The American Cistercian writer, Thomas Merton, is not too well known to Filipino readers. He had entered the Cistercian monastery in Louisville, Kentucky not long after his conversion to Roman Catholicism when Hitler rolled his tanks against the rest of the world. Known only to a few intimates at Columbia University where he had studied and taught, he became an overnight sensation when his autobiography appeared in America’s bookstores. From then on, the author of The Seven-Storey Mountain became part of the American Catholic spiritual life. His books and numerous essays won an enthusiastic following, and were soon translated into several languages. One of the delegates to the international congress on mystical prayer convened in Bangkok in 1968, he died unexpectedly, apparently accidentally electrocuted by the faulty wiring of an electric fan in his room. Since then, his ideas have continued to influence North American spirituality, and the number of his readers has grown steadily.

A key Merton concept was silence. Thomas Merton was initially hesitant and unsure of his choice of the contemplative life, but once he had made his decision, he never wavered from it. He felt the only way to God was to die to himself, to leave everything and give up literally everything, in order to find happiness. His preference for a contemplative career over that of an active apostolate for the underprivileged was motivated especially by the prospect of total surrender to God, total break and freedom from the world where, he wrote, “people are looking for nothing but their pleasure and advantage and comfort and success.” He wanted a complete change, a life that “least resembled the life men lead in the towns and cities of the world.”

THE MEANING OF SOLITUDE

The physical changes that monastic life imposed on Merton were comprehensive, as everyone knows. But he would be the first to admit that the more important changes in a monk’s life are spiritual. One important change was his own concept of the monastic vocation. He had entered the Trappist Order, one of the strictest in the world — until recently, the monks did not talk but used sign language — with some understanding of monastic discipline. As he confessed in his autobiography, he sought solitude in order that he could be lost to created things, to “die to them and to the knowledge of them.” For while creatures could tell him something about God, they could also be a veil hiding God from him. And so, if he became a poor solitary in the monastery, he could “live alone... out (and away) from them.” In other words, he wanted to escape from the clutches of worldly created things.²

Significantly, he was ill at ease in his new surroundings. He entered the monastery when vocations to the contemplative life flourished and the Cistercians were inundated with applications for admission. In Kentucky, the monastery had more than its share of monks and living quarters were overcrowded and noisy, much to Merton’s perplexity. He had come in search of quiet and peace, but the monastery building, filled with an excess of candidates, had to be expanded and renovated. Monastic life became just as busy, noisy, fussy and organized as elsewhere. Furthermore, the success of his autobiography brought him world renown and unexpected problems. He was, besides, assigned to translate a few books into English and to continue to write books. He felt he was overactive and not contemplative enough.

This brought to the surface his interior debate whether to transfer to the Carthusian Order or to continue in the Cistercian. He never doubted his monastic calling, but he was for long tempted to look elsewhere for what he had at first thought would bring him more opportunity for silence and solitude.

Somehow he weathered this storm and found an answer when, significantly, he ceased looking for it. He was already a priest and, after his first Mass, he wrote how he came to understand

perfectly and for the first time in my life, that nothing else in the world is important except to love God and serve Him with simplicity and joy. I saw most clearly that it is useless to look for some spectacular and extraordinary way to serve Him, when all ordinary service immediately becomes sublime and extraordinary as soon as it is transfigured by love for God.  

This was just the prelude. A few months afterwards, he found himself “face to face with the mystery that was beginning to manifest itself to the depths of my soul and to move me with terror.” He could not explain why or what it was, but he suffered interiorly from it. Then, more than a year later, his fears disappeared all at once, and he discovered what he described as “new moral resources, a new spring of life, a peace and happiness . . . never known before. . . .” And at last he knew, he felt, what solitude was:

Now for the first time, I began to know what it means to be alone. Before becoming a priest I had made a great fuss about solitude and had been rather a nuisance to my superiors and directors in my aspirations for a solitary life. Now, after my ordination, I discovered that the essence of a solitary vocation is that it is a vocation to fear, to helplessness, to isolation in the invisible God. Having found this, I now began for the first time in my life to taste a happiness that was so complete and so profound that I was happy — a vain expedient to prolong a transient joy — for this happiness was real and permanent and even in a sense eternal. It penetrated to the depths below consciousness, and in all storms, in all fears, in the deepest darkness, it was always unchangeably there.

Solitude, then, in Merton’s experience, implies pain and fear, and, apparently, the acceptance of this most obvious fact opened his eyes to its meaning. Solitude is loneliness, being bereft of everything. It implies helplessness, hunger, thirst, unfulfilled desires,


4. Ibid., p. 230. In the same spiritual journal, he wrote on 15 December 1949: “. . . a feeling of fear, dejection, non-existence. Yet it gives me a kind of satisfaction to realize that it is not by contact with creatures that I can recover the sense that I am real. Solitude means being lonely not in a way that pleases you but in a way that frightens you and empties you to the extent that it means exile even from yourself.” Ibid., p. 249.

5. Ibid., p. 149.

6. Ibid., p. 231.
poverty, sadness. He who has found solitude is "empty, as if he had been emptied by death."  

Where had he erred? Merton had been looking for "more solitude," either in another religious order or in his own Cistercian cell. Actually, he had been unconsciously shying away from the solitude that had already swallowed him when he pronounced his religious vows. He was looking for his own idea of solitude, seeking it as an "atmosphere or as a setting for a special and exalted spirituality" he thought he ought to strive for. Without meaning to, he was battling himself, dividing himself by his self-projection of an "ideal monk." He did not know it, but he himself was the main obstacle to his own ideals.

We would profit from an explanation how this change occurred, but we do not have any information beyond what Merton wrote in general terms. His experience of celebrating Mass and the sacrificial character of his priestly anointing were what gave him a new awareness of both solitude and the whole monastic vocation. At first glance, solitude or eremitical life is repudiation of normal human society. Actually it is part of man's personality. Merton wrote that every human person is a solitary, an individual set apart from everyone else by the inexorable limits of his "aloofness." Nothing shows this more than death. When a man dies, he dies alone and by the same token, each man must perforce live his life alone.

The human person is what he is by what he is uniquely in himself, by that hidden secret of his deep self that cannot be found in, or communicated to, anybody else, that by which a man calls himself "I," in contrast to "you," the other person. It is what "I" respect and love in "you," the other one, outside of myself, and that which limits my "self" and distinguishes "me" from "you." This is man's hiddenness, the "solitude of his own individual being, which God alone can penetrate and understand." And yet, this is also man's essential incompleteness which is completed and filled

9. Thomas Merton, No Man is an Island (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1955), p. 245. "That which is most perfect and most individual in each man's life is precisely the element in it which cannot be reduced to a common formula. It is the element which is 'nobody' else's but ours and God's. It is our own true, uncommunicable life, the life that has been planned for us and realized for us in the bosom of God." The Sign of Jonas, p. 181.
by loving others and accepting love in return. Because of this, man is _lonely_ and cannot fill this "void" by himself and he must learn to live it, because "everyone is lonely."  

Far from escaping solitude, then, each man should seek it. One avoids it at the risk of stunting his full stature as a man. First of all, everyone needs to be alone to think for himself, to assert his inner freedom and capacity for creative action if he does not want to fossilize into an unthinking automaton caught in the struggle for existence. This is what Merton meant when he wrote that solitude is

> the acquiring of a new and higher perspective, at the price of detachment . . . from which the mystifying, absurd chaos of human desires and illusions gives place . . . to a concrete intuition of providence and mercy at work even in the natural constitution of man himself. . . .

Instead of destroying human society, the hermit is precisely what cements it. Society depends for its existence on the "inviolable personal" society. This means that men are not violently held together by an abusive authority that seeks to weld them together as little more than well-oiled cogs in a machine. Society is not a mindless mob, but a union of free and responsible persons. Each individual member, in other words, must be guaranteed his "interior solitude," a sense of personal integrity, of one's own reality and of one's own ability to give himself to society — or hold himself back. Otherwise, such union becomes "putrid, it festers with servility, resentment and hatred."  

Solitude, therefore, is a positive value to human society, but much more to the individual person himself. Set apart from everyone else, the solitary man cannot live in an imaginary world of his own concoction. He has to face his own reality, and he is forced to be perfectly honest with himself. With no one around him, who is going to fool whom? And, as Merton put it, the solitary lives

11. _Disputed Questions_, p. xii.
in a world of emptiness, of humility, and purity beyond the reach of slogans and beyond the gravitational pull of diversions that alienate him from God and from himself. He lives in unity. His solitude is neither an argument, an accusation, a reproach, or a sermon. It is simply itself. It is.\textsuperscript{13}

The question before the man who lives alone is whether he wants to be himself or not. He cannot forever be putting off an answer. As Merton said, whether in the hermit’s cell or outside of it, one has to “go about the business of living.” For having renounced all concerns about the world, the solitary man has only one thing before him: to plumb the depths of his own life. In solitary existence, one cannot help but come to terms with the limits, the defects, the weaknesses, and the nothingness of one’s being. Second, the solitary man has to come face to face with God. He cannot avoid Him. But this is just another way of saying that the solitary life is really an affirmation of one’s identity, the “complete acceptance of oneself as willed by God and of one’s lot as given by God.” A man enters the monastery in order that, freed from the routine demands of worldly life, he can create for himself the conditions in which he may live fully.\textsuperscript{14}

Man does not just grow, eat, think, or love. On the other hand, growth, nutrition, work, thought, and love all help to integrate the existential fulness of the human person, whose mind has been endowed with powers that only God can fathom, and who has been made with an openness that only God’s vision can fill. In other words, liberated from the cares of human life, the man who chooses to live alone is in the best position to give a “freer response to the basic existential challenge that summons us to make our sense out of our life. Not just to accept someone else’s answers, but to discover by \textit{personal experience} and to verify existentially the meaning and value of human life...”\textsuperscript{15}

\textbf{THE DIMENSIONS OF SOLITUDE}

For Merton, then, solitude is necessary to realize one’s potential as a human person. It is more than external or physical isolation,

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Disputed Questions}, p. 184.


\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 98.
as expressed in the free option to enter a monastic order. On the other hand, interior solitude — to Merton, the only true solitude — is more than a negation. It is a function, it helps one to enter into communion with God in the depths of the soul. While interior solitude empties the heart of desires and cares, it is a good only because it leads to freedom, and allows one to discover the true inner dimensions of his own being, at once "real" and "unreal." The conviction of one’s "self" as a static, absolute and invariable reality undergoes a profound transformation and . . . we see that our "reality" is not a firmly established ego-self already attained that has merely to be perfected, but rather we are "nothing," a "possibility" in which the gift of creative freedom can realize itself by its response to the free gift of love and grace. 16

This is perhaps one of the richest concepts in Thomas Merton. Solitude is not a total abyss. It is indeed emptiness, yet such that a man is not enclosed within himself. That would be metaphysical annihilation or spiritual death. But in the solitude and emptiness of his heart, a man confronts another, more inexplicable solitude. Man’s loneliness is, in fact, the "loneliness of God," he wrote. In that psychological moment when man finds himself completely alone, he realizes his oneness with the One, Unique God, "alone as he himself is alone," and Who wants man to be alone with Him. 17

This union is the reason for man’s being, and its realization is the heart of the eremitical vocation. The hermit lives in his own cell, in the solitude of his own soul. The fulness of solitude, where the "hermit is not alone with himself," is when he is nourished with the Bread of Life and drinks deeply at the very Fountain of Life. The loneliness and solitude of a man shut in within himself is death. But the authentic, the really sacred solitude is the "infinite solitude of God Himself" alone in Himself in whom the hermit is alone. 18

16. Ibid., pp. 281-82. "True interior solitude is simply the solitude of pure detachment — a solitude which empties our hearts and isolates us from the desires and ambitions and conflicts and troubles and lusts common to all the children of this world. And so, in urging his monks to leave the world, St. Bernard insisted they should concentrate on being unlike the common run of men and enter into the loneliness of the saint, whose heart, isolated above the level of the world, exists in a rarified atmosphere where there is no desire but the desire of God alone." The Waters of Sike, p. 345.
18. Ibid., p. 169.
People avoid solitude and try to fill their loneliness with artificial substitutes, because they are averse to this basic and inevitable fact of life. And yet, without solitude, there can be neither love nor maturity. Man finds himself in his uniqueness, his special self that is not a thing or an object but an "I." Unless this "I" is first recovered, one cannot give himself to others, nor receive from others. Hence, solitude is the foundation of a "deep, pure, gentle sympathy with all other men, whether or not they are capable of realizing the tragedy of their plight."

Solitude, then, facilitates love for God and for one's neighbor. Otherwise, if one separates himself from the human community because he dislikes human exchange, he will not find peace, but will be isolating himself in the desert with a "tribe of devils." When one opts for solitude, he chooses something akin to martyrdom. He disappears from view, as a ripe fruit falls from a tree in the desert, where no man knows about it or goes to pick it up. He is known only to God Who has prepared the desert for him.

Merton's readers know that his language is frequently metaphorical, and with reason. Truth is sometimes better understood through symbols and figures. The desert is a case in point. It is arid, lifeless, unproductive, harsh, uninviting. It is just there. In the same way, the solitary life is outside any institutional framework, not subject to any prepared rules, and where the only activity is to be. It is a life where man is left alone to find out what it means to be alive, to answer the deep question what or who one is really, without any danger of pretense. There is not even the opportunity to hide from one's self behind "apostolic service" to the neighbor. It is a unidimensional existence in which one finds no easy answers, but a host of ambiguities in the silence that is the only answer. The solitary life demands faith to accept the responsibility for one's inner being in order to work one's way "through the darkness of his mystery until he discovers that his mystery and the mystery of God merge into one reality, which is the only reality ... God lives in him and he in God."20

This is the goal, man's transformation, when in his transcendent loneliness, he meets God who reveals to him his "new name,"

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his mysterious identity. Pushed almost to his biological and psychological limit, the solitary experiences true freedom in a life not only not subject to any kind of selfishness, but one lifted above the myths and fixations of an artificial society which has practically controlled modern man. This is what Merton meant when he wrote that interior solitude is the “central condition of the soul that is so overpowered by the infinite distance of God from creatures, that it becomes isolated in Him. It seems so clearly that He alone is good that it can be said to love Him alone.”

Solitude cannot be understood if it stops with God, although without God it is meaningless. As Merton warned, one who accepts solitude “delves in the center of society.” He has learned wisdom from his own lived experience of the “ground of his being in such a way that he knows the secret of liberation and can somehow or other communicate this to others.” The solitary or the contemplative (to Merton the two are interchangeable) faces the world from a totally different viewpoint, and maintains alive in the world the presence of a spiritual and intelligent consciousness which is the root of true peace and unity among men. This consciousness certainly accepts the fact of our empirical and individual existence, but refuses to take this as a basic reality. This basic reality is neither the individual empirical self, nor an abstract and ideal entity which can exist only in reason. The basic reality is being itself, which is one in all concrete existence, which shares itself among them and manifests itself through them.  

Thus, solitude in Merton gives a universal dimension to man. Because of his solitude, man is alone, but paradoxically, he is also one with others. The experience that one has of sharing God’s Being gives him an insight and a “taste” of himself as part of the universe of shared being. He begins to understand that God’s will in his regard has a double purpose, namely, that besides his own perfection as an image of God, he must seek his perfection also because he is part of creation. It is this double vision that Merton said is the “most important part of man’s education.” For it means a release from his basic selfishness and a reorientation of his whole

life. It is a transformation of one's consciousness, a strengthening in trust and faith, without which solitary existence would be impossible. Being does not end or begin with oneself. One now finds meaning and truth in his relationship with others, a relationship that, among others, is called love.

And so, one returns to a constant theme in Merton, die to self in order to live. One renounces everything in order to possess everything. The solitary man does not even seek a "reason" for his solitude, for it is a life of love which must keep in contact with the good that is the object of his love. This can only be faith and trust in the love, first, of God for him and, second, his answer of love, no matter how insignificant, to God. The solitary life, therefore, is also a life of activity, one of total response and surrender to God, based on a "personal and existential awareness" that God loves him. As Merton described it, the solitary life is

really an excellent way of life. Time takes on a completely different quality, and one really lives, even though nothing apparently happens at all. The direction is all vertical, and that is what matters, though at the same time one is not conscious of it.\textsuperscript{22}

THE MEANING OF SILENCE

Besides seeking solitude, Thomas Merton also longed for silence all his life. Not surprisingly, since the one necessarily follows the other. The immediate corollary of solitude is silence. When a man is alone, he has no need to talk. If solitude is essentially the metaphysical emptiness where one comes face to face with God, there is no need, as Merton remarks, to "create noise."\textsuperscript{23} It was for this reason that he entered the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance, whose members (till recently) do not use words but sign language to communicate with one another. Not satisfied with the institutional discipline of silence in the monastery, he obtained permission to live as a hermit and live a life of perpetual seclusion and silence.

\textsuperscript{22} Thomas Merton to Dom Jean Leclercq, O.S.B., 7 July 1966, cited in Richard A. Cashen, C.P., "The Concept of Solitude In the Thought of Thomas Merton" (Ph.D. dissertation, Institute of Spirituality, Gregorian University, Rome, 1976), p. 73.
\textsuperscript{23} Disputed Questions, p. 188.
Like solitude, silence has negative and positive aspects. It is obviously absence of noise and other sounds verbal communication implies. But it does not mean absence of communication. It is absence of vocal speech, but only in order that interpersonal relations may be purer and all-embracing. Silence is more than mere non-communication. One is silent when he seeks not communication but communion.

A man is silent in the presence of someone whose company he enjoys, whom he listens to, since words cannot and need not convey their feelings. Silence means fulness of presence, a deep experience of being. It also means listening. The essence of silence is the need not to communicate, either with others or with one’s self, as when one reflects on his own experiences, but simply enjoys them.

Mertonian silence is based on the function of words and human speech. Speech, he wrote, is a god-like gift. The capacity to form words is man’s power to externalize concepts, to sensibly manifest spiritual realities called into existence within man by man himself. This spiritual reality, man’s interior word or logos, is an image of man himself, such as the divine LOGOS is God’s image. Words, therefore, are an outward expression of man’s spiritual and interior self in action. Talking gives things a higher existence, for in talking, things receive a spiritual image in man’s mind. External reality is spiritualized by man’s power to create the human word. And so, Merton concludes, human speech is man’s creation to convey reality and truth, to communicate and share it with others, to understand and contemplate.

But, like every gift from above, a man’s contemplative ability and his power to communicate reality need to be controlled. Silence is the decision that controls this power, a decision necessitated by the fact that human communication is limited. A “low-level” communication eventually dries up the interior life. If a person’s conversation is exclusively about trivia, like the weather or week-end and sports, he is really dedicating his spiritual powers to things that do not count absolutely, and his mind cannot rise above superficialities. On the other hand, because of man’s orientation to Being, man has an urge to apprehend, to contemplate and to talk about being. However, a man’s limited capacity for being forces him into speechless wonder, by which he simply opens himself to the existential truth that he actually shares in Infinite Being. And so, between the shallow talk about inanities and the mystical
communion with and contemplation of Being that needs not and
cannot be expressed in human language, there are varying degrees
of speech and their corresponding silences.

There is, first, the material silence traditionally observed in
monastic establishments, of which the Cistercian Order is perhaps
the best example. In a monastery where people live and die in order
to find God, the basic premise is the avoidance of all kinds of
noise, even the necessary noise of human speech, in order to pro-
mote an atmosphere of recollection and peace for prayer and com-
munion with God. Words are suspect, for they usually get in the
way; they are rather a block between people and the reality of
things. Even God, Merton wrote, can become another “conceptual
unreality in a no-man’s land of language that no longer serves as a
means of communication with reality.” But silence “clears away
the smoke-screen of words that man has laid down between his
mind and things.”

There is a deeper, more positive aspect in monastic silence. In
accord with the mystical writers of the Catholic tradition, Thomas
Merton insisted that the search for God is not at all a matter of
applying certain ascetic techniques. It is rather a quieting and
ordering of one’s life so that God Himself can find and take pos-
session of the one who seeks Him. There is danger, to begin with,
that the constant effort to perfect oneself, to be a “good monk,”
may bring about the exact opposite when, unconsciously, the
monk’s attention is focused on his penance, his prayers, his works,
instead of on God. Unwittingly, his efforts to succeed in prayer
fail because he fails to find God. This is, in Merton’s description,
“noise and turmoil in the interior life . . . inspirations that proceed
from our emotions or from some spirit that is anything but holy.”

24. “The human dilemma of communication is that we cannot communicate ordinarily
without words and signs, but even ordinary experience tends to be falsified by our habits
of verbalization and rationalization. The convenient tools of language enable us to decide
beforehand what we think things mean and tempt us all too easily to see things only in a
way that fits our logical preconceptions and our verbal formulas. Instead of seeing things
and facts as they are, we see them as reflections and verifications of the sentences we
have previously made up in our minds. We quickly forget how to simply see things and
substitute our words and our formulas for the things themselves, manipulating facts so
that we see only what fits our convenient prejudices.” Thomas Merton, “A Christian
Essays XI, 142. “My knowledge of myself in silence (not by reflection on my self, but
by penetration to the mystery of my true self which is beyond words and concepts
because it is utterly peculiar) opens us into the silence and the ‘subjectivity’ of God’s
own self.” Thoughts in Silence, p. 68.

Or, on another occasion, “greed and passion enter into our own work and turn it into agitation. . . .”

But monastic life aims at man’s experiential union with the hidden God, for which words are both inadequate and unnecessary. What is needed is the conversion of the will, a total giving of one’s self to God. Whether God will be found at the end of the search does not depend on the seeker. Contemplative or experiential union with God is totally a free gift. “The moment we demand anything for ourselves,” Merton wrote, “or even trust in any action of our own . . . we defile and dissipate the perfect gift that He desires to communicate to us in the silence and repose of our powers.” Besides, since no material thing can represent God, one must go beyond matter, in Catholic mystical language, one must enter the darkness of God in order to find Him. If human words are a spiritual creation that gives a nobler reality to things outside of man, no human word or concept will fully represent God Who in no way can be “re-created” by man. One must be silent to find God.

Perhaps, one of the more penetrating of Merton’s insights into silence was expressed in this entry in his spiritual diary, The Sign of Jonas:

Here I sit surrounded by the bees and write in this book. The bees are happy and therefore they are silent. Without saying so, Merton implied that when things are as they ought to be, there is silence. Activity, especially noisy activity, is a sign of incompleteness. A man who cannot be still but feels the need to constantly be doing something is actually trying to justify

26. “Agitation is the useless and ill-directed action of the body. It expresses the inner confusion of a soul without peace . . . the whole reason for agitation is to hide the soul from itself, to camouflage its interior conflicts and their purposelessness, and to induce a false feeling that ‘we are getting somewhere.’ Agitation . . . is the fruit of tension in a spirit that is turning dizzily from one stimulus to another and trying to react to fifteen different appeals at the same time. Under the surface of agitation, and furnishing it with its monstrous and inexhaustible drive, is the force of fear or elemental greed for money, or pleasure, or power. The more complex a man’s passions, the more complex his agitation. All this is the death of the interior life.” No Man Is an Island, p. 110.

27. Seeds of Contemplation, p. 149. A slightly different text in New Seeds of Contemplation, p. 269, reads: “. . . if your experience of God comes from God, one of the signs may be a great difference in telling others about it. To speak about the gift He has given would seem to dissipate it and leave a stain on the pure emptiness where God’s light shone. No one is more shy than a contemplative about his contemplation.”

himself, to escape from his "inactivity" and is afraid that he is poor and empty by himself, that he has no reason for just being, but must be doing something in order to exist. And yet, unless a man stops and "enters" the silence of his own existence, he is liable to get caught in the vicious circle of noise and activity that will drag him away from himself. But since, as Merton points out, man's true being is hidden in obscurity and "nothingness," happiness will always elude one who avoids this "emptiness."

Silence is the fullness of being, the existential oughtness of things (just as the color white contains all colors). It also means the end of questioning. When one has the answers, he can dispense with questions, for he has now found reality "face to face without medium, in silence." 29

Words are not an absolute value or need of man. On the other hand, when without the mediation of words, a man comes to know reality, he no longer trusts entirely in language. "Truth rises from the silence of being." 30

For man is limited. Man, in scholastic language, is a being not fully actualized. Man's search for food, shelter, fame are actually his search for security and love, for his total self. But although these activities and needs are inevitable as long as man is here on earth, the greatest mistake would be to forget their subordinate role. Or to forget that every life activity can actually become an avenue of escape. Without knowing it, one develops an external identity, the "social self which is produced by our interaction with others," Merton warned. No matter how honest and open one may be in his social relations, this "social self does imply a necessary element of artifice. It is always to some extent a mask. It has to be. . . ." 31

For man, in a sense, acts as he is expected to act by others and he tries to live according to accepted social conventions which he did not invent. It pleases him to do so, for it gives him comfort to know he finds acceptance. But, without meaning to, he now lives as others want him to, regardless of the moral questions involved

29. Thoughts in Solitude, p. 110.
30. Ibid., p. 84.
31. "... my life and aims tend to be artificial, inauthentic, as long as I am simply trying to adjust my actions to certain exterior norms of conduct that will enable me to play an approved part in the society in which I live. After all, this amounts to little more than learning a role." Thomas Merton, "Creative Silence," Collected Essays, II: p. 306.
which are not the issue here. The way he lives is predetermined by forces outside of himself and he soon forgets and altogether ignores his true identity.

But if one stops in silence, if one steps aside from the ordinary chores and routines of the day, if one shuns the company of men and in solitude pushes toward the "very frontiers of human experience and . . . beyond, to find out what transcends the ordinary level of existence," he is soon faced by his inner self, he is present to himself and finds the road to self-discovery. One is forced to make decisions about himself, the sincerity of his commitments, the authenticity of his acts. He finds that all his feverish activity is really nothing and his fulfillment cannot come from his own efforts alone. To quote Merton again:

Not only does silence give us a chance to understand ourselves better, to get a truer and more balanced perspective of our lives . . . silence makes us whole if we let it. Silence helps us to draw together the scattered and dissipated energies of a fragmented existence. It is helpful to us in concentrating on a purpose that really corresponds not only to the deepest needs of our own being but also to God's intentions for us.32

This is not, however, the perfect silence of Merton. There is still too much personal activity, too much centering on the self. Experience taught him that silence demands a certain kind of faith, a commitment to the unknown. Perfect silence is complete interior silence, an "interior secrecy that amounts to not even thinking about myself . . . my prayer, the development of my interior life, a lucid silence that does not even imagine it speaks to anybody . . . in which I see no interlocutor, frame no message . . . formulate no words either for man or paper."33

Words define or measure "life," not what Merton wanted. He wanted the simple, direct, sudden penetration and intuition of what is, the "unexpected leap" into the "existential luminosity of Reality itself, not merely by the metaphysical intuition of being, but by the transcendent fulfillment of an existential communion with Him Who is."34 Reason has no place here. Life and reality at

32. Ibid., p. 47.
33. The Sign of Jonas, pp. 192, 258.
this stage are not only known, but lived and savored, experienced in its actual completeness. Freed of images, all the powers of the soul reach out and converge again in one supreme act of being, of experiencing reality in its highest and purest existential essence. It is a communion, a realization that one’s reality is immersed in, or in some way “one with,” the Supreme Reality, the Infinite Act of Being which the Christians call “God.” This silence, according to Merton, is something like the Buddhist or Zen meditation that seeks

not to explain but to pay attention, to become aware, to be mindful, in other words, to develop a certain kind of consciousness that is above deception by verbal formulae — or by emotional excitement. Deception in what? Deception due to diversion and distraction from what is right there — consciousness itself. 36

Perfect silence, then, is not so much a negation or absence of noise and movement, as positive experience of truth. It can be described as self-purification, because it turns a man inside out, forcing him to throw off all pretense until he has no longer any “self” to defend or hide. He simply is, perfectly open, totally defenseless in an act of utter surrender of himself. But this yielding is also seeking. For if a man thinks he has found silence and “rests” in that finding, he stops experiencing the reality of being. Silence goes dead within him, it no longer sustains the intuition of reality, it no longer speaks to him about God. A silence, Merton pointed out, from which God “does not seem to be absent, dangerously threatens His continued presence. He is found when He is sought and when He is no longer sought He escapes us.” 36

Silence brings a man farther than solitude. The solitary can still be agitated and noisy within himself even when alone and far from men; but the truly silent man does not even have the interior word by which he grasps things. In a moment of supreme experience, all

36. “... although every silent moment is a new discovery of a new silence, a new penetration into that eternity of which all things are always new, we know, by fresh discovery the deep reality that is our concrete existence here and now and in the depths of that reality we receive from the Father light, truth, wisdom and peace. These are the reflections of God in our souls... made to His image and likeness.” Thoughts in Solitude, p. 86.
his knowledge and powers of reasoning are set at naught. Neither expected nor anticipated, that moment of contact with pure being simply bursts into one's conscious awareness, revealing to him the indefinite depths of reality. Whereas words before could describe the world around him, now man finds that his words "renounce all their aspiration to circumscribe all they signify within clear and definite limits." The mind is overwhelmed, lost in Pure Existence, as philosophers phrase it, or has achieved satori, in Zen. 37 This, to the Christian contemplative, however, is the fulness and goal of his existence, pure love, pure freedom. In Merton's words, man is now free of everything, not determined by anything, or held down by any special relationship. It is love for love's sake. It is a sharing ... in the infinite charity of God. 38

How this takes place is best described by Merton himself:

The soul, touched and inflamed and transfigured by the illuminative flame of God's immediate presence, is no longer the object of knowledge but the actual medium in which God is known. Hence, God as He is in Himself is the object of the soul's contemplation. The medium in which He is seen is not charity considered as a habit or virtue, not the act of love reflected upon by the intelligence, but the soul itself burning and translucent in the flame of divine love. 39

At this moment, words are useless and futile:

the separate entity that was you suddenly disappears and nothing is left but a pure freedom indistinguishable from infinite Freedom, love identified with Love. Not two loves, one waiting for the other, striving for the other, but Love Loving in Freedom.

Would you call this experience? I think ... it seems wrong even to speak of it as something that happens. Because things that happen have to happen to some subject, and experiences have to be experienced by someone. But

37. "Satori ... the heart and essence of Zen, a revolutionary spiritual experience which, after prolonged purification and trial, and ... determined spiritual discipline, the monk experiences a kind of inner explosion that blasts his false exterior self to pieces and leaves nothing but his 'original face' and his 'original self before you were born'." The Inner Experience, pp. 7-8.
39. The Ascent to Truth, p. 278.
here the subject of any divided or limited or creature experience has vanished. You are not you, you are fruition. If you like, you do not have experience, you become Experience: but that is entirely different, because you no longer exist in such a way that you can reflect on yourself or see yourself as having an experience, or judge what is going on, if it can be said that something is going on that is not eternal and unchanging and an activity so tremendous that it is infinitely still.

And here all adjectives fall to pieces. Words are stupid. Everything you say is misleading. . . . Metaphor has now become hopeless altogether. 40

This is language closely akin to that of the Christian mystics. Not surprisingly, for Merton was not only a writer, but also a Cistercian contemplative. His contemporaries and closest associates described him as first and foremost a monk. He himself admitted his vocation was that of a hermit called to solitude and silence, poverty and emptiness, for it was the only way to God for him. Shortly after receiving permission to leave the community and continue as a hermit within the monastery precincts, he wrote:

The purpose of the solitary life is, if you like, contemplation . . . not in the pagan sense of an intellectual, esoteric enlightenment, achieved by ascetic techniques. The contemplation of the Christian solitary is awareness of the divine mercy transforming and elevating his own emptiness and turning it into the presence of perfect love, perfect fullness. 41

Thomas Merton was a contemplative and mystic in search of God in order to give himself completely to Him. He soon learned that one knows God by loving God, for God is pure love and the experience of loving God is an indescribable experience of being, in turn, loved and, at the same time, loving and knowing Who loves him. God is not known except by Himself. A man may perhaps have some ideas about God, but this is indirect knowledge. In order to know God the way God knows Himself, man must somehow be in God, transformed into God. Conceptual knowledge can only mediately lead to God; but knowledge born of union with God is immediate, more intimate. Communication between man and God is no longer mediated, but is realized as direct, unmediated communication. In other words, the deepest level of communication is

41. Disputed Questions, p. 192.
communion. Not every communication demands conceptualization. All true communication seeks union of minds and hearts, a filling of what is lacking in man. Silence is loving contemplation of God, union with God [all these mean the same thing] makes this fulfillment a reality in man's life.

THE DISCIPLINE OF SILENCE

Thomas Merton, whose life-long concern about the spiritual emptiness of modern man is well known, would be the first to say that not all are called to the solitary life of the hermit, not even every monk who has joined a monastic order. The life of perpetual solitude and silence demands courage and faith. As he put it, it is a "kind of unknowing" that puts in doubt one's existence. By its very concept, one cannot live the hermit's life without giving up the accepted conventions and even the necessary aids of modern society. The hermit's life is a rejection of the spirit of modernity in which man finds support from things outside of himself. In monasticism success is not judged on ethical terms, but on eternal norms by which "nothing is comprehensible (or) known except terror and silence. . . ."

But all men need silence. Life is such that people need to listen at least occasionally to the "deep inner voice of their own true self." One reason for contemporary man's disorientation is his inability or fear to be silent. Hypnotized by the alluring propaganda and advertisement of today's consumerist society, man is alienated from himself, and has effectively lost control of his life, surrendered the power to decide for himself. When a man says he is thinking, Merton observed, it is often

not you who think but "they" . . . the anonymous society of the collectivity speaking through your mask. When you say "I want," you are sometimes simply making an automatic gesture of accepting, paying for, what has been forced on you. That is to say you are ready for what you have been made to want.

But recorded history shows that silence has helped men to discover the deeper meaning of their lives. Monasteries exist today

because they provide the necessary help to men in their search for the hidden values, or, in Merton’s words, the purification of men’s freedom from this “stain of servility which it has contracted by its enslavement to things beneath it.”

Silence, individual or institutionalized, is a human need. No one can be always talking or doing something. Man needs to pause and rest, in order to recover what he has expended in speech and action. He needs to be himself again after a full day at the office, after giving himself to others or other pursuits. It is in silence that man has this opportunity to be himself.

This silence is not the negative passivity of sleep, but rather the positive acceptance of things just as they are. In silence man is brought into contact with reality, and is saved from the distortion of words inadequately describing reality.

People fear being silent even momentarily, basically, because of their transcendent fear of emptiness. It is the deeply rooted dread of annihilation in every contingent being. And, despite progress in learning and technology, contingent man is still faced with death, sickness, loneliness and mutual suspicion. In his efforts to escape this blight of modern life, he attaches himself to every fashionable promise of salvation, reaches out to every semblance or hope of permanence and reality to escape nothingness. Yet, paradoxically, it is when a man accepts silence and cuts off all communication with others that he meets reality and being. Stripped of the cloak of words and noise, silent reality immediately confronts a man and forces on him the uncomplicated but hard task of just being. This is not the existence of the silent stone or dry stick. In his silence, man is forced to probe without ceasing into his own worth, his own limited being, forced to solidify his existential grasp and awareness of what it means to be alive. Otherwise, silence will destroy him.

As Merton put it, the silent man finds his whole being in compunction and adoration before God, in the habitual realization that He is everything and we are nothing, that He is the Center to which all things tend, and to Whom all our actions must be directed. That our life and strength proceed from Him, that both in life and in death

we depend entirely on Him, that the whole course of our life is foreknown by Him and falls into the plan of His wise and merciful Providence, that it is absurd to live as though without Him, for ourselves, by ourselves; that all our plans and spiritual ambition are useless unless they come from Him and end in Him and that, in the end, the only thing that matters is His glory."^{45}

Mertonian silence, then, is digging to the bottom of one’s being. It is renunciation of worldly things, even of one’s own thinking, not only because they are unnecessary, but also because they do not furnish the ultimate answers. Silence is the act of faith and hope, because one has stopped looking for answers or self-justification, and simply waits until things are clarified. This is seen especially in moments of suffering and anxiety, and man is all agitated and frantic for the cause and explanation of so much “unreasonable” pain. But it is in silence, when he realizes that he must cease to impose his own norms or demand an accounting from the Creator, that things put on meaning. For whatever man says, or does, or thinks, is limited and cannot contain the greater reality of truth and being. Man is not the whole of life, nor can his words ever define life. It is the realization of this simple fundamental truth that imposes silence on man, because he now enjoys the “positive rest of the mind in truth.”^{46}

Silence, then, means humility, faith, hope, strength of soul, boldness to risk the unknown. It is not mere knowledge. It is the experience of truth, the fulness of being.