

MERTON AND RAZOR WIRE
"The Shackled Contemplative"

by Timothy J. Muise

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When one comes across a vein of gold in the bedrock of hate's mountain range you should mine what you can out of it. This is how I view the International Thomas Merton Society chapter here behind the razor wire of the state prison in Shirley, Massachusetts. Prison is the bedrock of hate to which I refer and in the years I have spent in these mountains of despair I have learned one thing for certain; only God can rescue the prisoner from the certain death of the soul that is the penal colony. Death by a thousand cuts.

Merton speaks of contemplation being "his whole life", not just part of it. He had learned it was a mistake to make it only part of his life. He talks about how "few religions ever really penetrate to the inmost soul of the believer...". Being a Catholic I always wanted to believe that our Mass, our sacred liturgy, made us somehow believers to the "inmost soul". My walk of faith taught me that in the dry times, when I wandered from our Lord, that hope was barren from most of my daily thoughts. In prison this can be dangerous (as it can be anywhere else) as there are so many pitfalls one can stumble into. To be a contemplative is still beyond my full understanding but even with the small inroads I have made this "waiting for God" that I have found contemplation to be has assisted me in avoiding some of those pitfalls.

To try to understand that contemplation is "as pure in proportion as it is free from sensible and conceptual elements" was a very arduous task for me, but through willingness to learn and actual daily participations, I have become enlightened to the fact that God desires that I become closer to him; to embrace His design. The requirement that I let go and "wait" for God is difficult for someone so used to the instant gratification of worldly things, but through practice and through application I have discovered that the "waiting" can be a very pleasant and calming experience. This is not a definition I thought would lend itself to any type of waiting, but as with many things in God's world it is a paradox. Good things come to those who wait.

The "Cloud of Unknowing" Merton refers to has at its core the question "How shall I think about Him, and what is He?". This

fourteenth century quandry from an unknown source is at the heart of what a contemplative is attempting to discern, but it also goes much deeper. For me, the razor wire contemplative, I must just trust that more will be revealed through the "waiting for God". Even at this infancy in my Merton inspired journey I have developed a great trust that indeed more will in fact be revealed, while also learning that I could never anticipate what those revelations may be. I trust that God is there, that he is in control, and that I must "wait" and see what His Grace has in store for me; a sinner.

The mountains of hate are not nearly as steep these days. That bedrock of despair not nearly as solid and the veins of gold seem larger as I grow spiritually. I am willing to wait. I am willing to be less as God becomes more. I am willing to be free from those spiritual shackles that have held me back, kept me small. His love and plan will be displayed in the waiting. I am now willing to work toward that "complete union with God" that is our ultimate destiny. No razor wire can keep Him out.

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AUTHORED BY:

Timothy J. Muise
PO Box 1218
Shirley, MA
01464-1218