

Thomas Merton and His Affinity for Nature

We are living in a world that is absolutely transparent, and God is shining through all the time.

Merton's Influences

An Artist's sensibilities

Both parents were artists, specifically his father was a Landscape Painter. He writes of his father **"His vision was religious and clean...since a religious man respects the power of God's creation to bear witness for itself"** (Seven Storey Mountain, pg 11)

Franciscan/Desert/Celtic Heart

But "Merton's awareness of the created world as it really is – **deeply interconnected by the Spirit of God and foundationally interdependent in a way that humanity oftentimes chooses to ignore** – seems to have emerged from within his heart and from an early age." (The Franciscan Heart of Thomas Merton, pp 131-132).

Influenced by the Franciscan Intellectual tradition of Duns Scotus and Bonaventure at Columbia University in the 1930's which provided his entry-way into Catholicism. This gave him the necessary framework to understand the hidden wholeness of creation.

One of his attractions to the Franciscans was Francis of Assisi's sense of kinship with all creation. A concern about entering the Cistercians was that he would be cut off from the natural world.

He embraced Desert Spirituality's expression of Theoria Physike (Evagrius and Maximus the Confessor) – "Contemplation of God in and through nature, in and through the things he has created, in history." (A Course in Christian Mysticism, pg 71)

Merton's interest in the Celtic began in the 1960's as an interest in his own Welsh roots. He notes similarities to St. Francis: **"I think it may be claimed that the Irish were naturally Franciscan, Franciscan before St. Francis!"** (Thomas Merton and the Celts, pg. 5). **He always enjoyed the palpable presence of Presence for whom he ... had sacrificed the world of human society** (when the trees say nothing – pg. 33). **Merton also identified with the Celtic monks' restless quest to recover paradise as a lived experience of the native harmony and unity of all beings.** (when the trees say nothing – pg. 34)

Zen Spirit

The platonic intuition cultivated by Western masters **began to yield to a direct, existential apprehension of the immediacy of things...** The romanticism of his early years distilled into a sparseness of observation. There was less interpretations... **there was less narrative because the narrator was disappearing... entrainment to nature brought him to his senses, letting him experience the naked vitality of life encompassing him on all sides... In the process his perception was washed clean of mental and emotional formations that blurred his vision of the way things really are...** The awakening of his Zen mind disclosed the deeper mystery of the God beyond concepts and images, intimated through a discipline of abandoning every name, every form, every concept of the divine. **The fruit of this labor was perception of the startling immediacy of an ever-incarnation divinity at once revealed and concealed in creation as mercy and love.** (where the trees say nothing – pp. 36-37)

...all problems are resolved, and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear. The rock, all matter, all life is charged with dharmakaya... everything is emptiness, and everything is compassion. – The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton – pg 235

How it shows up in his work

There are no specific books written by him about Nature, but it was interwoven throughout his writings (books, essays, poems, journals and letters), conferences to novices and as subjects of his Drawings/Art and Photography.

The Spirituality of creation that is found throughout Merton's journals, letters and other writings can be understood in terms of a threefold movement:

1. **There is a consciousness, an awakening, and an eye-opening movement** from the seclusion of one's human selfishness and self-centeredness **toward a realization of the harmony of creation and humanity's call to become aware of that symphonic tune.**
2. In addition to a growing consciousness of the created order, **Merton also understood each element of the created order as vestige (footprint) of God...** Everything that exists reflects or points back to its Creator.
3. **Recognizes a Kinship with all of Creation**

From the Franciscan Heart of Thomas Merton – Chapter 6

Four interrelated dimensions of Merton's writings about nature became evident:

1. Much more **interested in the peculiarities of natural phenomena.** Merton became attentive to the particular in nature. Being able to recognize and identify natural phenomena is not merely a way of labeling and cataloguing and so somehow controlling, living things, but rather is part of a fundamental discipline of respect for the created world.
2. The emblematic application of a natural fact or event to a human situation, **finding in nature the moral or spiritual lesson.**
3. The full significance of the relationship between the natural and the human. **Nature requires not simply investigation and analysis but participation. For Merton, this holistic consciousness is, or should be, something intrinsic to monastic life.** When he became master of students one of his innovations is to put them to work in the woods planting thousands of seedlings – sharing with them his own love and respect for nature and implanting in them the recognition that stewardship and renewal of the natural environment is a spiritual discipline. **A sense of unity with nature is for Merton an antidote to the "post-Cartesian technologism that separates man from the world"**
4. **An appreciative and responsible integration with the natural world is an essential component of any authentic human life,** but especially of one that aspires to some sort of contemplative awareness, **for the natural worlds in Merton's view is ultimately a source of revelation, a manifestation of the divine Ground of all created reality,** which nevertheless infinitely transcends it

As he engaged with the world (1960's) he had specific essays that addressed ecological concerns. His Reading of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) and Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1967) awakened his sense of urgency and ecological concern.

Books/Essays

Seven Storey Mountain:

I saw a part of the world in which I was one day going to learn how to be very happy... It is the association of that happiness which makes upper New York seem, in my memory, to be so beautiful. But it is objectively so, there is no doubt of that. **Those deep valleys and miles and miles of high, rolling wooded hills: the broad fields... the color, and freshness, and bigness, and richness of the land! The cleanness of it. The wholesomeness.... We got to Olean, we breathed its health and listen to its silence.** – pg 219

When the summer came, I sub-let the apartment on Perry Street to Seymour's wife and went up-state, into the hills behind Olean. **Lax's brother-in-law had a cottage, on top of a hill, from which you could see miles over New York and Pennsylvania – miles of blue hill-tops and wooded ridges, miles of forest... It was very pleasant to sit on the step of this porch and look at the valley in the quiet evening,** and play the drums. We had a pair of bongos... pp 261 - 262

The Sign of Jonas:

And now my whole being breathes the wind which blows through the belfry, and my hand is on the door through which I see the heavens. The door swings out upon a vast sea of darkness and of prayer. Will it come like this, the moment of my death? Will You open a door upon the great forest and set my feet upon a ladder under the moon, and take me out among the stars? The roof glistens under my feet, this long metal roof facing the forest and the hills, where I stand higher than the treetops and walk upon shining air. Mists of damp heat rise up out of the fields around the sleeping abbey. The whole valley is flooded with moonlight and I can count the southern hills beyond the watertank and almost number the trees of the forest to the north Now the huge chorus of living beings rises up out of the world beneath my feet: life singing in the watercourses, throbbing in the creeks and the fields and the trees, choirs of millions and millions of jumping and flying and creeping things. And far above me the cool sky opens upon the frozen distance of the stars. Lord God of this great night: do You see the woods? Do You hear the rumor of their loneliness? Do You behold their secrecy? Do You remember their solitudes? Do You see my soul is beginning to dissolve like wax within me? ... There is no leaf that is not in Your care. There is no cry that was not heard by You before it was uttered. There is no water in the shales that was not hidden there by Your wisdom. There is no concealed spring that was not concealed by You. There is no glen for a lone house that was not planned by You for a lone house. There is no man for that acre of woods that was not made by You for that acre of woods. But there is a greater comfort in the substance of silence than in the answer to a question. Eternity is in the present. Eternity is in the palm of the hand. Eternity is a seed of fire, whose sudden roots break barriers that keep my heart from being an abyss. The things of time are a connivance with eternity. The shadows serve You. The beasts sing to You before they pass away. The solid hills shall vanish like a worn-out garment. All things change, and die and disappear. Questions arrive, assume their actuality, and also disappear. In this hour I shall cease to ask them, and silence shall be my answer. The world that Your love created, that the heat has distorted, and that my mind is always misinterpreting, shall cease to interfere with our voices. Minds which are separated pretend to blend in one another's language. The marriage of souls in concepts is mostly an

illusion. Thoughts which travel outward bring back reports of You from outward things: but a dialogue with You, uttered through the world, always ends by being a dialogue with my own reflections in the stream of time. With You there is no dialogue unless You choose a mountain and circle it with cloud and print Your words in fire upon the mind of Moses. What was delivered to Moses on tablets of stone, as the fruit of lighting and thunder, is now more thoroughly born in our own souls as quietly as the breath of our own being. The hand lies open. The heart is dumb. The soul that held my substance together, like a hard gem is the hollow of my own power, will one day totally give in. Although I see the stars, I no longer pretend to know them. Although I have walked in those woods, how can I claim to love them? One by one I shall forget the names of individual things. You, Who sleep in my breast, are not met with word, but in the emergence of life within life and of wisdom with wisdom. You are found in communion: Thou in me and I in Thee and Thou in them and they in me: dispossessions within dispossessions, dispassion within dispassion, emptiness within emptiness, freedom with freedom. I am alone. Thou art alone. The Father and I are One. – Firewatch pp 360-362

New Seeds of Contemplation:

If I were looking for God, every event and every moment would sow, in my will, grains of His life that would spring up one day in a tremendous harvest. For it is God's love that warms me in the sun and God's love that sends the cold rain. It is God's love that feeds me in the bread I eat and God that feeds me also by hunger and fasting. It is the love of God that sends the winter days when I am cold and sick, and the hot summer when I labor and my clothes are full of sweat: but it is God Who breathes on me with light winds off the river and in the breezes out of the wood. His love spreads the shade of the sycamore over my head and sends the water-boy along the edge of the wheat field with a bucket from the spring, while the laborers are resting, and the mules stand under the tree. It is God's love that speaks to me in the birds and stream; but also, behind the clamor of the city God speaks to me in His judgements, and all these things are seeds sent to me from His will. If these seeds would take root in my liberty, and if His will would grow from my freedom, I would become the love that He is, and my harvest would be His glory and my own joy. And I would grow together with thousands and millions of other freedoms into the gold of one huge field praising God, loaded with increase, loaded with wheat. If in all things I consider only the heat and the cold, the food or the hunger, the sickness or labor, the beauty or pleasure, the success and failure or the material good or evil my works have won for my own will, I will find only emptiness and not happiness. I shall not be fed; I shall not be full. For my food is the will of Him Who made me and Who made all things in order to give Himself to me through them. – New Seeds of Contemplation pp 16-17

A Tree gives glory to God by being a tree. For in being what God means it to be it is obeying Him. It "consents." so to speak, to His creative love. It is expressing 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. The more a tree is like itself, the more it is like Him. If it tried to be like something else which was never intended to be, it would be less like God and therefore it would give Him less glory...This particular tree will give glory to God by spreading out its roots in the earth and raising its branches into the air and the light in a way that no other tree before or after it ever did or will do... The forms and individual characters of living and growing things, of inanimate beings, of animals and flowers and all nature, constitute their holiness in the sight of God. Their inscape is their sanctity. It is the imprint of His wisdom and His reality in them. The special clumsy beauty of this colt on this April day in this field under these clouds is a holiness consecrated to God by His own creative wisdom and it declares the glory of God. The pale

flowers of the dogwood outside this window are saints. The little yellow flowers that nobody notices on the edge of that road are saints looking up into the face of God... The lake hidden among the hills are saints and the sea too is a saint who praises God without interruption in her majestic dance. The great, gnashed, half-naked mountain is another of God's saints... nothing else in the world ever did or ever will imitate God in quite the same way. That is His 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. Trees and animals have no problem. God makes them what they are without consulting them, and they are perfectly satisfied. With us it is different. God leaves us free to be whatever we like. We can be ourselves or not, as we please. – Things in their Identity pp 29 – 31

The fulfillment we find in creatures belongs to the reality of the created being, a reality that is from God and belongs to God and reflects God. The anguish we find in them belongs to the disorder of our desire which looks for a greater reality in the object of our desire than is actually there: a greater fulfillment than any created thing is capable of giving. Instead of worshipping God through His creation we are always trying to worship ourselves by means of creatures. – Everything that Is, Is Holy pg 26

The world was made as a temple, a paradise into which God Himself would descend to dwell familiarly with the spirits He had placed us there to tend it for Him. The early chapters of Genesis... are precisely a poetic and symbolic revelation, a completely true, though not literal, revelation of God's view of the universe and of His intentions for man. The point of these beautiful chapters is that God made the world as a garden in which He himself took delight. He made man and gave to man the task of sharing in His own divine care for created things... The Word of God Himself was the "firstborn of every creature." He "in Whom all things consist" was not only to walk with man in the breeze after noon, but would also become Man, and dwell with man as a brother... Because He loved His creatures... What in God might appear to us as "play" is perhaps what He Himself takes most seriously. At any rate, the Lord plays and diverts Himself in the garden of His creation, and if we let go of our obsession with what we think is the meaning of it all, we might be able to hear His call and follow Him in His mysterious cosmic dance. We do not have to go very far to catch echoes of that game, and of that dancing. When we are along on a starlit night; when by chance we see the migrating birds in autumn descending on a grove of junipers to rest and eat; when we see children in a moment when they are really children; when we know love in our hearts; or when, like the Japanese poet Basho we hear an old frog land in a quiet pond with a solitary splash- at such times the awakening, the turning inside out of all values, the "newness," the emptiness and purity of vision that makes themselves evident, provide a glimpse of the cosmic dance... we are invited to forget ourselves on purpose, cast our awful solemnity to the winds and join in the general dance. – The General Dance pp 290 - 297

Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander:

How the valley awakes. At two-fifteen in the morning there are no sounds except in the monastery: the bells ring, the office begins. Outside, nothing, except perhaps a bullfrog saying "Om" in the creek or in the guesthouse pond. ... The mysterious and uninterrupted whooping of the whippoorwill begins about three, these mornings. He is not always near. Sometimes there are two whooping together, perhaps a mile away in the woods in the east. **The first chirps of the waking day birds mark the "point vierge" of the dawn under a sky as yet without real light, a moment of awe and inexpressible innocence, when the Father in perfect silence open their eyes. They begin to speak to Him, not with**

fluent song, but with an awakening question that is their dawn state, their start at the “point vierge.” The condition asks if it is time for them to “be.” He answers “yes.” Then, they one by one wake up, and become birds. They manifest themselves as birds, beginning to sing. Presently they will be fully themselves, and will even fly. Meanwhile, the most wonderful moment of the day is that when creation is its innocence asks permission to “be” once again, as it did on the first morning that ever was. All wisdom seeks to collect and manifest itself at that blind sweet point. Man’s wisdom does not succeed, for we are fallen into self-mastery and cannot ask permission of anyone. We face our mornings as men of undaunted purpose... For the birds there is no time that they tell, but the virgin point between darkness and light, between nonbeing and being... So they wake: first the catbirds and cardinals and some that I do not know. Later the song sparrows and wrens. Last of all the doves and crows. The waking of crows is most like the waking of men: querulous, noisy, raw. Here is an unspeakable secret: paradise is all around us and we do not understand. It is wide open. The sword is taken away, but we do not know it: we are off “one to his farm and another to his merchandise.”... “Wisdom” cries the dawn deacon, but we do not attend. – The Night Spirit and Dawn Air pp 127-128

All being is from God. This is not simply an arbitrary and tendentious “religious” affirmation which in some way or other robs being of autonomy and dignity. On the contrary, the doctrine of creation is, when properly understood, what which implies the deepest respect for reality and for the being of everything that is. The doctrine of creation is rooted not in a desperate religious attempt to account of the fact that the world exists. It is not merely an answer to the question of how things got to be what they are by pointing to God as a cause. On the contrary, the doctrine of creation as we have it in the Bible and as it has been developed in Christian theology (particularly in St. Thomas) starts not from a question about being but from a direct intuition of the act of being. Nothing could be further from a merely mechanistic and casual explanation of existence. “Creation” is then not merely a pat official answer to a religious query about our origin. One who apprehends being as such apprehends it as an act which is utterly beyond a complete scientific explanation. To apprehend being is an act of contemplation and philosophical wisdom rather than the fruit of scientific analysis. It is in fact a gift given a few. Anyone can say: “This is a tree and that is a man.” But how few are ever struck by the realization of the real import of what is really meant by “is”? Sometimes it is given to children and to simple people... to experience a direct intuition of being. Such an intuition is simply an immediate grasp of one’s own inexplicable personal reality in one’s own incommunicable act of existing! One who has experienced the baffling, humbling, and liberating clarity of this immediate sense of what it means to be has in that very act experienced something of the presence of God. For God is present to me in the act of my own being, an act which proceeds directly from His will and is His gift. My act of being is a direct participation in the Being of God. God is pure Being, this is to say He is the pure and infinite Act of total Realty. All other realities are simply reflections of His pure Act of Being, and participations in it granted by His free gift. Now my existence differs from that of a stone or a vegetable—or even from that of an irrational animal. The being that is given to me is given with certain possibilities which are not open to other beings. And the chief of these possibilities is that I am capable of increasing the intensity of the quality of my act of existence by the free response I make to life. And here we come to the root problem of life. My being is given me not simply as an arbitrary and inscrutable affliction, but as a source of joy, growth, life, creativity, and fulfillment. But the decision to take existence only as an affliction is left to me... We no longer know how to live, and because we cannot accept life in its reality life ceases to be a joy and become an affliction. And we even go so far as to blame God for it! The evil in the world is all our own making, and it proceeds entirely from our

ruthless, senseless, wasteful, destructive, and suicidal neglect of our own being. This moral and spiritual disease is manifesting itself daily in symptoms that are more and more critical... A respect for "the world" that does not rest on a real intuition of the act of being and a grateful, contemplative, and Christian sense of being will end only in the further destruction and debasement of the world in the name of a false humanism which has no other fruit than to make man hate himself, hate life, and hate the world he lives in. – The Fork in the Road, pp 220 - 223

Mystics and Zen Masters

The deepest and most mysterious potentialities of the physical and bodily world, potentialities essentially sacred, demanded to be worked out on a spiritual and human level. The pilgrimage of the Irish monk was therefore not merely the restless search of an unsatisfied romantic heart. It was a profound and existential tribute to the realities perceived in the very structure of the world, and of man, of their being: a sense of ontological and spiritual dialogue between man and creation in which spiritual and bodily realities interweave and interlace themselves like manuscript illuminations in the Book of Kells... Better perhaps than the Greeks, some of the Celtic monks arrived at the purity of that theoria physike which sees God not in the essences of logoi of things but in the hierophanic [refers to any manifestation of the sacred in whatever object throughout history] cosmos; hence the marvelous vernacular poetry of the sixth and seventh century Celtic hermits. – From Pilgrimage to Crusade pp 97 - 98

Day of the Stranger – May 1965

The hills are blue and hot. There is a brown, dusty field in the bottom of the valley...I know there are tress here. I know there are birds here. I know the birds in fact very well, for there are precise pairs of birds (to each of fifteen or twenty species) living in the immediate area of my cabin. I share this particular place with them: we form an ecological balance. This harmony gives me the idea of 'place' a new configuration. As to crows, they form part of a different pattern. They are vociferous and self-justifying, like humans.... There is also the non-ecology, the destructive unbalance of nature, poisoned and unsettled by bombs, by fallout, by exploitation: the land ruined, the waters contaminated, the soil charged with chemicals, ravaged with machinery, the houses of farmers falling apart because everybody goes to the city and stays there... There is no poverty so great as that of the prosperous, no wretchedness so dismal as affluence. Wealth is poison. There is not misery to compare with that which exists where technology has been a total success... I live in the woods out of necessity. I get out of bed in the middle of the night because it is imperative that I hear the silence of the night, alone, and with my face on the floor, say psalms, alone in the silence of the night.... It is necessary for me to see the first point of light which begins to be dawn. It is necessary to be present alone at the resurrection of the Day, in the solemn silence at which the sun appears, for at this moment all the affair of cities, of governments, of war departments, are seen to be the bickerings of mice. I receive from the Eastern woods, the tall oaks, the one word DAY, which is never the same. It is always a totally new language. After dawn I go down to into the valley, first under the pines, then under tall oaks, then down a sharp incline, past an old barn, out into the field where they are planting corn... In the heat of noon I return through the cornfield, past the barn under the oaks, up the hill, under the pines, to the hot cabin. Larks rise out of the long grass singing. A bumblebee hums under the wide shady eaves... Soon I will cut bread, eat supper, say psalms, sit in the back room as the sun sets, as the birds sing outside the window, as silence descends on the valley and night descends... It is necessary to be alone,... to be in the exile of silence... – Dancing in the Water of Life, pp 239 - 242

Poetry – Hagia Sophia

I. Dawn. The Hour of Lauds.

There is in all visible things an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness, a hidden wholeness. This mysterious Unity and Integrity is Wisdom, the Mother of all, Natura naturans. There is in all things an inexhaustible sweetness and purity, a silence that is a fount of action and joy. It rises up in wordless gentleness and flows out to me from the unseen roots of all created being, welcoming me tenderly, saluting me with indescribable humility. This is at once my own being, my own nature, and the Gift of my Creator's Thought and Art within me, speaking as Hagia Sophia, speaking as my sister, Wisdom.

I am awakened, I am born again at the voice of this my Sister, sent to me from the depths of the divine fecundity.

Let us suppose I am a man lying asleep in a hospital. I am indeed this man lying asleep. It is July the second, the Feast of Our Lady's Visitation. A Feast of Wisdom.

At five-thirty in the morning I am dreaming in a very quiet room when a soft voice awakens me from my dream. I am like all mankind awakening from all the dreams that ever were dreamed in all the nights of the world. It is like the One Christ awakening in all the separate selves that ever were separate and isolated and alone in all the lands of the earth. It is like all minds coming back together into awareness from all distractions, cross-purposes and confusions, into unity of love. It is like the first morning of the world (when Adam, at the sweet voice of Wisdom awoke from nonentity and knew her), and like the Last Morning of the world when all the fragments of Adam will return from death at the voice of Hagia Sophia, and will know where they stand.

Such is the awakening of one man, one morning, at the voice of a nurse in the hospital. Awakening out of languor and darkness, out of helplessness, out of sleep, newly confronting reality and finding it to be gentleness.

It is like being awakened by Eve. It is like being awakened by the Blessed Virgin. It is like coming forth from primordial nothingness and standing in clarity, in Paradise.

In the cool hand of the nurse there is the touch of all life, the touch of Spirit.

Thus Wisdom cries out to all who will hear (*Sapientia clamitat in plateis*) and she cries out particularly to the little, to the ignorant and the helpless.

Who is more little, who is more poor than the helpless man who lies asleep in his bed without awareness and without defense? Who is more trusting than he who must entrust himself each night to sleep? What is the reward of his trust? Gentleness comes to him when he is most helpless and awakens him, refreshed, beginning to be made whole. Love takes him by the hand, and opens to him the doors of another life, another day.

(But he who has defended himself, fought for himself in sickness, planned for himself, guarded himself, loved himself alone and watched over his own life all night, is killed at last by exhaustion. For him there is no newness. Everything is stale and old.)

When the helpless one awakens strong at the voice of mercy, it is as if Life his Sister, as if the Blessed Virgin, (his own flesh, his own sister), as if Nature made wise by God's Art and Incarnation were to stand over him and invite him with unutterable sweetness to be awake and to live. This is what it means to recognize Hagia Sophia.

II. Early Morning. The Hour of Prime.

O blessed, silent one, who speaks everywhere!

We do not hear the soft voice, the gentle voice, the merciful and feminine.

We do not hear mercy, or yielding love, or nonresistance, or non-reprisal. In her there are no reasons and no answers. Yet she is the candor of God's light, the expression of His simplicity.

We do not hear the uncomplaining pardon that bows down the innocent visages of flowers to the dewy earth. We do not see the Child who is prisoner in all the people, and who says nothing. She smiles, for though they have bound her, she cannot be a prisoner. Not that she is strong, or clever, but simply that she does not understand imprisonment.

The helpless one, abandoned to sweet sleep, him the gentle one will awake: Sophia.

All that is sweet in her tenderness will speak to him on all sides in everything, without ceasing, and he will never be the same again. He will have awakened not to conquest and dark pleasure but to the impeccable pure simplicity of One consciousness in all and through all: one Wisdom, one Child, one Meaning, one Sister.

The stars rejoice in their setting, and in the rising of the Sun. The heavenly lights rejoice in the going forth of one man to make a new world in the morning, because he has come out of the confused primordial dark night into consciousness. He has expressed the clear silence of Sophia in his own heart. He has become eternal.

III. High Morning. The Hour of Tierce.

The Sun burns in the sky like the Face of God, but we do not know his countenance as terrible. His light is diffused in the air and the light of God is diffused by Hagia Sophia.

We do not see the Blinding One in black emptiness. He speaks to us gently in ten thousand things, in which His light is one fullness and one Wisdom.

Thus He shines not on them but from within them. Such is the loving-kindness of Wisdom.

All the perfections of created things are also in God; and therefore He is at once Father and Mother. As Father He stands in solitary might surrounded by darkness. As Mother His shining is diffused, embracing all His creatures with merciful tenderness and light. The Diffuse Shining of God is Hagia Sophia. We call her His "glory." In Sophia His power is experienced only as mercy and as love.

(When the recluses of fourteenth-century England heard their Church Bells and looked out upon the wolds and fens under a kind sky, they spoke in their hearts to "Jesus our Mother." It was Sophia that had awakened in their childlike hearts.)

Perhaps in a certain very primitive aspect Sophia is the unknown, the dark, the nameless Ousia. Perhaps she is even the Divine Nature, One in Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. And perhaps she is in infinite light unmanifest, not even waiting to be known as Light. This I do not know. Out of the silence Light is spoken. We do not hear it or see it until it is spoken.

In the Nameless Beginning, without Beginning, was the Light. We have not seen this Beginning. I do not know where she is, in this Beginning. I do not speak of her as a Beginning, but as a manifestation.

Now the Wisdom of God, Sophia, comes forth, reaching from “end to end mightily.” She wills to be also the unseen pivot of all nature, the center and significance of all the light that is in all and for all. That which is poorest and humblest, that which is most hidden in all things is nevertheless most obvious in them, and quite manifest, for it is their own self that stands before us, naked and without care.

Sophia, the feminine child, is playing in the world, obvious and unseen, playing at all times before the Creator. Her delights are to be with the children of men. She is their sister. The core of life that exists in all things is tenderness, mercy, virginity, the Light, the Life considered as passive, as received, as given, as taken, as inexhaustibly renewed by the Gift of God. Sophia is Gift, is Spirit, Donum Dei. She is God-given and God Himself as Gift. God as all, and God reduced to Nothing: inexhaustible nothingness. Exinanivit semetipsum. Humility as the source of unfailing light.

Hagia Sophia in all things is the Divine Life reflected in them, considered as a spontaneous participation, as their invitation to the Wedding Feast.

Sophia is God’s sharing of Himself with creatures. His outpouring, and the Love by which He is given, and known, held and loved.

She is in all things like the air receiving the sunlight. In her they prosper. In her they glorify God. In her they rejoice to reflect Him. In her they are united with him. She is the union between them. She is the Love that unites them. She is life as communion, life as thanksgiving, life as praise, life as festival, life as glory.

Because she receives perfectly there is in her no stain. She is love without blemish, and gratitude without self-complacency. All things praise her by being themselves and by sharing in the Wedding Feast. She is the Bride and the Feast and the Wedding.

The feminine principle in the world is the inexhaustible source of creative realizations of the Father’s glory. She is His manifestation in radiant splendor! But she remains unseen, glimpsed only by a few. Sometimes there are none who know her at all.

Sophia is the mercy of God in us. She is the tenderness with which the infinitely mysterious power of pardon turns the darkness of our sins into the light of grace. She is the inexhaustible fountain of kindness, and would almost seem to be, in herself, all mercy. So she does in us a greater work than that of Creation: the work of new being in grace, the work of pardon, the work of transformation from brightness to brightness *tamquam a Domini Spiritu*. She is in us the yielding and tender counterpart of the power, justice, and creative dynamism of the Father.

IV. Sunset. The Hour of Compline. Salve Regina.

Now the Blessed Virgin Mary is the one created being who enacts and shows forth in her life all that is hidden in Sophia. Because of this she can be said to be a personal manifestation of Sophia, Who in God is Ousia rather than Person.

Natura in Mary becomes pure Mother. In her, Natura is as she was from the origin from her divine birth. In Mary Natura is all wise and is manifested as an all-prudent, all-loving, all-pure person: not a Creator, and not a Redeemer, but perfect Creature, perfectly Redeemed, the fruit of all God's great power, the perfect expression of wisdom in mercy.

It is she, it is Mary, Sophia, who in sadness and joy, with the full awareness of what she is doing, sets upon the Second Person, the Logos, a crown which is His Human Nature. Thus her consent opens the door of created nature, of time, of history, to the Word of God.

God enters into His creation. Through her wise answer, through her obedient understanding, through the sweet yielding consent of Sophia, God enters without publicity into the city of rapacious men.

She crowns Him not with what is glorious, but with what is greater than glory: the one thing greater than glory is weakness, nothingness, poverty.

She sends the infinitely Rich and Powerful One forth as poor and helpless, in His mission of inexpressible mercy, to die for us on the Cross.

The shadows fall. The stars appear. The birds begin to sleep. Night embraces the silent half of the earth.

A vagrant, a destitute wanderer with dusty feet, finds his way down a new road. A homeless God, lost in the night, without papers, without identification, without even a number, a frail expendable exile lies down in desolation under the sweet stars of the world and entrusts Himself to sleep.

Journals and Letters

In June 1949, when he was given permission to spend time alone meditating in the woods, a sense of liberation, contentment, and heightened awareness radiates through his description of his first afternoon outside the monastic enclosure. - Encyclopedia

Gethsemani looked beautiful from the hill. It made much more sense in its surroundings. We do not realize our own setting and we ought to: it is important to know where we are put on the face of the earth. ... And I thought: if we only knew how to use this space and this area of sky and these free woods. Then the Spirit of God got hold of me and I started through the woods... this place was simply wonderful. It was quiet as the Garden of Eden. I sat on the high bank, under young pines, and looked out over this glen. Right under me was a dry creek, with clean pools lying like glass between the shale pavement of the stream and the shale was as white and crumpled as sea-biscuit. Down in the glen were the songs of marvelous birds. I saw the gold-orange flame of an oriole in a tree. Orioles are too shy to come near the monastery. There was a cardinal whistling somewhere, but the best sound was that of two birds that sounds as wonderfully, as nightingales and their sound echoes through the wood. I could not tell what they were. I had never heard such birds before. The echo made the place sound more remote and self-contained more perfectly enclosed, and more like Eden... And I thought – 'Nobody ever comes here!' The marvelous quiet! The sweet scent of the woods – the clean

stream, the peace, the inviolate solitude! And to think that no one pays any attention to it. It is there and we despise it, and we never taste anything like it without fuss and our books and our sign-language and our tractors and our broken-down choir. (Entering the Silence, 329)

February 10, 1950, St. Scholastica

*I went to the garden house attic, as usual, after dinner. Today it was wonderful. Clouds, sky overcast, but tall streamers of sunlight coming down in a fan over the bare hills. **Suddenly I became aware of great excitement. The pasture was full of birds- starlings. There was an eagle flying over the woods. The crows were all frightened, and were soaring very high, keeping out of the way.** Even more distant still were the buzzards, flying and circling, obscuring everything from a distance. **And then starlings filled every hill tree and shone in the light and sang. The eagle attacked a tree full of starlings, but before he was near then, the whole cloud of them left the tree and avoided him and he came nowhere near them. Then he went away and they alighted on the ground. They were there moving about and singing for about five minutes. Then, like lightning, it happened. I saw a scare go into the cloud of birds, and they opened their wings and began to rise off the ground and in that split second, from behind the house and from over my roof, a hawk came down like a bullet, and shot straight into the middle of the starlings just as they were getting off the ground. They rose into the air and there was a slight scuffle on the ground as the hawk got his talons into the one bird he had nailed. It was a terrible and yet beautiful thing, that lightning flight, straight as an arrow, that killed the slowest starling. Then every tree, every field was cleared. I do not know where all the starlings went... The hawk, all alone in the pasture, possessed his prey. He did not fly away like a thief. He stayed in the field like a king with the killed bird, and nothing else came near him. He took his time. I tried to pray, afterward. But the hawk was eating the bird. And I thought of that flight, coming down like a bullet from the sky behind me and over my roof, the sure aim with which he hit this one bird, as though he had picked it out a mile away... I think that hawk is to be studied by saints and contemplatives because he knows his business. I wish I knew my business as well as he does his. I wonder if my admiration for you gives me an affinity for you, artist!*** (Entering the Silence, pp 407 - 408)

March 17, 1952

When your tongue is silent, you can rest in the silence of the forest. When your imagination is silent, the forest speaks to you, tells you of its unreality and of the Reality of God. But when your mind is silent, then the forest suddenly becomes magnificently real and blazes transparently with the Reality of God. For now I know that the Creation, which first seems to reveal Him in concepts, then seems to hide Him by the same concepts, finally is revealed in Him, in the Holy Spirit. And we who are in God find ourselves united in Him with all that springs from Him. This is prayer, and this is glory! (Entering the Silence, 470-471)

October 5, 1957

*The warblers are coming through now. Very hard to identify them all, even with field glasses and a bird book. (Have at least one that is definitely not in the bird book.) Watching one which I took to be a Tennessee warbler. **A beautiful, neat, prim looking thing – seeing this beautiful thing which people do not usually see, looking into this world of birds, which is not concerned with***

us or with our problems. I felt very closer to God or felt religious awe anyway. Watching those birds was food for meditation or as mystical reading. Perhaps better. Also the beautiful, unidentified red flower or fruit I found on a bud yesterday. I found a bird in the woods yesterday on the feast of St. Francis. Those things say so much more than words Mark was saying, "The birds don't know they have names." Watching them I thought: who cares what they are called? But do I have the courage not to care? Why not be like Adam, in a new world of my own, and call them by my own names? That would still mean that I thought names were important. No names and no words to identify the beauty and reality of those birds today, is the gift of God to me in letting me see them. (And that name – God – is no name! It is like a letter. X or Y. Yawheh is a better Name – it finally means Nameless One.) (A Search for Solitude, pp163 – 164)

December 11, 1962

I have been shocked at a notice of a new book, by Rachel Cardon [Silent Spring], on what is happening to birds as a result of the indiscriminate use of poisons (which do not manage to kill all the insects they intend to kill). Someone will say: you worry about birds: why not worry about people? I worry about both birds and people. We are in the world and part of it and we are destroying everything because we are destroying ourselves, spiritually, morally, and in every way. It is all part of the same sickness, and it all hangs together. I want to get this book. Why? Because this is a truth I regard as very significant and I want to know more of it. (Turning toward the World, pg 274)

April 13, 1963, Holy Saturday

... Then the sunrise, enormous yolk of energy spreading and spreading as if to take over the sky. After that the ceremonies of the birds feeding in the dewy grass and the meadowlark feeding and singing. Then the quiet, totally silent day, warm mid morning under the climbing sun. It was hard to say psalms: one's attention was totally absorbed by the great arc of the sky and the trees and hills and grass and all things in them. How absolutely true, and how central a truth, that we are purely and simply part of nature, though we are the part which recognizes God. It is not Christianity, indeed, but post-Cartesian technologism that separates man from the world and makes him a kind of little god in his own right, with his clear ideas, all by himself. We have to be humbly and realistically what we are... Turning toward the World, pg 312)

July 6, 1963 – Merton sees ecological awareness as part of an authentic contemporary monastic spirit, in continuity with traditional Benedictine respect for the land.

MONASTIC SPIRIT

- 1. Importance of the Biblical element, of real monastic tradition (not ritual "traditions").***
- 2. Importance of restoring the distinction of action and contemplation within the monastery...***
- 3. Importance of a tradition that opens out in full continuity into a wisdom capable of understanding the mystery of the contemporary world in light of theoria, -- Sensitivity on the issue of peace, racial justice, but also technology and the great spiritual***

problem of the profound disturbances of ecology all over the world, the tragic waste and spoilage of natural resources, etc. (Turning toward the World, pg 330)

January 12, 1963 (Letter to Rachel Carson)

The awful responsibility with which we scorn the smallest values is part of the same portentous irresponsibility with which we dare to use our titanic power in a way that threatens not only civilization but life itself. The same mental processing – I almost said mental illness – seems to be at work in both cases, and your book makes it clear to me that there is a consistent pattern running through everything that we do, through every aspect of our culture, our thought, our economy, our whole way of life. What this pattern is I cannot say clearly, but I believe it is now the most vitally important thing for all of us, however we may be concerned with our society, to try to arrive at a clear, cogent statement of our ills, so that we may begin to correct them. Otherwise, our efforts will be directed to purely superficial symptoms only, and perhaps not even at things related directly to the illness. On the contrary, it seems that our remedies are instinctively those which aggravate the sickness: the remedies are expressions of the sickness itself. I would almost dare to say that the sickness is perhaps a very real and very dreadful hatred of life as such, of course subconscious, buried under our pitiful and superficial optimism about ourselves and our affluent society. But I think that the very thought processes of materialistic affluence... are self-defeating. They contain so many built-in frustrations that they inevitably lead us to despair in the midst of “plenty” and “happiness” and the awful fruit of this despair is indiscriminate, irresponsible destructiveness, hatred of life, carried on in the name of life itself. In order to “survive” we instinctively destroy that on which our survival depends... Another thought has struck me... the meaning of original sin, whatever may be one’s dogmatic convictions about it, is that man has built into himself a tendency to destroy and negate himself when everything is at its best, and that is just when things are paradisiacal that he uses this power. The whole world itself, to religious thinkers, has always been a transparent manifestation of the love of God, as a “paradise” of His wisdom, manifested in all His creatures, down to the tiniest, and in the most wonderful interrelationship between them. Man’s vocation was to be in this cosmic creation, so to speak, as the eye in the body. What I say now is a religious, not a scientific statement. That is to say, man is at once a part of nature and he transcends it. In maintaining this delicate balance, he must make use of nature wisely, and understand his positions, ultimately relating both himself and visible nature to the invisible- in my terms, to the Creator, in any case, to the source and exemplar of all being and all life. But man lost his “sight” and is blundering around aimlessly in the midst of the wonderful works of God. It is in thinking that he sees, in gaining power and technical know-how, that he has lost his wisdom and his cosmic perspective. (Thomas Merton, A Life in Letters, pp 207-209)

November 4, 1964

In the afternoon, lots of pretty little myrtle warblers were playing and diving for insects in the low pine branches over my head, so close I could almost touch them. I was awed at their loveliness, their quick flight, etc. Sense of total kinship with them as if they and I were of the same nature, and as if that nature were nothing but love. And what else but love keeps us all together in being? (Dancing in the Water of Life, pg 162)

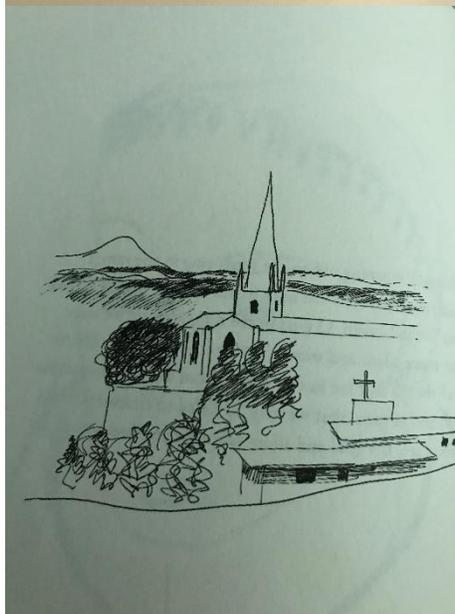
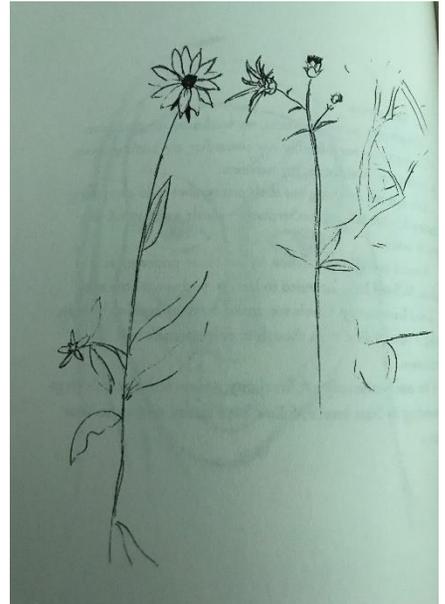
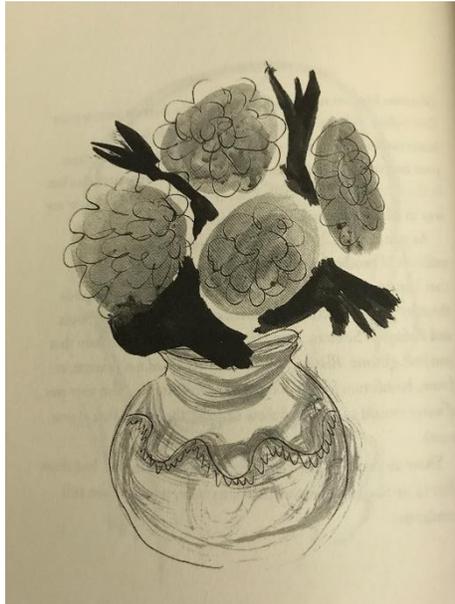
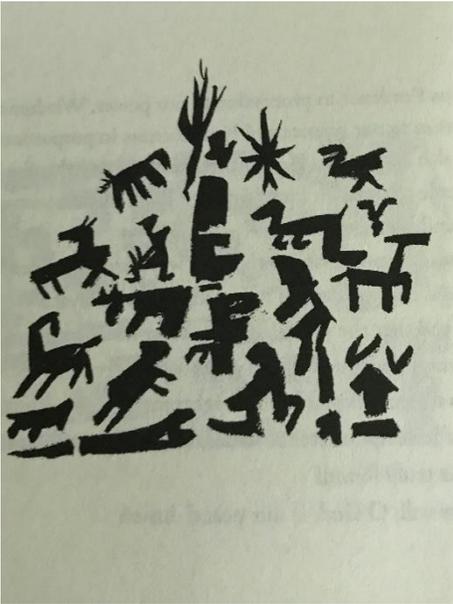
March 25, 1967 (Letter to Mario Falsina)

My idea of the world: first of all, the world as God's good creation. I have the good fortune to live in close contact with nature, how should I not love this world, and love it with passion? I understand the joy of St. Francis amid the creatures! God manifests himself in his creation, and everything that he had made speaks of him.

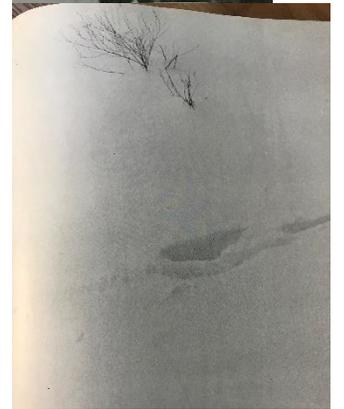
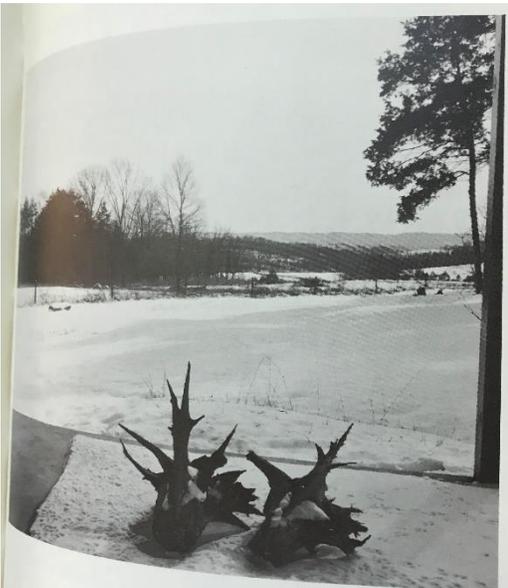
February 16, 1968 (Letter to Barbara Hubbard)

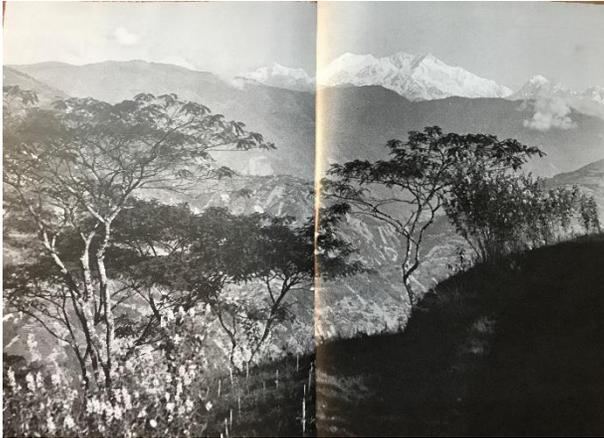
The future depends very much on what we are thinking and doing now... I detect two broad kinds of ethical consciousness developing...: (1) a millennial consciousness, (2) an ecological consciousness. The millennial consciousness is like this: all that has happened up to now has been at best provisional and preparatory, at worst a complete mess. The real thing is about to happen: the new creation, the millennium, the coming of the Kingdom, the withering away of the State, etc... The ecological consciousness says: look out! In preparing this great event you run the risk of forgetting something. We are not alone in this thing. We belong to a community of living beings and we owe our fellow members in this community the respect and honor due to them. If we are to enter into a new era, well and good, but let's bring the rest of the living along with us. In other words, we must not try to prepare the millennium by immolating our living earth, by careless and stupid exploitation for short-term commercial, military, or technological ends which will be paid for by irreparable loss in living species and natural resources. This ecological consciousness can be summed up in the words of Albert Schweitzer: to wit, "life is sacred... that of plants and animals [as well as that of our] fellow man". And the conservationist Aldo Leopold spoke of a basic "ecological conscience," the source of an ethic that can be stated in the following expansion of the Golden Rule: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise." (Thomas Merton, A Life in Letters, pp 222-222)

Drawings/Art



Photographs





Sources of Insight about Merton

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5. Thomas Merton's Journals (Entering the Silence, A Search of Solitude, Turning toward the World, Dancing in the Water of Life)
6. The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton
7. The Seven Storey Mountain
8. The Sign of Jonas