

# **Thomas Merton and Henri Nouwen**

## **Western Explorers of the Christian East**

by Jim Forest

At different periods of my life, Thomas Merton and Henri Nouwen were spiritual fathers to me. Both were excellent confessors. They made it possible for me to share parts of myself that were painful, awkward or embarrassing. Each helped me survive hard times and cope with periods of despair. So I say at the beginning that what light I can shine on them is not the result simply of studying their writing, identifying main themes, trying to see where their thoughts converge or diverge, or analyzing them as if I were studying them through a telescope. They were both people who played – in fact still play – a role in my life.

For all their differences, they had a great deal in common. Both were Europeans who made their home in North America. Both were Catholic priests. Both lived a life that was centered in the Liturgy. Both were deeply responsive to the suffering of others. Both were involved in opposition to war and social injustice, for which they were sometimes regarded as liberals or even radicals, yet both were passionately devoted to promoting the spiritual life and took a dim view of popular political ideologies, for which they were sometimes regarded as conservatives.

Both were restless men.

After writing an autobiography which seemed to say there was no better place on earth to be than the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in rural Kentucky, many of Merton's letters in later years almost catch fire with complaints about the shortcoming of life in his chosen monastery. On several occasions Merton sought to permission to leave with the idea of sharing in the life of a poorer, smaller, more primitive monastery either in Latin America or some other part of the world. One of the amazing achievements of his life was that he was steadfast in his monastic vocation but remained a monk of the Abbey of Gethsemani until his death. Still

there was a basic restlessness. It is somehow appropriate that he should die while on pilgrimage on the other side of the planet while attending a monastic conference in Thailand after weeks of travel in India and Sri Lanka.

Henri had no monastic vows to limit his travel nor was his bishop in Utrecht inclined to rein him in. His restlessness brought him from Holland to America. He taught at Notre Dame, then Yale, then Harvard, but could bring himself to stay at none of these distinguished institutions. Searching for community, he was a kind of temporary brother at a Trappist monastery for several extended periods, but found monastic life, though it helped clear his mind, didn't suit him. He had a sabbatical in Latin America and thought for a time he was called to make his life there as a missionary, but then decided also wasn't his calling. He finally found a home for himself not in academia or monastic life but with the L'Arche community in Canada – not the brilliant but the physically and mentally handicapped plus their downwardly-mobile assistants. Even then he was often on the move. Like Merton, he died while traveling – two heart attacks in his homeland, Holland, while en route to Russia where he intended to make a film about Rembrandt's painting of the return of the Prodigal Son.

There are still other similarities:

Both had a remarkable gift for communicating to others the fact that a life of faith is one of endless exploration, an adventure second to none. Both produced a flood of books, many of which remain in print. Few writers on religious life has been so widely read or been so often translated into other languages. Years after their deaths, both still have a huge influence on the lives of many people.

Both of them died relatively young. I am now eight years older than Merton when he died, age 54, in 1968, and I'm two years short of the age that Henri was when he died, age 64, in 1996.

Both felt that the healing of east-west divisions within the Church was assisted more by a process of east-west integration in the spiritual life than

by academic theological conferences. As Merton put this is *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*:

"If I can unite in myself the thought and devotion of Eastern and Western Christendom, the Greek and the Latin Fathers, the Russian and the Spanish mystics, I can prepare in myself the reunion of divided Christians. From that secret and unspoken unity in myself can eventually come a visible and manifest unity of all Christians. If we want to bring together what is divided, we cannot do so by imposing one division upon the other. If we do this, the union is not Christian. It is political and doomed to further conflict. We must contain all the divided worlds in ourselves and transcend them in Christ."

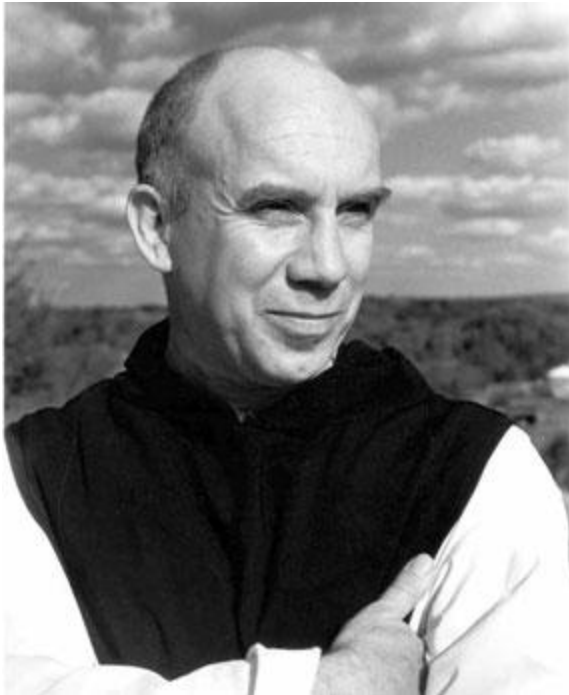
This passage opens a vital door in the movement toward unity among Christians, a goal which seems more elusive today than when Merton made his journal entry in April 1957. Yet beneath the flagging processes of official inter-church dialogue, one notes that the use of icons — an art form chiefly associated with the Orthodox Church — has slowly but steadily been gaining ground among non-Orthodox Christians. These days we often find them in Catholic and Protestant churches, offices and retreat centers.

Both Thomas Merton and Henri have played a major role in this quiet movement of rediscovering icons. It is this area of their search that I will especially focus on today. Would that we also had time to explore other areas of their debt to eastern Christianity. For example both had a passionate interest in to the Desert Fathers. Both of them published collections of Desert Father stories. Both of them were deeply drawn to hesychasm — from the Greek word for silence, hesychia — referring to a way of prayer originally fostered by desert monasticism in Egypt and Palestine. Both Merton and Henri had in common a deeply established practice of the Jesus Prayer, which is at the core of the hesychast spiritual tradition.

My contact with Merton started in the summer of 1961 not long after I had been discharged from the U.S. Navy. I had just joined the Catholic Worker community in New York City, a house of hospitality mainly for street people in that part of Manhattan now called the East Village. In those days

it was just the Lower East Side. You could rent a cold-water flat for \$25 a month. I had the idea at the time that the Catholic Worker would be a way station en route to the monastery, a vocational ambition that had in part been nurtured by reading Merton's autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

The first letter led to many more. For more than seven years, until his death, I wrote to Merton often, perhaps on average a letter per month, and there were letters, cards and copies of manuscripts from Merton at about the same rate. There were sometimes packages – an occasional box of monastery-made cheese with a gift card signed “Uncle Louie.” (In monastic



life, Merton was Father Louis.) There were also two extended visits with Merton at the monastery, one early in 1962, another late in 1964.

In the summer or fall of 1962 a postcard came, the image side of which I look back on as quite significant but at the time I regarded in vaguely negative terms: a black and white photograph of a medieval Russian icon – Mary with the child Jesus in her arms. Jesus, though infant-sized, looked more like a miniature man. It seemed to me formal, lifeless and absolutely flat. Compared to the

masterpieces of the Renaissance, this sort of thing seemed to me at best something left over from the kindergarten of art history. Years later, when I had occasion to make a complete set of photocopies of all Merton's notes and letters to me, I didn't bother to photocopy the image side of this or any of the other icon postcards he had sent me from time to time. I always assumed that Merton had no more taste for this kind of primitive Christian than I did. I imagined some donor had given his monastery a box of icon postcards which Merton was using in the spirit of voluntary poverty.

It was only in writing a biography of Merton, *Living With Wisdom*, that it finally dawned on me how crucial a role icons had played in Merton's life and realized that no one could have been happier in sending out an icon photo to friends than Merton.

In fact I should have been aware of this side of Merton even before I knew him personally. It's something he writes about with deep feeling in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, when he describes one of the great catastrophes of the unsettled childhood, his father's premature death when Tom was a student at a residential high school in rural England. Owen Merton was suffering from a brain tumor that produced a large lump on his head and made him unable to speak. His 16-year-old son would occasionally go down to London and sit in mute silence next to his father's bed in Middlesex Hospital while gazing at his father's eyes.

Merton could see no meaning in what was happening to his father, whose misshapen head seemed to him like "a raw wound for which there was no adequate relief." Having already lost his mother to cancer ten years earlier and now on the verge of becoming an orphan, he responded with fury to the religious platitudes he heard from the chaplain of his Anglican school. Clearly there was no "loving God." Clearly life had no meaning. His parents' fate was proof of that. "You had to take it like an animal," he wrote later on. The only lesson he could draw from his parents' fate was avoid as much pain as possible and take what pleasure you could out of life. At chapel services at his school in Oakham, Merton would no longer join in reciting the Creed. "I believe in nothing" summed up his creed at this point in his life.

Yet Owen Merton had another view of his own suffering which he finally managed to communicate to his son through drawings, the only "last word" he could manage in his silenced condition. Merton came to see his artist father in his hospital room and, to his amazement, found the bed littered with drawings of "little, irate Byzantine-looking saints with beards and great halos." In a word: drawings of icons. The younger Merton didn't know what to make of them. He had no eye for icons at the time. He then regarded Byzantine art, he confessed in an unpublished autobiographical novel, *The Labyrinth*, as "clumsy and ugly and brutally stupid."

Owen Merton died early in 1931. Two years passed. On Tom's 18th birthday, January 31, 1933, having finished his studies at Oakham early, with more than half a year off before entering Clare College in Cambridge in September, and with money in his pocket from his wealthy grandfather in America, Merton set off for an extended European holiday, a one man Grand Tour with an extended visit to Italy the main event. He hiked along the Mediterranean coast of France and then took the train from Saint Tropez into Italy: first Genoa, then Florence, finally Rome.

Once in Rome, for days he followed the main tourist track, a Baedeker guidebook in hand, but the big attractions, from the Roman Forum to St. Peter's Basilica, left him either yawning or annoyed. The architecture, statuary and painting of the Roman Empire, the Renaissance and the Counter-Reformation struck him as vapid and melodramatic. "It was so evident, merely from the masses of stone and brick that still represented the palaces and temples and baths, that imperial Rome must have been one of the most revolting and ugly and depressing cities the world has ever seen," Merton wrote in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, words that still sound like the reflections of a bright, hyper-critical teen-ager. It seemed to him that the best one could say of ancient Rome was that it would have been an ideal set for a Cecil B. DeMille's film epic.

Perhaps we would never have heard of Thomas Merton had it not been for what happened when he made his way from the guidebook's four-star attractions to those with three or two stars, or even one, and thus came to know some of Rome's most ancient churches – San Clemente, Santa Sabina, Santa Maria Maggiore, Cosmas and Damian, the Lateran, Santa Costanza, Santa Maria in Trastevere, and San Prassede. These moved him in an unexpected and extraordinary way. On the walls of many of these churches he met his father's drawings.

These were all churches of sober design whose main decoration were mosaic icons, images of deep stillness, bold lines, vibrant colors and quiet intensity that have little in common with the more theatrical art that was eventually to take over in Rome. They house some of the best surviving examples of the art of Christianity's first millennium. In Santa Maria Maggiore, two lengthy tiers of mosaic icons date from the fourth century.



Merton first such encounter with ancient Christian art was with a fresco in a ruined chapel. Later he discovered a large mosaic over the altar at Sts. Cosmas and Damian of Christ coming in judgment with a fiery glow in the clouds beneath his feet against a vivid blue background. This was not at all the effeminate Jesus he had so often encountered in English art of the Victorian period.

“I was fascinated by these Byzantine mosaics,” he wrote in his autobiography. “I began to haunt the churches where they were to be found, and, as an indirect consequence, all the other churches that were more or less of the same period. And thus without knowing anything about it, I became a pilgrim.”

The excited memory of those days of eager discovery was still fresh when he was writing *The Seven Storey Mountain* fifteen years later:

What a thing it was to come upon the genius of an art full of spiritual vitality and earnestness and power – an art that was tremendously serious and alive and eloquent and urgent in all that it had to say .... [an art] without pretentiousness, without fakery, that had nothing theatrical about it. Its solemnity was made all the more astounding by its simplicity ... and by its subservience to higher ends, architectural, liturgical and spiritual ends which I could not even begin to understand, but which I could not avoid guessing, since the nature of the mosaics themselves and their position and everything about them proclaimed it aloud.

Through these icons, he began to understand, not simply who Christ was but who Christ is. In this crucial section of his autobiography, the

crescendo comes in two intense paragraphs that read more like a litany than ordinary prose:

"And now for the first time in my whole life I began to find out something of Who this Person was that men call Christ. It was obscure but it was a true knowledge of Him, in some sense, truer than I know and truer than I would admit. But it was in Rome that my conception of Christ was formed. It was there I first saw Him, Whom I now serve as my King, and Who owns and rules my life. It is the Christ of the Apocalypse, the Christ of the Martyrs, the Christ of the Fathers. It is the Christ of Saint John, and of Saint Paul, and of St. Augustine and St. Jerome and all the Fathers – and of the Desert Fathers. It is Christ God, Christ King."

The intensity of the experiences reflected in this powerful litany may be due in part to the fact that Merton was alone in Rome. There is something about unmediated, face-to-face contact that can increase one's vulnerability to a work of art. There is no schedule to keep, no guide or professor to explain, no handbook to provide a caption, no bus to board in fifteen minutes, no idle chatter with people more interested in menus than mosaics. Eager to decipher the iconographic images that so arrested his eyes, Merton put aside the D.H. Lawrence books that had weighted down his rucksack and bought a Bible. "I read more and more of the Gospels, and my love for the old churches and their mosaics grew from day to day."

The attraction of icons wasn't simply due to Merton's newly-gained appreciation of the aesthetics of iconography but a profound sense of peace he experienced within the walls of churches graced with such imagery. He had, he said, "a deep and strong conviction that I belonged there."

Merton desperately wanted to pray, to light a candle, to kneel down, to pray with his body as well as his mind, but found the prospect of publicly kneeling in a church alarming.

Finally one morning he climbed to the top of the Aventine Hill on the east side of the Tiber, crowned by the fifth century church of Santa Sabina, one of the oldest and least spoiled churches in Rome. Once inside, he found he could no longer play the guidebook-studying tourist: "Although the church



was almost empty, I walked across the stone floor mortally afraid that a poor devout old Italian woman was following me with suspicious eyes.”

He knelt down at the altar rail and, with tears, again and again recited the Our Father.

At age 18, Merton had undergone, without realizing exactly what it was, a mystical experience: an encounter with Christ. From that moment he had something against which to measure everything, whether himself or religious art or the Church in history. He knew what was phony, not because of some theory but because of an experience of Christ mediated through iconography.

If you know his life story, you know that the pilgrimage that followed was nothing like an arrow's direct flight to faith, baptism and the Church. The coming winter at Clare College was to prove a disastrous time in his life, the “nadir of winter darkness,” as he put it later on, leaving wounds from which I doubt he ever fully healed. He did more drinking than studying and fathered an illegitimate child. His well-to-do guardian in London wanted no further responsibility for Owen Merton's wayward son and sent him packing to his grandparents in America.

Four years after arriving in New York, while a student at Columbia, Merton was received into the Catholic Church. Three years later, in 1941, he was a new member of the Trappist monastic community of the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky. Yet his encounter with icons was far from finished nor was that the only aspect of what today is especially linked with eastern Christianity: the Orthodox Church.

For twenty years, beginning in the late 40s, books poured from his pen at the average of two a year, many of them best sellers, many of them still in print. It is striking to discover that only one book of Merton's got as far as being set in type and yet wasn't published: *Art and Worship*. It was to have gone to press in 1959. The galley sheets survive at the Thomas Merton Study Center in Louisville. I have a photocopy in my home. But his publisher had second thoughts, fearing the book would damage Merton's reputation. The art historian Eloise Spaeth was enlisted by his publisher as a kind of professor-by-post to ferry Merton's tastes into the modern world,

but in the end she threw up her hands. She was appalled with Merton's "'sacred artist' who keeps creeping out with his frightful icons."

Merton's aesthetic heresy was his view that Christian religious art had been more dead than alive for centuries. What he had hoped to do with his small book was to sensitize his readers to an understanding of iconography, a tradition which in the west at least, had been abandoned since the Renaissance and all but forgotten.

"It is the task of the iconographer," he declared in *Art and Worship*, "to open our eyes to the actual presence of the Kingdom in the world, and to remind us that though we see nothing of its splendid liturgy, we are, if we believe in Christ the Redeemer, in fact living and worshipping as 'fellow citizens of the angels and saints, built upon the chief cornerstone with Christ'."

It seemed to his publisher that such an opinion was badly dated. The sixties were about to unfold, but even in the fifties nothing could be more out-of-fashion than icons.

Yet Merton was never weaned of his love of this art form. Occasionally Merton returned to the topic of icons in letters. Only months before his death, he was in correspondence about icons with a Quaker correspondent, June Yungblut, in Atlanta. He confessed to her that books such as her husband was writing which presented Jesus as one of history's many prophetic figures left him cold. He was, he told her, "hung up in a very traditional Christology." He had no interest in a Christ who was merely a great teacher who possessed "a little flash of the light." His Christ, he told her, was "the Christ of the Byzantine icons."

June Yungblut found the phrase "the Christ of the Byzantine icons" scandalous. Didn't Merton feel a shiver to use the word "Byzantine"? Didn't "Byzantine" signify the very worst in both Christianity and culture? And as for icons, weren't they of about as much artistic significance as pictures on cereal boxes?

In a letter sent in March 1968, Merton explained what he meant by the "Christ of the Byzantine icons." The whole tradition of iconography, he

said, “represents a traditional experience formulated in a theology of light, the icon being a kind of sacramental medium for the illumination and awareness of the glory of Christ within us. ... What one ‘sees’ in prayer before an icon is not an external representation of a historical person, but an interior presence in light, which is the glory of the transfigured Christ, the experience of which is transmitted in faith from generation to generation by those who have ‘seen,’ from the Apostles on down. ... So when I say that my Christ is the Christ of the icons, I mean that he is reached not through any scientific study but through direct faith and the mediation of the liturgy, art, worship, prayer, theology of light, etc., that is all bound up with the Russian and Greek tradition.”

Even from Orthodox writers, one rarely finds so insightful and yet succinct presentation of the theology of icons.



What Merton had learned about icons had been hugely enriched by the gift from his Greek Orthodox friend, Marco Pallis, of a hand-painted icon, originally from Mount Athos. It had arrived in the late summer of 1965, just as he was beginning his hard apprenticeship as a hermit living in a small cinderblock house in the woods near the monastery. It was one of the

most commonly painted all icons, and image of the Mother of God and the Christ Child. For Merton it was like a kiss from God.

He wrote Pallis in response: “How shall I begin? I have never received such a precious and magnificent gift from anyone in my life. I have no words to express how deeply moved I was to come face to face with this sacred and beautiful presence granted to me.... At first I could hardly believe it.... It is a perfect act of timeless worship. I never tire of gazing at it. There is a spiritual presence and reality about it, a true spiritual ‘Thaboric’ light, which seems unaccountably to proceed from the Heart of the Virgin and Child as if they had One heart, and which goes out to the whole universe. It is unutterably splendid. And silent. It imposes a silence on the whole

hermitage. ... [This] icon of the Holy Mother came as a messenger at a precise moment when a message was needed, and her presence before me has been an incalculable aid in resolving a difficult problem.”

Marco Pallis’ gift was the first of seven icons that made their way to Merton in his last three years of life and found a place in his small chapel.

We come upon a final clue to the place icons had in his inner life when we consider the short list of personal effects that were returned with his body when it was flown back to the monastery from Thailand:

- 1 Timex Watch
- 1 Pair Dark Glasses in Tortoise Frames
- 1 Cistercian Leather Bound Breviary
- 1 Rosary
- 1 Small Icon on Wood of Virgin and Child

But what about the place of icons in the life of Henri Nouwen?



Henri managed not only to write but to publish a book on icons that Merton would have loved: *Behold the Beauty of the Lord*. This thin volume remains among the best introductions to icons – very accessible, not at all technical, with a directness and sobriety that one can only describe as icon-like. With his usual immediacy, Henri explains how one icon and then others gained a place in his life and what he had so far learned from long periods of living with four of them: Rublev’s Holy Trinity icon, an icon of Mary holding Christ in her arms, an icon of the face of Christ (also by Rublev), and finally an icon of the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles at Pentecost.

Of course Henri had seen icons in art history books, museums, churches and monasteries many times, but it wasn’t until his first visit to the L’Arche community in Trosly, France, in 1983 that he began to see icons with wide-

open eyes. Barbara Swanekamp, assistant to L'Arche founder Jean Vanier, had put a reproduction of Rublev's icon of the Holy Trinity on the table of the room where Henri would be staying. "After gazing for many weeks at the icon," Henri noted in *Behold the Beauty of the Lord*, "I felt a deep urge to write down what I had gradually learned to see."

Those of you who knew Henri or are familiar with him through his books know that he was profoundly sensitive to the visual arts. It was a family trait. In the introduction to his book on icons, he recalls a Chagall painting his parents had purchased early in their marriage when Chagall was hardly known — a watercolor of a vase filled with flowers placed on a sunlit window ledge, a simple yet radiant work that made one aware of God's silent energy. I recall seeing it when Henri brought me with him to stay with at his father's house. There were many other beautiful works of art in the house — the house was a small museum of fine art — but the Chagall watercolor stood out from the rest and still remains a fresh memory. "The flowers of Chagall," Henri writes, "come to mind as I wondered why those four icons have become so important to me."

The connection does not surprise me. Chagall's work was deeply influenced by iconography. In some of his paintings the link is made explicit, but it is always there in more subtle ways. Chagall's work in was never a slave to the rules of perspective or to the physics of gravity. People and animals fly. Fiddlers play on rooftops. Husbands and wives float in the kitchen. Like an iconographer, Chagall made his canvas a window opening on the invisible world and the life of the soul. It may be that the Chagall painting Henri grew up with helped awaken in him a capacity to appreciate icons and understand their special language.

I remember Henri coming to visit us in Holland following his stay at Trosly. He was very excited about the gift he had brought with him, a reproduction of the Holy Trinity icon he had bought that morning in a shop in Paris. Though he had not yet seen the actual icon — it was in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow — yet he was confident that the print came as close to the real thing as print technology would allow.

Though I had seen icons from time to time, until that day I had taken only a meager interest in them. Merton's enthusiasm for them had been was a

mystery to me. It wasn't until Henri's visit that finally I began to see them with a similar excitement.



I vividly recall sitting at Henri's side as he explored, with childlike fascination, every tiny detail of the Holy Trinity icon. I think he remarked first on the utterly submissive faces of the three angelic figures, each inclined toward the other, in a silent dialogue of love. He considered their profound stillness and yet warmth and vitality. Then we looked at the colors Andrei Rublev had chosen, though even the best reproduction can only hint at what Rublev had actually achieved, as I was to see for myself not long afterward when I first visited the Tretyakov Gallery. Henri traced the perfect circle that invisibly contained the three angels. Then he traced a cross within the circle and then the triangle it also contained. All this significant geometry reveals the icon's theology yet none of it is heavy-handed. Then there was the table around with the three figures were placed – the Eucharistic altar with golden chalice. Above the three figures were three objects: a house with an open door, a tree, and a mountain. The doorless building is the Church. The tree is the Tree of Life and also the Life-giving Cross. The mountain is the Mountain of the Beatitudes.

Henri also spoke about what the history of the icon, how Rublev had painted it as the principal icon for the Cathedral of the Holy Trinity where the body of St. Sergius of Radonezh had been placed. St. Sergius, one of Russia's most beloved saints, was a monk and woodworker who lived in the 14th Century. He left no writings. The only words that come down to us from St. Sergius are these: "The contemplation of the Holy Trinity destroys all enmity." Through this icon standing a few meters from the burial place of St. Sergius, Rublev sought to provide the opportunity for the contemplation of the Holy Trinity.

It may have been from Henri that I first heard the comment of one of the martyrs of the Soviet era, the physicist, mathematician, theologian and priest, Pavel Florensky, who wrote: "Because of the absolute beauty of Rublev's Holy Trinity icon, we know that God exists." Henri understood this way of thinking – beauty is a witness to the existence of God. Again and again he found in works of art doors to heaven: Rembrandt's Prodigal Son, and many of the paintings of Van Gogh.

For Henri the Holy Trinity icon was an icon of "the house of love" – the Church as God intends it to be, the doors of which are never closed and which needs no locks.

Henri linked icons with the question: "What do we really choose to see?"

It is a matter of enormous importance what we look at and how we look at it. "It makes a great difference," Henri noted, "whether we see a flower or a snake, a gentle smile or menacing teeth, a dancing couple or a hostile crowd. We do have a choice. Just as we are responsible for what we eat, so we are responsible for what we see. It is easy to become a victim of the vast array of visual stimuli surrounding us. The 'powers and principalities' control many of our daily images. Posters, billboards, television, videos, movies and store windows continuously assault our eyes and inscribe their images upon our memories. We do not have to be passive victims of a world that wants to entertain and distract us. We can make decisions and choices. A spiritual life in the midst of our energy-draining society requires us to take conscious steps to safeguard that inner space where we can keep our eyes fixed on the beauty of the Lord."

Henri proposed a theology of seeing, or gazing, the verb he preferred. To really see something beautiful, such as a well-painted icon, so that its beauty becomes a sacramental reality, one has to do much more than glance.

For both Merton and Nouwen, the icon is the primary visual art of the Church – if not the door of the Church, than the window. Nor could they see it as something meaningful apart from the totality of the Church. The icon becomes a dead plant when it becomes simply a "work of art," a

“collector’s item,” an aesthetic object. For both Merton and Nouwen, icons were intimately connected with Eucharistic life and daily prayer.

Like the Bible, the icon is made by the Church and guarded by the Church. The icon is a witness to the truths the Church lives by. Each icon has dogmatic content. For example, any icon of Christ in the arms of his mother reminds us that he took flesh in the flesh of her body. Christ’s bare feet seen in the Virgin of Vladimir icon are a reminder that he was fully human, walking on the same earth that we do. Though an infant he is shown dressed as an emperor because in reality, he continually rules the cosmos.

The constraints of time have made me focus on icons, but Merton and Henri’s debt to Eastern Orthodox Christianity goes much further. Both were attentive to Orthodox teachers of prayer. Both were familiar with the *Philokalia*, a huge anthology of writings, mainly from patristic sources, whose main topic is Prayer of the Heart. Both Merton and Henri would often borrow a sentence from one of the authors included in the *Philokalia*, St. Theophan the Recluse: “Prayer is descending with the mind into your heart, and there standing before the face of the Lord, ever present, all seeing, within you.”

Henri would build on this in writing: “The great challenge is living your wounds through instead of thinking them through. It is better to cry than to worry, better to feel your wounds deeply than to understand them, better to let them enter into your silence than talk about them. The choice you face constantly is whether you are taking your wounds to your head or to your heart. In your head you can analyze them, find their causes and consequences, and coin words to speak and write about them. But no final healing is likely to come from that source. You need to let your wounds go down to your heart. Then you can live through them and discover that they will not destroy you. Your heart is greater than your wounds.” [*The Inner Voice of Love*, p. 91]

The Prayer of the Heart is another name for the Jesus Prayer, a short prayer which centers on the name of Jesus and which is very widely used, especially in the Orthodox Church, though gradually it is becoming well known in the West. In its most common form, it is: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”



Merton's use of the Jesus Prayer seems to have begun around 1950. It was well established in his life by 1959, when he wrote the following to a correspondent in England, John Harris: "I heartily recommend as a form of prayer, the Russian and Greek business where you get off somewhere quiet ... breathe quietly and rhythmically with the diaphragm, holding your breath for a bit each time and letting it out easily: and while holding it, saying 'in your heart' (aware of the place of your heart, as if the words were spoken in the very center of your being with all the sincerity you can muster): 'Lord Jesus Christ Son of God have mercy on me a sinner.' Just keep saying this for a while, of course with faith, and the awareness of the indwelling, etc. It is a simple form of prayer, and fundamental, and the breathing part makes it easier to keep your mind on what you are doing. That's about as far as I go with methods. After that, pray as the Spirit moves you, but of course I would say follow the Mass in a missal unless there is a good reason for doing something else, like floating suspended ten feet above the congregation."

Merton's tended to write about these matters in a more playful way than Henri, but in this area of their lives they were both following the same path, finding in the east what could be useful in the west, for the health of their own spiritual lives and the good of those around them, both knowing that prayer, however hidden and private, has profound consequences for the world.

The connection between spiritual life and response to others was basic in both their lives.

One of the hardest choices Merton faced in as a young man was whether to become a monk or to be full-time member of a community of hospitality, Friendship House, in Harlem. He had been volunteering at Friendship House while teaching at St. Bonaventure's University. Even after deciding on the monastic path, a part of Merton continued to feel a powerful connection to those who undertook the works of mercy in the world, especially the Catholic Worker movement that Dorothy Day had founded. Through correspondence and hospitality at the monastery, he became a spiritual father to many people like myself.

Henri was also torn between competing vocational attractions – university professor, monk, missionary, or becoming part of a community of hospitality. He explored each of these possibilities before finally becoming a member of the L’Arche community at Daybreak near Toronto. He too became spiritual father to many people.

In both their lives there was a realization that the icon, far from being merely an artistic image that directs our attention away from the world we live in with all its agonies, is a school of seeing. It is meant to help reshape the way we see and relate to other people. The icon – the Greek word for image – is a reminder that each person, no matter how damaged his life, is a bearer of God’s image and, like those whom we regard as saints, has the capacity to reclaim the lost likeness.

But it is one thing to believe intellectually that, each person is made in the image of God, no less than Adam and Eve, and yet another to actively seek that image and to relate to the other in ways that bear witness to that awareness.

In Merton’s life, one sees this in his remarkable capacity to welcome people of other faiths and to discover areas of common ground. In a time when religious walls were high and bitterly defended, he formed significant friendships not only with a wide variety of non-Catholic Christians but also with Jews, Moslems, Hindus and Buddhists – and also with people who were not sure what they believed or quite where they fit in. As Merton put it while speaking at an inter-religious conference in India, “we all stand on the hidden ground of love.”

In Henri’s life, perhaps the most important event in the last phase of his life was his taking responsibility at Daybreak community for Adam Arnett, a young man of 25 who could not speak, suffered frequent epileptic seizures, and was utterly dependent on help from others. Adam was a person whom many would regard as a first-class case for abortion or, having managed to be born, an excellent candidate for what is euphemistically called “mercy killing.” It was no easy thing for Henri, far from the world’s most practical or physically well-coordinated person, a man who had difficulty frying an egg or operating a washing machine, to center his life on attending to Adam’s numerous practical needs. Yet Adam became both physically and

spiritually a person at the center of Henri's life, one of Henri's most important teachers.

"His heart, so transparent, reflected for me not only his person but also the heart of the universe and, indeed, the heart of God. After my many years of studying, reflecting and teaching theology, Adam came into my life, and by his life and his heart he announced to me and summarized all I had ever learned." [Adam, p. 38]

Much the healing that occurred in the final years of Henri's life was Adam's gift. Adam became in Henri's life a living icon.

Henri Nouwen and Thomas Merton: explorers both, discoverers of icons on wood and in flesh, always trying to open their eyes just a little bit wider, always trying to become just a little less blind. May these two pilgrims help us see more clearly!



Jim Forest and Father Steve