. It is pure unity and oneness in the One who makes all things whole.

But sin, or living as a false self, destroys integrity. The false self is the greatest existential danger the parish pastor faces. It threatens the pastor and the efficacy of parish ministry. The false self is an "illusory person...This is the man that I want myself to be but who cannot exist, because God does not know anything about him."<sup>83</sup> For most, the false self is reality, but the reality is rooted in the surrounding culture and not in God. At the heart of the false self is one's ego. Bowing to one's ego obliterates the parish pastor's integrity.

The ego is the greatest single threat to parish ministry and contemplation itself. The pursuit of the desires of the ego involves discontent, but this discontentment is due to not getting what the ego desires. It is not a holy discontent. The pursuit of contemplation involves discontent at times, but it is a holy discontent that seeks to allow the Spirit to ferret out one's attachments. There can often be an egoistic contentedness

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<sup>83</sup> Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 34.

where one takes total pride in one's self and sees no need to pursue greater intimacy with God. In contrast, the pursuit of contemplation calls one to a greater awareness for the need for the Spirit's guidance and correction. Contemplation comes in the experience of unity with God in utter dependence and rest into God's grace. The pursuits of the ego destroy the possibility of receiving the gift of contemplation.

Key to remaining grounded in parish ministry is self-discovery. The help of a counselor, therapist, or spiritual director can be invaluable. For Merton, self-discovery in God is salvation. Real life is found in the self-emptying love of God. Merton says, "In order to become myself I must cease to be what I always thought I wanted to be, and in order to find myself I must go out of myself, and in order to live I have to die."<sup>84</sup> Once the parish pastor has found herself in God, the sin of pride becomes particularly perilous and must be guarded against through community. Pursuit of integrity is not merely a solitary endeavor. Christian community is a necessary tool of the Holy Spirit for identifying unconscious attachments that hold one in bondage to the ego. True integrity is found when one forgets oneself in God. Paradoxically, the fullness of God is found in emptiness. Cultivating the gifts and graces that God has given is life-giving, but not always easy. Self-forgetfulness or being lost in God is freedom. Self-discovery is a means to that freedom.

Indeed, unity or integrity in God is found by being lost in God. In describing the call of the parish pastor, Merton pulls no punches. The call is to be another Christ. This endeavor is rooted in the sacraments as the parish priest seeks to be a living sacrament.

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 47.

Through practicing the sacramental life of the church the parish pastor grows in sanctification. It is a high calling, but a gift given through the grace of God. It is “beauty and...terror” as the pastor’s flaws become excruciatingly clear in the light of God’s grace.<sup>85</sup> Yet, living in the tension of this struggle is where the parish pastor belongs.

Pastors must remember, integrity is found in God. As Merton explains, “To say that I am made in the image of God is to say that love is the reason for my existence, for God is love. Love is my true identity. Selflessness is my true self. Love is my true character. Love is my name.”<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Merton, *No Man Is an Island*, 150.

<sup>86</sup> Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 60.



## Chapter 3 Solitude and Prayer

Pure interior solitude is found in the virtue of hope. Hope takes us entirely out of this world while we remain bodily in the midst of it.

Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island*<sup>1</sup>

Having demonstrated the value of contemplation and the contemplative life for parish pastors, and the call to integrity in the contemplative life, we turn in this chapter to the need for solitude and prayer in the contemplative life. Contemplation cannot be experienced without solitude and prayer, which, for Thomas Merton, are inextricably bound. Solitude provides a means to receive the gift of God's grace for prayer. Solitude deepens the prayer life of the disciple and offers a greater understanding of her identity in God. When the disciple quiets the noise of the surrounding culture and the noise inside herself, it allows her to open up the center of her being and, thereby, encounter God. It also allows the disciple complete dependence upon God and the interdependence of humankind. This recognition is indispensable in making oneself available for the gift of contemplation. Thus, this thesis argues for today's parish pastor to devote more time to the cloister. This is not a call for the destruction of the active apostolic vocation of parish pastor. Rather, it is a call to a renewed interior life for the parish pastor to maintain the disposition of being in the world, but not of the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Merton, *No Man Is an Island*, 267.

## 3.1 *What is Solitude?*

### 3.1.1 *Exterior Solitude*

Merton distinguishes between exterior and interior solitude, to identify interior solitude as the primary objective. Even so, he marks the importance of exterior solitude in the process. Merton opines, “Although it is true that...solitude is everywhere, there is a mechanism for finding it that has some reference to actual space, to geography, to physical isolation from the towns and the cities of men.”<sup>2</sup> For Merton, solitude requires withdrawal, an exterior solitude. He states, “There should be at least a room, or some corner where no one will find you and disturb or notice you. You should be able to untether yourself from the world and set yourself free, losing all the fine strings and strands of tension that bind you, by sight, by sound, by thought, to the presence of other men.”<sup>3</sup> But exterior solitude must not be motivated by a hatred of humankind. Merton states, “If you seek solitude merely because it is what you prefer, you will never escape from the world and its selfishness; you will never have the interior freedom that will keep you really alone.”<sup>4</sup> Exterior solitude is a means to the ultimate destination of interior solitude. This requires silence.

#### 3.1.1.1 *Silence*

According to Merton, “There must be a time of day when the man who makes plans forgets his plans, and acts as if he had no plans at all...There must be a time of day when the man who has to speak falls very silent. And his mind forms no more

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<sup>2</sup> Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, 59-60.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

propositions, and he asks himself: Did they have a meaning?" Silence affords this opportunity.

It is silence that allows us to hear ourselves in our hearts and allows for the possibility of hearing from God in ways that transcend language.<sup>5</sup> In *No Man Is an Island* Merton declares,

God our Creator and Savior has given us language in which He can be talked about, since faith cometh by hearing and our tongues are the keys that open Heaven to others. But when the Lord comes as a Bridegroom there remains nothing to be said except that He is coming, and that we must go out to meet Him. After that we go forth to find Him in solitude.<sup>6</sup>

We must first quiet the tongue in order to quiet the soul.

Merton speaks of the language that comes from the depths of our soul as something that is beyond words. "When what we say is meant for no one else but Him, it can hardly be said in language. What is not meant to be related is not even experienced on a level that can be clearly analyzed. We know that it must not be told, because it cannot."<sup>7</sup> Silence draws us into a realm beyond words.

Silence also provides rest for the body that can lead to rest in our inmost being. "The silence of the tongue and of the imagination dissolves the barrier between ourselves and the peace of things that exist only for God and not for themselves. But the silence of all inordinate desire dissolves the barrier between ourselves and God. Then we come to live in him alone."<sup>8</sup> This rest allows us to open to our inmost being and to

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<sup>5</sup> Merton, *No Man Is an Island*, 269.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 271.

the possibility of union with God. Once exterior noise is quieted, we begin to hear what is really real.

The silence of the sky remains when the plane is gone. The tranquility of the clouds will remain when the plane has fallen apart. It is the silence of the world that is real. Our noise, our business, our purposes, and all our fatuous statements about our purposes, our business, and our noise: these are the illusion.<sup>9</sup>

It is silence that allows us to make distinctions regarding reality.<sup>10</sup>

Merton also describes silence as “the mother of speech.”<sup>11</sup> For it is in silence that we prepare ourselves for the ultimate declaration, which is Christ. “We speak to confess Him, and we are silent in order to meditate on Him and enter deeper into His silence, which is at once the silence of death and of eternal life – the silence of Good Friday night and the peace of Easter morning.”<sup>12</sup> Silence gives birth to the possibility of hearing that is beyond speech as the distractions of the exterior world are minimized.

Silence is a means to salvation. Merton declares, “My life is a listening, His is a speaking. My salvation is to hear and respond. For this, my life must be silent. Hence, my silence is my salvation.”<sup>13</sup> However, in order to make progress in silence, one must contend with distractions.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 272.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 276.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 273.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 274.

<sup>13</sup> Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*, 77.

### 3.1.1.2 Distractions

In his discussions of distractions, Merton writes, "Prayer and love are really learned in the hour when prayer becomes impossible and your heart turns to stone."<sup>14</sup>

He elaborates by saying,

If you have never had any distractions you don't know how to pray. For the secret of prayer is a hunger for God and for the vision of God, a hunger that lies far deeper than the level of language or affection. And a man whose memory and imagination are persecuting him with a crowd of useless or even evil thoughts and images may sometimes be forced to pray far better, in the depths of his murdered heart, than one whose mind is swimming with clear concepts and brilliant purposes and easy acts of love.<sup>15</sup>

Distractions can prompt deeper solitude as the disciple is driven toward a deeper hunger for God's presence. Therefore, the disciple need not get upset about distractions; rather she should allow them to fuel her hunger for God. According to Merton, the profit is found in "resisting distractions and learning something of your own helplessness."<sup>16</sup>

Distractions occur in part due to the "memory and imagination" being underemployed because our will and attention are drawn to "obscurely and mutely loving God."<sup>17</sup> According to Merton, once one has grown in the practice of meditation for "a few years," the will and attention fasten quickly to the pursuit of God and, thereby, under employ the mind such that "the doors of [one's] subconscious mind fall ajar and all sorts of curious figures begin to come waltzing about on the scene."<sup>18</sup> It is best to

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<sup>14</sup> Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 221.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

ignore these distractions and allow them to point the disciple's will and attention toward loving God.<sup>19</sup> For Merton, a sense of humor can be an asset with faced with distractions.<sup>20</sup> The more harmful distractions are those that "draw our will away from its profound and peaceful occupation with God and involve it in elaborations of projects that have been concerning us during our day's work."<sup>21</sup>

Distraction is a significant challenge for a parish pastor. As Merton writes, "It will be hard for anyone who has a heavy job on his shoulders to get rid of these things."<sup>22</sup> Yet this should strengthen one's resolve to pursue loving God and a life bathed in prayer. Merton offers this consolation:

It is the will to pray that is the essence of prayer, and the desire to find God, to see Him and to love Him is the one thing that matters. If you have desired to know Him and love Him, you have already done what was expected of you, and it is much better to desire God without being able to think clearly of Him, than to have marvelous thoughts about Him without desiring to enter into union with His will...He is unfailingly there; if He were not, you could not even exist. The memory of His unfailing presence is the surest anchor for our minds and hearts in the storm of distraction and temptation by which we must be purified.<sup>23</sup>

God is with us no matter the intensity of our distractions, and this consolation should encourage us to rest into interior solitude.

### ***3.1.2 Interior Solitude***

For Merton, "There is no true solitude except interior solitude."<sup>24</sup> He continues,

[interior] solitude is not something outside you, not an absence of men or of sound around you; it is an abyss opening up in the center of your own soul. And

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 224.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 56.

this abyss of interior solitude is a hunger that will never be satisfied with any created thing...The only way to find solitude is by hunger and thirst and sorrow and poverty and desire, and the man who has found solitude is empty, as if he had been emptied by death.<sup>25</sup>

It is here that the most important work begins.

### *3.1.2.1 From Attachments to Freedom*

For Merton interior solitude is found through moving from attachments to freedom. Perhaps the greatest impediment to interior solitude and contemplation is attachments, i.e., an “inordinate love” for things spiritual or physical.<sup>26</sup> Merton muses:

I wonder if there are twenty men alive in the world now who see things as they really are. That would mean that there were twenty men who were free, who were not dominated or even influenced by any attachment to any created thing or to their own selves or to any gift of God, even to the highest, the most supernaturally pure of His graces. I don't believe that there are twenty such men alive in the world. But there must be one or two. They are the ones who are holding everything together and keeping the universe from falling apart.<sup>27</sup>

Physical attachments are battled through ascetic practice (more on that in Chapter Four).

But spiritual practices and our feelings related to them, or generated from them, can

become attachments as well. Merton opines,

Even in the strictest monasteries and in places where people have seriously dedicated their lives to the search for perfection, many never come to suspect how much they are governed by unconscious forms of selfishness...In fact, it is often precisely the rigidity and the unbending formalism of these pious men that keep them from becoming truly detached.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 80-81.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 205-206.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 203.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 204.

Even a sense of peace can become an attachment!<sup>29</sup> Merton states, “recollection is just as much a creature as an automobile. The sense of interior peace is no less created than a bottle of wine.”<sup>30</sup> By recollection Merton means a re-collection of one’s existence in God, a sense of peace, unity, and oneness. The only difference between physical and emotional and/or spiritual attachments is one is “material” and the other is not.<sup>31</sup> Each can be a roadblock to the contemplative life.

According to Merton, there are some who are in an even worse state. They are those who “never even get as far as contemplation because they are attached to activities and enterprises that seem to be important.”<sup>32</sup> Not unlike a spiritual attachment, these sorts of attachments can easily “slip under the radar” for so-called “religious professionals,” such as monks and parish pastors. Sometimes these attachments that would be so apparent for laypeople might have a sanctified appearance for clergy. They are nevertheless toxic. Often clergy, not unlike the surrounding culture, desire “ceaseless motion...a constant sense of achievement...a hunger for results, for visible and tangible success...They work themselves into a state in which they cannot believe that they are pleasing God unless they are busy with a dozen jobs at the same time.”<sup>33</sup> Merton’s words can serve as an indictment for parish pastors:

Sometimes they fill the air with lamentations and complain that they no longer have any time for prayer, but they have become such experts at deceiving themselves that they do not realize how insincere their lamentations are. They

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.



not only allow themselves to be involved in more and more work, they actually go looking for new jobs...So having no interior strength left, they fall apart.<sup>34</sup>

These sorts of attachments can wreck a parish pastor's spiritual life. The call is not to more, but to keep "quiet" and "keep...at peace, attentive to the secret work He is beginning" in the pastor's soul.<sup>35</sup>

So how does one break free from the power of attachments? Detachment and renunciation are key themes for Merton in this regard. "The secret to interior peace is detachment. Recollection is impossible for the man who is dominated by all the confused and changing desires of his own will."<sup>36</sup> These are important words for parish pastors. "You will never be able to have perfect interior peace and recollection unless you are detached even from the desire for peace and recollection. You will never be able to pray perfectly until you are detached from the pleasures of prayer."<sup>37</sup> The key is to seek only God's will. Merton states, "If you give up all these desires and seek one thing only, God's will, He will give you recollection and peace in the middle of labor and conflict and trial."<sup>38</sup> Thus, even our labors, conflicts, and trials can be means of grace as long as the one thing necessary is present – the pursuit of God's will as primary.

The metaphors of desert, wilderness, poverty, and weakness are important to Merton in regard to detachment and renunciation. According to Merton, our intentions to love and serve God should be pure. Our intentions "are pure when we identify our advantage with God's glory, and see that our happiness consists in doing His will

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 206-207.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

because His will is right and good.”<sup>39</sup> The way to purity of intention comes through renouncing those things that hold us in bondage. Purity of intention comes through poverty and the desert. Merton states,

Our intention cannot be completely simple unless it is completely poor. It seeks and desires nothing but the supreme poverty of having nothing but God. True, anyone with a grain of faith realizes that to have God and nothing else besides is to have everything in Him. But between the thought of such poverty and its actualization in our lives lies the desert of emptiness through which we must travel in order to find Him.<sup>40</sup>

To be in the desert/wilderness, or to be impoverished and weak, is freedom to receive God’s grace for real life. The result is recollection. As Merton states in *Thoughts in Solitude*, “The unity which is the work of poverty in solitude draws together all the wounds of the soul and closes them. As long as we remain poor, as long as we are empty and interested in nothing but God, we cannot be distracted. For our very poverty prevents us from being ‘pulled apart’ (dis-tracted).”<sup>41</sup> As he explains, “Distress is to our advantage when we have nothing to seek but mercy. We can be glad of our helplessness when we really believe that His power is made perfect in our infirmity.”<sup>42</sup>

### 3.1.2.2 *Recollection*

As noted above, by recollection Merton means a re-collection of one’s existence in God, a sense of peace, unity, and oneness. Recollection is certainly something one should expect in relationship with God, yet Merton warns against seeking relationship with God in order to “feel” a certain way. Rather, true recollection

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<sup>39</sup> Merton, *No Man Is an Island*, 56.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>41</sup> Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*, 103.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 28-29.

is a change of spiritual focus and an attuning of our whole soul to what is beyond and above ourselves. It is a 'conversion' or a 'turning' of our being to spiritual things and God...It gathers up all the love of our soul, raises it above created and temporal things, and directs it all to God in Himself and in His will.<sup>43</sup>

Indeed, recollection is "known by its effects: peace, interior silence, tranquility, heart."<sup>44</sup>

It is a peace in the depths of one's soul. Recollection is a "fruit" of the Christian virtues, most especially "humility and charity."<sup>45</sup>

Yet, recollection is not to be confused with simple concentration. It is "more than a mere turning inward upon ourselves, and it does not necessarily mean the denial or exclusion of exterior things."<sup>46</sup> Merton declares:

Recollection should be seen not as an absence but as a presence. It makes us, first of all, present to ourselves. It makes us present to whatever reality is most significant in the moment of time in which we are living. And it makes us present to God, present to ourselves in Him, present to everything else in Him. Above all, it brings His presence to us. And this is what gives meaning to all the other "presences" of which we have spoken.<sup>47</sup>

Recollection calibrates the interior and exterior aspects of life, bringing them into balance.<sup>48</sup> Human senses are prone to "scatter to pursue their various quarries all over the face of the earth. Recollection brings them home. It brings the outward self into line with the inward spirit, and makes my whole being answer the deep pull of love that reaches down into the mystery of God."<sup>49</sup> This calibration is indispensable for the parish pastor. Given the active nature of parish ministry, without this cultivation of the interior

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<sup>43</sup> Merton, *No Man Is an Island*, 229.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 229-230.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 230-231.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 232-233.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

life a dissonance can develop between one's relationship with God and one's work.

According to Merton,

In order to be recollected in action I must not lose myself in action. And in order to keep acting, I must not lose myself in recollection. Hence recollected activity, in carrying out the will of God in the duties of my state of life, means a balance between interior purity and exterior attention. Both these are required.<sup>50</sup>

Recollection is a sense of rightness or unity. In a sense, it is the active work of maintaining integrity, an indispensable and ongoing part of our journey.

However, Merton warns of seeking the peace of recollection as an emotional state. While deep inner peace is often a by-product of recollection, recollection nevertheless is not something that takes the disciple out of the complicated relationship of living the Gospel in a culture at odds with the self-emptying nature of God's grace. Merton makes this point as he argues for monastic reforms that call for the recognition of the monk's obligations to God and the world.<sup>51</sup> In a sense, Merton is calling his brother monks to look beyond the cloister. This thesis is calling the parish pastor to devote more time in the cloister to allow for solitude and recollection.

### **3.1 *Meditation: The Prayer of the Heart***<sup>52</sup>

One practice that cultivates recollection is meditation. Meditation is an important topic throughout the Merton corpus, as it is the primary means of receiving the gift of contemplation. Therefore, its importance cannot be overestimated. Merton speaks of meditation in a number of different ways. One of these is meditation on the spiritual life

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, page number.

<sup>52</sup> "Meditation" and "prayer of the heart" are used interchangeably in this section.

through writing and deep reflection on spiritual topics.<sup>53</sup> The type of meditation under consideration here, however, is meditation as a particular form of prayer. Merton speaks most thoroughly and systematically about this topic among the texts under consideration in *Contemplative Prayer*, a book that was originally published under the name, *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*.

Meditation is a powerful tool for the parish pastor's work. The parish pastor must build bridges for parishioners from the worship life of the church to the ordinary day-to-day lives of persons seeking to walk the path of discipleship. These bridges help parishioners see the extraordinary in the ordinary as they begin to recognize God's presence in all things. The surrounding culture is hostile to the Gospel. The pastor must be adept at helping the parishioner know how to live in this complex milieu. To serve that leadership role the pastor must seek a deep prayer life capable of making connections from the church to the world, a prayer life that helps penetrate our ego-centric and socio-centric behavior. But more importantly, meditation can help the parish pastor better understand and identify the attachments that keep her from being the prophetic voice she needs to be to the congregation. It allows God to identify areas of self-deception in her life and further pave the way to the possibility of receiving the gift of contemplation.

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<sup>53</sup> Merton, *No Man Is an Island*, xiv.

### 3.2.1 *Not the Whole, But a Part*

One should first understand that meditation is simply a part of the whole life of prayer and worship in the life of the church.<sup>54</sup> Merton states,

In the way of prayer, as described by the early monastic writers, *meditation* must be seen in its close relation to *psalmodia*, *lectio*, *oratio*, and *contemplatio*. It is part of a continuous whole, the entire unified life of the monk, *conversatio monastica*, his turning from the world to God. To separate meditation from prayer, reading, and contemplation is to falsify our picture of the monastic way of prayer.<sup>55</sup> (See 1.1.1.3 Prayer).

Meditation should be viewed as part of the communal worship and prayer life of the church as a whole.

Merton describes meditation as a “twofold discipline” with a “twofold function.”<sup>56</sup> First, meditation helps you have “sufficient control over your mind and memory...to enable you to recollect yourself and withdraw from exterior things and the business and activities and thoughts and concerns of temporal existence.”<sup>57</sup> Second, “this is the real end of meditation...it teaches you how to become aware of the presence of God; and most of all it aims at bringing you to a state of almost constant loving attention to God, and dependence on Him.”<sup>58</sup> Merton elaborates,

The real purpose of meditation is this: to teach a man how to work himself free of created things and temporal concerns, in which he finds only confusion and sorrow, and enter into a conscious and loving contact with God in which he is disposed to receive from God the help he knows he needs so badly, and to pay to God the praise and honor and thanksgiving and love which it has now become his joy to give.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 29.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 217.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 217-218.

Meditation allows us to enter into the recognition of God's loving presence.

How is the success of meditation measured? Merton makes it clear that it is not by emotions or the cleverness of insights gained during the process, although at times these may be the fruit of meditation. Nor is it necessarily the recognition of God's presence.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, according to Merton, the closer one gets to God the deeper the mystery of God's existence.<sup>61</sup> In fact, the cloud that surrounds God may baffle or repel you.<sup>62</sup> Merton implores, however, not to give up at this point. Instead, "return to it at your appointed time each day, in spite of the difficulty and dryness and pain you feel. Eventually your own suffering and the secret work of grace will teach you what to do."<sup>63</sup> According to Merton, at that point in the practice of meditation you may be drawn to "a completely simple form of affective prayer in which your will, with few words or none, reaches out into the darkness where God is hidden, with a kind of mute, half-hopeless and yet supernaturally confident desire of knowing and loving Him."<sup>64</sup> The point, however, is that the success of meditation is the extent to which you are "forced to reach out for Him by blind faith and hope and love."<sup>65</sup> It draws the disciple into the recognition of her utter dependence upon God for everything, and cultivates her love for God. Again, this is one aspect of prayer, not the whole. As Merton states,

the kind of prayer we here speak of as properly "monastic" (though it may also fit into the life of any lay person who is attracted to it) is a prayer of silence,

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 218.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

simplicity, contemplative and meditative unity, a deep personal integration in an attentive, watchful listening of “the heart.” The response such prayer calls forth is not usually one of jubilation or audible witness: it is a wordless and total surrender of the heart in silence.<sup>66</sup>

At its simplest, meditation, or “the prayer of the heart,” is prayer that listens rather than speaks.

### **3.2.2 Meditation as Prayer of the Heart**

In *Contemplative Prayer* Merton explicates the phrase “prayer of the heart”:

It must be observed that the term *mental* prayer is totally misleading in the monastic context. We rarely pray with the “mind” alone. Monastic meditation, prayer, *oratio*, contemplation and reading involve the whole man, and proceed from the “center” of man’s being, his “heart” renewed in the Holy Spirit, totally submissive to the grace of Christ. Monastic prayer begins not so much with “considerations” as with a “return to the heart,” finding one’s deepest center, awakening the profound depths of our being in the presence of God who is the source of our being and our life...By “prayer of the heart” we seek God himself present in the depths of our being and meet him there by invoking the name of Jesus in faith, wonder and love.<sup>67</sup>

The prayer of the heart is a deep awareness of God’s infinite love, one’s need for God and one’s desire to please God.<sup>68</sup>

So what is the purpose of meditation as the prayer of the heart? Merton believes,

In the “prayer of the heart” we seek first of all the deepest ground of our identity in God. We do not reason about dogmas of faith, or “the mysteries.” We seek rather to gain a direct existential grasp, a personal experience of the deepest truths of life and faith, *finding ourselves in God’s truth*.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 29-30.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 30-31.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.



One's desire in meditation as the prayer of the heart can be summed up in St.

Augustine's words: "May I know you, may I know myself."<sup>70</sup>

To lead God's people the parish pastor must hear from God and obey.

Meditation as the prayer of the heart is a means to "lose ourselves in his love and rest in him."<sup>71</sup> To lead the church in any time, but especially in this time, pastors must "hear his word and respond to it with our whole being."<sup>72</sup> Pastors must "know his merciful will and submit to it in its totality."<sup>73</sup> This is the aim of meditation as the prayer of the heart.

The monastic life seeks "purity of heart, an unconditional and totally humble surrender to God, a total acceptance of ourselves and of our situation as willed by him."<sup>74</sup> According to Merton, "*Purity of heart* is...correlative to a new spiritual identity – the 'self' as recognized in the context of realities willed by God – Purity of heart is the enlightened awareness of the new man, as opposed to the complex and perhaps rather disreputable fantasies of the 'old man.'"<sup>75</sup>

Is "a total acceptance of ourselves and of our situation as willed by him" a form of complacency?<sup>76</sup> Is this valuing a so-called "life of balance" over the expansion and thriving of the Kingdom of God?<sup>77</sup> No. In fact, it is just the opposite. It is a relentless whole-bodied pursuit of God's will, but with the appropriate safeguards for self-

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Willimon, William H. "Integration: Sustaining and Strengthening Mission." Lecture, Recognizing and Living with One's Weakness., Duke Divinity School, Durham North Carolina, January 14, 2016. Bishop Willimon critiques the notion of "a life of balance" for the parish pastor. Willimon does not see an argument in Gospel accounts for "balance" in the life of discipleship.

understanding such that we are not shaken or distracted by the expectations of the surrounding culture. This is the ultimate recognition that one's identity is found in God and all other pursuits are illusion. Not only are these pursuits illusions, but they are bondage instead of the ultimate freedom God offers. Merton states,

My true identity lies hidden in God's call to my freedom and my response to him. This means I must use my freedom in order to *love*, with full responsibility and authenticity, not merely receiving a form imposed on me by external forces, or forming my own life according to an approved social pattern, but directing my love to the personal reality of my brother, and embracing God's will in its naked, often unpenetrable mystery. I cannot discover my "meaning" if I try to evade the dread which comes from first experiencing my meaninglessness!<sup>78</sup>

Meditation seeks to lead us deeper into love of God and love of neighbor. The self-forgetfulness of love of God and love of neighbor leads to true freedom.

However, Merton warns not to allow this self-forgetfulness to become "mere *impersonation*."<sup>79</sup> This can occur if we lower our defenses and allow "artificial, inauthentic" accretions to attach to our identity taking it outside of God.<sup>80</sup> According to Merton, "We must approach our meditation realizing that 'grace,' 'mercy' and 'faith' are not permanent inalienable possessions which we gain by our efforts and retain as though by right, provided that we behave ourselves. They are *constantly renewed gifts*."<sup>81</sup> Renewal of the gift of God's grace calls for continual humility that looks to God as "source and...end."<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 68.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

Thus, meditation should begin with the recognition of our utter helplessness and complete dependence upon God for everything in life. To encounter the depths of the prayer of the heart one must return to one's "nothingness" before God in order to enter into God's all-sufficiency.<sup>83</sup> To elaborate on the sense of nothingness, we will now turn to the climate of meditation and the dark night.

### ***3.2.3 The Climate of Meditation and the Dark Night***

The way to meditation and the contemplative experience is through the desert. The metaphors of desert, wilderness, poverty, and weakness were discussed briefly in regard to renunciation and detachment in 3.1.2.1 From Attachments to Freedom. Here we take a closer look at the metaphor of the desert.

Merton declares that "The climate in which monastic prayer flowers is that of the desert, where the comfort of man is absent, where the secure routines of man's city offer no support, and where prayer must be sustained by God in the purity of faith."<sup>84</sup> The call to the desert is a call to explore one's own inner being in solitude.<sup>85</sup>

For Merton, this is a state where one is confronted by scripture and worship as both source of joy and conviction. It is a condition that calls for humility and compunction as one is confronted with the holiness and mercy of God that is at once the bright light of hope while at the same time the dread of dissonance. The dread of dissonance is the realization of the gap in the disciple's life between the will of God for the disciple and the actual life the disciple is living. At the same time, however, it is the

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

bright light of hope as the disciple's utter dependence and the magnitude of God's grace are revealed. This is an experience of one's sin and redemption. It is a dread that is eclipsed and subsumed into God's grace. Merton asserts, "*Alleluia* is the song of the desert...*Alleluia* is the victorious acclamation of the Risen Savior."<sup>86</sup> Why? Because it is a confrontation with one's utter poverty and God's gracious provision.

Early in *Thoughts in Solitude* Merton writes, "There is no greater disaster in the spiritual life than to be immersed in unreality, for life is maintained and nourished in us by our vital relation with realities outside and above us."<sup>87</sup> According to Merton most of us spend our lives basking in unreality, but a life of feeding on unreality is a life of starvation that ultimately leads to death.<sup>88</sup> The death that leads to real life is a death that renounces unreality and offers the self in total commitment to God.

Ironically, the unreality in which most spend their existence is real in the sense that it destroys the "*greater* reality of spiritual things."<sup>89</sup> The beginning of the renunciation of unreality is to step back from all creatures to understand them outside of the egoism of humanity.<sup>90</sup> It is then that disciples can gain perspective and "cease to hug them to our own bosom."<sup>91</sup> Our selfishness prevents differentiation from unreality until we renounce and detach ourselves from it. This is the wisdom of the desert. As Merton

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*, 3.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

writes, "The Desert Fathers believed that the wilderness had been created as supremely valuable in the eyes of God precisely because it had no value to men."<sup>92</sup>

Merton believes that one must accept one's desert but not give in to the despair. "This, then, is our desert: to live facing despair, but not to consent. To trample it down under hope in the Cross. To wage war against despair unceasingly. That war is our wilderness. If we wage it courageously, we will find Christ at our side. If we cannot face it, we will never find him."<sup>93</sup>

The desert is an arid spiritual experience that grants the opportunity for the disciple to grow in prayer. This is similar to St. John of the Cross's notion of the "dark night of the soul," about which Merton speaks extensively. The dark night occurs when spiritual practice ceases to provide the feelings of warmth and security it once did. Now there is only darkness. Solitude and meditation take the disciple to the desert. It is there that she is stripped of the familiar categories, paradigms, practices, and narratives that undergirded relationship with God. The dark night is encountered when the pettiness of one's personal spiritual projects come to light. The things that once provided light no longer provide that light. Old ways are frustrated and fail to bring about the feelings and emotions that they once produced. Merton puts it this way,

God brings these people into the way of life by depriving them of the light and consolation which they seek, by impeding their own efforts, by confusing and depriving them of the satisfactions which their own efforts aim to attain. Thus blocked and frustrated, unable to carry on with their accustomed projects, they find themselves in a very painful state in which their own wishes, their self-esteem, their presumption, their aggressivity and so on are systematically humiliated. What is worse, they cannot understand how this comes about! They

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 9.

do not know what is happening to them. It is here that they must decide whether to go on in the way of prayer under the secret guidance of grace, in the night of pure faith, or whether they will go back to a form of existence in which they can enjoy familiar routines and retain an illusory sense of their own perfect autonomy in perfectly familiar realms, without having to remain subject to the obedience of faith in these trying and baffling circumstances proper to the “dark night.”<sup>94</sup>

Even so, the dark night is no pure negation. As the disciple’s old paradigms and practices are dismantled in this time of perceived spiritual crisis, simultaneously there is the infusion of Reality or Supernatural Light. Merton muses,

If [the dark night] empties the mind and heart of the connatural satisfactions of knowledge and love on a simply human plane, it does so in order to fill them with a higher and purer light which is “darkness” to sense and to reason. The darkening is therefore at the same time an enlightenment. God darkens the mind only in order to give a more perfect light...Direct exposure to supernatural light darkens the mind and heart, and it is precisely in this way that, being led into the “dark night of faith,” one passes from meditation, in the sense of active “mental prayer,” to contemplation, or a deeper and simpler intuitive form of receptivity, in which, if one can be said to “meditate” at all, one does so only by receiving the light with passive and loving attention.<sup>95</sup>

For Merton, the purpose of monastic prayer (the daily office including the recitation of the Psalms, meditation, and *lectio divina*) is to cultivate a “faculty for the supernatural,” this capacity for inner illumination by faith and by the light of wisdom, in the loving contemplation of God.”<sup>96</sup>

In Merton’s mind, “The dark night rectifies our deepest intentions. In the silence of this ‘night of faith’ we return to simplicity and sincerity of heart. We learn “*recollection*, which consists in listening for God’s will, in direct and simple attention to

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<sup>94</sup> Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 43-44.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

*reality*. Recollection is awareness of the unconditional.”<sup>97</sup> But Merton adds, should this “obscure” form of prayer turn “painfully dry and fruitless,” then one would do well to return to help from “psalmody [the work of the daily office] or from a few simple words of the Scriptures,” rather than “resorting to the conventional machinery of discursive ‘mental prayer.’”<sup>98</sup>

By leading to the recognition and surrender of attachments, the dark night is a means toward resting in the love of God. According to Merton, “The purpose of the dark night, as St. John of the Cross shows, is not simply to punish and afflict the heart of man, but to liberate, to purify and to enlighten in perfect love. The way that leads through dread goes not to despair but to perfect joy, not to hell but to heaven.”<sup>99</sup>

What if a parish pastor allowed her dark moments of frustration to lead her to the recognition of the possibility that she is bound by attachments? What if she asked herself, “Why am I feeling angry, disrespected, or powerless? Is it because I am not being recognized as an authority, or as important, or powerful? Is my moment of perceived crisis a moment where God wants to stretch the limits of my belief, or challenge my need to feel in control? Where is the spiritual growth opportunity in this moment?”

### **3.3 Conclusion**

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 110.

Thomas Merton makes clear that solitude and prayer are indispensable for receiving the gift of contemplation. Solitude allows for the possibility to pray deeply. Merton notes that a certain level of exterior solitude is necessary to move toward a more contemplative life, but that interior solitude is the goal. There must be withdrawal in order to prepare one's heart for meditation and the possibility of contemplation. But this withdrawal must not be motivated out of distaste for humankind.

Moreover, silence is necessary for the deepening of one's spiritual life. Silence allows the disciple to hear from the heart. In order to hear the sounds of the soul, the noise of the tongue must cease. Indeed, Merton speaks of silence as an opportunity to hear a language that transcends speech. It provides an opportunity to discern what is really real. He calls silence the "mother of all speech" given that it is in silence that the disciple has the opportunity to hear the ultimate declaration, which is Jesus Christ.

Yet, anyone who has spent time in silence knows how powerful distractions can be. Imaginations can run wild in silence, but Merton also says that these distractions can help us pray with greater intention. Merton warns that distractions can be particularly difficult for those with active jobs. But distractions should not deter the disciple; rather, they should strengthen her resolve by pointing to her need for God. This leads to interior solitude.

Merton describes interior solitude as "an abyss opening up in the center of your own soul."<sup>100</sup> It is here that the most important work begins as the disciple moves from attachments to freedom. According to Merton, attachments are an "inordinate love" for

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<sup>100</sup> Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 80.



things spiritual or physical, either of which can be a roadblock to the contemplative life.<sup>101</sup>

Detachment and renunciation are keys to freedom from attachments. The disciple must name her attachments, renounce their power, and wholeheartedly seek the will of God. Merton uses the metaphors of the desert and poverty to speak of the process of being freed from attachments. In the desert of one's soul attachments can be named and renounced. It is in this poverty that complete reliance upon God is cultivated as one is recollected in God.

Recollection is being put back together in God through the calibration of one's interior and exterior life. It is the experience of moving toward integrity. The byproduct of this experience is often peace and unity. But Merton warns not to become attached to the emotional aspects of recollection as these too can become attachments. Solitude and recollection are important in that they lead deeper into the life of prayer.

Merton speaks of this deeper life of prayer as meditation or what is called the "prayer of the heart" in the tradition of the Eastern church. At its simplest, meditation is prayer that listens rather than speaks. The prayer of the heart is a deep awareness of our God's infinite love, where one finds oneself in God drinking deeply from the wells of God's grace to grow in love of God and love of neighbor. This is the well from which the parish pastor must drink in order to lead the church in this day and age.

But this path will lead a pastor to find past ways of encountering God inadequate. It will lead the pastor time and again into the desert to be freed from the

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 205-206.

attachments of the world. It will call the pastor to recognize yet again that every disciple is completely dependent upon God's grace for life. If the pastor allows for this possibility, the power of the negation of the dark night will purify her intentions to rest in God alone as the source of life. In the next chapter we turn to practices that help us stay close to the Source of Life.

## Chapter 4 A Life of Discipline and a Heart of Gratitude

Let this be my only consolation, that wherever I am You, my Lord, are loved and praised.

Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*<sup>1</sup>

Self-discipline is central to the contemplative life. A parish pastor seeking to receive the gift of contemplation must live a disciplined life with personal and communal accountability. As a Cistercian monk, Merton certainly lived a life of personal and communal discipline. Cistercian monks live lives centered in the liturgy of the church with rigorous daily spiritual discipline and communal living under the leadership of an abbot while adhering to the monastic rule of St. Benedict. In the author's notes in *Seeds of Contemplation* and *New Seeds of Contemplation* Merton states, "Everything taught in the Gospel of Christ and the Rule of St. Benedict, everything accepted by Catholic tradition about the self-discipline of Christian asceticism is here taken for granted, and there is no attempt at apologetics on these points or any others."<sup>2</sup> Moreover, he states, "In general, it can be said that no contemplative life is possible without ascetic self-discipline."<sup>3</sup> This austerity forms the backdrop to all of Merton's thoughts on the contemplative life. Yet, one should not be overwhelmed thinking that all depends on self-discipline. No, gratitude for the grace that has been freely given is central to Christian discipleship. The struggle in an ascetic life can be transformed with gratitude for what is learned about oneself and God. Moreover, the Christian life is not drudgery, but a life of praise and thanksgiving to God. Therefore, this thesis would be incomplete without attention given to the importance of self-discipline and gratitude.

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<sup>1</sup> Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*, 111.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, 14 and *New Seeds of Contemplation*, xiv.

<sup>3</sup> Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 86.

This chapter considers the self-discipline of asceticism and sacrifice and their role in shaping the work of a parish pastor seeking to live the contemplative life.

## **4.1 Asceticism**

### **4.1.1 Self-surrender**

To discover and cultivate the true self requires asceticism. Ascetic practices are a way of opening the disciple to the work of the Holy Spirit in the Christian life to be her best self and receptive to what God is calling her to do. Asceticism involves taking up certain practices and eliminating others from the disciple's life to help the disciple be more receptive to God's grace. Asceticism helps identify and free the follower of Jesus Christ from attachments. As stated in Chapter Two, one's true identity is revealed in Christian baptism. It is in and through baptism that a person is awakened to the reality that she is a child of God. Each child of God possesses unique gifts and graces to be employed in the furtherance of God's kingdom. Sin clouds the disciple's ability to see her true self clearly. The surrounding culture presents many attachments that keep her from understanding herself in God. Asceticism is key to removing those attachments to progress in her relationship with God.

An aspect of asceticism for Merton is what he refers to as "self-conquest."<sup>4</sup> Throughout the works under consideration Merton speaks of self-conquest often and in a number of different ways. What is clear is that an ongoing process of self-conquest is absolutely necessary to pursue the gift of contemplation. Self-conquest is perhaps better stated as cultivation of the true self or self-surrender. In *Thoughts in Solitude* Merton

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<sup>4</sup> Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*, 20.

states, "Real self-conquest is the conquest of ourselves not by ourselves but by the Holy Spirit. Self-conquest is really self-surrender."<sup>5</sup> So what allows for this process of self-surrender?

Merton writes, "before we can surrender ourselves we must become ourselves. For no one can give up what he does not possess...More precisely – we have to have enough mastery of ourselves to renounce our own will into the hands of Christ – so that He may conquer what we cannot reach by our own efforts."<sup>6</sup> What Merton means here is that before the disciple pursues the work of self-surrender she must receive the grace that God freely gives that identifies her as a child of God. She must receive the gift of the true self through conversion, and practice the means of grace, also known as spiritual disciplines, to allow the grace of God to be actualized in her life revealing the true self.

Merton elaborates,

Grace, which is charity, contains in itself all virtues in a hidden and potential manner, like the leaves and the branches of the oak hidden in the meat of an acorn. To be an acorn is to have a taste for being an oak tree. Habitual grace brings with it all the Christian virtues in their seed. Actual graces move us to actualize these hidden powers and to realize what they mean: - Christ acting in us.<sup>7</sup>

The grace for contemplation has been given, but it must be actualized. This grace is actualized through ascetic practices. This ascetic way of living keeps worship rightly centered on God rather than the gods of the culture and ego, i.e., the expectations of others based on cultural norms rather than Gospel norms.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 22-23.

The practical work of self-surrender or actualizing grace involves at a minimum the practice of traditional spiritual disciplines such as worship, praying the liturgy of the hours, fasting, *lectio divina*, silence, solitude, frequent celebration of Holy Communion, living in accord with the Baptismal covenant, and communal support and accountability. Other fruitful disciplines might include journaling, reading biblical and theological texts and treatises, self-discovery tools such as spiritual gifts inventories, creeds, catechisms, manual labor for the common good, and others. Merton states, "It is one thing to live *in* the flesh, and quite another to live *according* to the flesh...Our whole being, both body and soul, is to be spiritualized and elevated by grace."<sup>8</sup> The above-referenced spiritual disciplines help to elevate the disciple's life. Furthermore, "We must indeed control the flesh, we must 'chastise it and bring it into subjection,' but this chastisement is as much for the body's benefit as for the soul's. For the good of the body is not found in the body alone but in the good of the whole person."<sup>9</sup> Spiritual discipline should be a whole-bodied endeavor. It is the cultivation of new habits to replace habits instilled by the culture. The disciple must ask herself what her days must consist of in order to be counter-formed in the Gospel over and against the formation of the culture. This is where the work of James K.A. Smith becomes particularly helpful as he offers guidance for exegeting the subliminal cultural formation of consumerism. Moreover, he offers examples like reclaiming and reordering time through the liturgical calendar to continually remind the disciple that all time is God's time and she should be redeeming time for kingdom purposes. A concrete example of a habit that forms a person as a

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<sup>8</sup> Merton, *No Man Is an Island*, 101.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

consumer is shopping itself. It is not unusual to hear shoppers talk about how shopping relieves stress. Yet, its relief is temporary, requiring a return to the practice of shopping again and again. Could more substantial relief with greater permanence come from prayer or exercise? Smith calls one to look deeply at the embedded *telos* of one's actions. What does that embedded *telos* say about who or what one worships? The work of self-surrender is less about what one thinks than it is about what one does and how those actions express the *telos* of worship. The Eucharist calls the disciple to live a sacrificial life. Rather than acquire things for self-worth, the disciple should empty herself and find herself in the love and self-giving of God. The Baptismal Covenant calls Christ-follower to daily die to sin, rise to new life in Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, rather than search out those things that offer immediate pleasure or pleasure at the expense of someone else. It also reminds the disciple of her identity as a child of God and constitutes the disciple as an indispensable part of the Body of Christ. The biblical account counters the narrative of Madison Avenue. Worship re-members Christ-followers as the Body of Christ putting them in proper relationship with one another as brothers and sisters and reorienting them to the praise of God rather than the pursuit self-satisfaction. Habits must have the objective of encountering God for desire to shaped toward God's will.

There is no doubt that in Merton's early monastic experience that physical asceticism was what many would consider extreme. Lawrence S. Cunningham notes,

Almost everyone who speaks or writes of the Abbey of Gethsemani, located just south of Bardstown, Kentucky, where Thomas Merton became a monk in 1941, describes the life there as "medieval." Looking at photographs of the monks and

their milieu at that time would lend credence to this description. The monks, in their hooded robes and heads shaved with a monastic crown, worked the fields, cut wood to heat their house, used great draft horses for their farm work, spent long hours in the monastic choir with great Psalters set out in front of them, maintained a rule of silence, ate sparsely of a vegetarian diet, kept a daily schedule that began long before dawn, and finished as the sun went down, the monks going off to bed on straw pallets in small cubicles in a large dormitory. They baked their own bread, cobbled their own heavy work boots, made cheese, raised livestock even though they did not eat meat, and grew their food as if modern shops did not exist. The monks wore rough monastic habits complete with a sort of ancient undergarment and rough leggings in lieu of socks. Their clothing was made in the tailor shop of the monastery. They earned a good deal of their income from agriculture, as they had for centuries, relying on great Percheron horses for most of their work. The monastery was heated (to the degree that it was heated at all) by wood that they culled from their own forests. Most of these customs, in fact, were done in imitation of their Cistercian ancestors of the twelfth century.<sup>10</sup>

Monastic reforms over the years have lessened the severity of Cistercian ascetic life, but physical asceticism remains important. Asceticism helps free one from attachments as well helps one maintain perspective in regard to God and creation. For example, today the purchase of food in large grocery stores creates a disconnection from the origin and efforts required to produce that food – the nurture, cultivation, and sacrifice. Asceticism has a way of keeping a disciple in touch with her humanity and with God. Merton says that in fighting the

deliberate and evident vices a planned strategy of resolutions and penances is the best way – if not the only way. You plan your campaign and fight it out and reshape the plan according to the changes in the aspect of the battle. You pray and suffer and hang on and give things up and hope and sweat, and the varying contours of the struggle work out the shape of your liberty...When it ends, and when you have a good habit to work with, do not forget the moments of the battle when you were wounded and disarmed and helpless. Do not forget that, for all your efforts, you only won because of God, Who did the fighting in you.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Cunningham, *Thomas Merton & the Monastic Vision*, 19-20.

<sup>11</sup> Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 256-257.



An excellent example of asceticism is fasting or abstaining from certain foods or habits. The hunger pangs should call the disciple to remember that all of life comes from God, and that the love of God through Jesus Christ is the spiritual sustenance for life. As one lives these struggles, she should allow the memory of the hunger pang to be a reminder of her utter dependence upon the grace of God. Life's physical and spiritual attachments keep the disciple in bondage. Asceticism helps her separate from physical and spiritual attachments freeing her for real life that is found in relationship to God and service to God's kingdom.

#### ***4.1.2 Holistic Discipline, Not Torture***

The asceticism of which Merton speaks is discipline that permeates the whole of life. But it is not something that is heroic. According to Merton,

The way to contemplation is an obscurity so obscure that is no longer even dramatic. There is nothing in it that can be grasped and cherished as heroic or even unusual. And so, for a contemplative, there is supreme value in the ordinary everyday routine of work, poverty, hardship and monotony that characterize the lives of all the poor, uninteresting and forgotten people of the world.<sup>12</sup>

Merton points out that Jesus could have surrounded himself with heroic ascetics, but instead his apostles were regular people.<sup>13</sup> He elaborates by saying,

The surest asceticism is the bitter insecurity and labor and nonentity of the really poor. To be utterly dependent on other people. To be ignored and despised and forgotten. To know little of respectability or comfort. To take orders and work hard for little or no money: it is a hard school, and one which most pious people do their best to avoid.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 250.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

Merton notes,

The contemplative life certainly does not demand a self-righteous contempt for the habits and diversions of ordinary people. But nevertheless, no man who seeks liberation and light in solitude, no man who seeks spiritual freedom, can afford to yield passively to all the appeals of a society of salesman, advertisers and consumers. There is no doubt that life cannot be lived on a human level without certain legitimate pleasures. But to say that all the pleasures which offer themselves to us as necessities are not “legitimate” is quite another story.<sup>15</sup>

Christians are constantly being formed by their culture as consumers. Therefore, the pastor’s counter-formative efforts to shape herself as a self-emptying disciple of Jesus who leads other disciples of Jesus are absolutely crucial to curate her heart for God.

This requires a holistic approach to asceticism. Parish pastors must take stock of their priorities and arrange them in such a way that the pursuit of communion with God is primary. Yet, parish pastors are not monastic contemplatives. They are engaged in apostolic ministry seeking to spread the Good News while shepherding and shaping the church into a missional community that seeks to further the Kingdom of God. A pastor’s day is not structured such that significant portions of the day can be given to prayer and manual labor. Yet through holistic asceticism the pastor stands ready to receive God’s grace at all times and the monotony and stress of the pastor’s work, like the monk’s manual labor, can be transformed through being offered as prayer.

The parish pastor can view her daily work with a contemplative lens that allows the most mundane work to be taken, blessed, broken, and given such that even most ordinary and difficult of tasks become windows onto the life-giving work of God in the world. Asceticism and sacrifice will help the pastor see more clearly along the path. As

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 84.

the pastor gives things up for the glory of God, God will use those efforts to help remind her of her utter dependence upon God and to take joy in the good times and the bad times alike, for everything is a gift from God.

This is not a call to a life of torture! Merton makes clear that not all of life has to be “miserable and disgusting” for someone to become a contemplative.<sup>16</sup> “It is not filth and hunger that make saints, nor even poverty itself, but love of poverty and love of the poor.”<sup>17</sup> When the pastor drops her bad habits and does battle to establish good habits God provides the ability to see her dependence upon God and God’s work in her and through her.<sup>18</sup> Asceticism and sacrifice are indispensable for this new vision as a pastor pursues a contemplative life.

#### **4.1.3 Unconscious Attachments**

Through asceticism and sacrifice obvious issues and vices can be readily addressed. But what of those attachments of which one is unaware?<sup>19</sup> According to Merton, these are the most dangerous impediments to clear spiritual vision. Good habits can even work against a disciple at times by becoming attachments themselves.<sup>20</sup> For example, “the proud man resolves to fast more and punish his flesh more because he wants to make himself feel like an athlete: his fasts and disciplines are imposed on him

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 252

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 251.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 256-257.

<sup>19</sup> Unconscious attachments should also remind a disciple of the ever-present power of humankind’s sinful state. All of life is impacted by sin and its destructive potential should not be underestimated. For an interesting discussion on how even Christian practices are not exempt from the effects of humankind’s fallen condition see Lauren F. Winner’s *The Dangers of Christian Practice: On Wayward Gifts, Characteristic Damage, and Sin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 257.

by his own vanity, and they strengthen the thing in him that most needs to be killed."<sup>21</sup>

This is a "dangerous condition" of "spiritual blindness."<sup>22</sup>

For unconscious attachments, those times when we suffer from "spiritual blindness," Merton tells us that "our own initiative is almost always useless."<sup>23</sup> We must rely completely upon God to work in us directly or "in the night of aridity and suffering, or through events and other men."<sup>24</sup> Merton points out a real danger here. It is not unusual for holy people to experience a crisis in the life of faith at this point. Once unable to see by the light of her own intellect she often stops progressing in the spiritual life and begins to question if all previous progress was simply illusion. This is a sure indicator of a tendency only to accept what is rooted in her feelings. But, for the disciple to rely on her own feelings in the spiritual life is a critical mistake. Feelings are not always a reliable indicator of reality, but can lead one profoundly astray. Merton warns that this is especially true if to this point, one has been "warmed by the approval of other men."<sup>25</sup> If spiritual practices now draw the ire of the surrounding culture, then it is not unusual to withdraw to the safety of the surrounding norms.<sup>26</sup> At this juncture, complacency can stagger growth, unless faith to grows in the dark night. Merton elaborates,

When the time comes to enter the darkness in which we are naked and helpless and alone; in which we see the insufficiency of our greatest strength and the hollowness of our strongest virtues; in which we have nothing of our own to rely

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 258.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

on, and nothing in our nature to support us, and nothing in the world to guide us or give us light – then we find out whether or not we live by faith...It is in this darkness, when there is nothing left in us that can please or comfort our own minds, when we seem to be useless and worthy of all contempt, when we seem to have failed, when we seem to be destroyed and devoured, it is then that the deep and secret selfishness that is too close for us to identify is stripped away from our souls. It is in this darkness that we find true liberty. It is in this abandonment that we are made strong. This is the night which empties us and makes us pure.<sup>27</sup>

The disciple must be mindful of the power of unconscious attachments and seek God's help in utter humility. Unconscious attachments require the initiative of God. In these instances God works through the dark night or in other unexpected ways. New life is not found in avoiding struggle, but in living through it.

It is here that Merton reminds the disciple that life is not for pleasure.<sup>28</sup> This is crucial for the parish pastor to remember. Rather, life is for "spiritual JOY."<sup>29</sup> The difference between spiritual joy and pleasure is revealed through living out the self-emptying love of Jesus Christ – through the way of the cross. According to Merton, pleasure is "selfish," and joy is destroyed by selfishness.<sup>30</sup> He continues, "Pleasure is restrained and killed by pain and suffering. Spiritual joy ignores suffering or laughs at it or even exploits it to purify itself of its greatest obstacle, selfishness."<sup>31</sup>

True joy comes by rejoicing in the freedom God provides and allowing the soul to rest confidently in God.<sup>32</sup> Merton warns, "Sometimes pleasure can be the death of joy, and so the man who has tasted true joy is suspicious of pleasure. But anyone who knows

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 259.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

true joy is never afraid of pain because he knows that pain can serve him as another opportunity of asserting – and tasting – his liberty.”<sup>33</sup> Even pain can contribute to joy. This should fuel profound hope for all Christians, and especially the parish pastor.

But do not mistake this for a masochistic endeavor. For Merton, “joy, in so far as it is true, is above pain and does not feel pain. And that is why it laughs at pain and rejoices in confounding pain. It is the conquest of suffering by disinterestedness, by unselfishness, by perfect love.”<sup>34</sup> In contemplative experience with God, one is lost in self-forgetfulness and, thereby, freed from the typical notion of pain. Followers of Jesus Christ participate not only in Christ’s crucifixion but also his resurrection. This is a powerful way to transform the daily struggles of parish ministry. Contemplation is not the pursuit of pleasure. Contemplation is a direct experience of God. Joy is found through the death of selfishness. “Pain cannot touch this highest joy – except to bring it an accidental increase of purity by asserting the soul’s freedom from sense and emotion and self-love, and isolating our wills in a clean liberty beyond the level of suffering.”<sup>35</sup> Parish pastors must not fall prey to pursuing pleasure, but they must persevere in pursuing the joy found in God. Christian community is one of most powerful ways to do this.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 260.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

#### **4.1.4 The Need for Community**

One of the greatest impediments to flourishing in pastoral leadership is a lack of Christian community.<sup>36</sup> By Christian community I mean a group of similarly situated people who provide mutual support, accountability, and encouragement in pursuing the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The local church provides this for lay persons, but parish pastors need other parish pastors to provide the support that only Christian community can provide.

One's own parish typically cannot provide this type of community for the pastor. It is certainly true that deep and lasting relationships are formed in healthy parishes between and among parishioners and pastors. Even so, the parishioner/pastor relationship is laden with complexities, not the least of which is the power vested in the pastor, that prevent that relationship from providing the Christian community the parish pastor needs to thrive. This means that the parish pastor must pursue community outside of her parish. Parish pastors must walk with fellow pilgrims who are pursuing the same vocation.

Toward the end of his life, Merton offers some wisdom regarding community toward the end of his life when he argues that reform of the monastic community requires renewed focus on the objective of that communal life, and pursuing renewal around that common objective.<sup>37</sup> Parish pastors must have a community that shares the common pursuit of apostolic ministry, i.e., the common objective of sharing the good

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<sup>36</sup> I use "community" and "Christian community" interchangeably.

<sup>37</sup> Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 17-19.

news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and shepherding the local congregation in the life of discipleship and mission. Merton wisely states,

Very few men are sanctified in isolation. Very few become perfect in absolute solitude...Living with other people and learning to lose yourself in the understanding of their weaknesses and deficiencies – which are also your own – is not only the way to perfection in general but even helps us to become true contemplatives.<sup>38</sup>

We must support one another in our common objective through community.

In some denominations a presbytery or order of ministry can provide a means of community. For example, in The United Methodist Church there is the Order of Deacons and Order of Elders on each annual conference (particular geographical areas) to aid in the effort of community. Often these orders collectively draft a rule of life to help provide accountability and support in the pursuit of parish ministry. Parish pastors in churches with a congregational polity must pursue similar community albeit without the aid of denominational structure. Larger groups such as presbyteries and orders are helpful, but the parish pastor must also have a smaller group of accountability and support within or outside the presbytery or order where individual challenges and joys can be shared in confidence and prayed about with other pastors. Group support and accountability is a must for parish pastors to survive and thrive. Merton's advice is clear in the pursuit of the contemplative life: "Do not flee to solitude from the community. Find God first in the community, then He will lead you to solitude."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, 114.

<sup>39</sup> Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*, 131.



Obedience to the authorities of one's community is also important. Merton speaks often of obedience.<sup>40</sup> Many denominational structures provide supervision whether through superintendents, bishops, or other leaders. Pastors in churches with a congregational polity must take seriously the accountability provided by lay leadership structures. Merton offers a stark warning in this regard: "The most dangerous man in the world is the contemplative who is guided by nobody. He trusts his visions. He obeys the attractions of an interior voice but will not listen to other men. He identifies the will of God with anything that makes him feel, within his own heart, a big, warm, sweet interior glow."<sup>41</sup> For Merton, appropriate obedience to reasonable authority provides not only accountability, but also freedom as we trust God to work through others.<sup>42</sup> But the contemplative life is not all about asceticism. Central to the contemplative life is gratitude.

## **4.2 A Heart of Gratitude**

Gratitude is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian, and it can inspire and sustain the ministry of the parish pastor. Gratitude provides new vision. It allows the Christian to see God's blessings all around her, and God's blessings inspire gratitude.

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<sup>40</sup> Merton struggled with obedience even though ultimately he seemed to acquiesce for the most part to his superiors. Indeed, his turbulent relationship with his abbot, Dom James Fox, is a prime example. For a journey into Merton's struggles with authority, his journals are illuminating. For an accessible compilation see, *The Intimate Merton: His Life from His Journals* (New York, NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999).

<sup>41</sup> Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 194-195.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 191-198.

Gratitude is the power of knowing that all of our prayers are already answered.<sup>43</sup>

“Gratitude is...the heart of the Christian life.”<sup>44</sup>

The habits that prompt gratitude are rooted in worship. The overall narrative of Scripture reveals a God who relentlessly woos and pursues wayward humankind. The love of God is so relentless in that pursuit that it sends Jesus Christ to the cross. Humankind is called to praise God and give thanks for the wonder of God’s love and grace. The essence of worship is based on that biblical paradigm of God speaking, and God’s people responding. The people of God gather to offer praise to God, to hear God’s word proclaimed, to respond appropriately to that word, and give thanks for all God has done, is doing, and promises yet to do. At the heart of worship is gratitude.

Gratitude opens the gift of prayer, as well. God has given the Christ-follower the fullness of God’s love through the grace of God in Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. But this gift remains unopened without prayer in gratitude for the gift. Gratitude leads the disciple deeper into the recognition of God’s love. The line of communication with God through prayer is accessed in its fullness in gratitude. According to Merton, prayer is a gift from God, but not all receive it, nor do all experience the richness of prayer due to a lack of gratitude.<sup>45</sup> This gratitude is perhaps most powerfully expressed in silence when the division of subject and object dissolves and “He [God] IS.”<sup>46</sup> God simply “absorbs everything else,” i.e., the experience of

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<sup>43</sup> Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*, 118-119.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>45</sup> Merton, *No Man Is an Island*, 46.

<sup>46</sup> Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 267.

contemplation Itself.<sup>47</sup> Merton also notes, “The climate of...prayer is, then, one of awareness, gratitude and a totally obedient love which seeks nothing but to please God.”<sup>48</sup> The fullness of the life of prayer is opened through gratitude.

Suffering is transformed through gratitude. As referenced in section 4.1.3 above, there is a difference between joy and pleasure. Pleasure seeks selfish ends. Joy rejoices in the fact that God is at work through all creation. Suffering is an opportunity for God to reveal God’s self to the disciple in a new and different way. Suffering is an opportunity to be reminded again of absolute dependence upon God for all of life, and the freedom from attachments that results from seeking God in God’s fullness. Merton encourages the disciple to see suffering as the “fruit of baptism.”<sup>49</sup> Viewing suffering through the lens of baptism brings into perspective the suffering that is undergone on the path to resurrection life in Jesus Christ.<sup>50</sup> In that sense suffering is “consecrated” to God and given the “power to wash and purify” by and through baptism.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, suffering is meant to transform and purify, thus leading to joy.

Gratitude not only can transform suffering, but it can transform all of life. It reveals the extraordinary in the ordinary things of life. Gratitude or thanksgiving transforms everything, not unlike in the Eucharist. It is Eucharistic living. When ordinary things are taken, blessed, broken, and given, as the elements are in Holy Communion, they are transformed into the life-giving presence of God, a visible sign of

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 33.

<sup>49</sup> Merton, *No Man Is an Island*, 86.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

an invisible grace. The same is true for all of life when viewed through the lens of gratitude.

Gratitude demonstrates reverence. Merton tells us that if we are not grateful to God, then our vision is clouded and we will be unable to find God in creation.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, if we fail to express gratitude to God for our own creation we will be unable to “know who we are...[and discover] what it really means to be and to live.”<sup>53</sup> All of life is a gift from God and “Gratitude shows reverence to God in the way it makes use of His gifts.”<sup>54</sup> Gratitude indicates a profound appreciation for who God is, and for what God has done, is doing, and promises yet to do.

Gratitude shows confidence in God. It anticipates the fullness of God’s Kingdom to come. In this sense, gratitude is apocalyptic, i.e., it helps us to see through the kingdoms of the surrounding culture to the fullness of God’s redemption. In that sense, gratitude unmask the powers and principalities of the world, and reveals God at work in the present and in the age to come. Gratitude is a powerful expression of God’s power to redeem and make new.

According to Merton, fruitfulness in the Christian life begins with gratitude. It is through “gratitude for life,” and in our “consent to live” that the “full fruitfulness of spiritual life begins.”<sup>55</sup> It is in this “greater gratitude that seeks to be dissolved and to be

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 257.

with Christ” that the fullness of God’s love is released.<sup>56</sup> All of life is more fruitful in the light of gratitude.

For Merton, paradoxically, “true poverty” is gratitude.<sup>57</sup> The contemplative life is one of seeking contentment in “whatever I have from God.”<sup>58</sup> The parish pastor must not confuse this with a complacency that causes her to reduce her efforts to spread the good news of the Gospel. Rather, it is the pursuit of a contentment or peace in relationship with God. Merton says,

True poverty is that of a beggar who is glad to receive alms from anyone, but especially from God. False poverty is that of a man who pretends to have the self-sufficiency of an angel. True poverty, then, is a receiving and giving of thanks, only keeping what we need to consume. False poverty pretends not to need, pretends not to ask, strives to seek everything and refuses gratitude for anything at all.<sup>59</sup>

The pastor must receive the gift of parish ministry and give thanks. Our continual gratitude for this gift has the power to transform and sustain pastoral work.

### **4.3 Conclusion**

Discipline and gratitude are essential for integrating contemplation into the life of the parish pastor. Merton speaks of discipline in terms of asceticism. To discover the true self requires engaging in what Merton calls self-conquest or cultivation of the true self, or perhaps best stated, self-surrender. But before self surrender cannot occur without first becoming embracing one’s true identity as a child of God. The holistic practices of self-surrender include worship, praying the liturgy of the hours, fasting,

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*, 105.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

*lectio divina*, silence, solitude, and the like. These practices help remove the masks of the surrounding culture prompts the pastor to wear, freeing her to be who she is to God and others.

The goal of asceticism and sacrifice is not self-flagellation, but freedom. The purpose is not torture, nor should it breed self-righteousness. It is a call to take stock of one's priorities and arrange them such a way that the pursuit of communion with God and others is primary. It is also allowing the whole of the pastor's work to be viewed as an ascetic endeavor. This does not mean living as monastics. Parish pastors are not monastics. But if a pastor pursues her daily work as an ascetic endeavor allowing it to be taken, blessed, broken, and given, then even the most stressful or mundane work can be transformed into living bread for the sake of parish ministry. This ascetic and sacramental perspective can bring freedom from physical and spiritual attachments that hinder flourishing in service to God.

When speaking of asceticism and sacrifice, Merton gives special attention to what he calls unconscious or secret attachments. Asceticism and sacrifice address obvious issues that occur in the spiritual life, including "blind spots?" Merton lets the pastor know that her own efforts regarding unconscious attachments are almost always useless. Help often comes through the dark night, which brings a reminder of complete and utter dependence upon the grace of God for everything. The spiritual life is not for pleasure. It is for real joy. While pleasure is selfish, real joy is destroyed by selfishness. Real joy is found through the self-emptying way of the cross. It provides the freedom for to rest in the loving grace of God in unity with God. But Merton warns the pastor not to

mistake his advice as masochistic. Pain should not be sought for its own sake. Rather, joy resides above mere pleasure and pain. God's direct invention brings freedom from unconscious attachments through the dark night with the help of community.

Indeed, one of the greatest impediments to flourishing as a parish pastor is a lack of Christian community, i.e., a lack of mutual support, accountability, and encouragement from similarly situated brothers and sisters in Christ. Rarely can one's own parish provide such community due to the complexity of pastor/parishioner relationships. Some denominations provide such community through a presbytery or orders of ministry. Regardless, the parish pastor must take responsibility for pursuing community.

Obedience to authority is also important to maintain accountability and help prevent "blind spots" in ministry. Many denominations provide this structure through bishops and superintendents, but those in congregational polities must seek this intentionally whether it be through a board of elders or otherwise.

Most importantly, the transformative power of gratitude must not be overlooked. Gratitude is at the heart of what it means to be Christian. Cultivating a heart of gratitude can transform the way one sees the world. The habits that form a disposition of gratitude are found in the worship life of the church. In the biblical account of worship, God speaks and calls for the response of praise and gratitude for what God has done for humankind. This gratitude helps the pastor to experience the fullness of prayer. Suffering and all of life are transformed by gratitude. It demonstrates reverence, confidence in God, and sparks fruitfulness in the spiritual life. Merton

declares paradoxically that true poverty is gratitude. It is practicing the disposition of being thankful with whatever one has received from God.



## Conclusion

These are difficult days to be a parish pastor – not that being a parish pastor was ever easy. There are cultural forces aligned against the self-emptying kingdom of God centered in Jesus Christ. Contemporary North American culture is driven by economic forces that form persons as consumers. These economic forces shape everything from employment trends, to food production, to social interaction. As the philosopher James K.A. Smith reminds his readers, “We are what we love,” and it seems North Americans love to acquire.<sup>1</sup> Consumerism drives life in North American culture if not throughout the world.

This creates a daunting challenge for the parish pastor. Consumers want what they want when they want it. Consumerism has created a similar culture within the church in the sense that worship and discipleship programming are often geared toward self-fulfillment. The church landscape is littered with phrases like, “I just didn’t get anything out of that,” as if discipleship formation is about making people feel good about themselves. The forces of consumerism create cultures within congregations where people are ready to be served, rather than to serve. These demands pull pastors in various directions and expectations wear on those who are called to give their lives to the cause of the Gospel for a lifetime. Instead pastors depart ministry burned-out and disillusioned about what it means to follow Jesus Christ and to lead the church.

To combat this, pastors need a better understanding of how disciples are formed and how to structure counter-formative efforts to fight consumer habits. But most

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<sup>1</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, 37.

importantly, parish pastors need a paradigm that keeps them pursuing a direct encounter with God in order to supply them with what they need to lead the church of the twenty-first century. This is not a self-help gimmick, but a way of curating their hearts such that the imbedded *telos* of their lives is being fully present and available to God to be shaped into another Christ for the sake of the church and the world. A pastor's habits aim her love in a particular direction, and she must consider where those habits aim her love. Do those habits shape a person after the heart of Jesus Christ, or into something else? Determine what habits and actions say about her deepest loves requires rigorous self-examination. A pastor must be primarily concerned with direct communion with God in order to fulfill her vocation. The life of the theologian Thomas Merton was consumed with seeking direct experience with God through contemplation. His writings form a rich resource to shape a paradigm for curating the heart of a pastor in the demanding world of today's church.

Contemplation is the gift of direct experience of God. There is no more powerful resource for the parish pastor. The transformative power of the contemplative life can help the pastor resist the temptation to deviate from the Gospel's demand for self-emptying. The contemplative life with its attendant practices aim the pastor's heart toward unity with God to combat humankind's tendency toward egocentrism.

But it is a mistake to read Merton on contemplation without an understanding of what undergirds the contemplative life as lived by Merton. This means an understanding of his Cistercian monastic context. Central to that context and Christian life is worship. Humankind is made for worship. The center of the parish pastor's life

should be worship. Christians are people of bath, Word, prayer, and Table. Baptism is initiating, naming, claiming, commissioning and empowering disciples for ministry. It also serves to remind the disciple to daily die to sin, and to rise to new life in the power of God's Holy Spirit. Holy Communion provides the spiritual food necessary for the journey as well as a paradigm for living as the disciple allows her life to be taken, blessed, broken, and given for God's salvific purposes in the world. Moreover, the Bible gives narrative shape to the Christian's world, and prayer is the primary means of communicating with God in the Christian life. These basics were essential to Merton, and they are essential to the life of the parish pastor.

Contemplation and the contemplative life add richness and depth to the prayer life of the parish pastor by cultivating a readiness to receive the gift of God's presence at any time. Contemplation is a holistic availability to God. It is both an experience and journey. It is, indeed, a direct experience of the mystery of God, but it is also a process or way of life that cultivates a readiness to receive that gift. Merton gives us rich themes regarding a disciple's identity and God's identity, such as the holiness of all things, and the journey of self-discovery rooted in the grace of God. Contemplation is a paradoxical encounter with the Inexplicable. It is perfect love, real life, and transformation. It is death to self and freedom in God as attachments are surrendered to God and the disciple rests into the love that God has not only for the disciple, but for all humankind. The invitation to the contemplative experience is both individual and universal. It is a personal love that may evoke emotion, but it is certainly beyond emotion. It is fulfillment of humankind's intellectual and spiritual experience. Even as one attempts to

describe contemplation there is the recognition that it is beyond description. As soon as a category or metaphor is assigned that same category or metaphor is cancelled. It is truly apophatic.

Given the apophatic nature of contemplation, the limits of language are acute, but words are humanity's primary tool of description. In fact, Merton warns that any attempts at describing contemplation are dangerous and incomplete. Language simply cannot contain the Mystery of contemplative experience. But that Mystery is God and should be the parish pastor's highest desire. Merton illuminates how a disciple of Christ can sharpen her ability to be fully available to God and God's transformative power.

As Merton describes the contemplative life, it is clearly a life of Christian integrity or wholeness. It is increased understanding of one's identity and calling in God, and the foundation of this exploration of vocation is faith. It is saying "yes" to God not once, but continually. It is pursuing the question, "Who am I?" and "What am I called to do?" These questions help the pastor guard against cultural expectations that are counter to the Gospel such as power over others, accumulation of material things, and the need to be recognized, perceived as intelligent or effective by the culture's standards rather than the Gospel standards of self-giving and self-forgetfulness. It is a recognition that the disciple is made in the image of God and that the "masks" of cultural expectations cloud one's ability to see clearly. Continually working to maintain Christian integrity keeps the disciple free to be who God has created her to be.

But one cannot underestimate the power of sin to corrupt the pursuit of the contemplative life. Parish pastors are continually tempted to comport with the

expectations of others, which creates a false self. The false self is driven by the ego. To combat this temptation the parish pastor must continually pursue self-discovery through the rich resources of the contemplative life and mental health resources. A good spiritual director and therapist are invaluable to help remove the masks of the culture. The goal of self-discovery is self-understanding and pursuit of God's call such that the disciple is lost in the love of God. Sin is insidious and requires continual cultivation of habits and practices that move the disciple closer to the freedom God's grace provides. Parish pastors should receive the gift of parish ministry through the practices unique to that call, i.e., living the life of Word, Sacrament, order, and service and to allow these practices to continually sanctify the pastor's work.

Solitude and prayer are indispensable in living this life. Solitude and silence create an environment that offers the time and space to hear from God through prayer. Time must be taken to engage in meditation as the prayer of the heart to allow God to identify and peel away the attachments that hold the parish pastor in bondage. Meditation creates an awareness of God's love and reaffirms the disciple's absolute dependence upon that love. Meditation creates an awareness of God's transformative power to take even the most difficult circumstances and trials in parish ministry and use those as a means of grace.

But the journey requires self-discipline and gratitude for all of life. Asceticism and sacrifice provide the context for self-surrender as the disciple lays her burdens before God and releases them to receive God's joy – a state beyond emotion, a state of resting in the One who holds all things. This work is accomplished individually and

communally. The practices of worship, daily praise and prayer, the reading of scripture, participation in the sacramental life of the church, work, and fasting are essential. Christian community is needed for support and accountability. The parish pastor cannot delude herself into believing that she can walk the journey alone. Relationships with other pastors both in large and small groups are required to survive and thrive. The hope is that these disciplines and relationships drive the pastor to be grateful. The transformative power of gratitude cannot be underestimated. Gratitude begets gratitude, and gratitude is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. Pastors should take heart. They have been entrusted with proclaiming the good news of the Gospel and the shepherding of the church to further God's kingdom. It is truly a life of privilege

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## Biography

Ruben Anthony “Tony” Griffin was born in Jonesboro, Arkansas in the United States in 1969 to Gordon Ruben Griffin and Virginia Ruth (Haltom) Griffin. He has one sibling, a brother, Steven Haltom Griffin. Tony’s early religious experiences were in the Church of the Nazarene and he obtained his Bachelor of Science in accounting in 1991 from Southern Nazarene University. Immediately after his undergraduate studies he attended the Bowen School of Law at the University of Arkansas, Little Rock, completing his Juris Doctor degree in 1994. He was licensed as a lawyer and became a Certified Public Accountant in 1995.

Tony worked in the fields of law, finance, and management until returning to school to attend the Candler School of Theology at Emory University to obtain his Master of Divinity. He was ordained as an elder in the Church of the Nazarene in 2007. He transferred his ordination to The United Methodist Church in 2011 and has served United Methodist churches since 2001. Tony is married to Tracy Dawn Griffin and they have three children, Addison, Will, and Lainey.