

## Reflections — The False Self

### **Merton's Palace of Nowhere** (James Finley)

Merton leads us along the journey to God in which the self that begins the journey is not the self that arrives. The self that begins is the self that we thought ourselves to be. It is this self that dies along the way until in the end “no one” is left. This “no one” is our true self. It is the self the Father forever loves.



Here Merton equates sin with the identity-giving structures of the false self. This in itself is significant. The focus of sin is shifted from the realm of morality to that of ontology. For Merton, the matter of *who* we are always precedes what we do. Thus, sin is not essentially an action but an identity. Sin is a fundamental stance of wanting to be what we are not. Sin is thus an orientation to falsity, a basic lie concerning our own deepest reality. Likewise, to turn away from sin is, above all, to turn away from a tragic case of mistaken identity concerning our own selves.



“All sin starts from the assumption that my false self, the self that exists only in my own egocentric desires, is the fundamental reality of life to which everything else in the universe is ordered. Thus I use up my life in the desire for pleasures and the thirst for experiences, for power, honor, knowledge, and love to clothe this false self and construct its nothingness into something objectively real. And I wind experiences around myself and cover myself with pleasures and glory, like bandages in order to make myself perceptible to myself and the world, as if I were an invisible body that could only become visible when something visible covered its surface.”

– Merton



Thus, the false self is found in a fragmented state which it seeks to overcome by adherence to the chimera of social myths. By way of social myths the false self is projected into the communal lie of the world, understood in the negative sense as that place which fosters our own deepest lie about ourselves.



Once the false self gives birth to its own dark gossamer existence as cut off from God, it begins to function as its own God by passing final decisions and judgments upon everything under the sun. A whole system of formulas, laws and ideologies is created to form not only one's relationship to others but to God as well. Both self and God become equated with the definitions given to them. Both God and self become cogs in a smoothly running system of self-creation.



It is our true self, that is, a secret self hidden in and one with the divine freedom. In obeying God, in turning to do his will, we find him willing us to be free. He created us for freedom, that is to say, he created us for himself.



...one becomes oneself an empty vessel, a broken vessel, a void that lies open before God and finds itself filled with God's own life. This gift of God is revealed to be the ground and root of our very existence. It is our own true self.

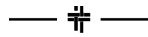


It is not the self we imagine ourselves to be. It is rather the true self, the self whose identity lies hidden in God and whose identity is revealed only in union with God. And in this revelation there is no observer, but only communion and consummation in love.



"Since our inmost 'I' is the perfect image of God, then when that 'I' awakens, he finds within himself the Presence of Him Whose image he is." – Merton

And so we must come to recognize and acknowledge our false self, but even more to acknowledge the true self that sleeps within us like Lazarus in the tomb waiting for the voice of Jesus to awaken us to life.



Contemplation is nothing less than that surrender, that abandon, that letting go of self to love in order to realize a deeper self born of love.



God is love and it is in love alone that we will find the full significance of what it means to be a person, that is, to be like God.



In the eyes of the one we love and in the eyes of the one who loves us we see reflected a glimmer of the true self. In genuine love for others, we go out of ourselves and find a new center in the center of the loved one who stands before us as an epiphany of God. This love manifests our true self for it does not spring from the ego but from God.



This disappearance, this annihilation is all a matter of appearances as seen through the eyes of the false self. The annihilation is only apparent, for the self being annihilated is itself only apparent. It is a self without God, that is, a self that can never exist. What is annihilated is our false self, our external self made absolute, the imposter, the mask (persona), the liar we think we are but are not. The annihilation therefore is not annihilation at all, for nothing real or genuine is annihilated.



### **New Seeds of Contemplation** (Thomas Merton)

Contemplation is not and cannot be a function of this external self. There is an irreducible opposition between the deep transcendent self that awakens only in

contemplation, and the superficial, external self which we commonly identify with the first person singular.



We must remember that this superficial “I” is not our real self. It is our “individuality” and our “empirical self” but it is not truly the hidden and mysterious person in whom we subsist before the eyes of God.



Our external, superficial self is not eternal, not spiritual. Far from it. This self is doomed to disappear as completely as smoke from a chimney.



The mind that is the prisoner of conventional ideas, and the will that is the captive of its own desire cannot accept the seeds of an unfamiliar truth and a supernatural desire. For how can I receive the seeds of freedom if I am in love with slavery and how can I cherish the desire of God if I am filled with another and an opposite desire?



...we are even called to share with God the work of creating the truth of our identity. We can evade this responsibility by playing with masks, and this pleases us because it can appear at times to be a free and creative way of living.



To say I was born in sin is to say I came into the world with a false self. I was born in a mask. I came into existence under a sign of contradiction, being someone that I was never intended to be and therefore a denial of what I am supposed to be.



Every one of us is shadowed by an illusory person: a false self. This is the man that I want myself to be but who cannot exist, because God does not know anything about him. And to be unknown of God is altogether too much privacy.

All sin starts from the assumption that my false self, the self that exists only in my own egocentric desires, is the fundamental reality of life to which everything else in the universe is ordered.



The constant din of empty words and machine noises, the endless booming of loudspeakers end by making true communication and true communion almost impossible. Each individual in the mass is insulated by thick layers of insensibility. He doesn't care, he doesn't hear, he doesn't think. He does not act, he is pushed.



One of the paradoxes of the mystical life is this: that a man cannot enter into the deepest center of himself and pass through that center into God, unless he is able to pass entirely out of himself and empty himself and give himself to other people in the purity of a selfless love.



As long as we are on earth, the love that unites us will bring us suffering by our very contact with one another, because this love is the resetting of a Body of broken bones. Even saints cannot live with saints on this earth without some anguish, without some pain at the differences that come between them.



He who cannot love feels unworthy, and at the same time feels that somehow no one is worthy. Perhaps he cannot feel love because he thinks he is unworthy of love, and because of that he also thinks no one else is worthy.



On the contrary, in the devil's theology, the important thing is to be absolutely right and to prove that everybody else is absolutely wrong. This does not exactly make for peace and unity among men, because it means that everyone wants to be absolutely

right himself or to attach himself to another who is absolutely right. And in order to prove their rightness they have to punish and eliminate those who are wrong.



What attracts men to evil acts is not the evil in them but the good that is there, seen under a false aspect and with a distorted perspective. The good seen from that angle is only the bait in a trap. When you reach out to take it, the trap is sprung and you are left with disgust, boredom—and hatred. Sinners are people who hate everything, because their world is necessarily full of betrayal, full of illusion, full of deception.



Hence the function of faith is not only to bring us into contact with the “authority of God” revealing, not only to teach us truths “about God,” but even to reveal to us the unknown in our own selves, in so far as our unknown and undiscovered self actually lives in God, moving and acting only under the direct light of His merciful grace.



From the moment that we have responded by faith and charity to His love for us, a supernatural union of our souls with His indwelling Divine Person gives us a participation in His divine sonship and nature. A “new being” is brought into existence. I become a “new man” and this new man, spiritually and mystically one identity, is at once Christ and myself.



Therefore if you spend your life trying to escape from the heat of the fire that is meant to soften and prepare you to become your true self, and if you try to keep your substance from melting in the fire—as if your true identity were to be hard wax—the seal will fall upon you at last and crush you.



To the extent that you are free to choose evil, you are not free. An evil choice destroys freedom. We can never choose evil as evil: only as an apparent good. But when we decide to do something that seems to us to be good when it is not really so, we are doing something that we do not really want to do, and therefore we are not really free.



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



This clean light, which tastes of Paradise, is beyond all pride, beyond comment, beyond proprietorship, beyond solitude. It is in all, and for all. It is the true light that shines in everyone, in “every man coming into this world.” It is the light of Christ, “Who stands in the midst of us and we know Him not.”

At no time in the spiritual life is it more necessary to be completely docile and subject to the most delicate movements of God’s will and His grace than when you try to share the knowledge of His love with other men.



It is a great mistake to confuse the person (the spiritual and hidden self, united with God) and the ego, the exterior, empirical self, the psychological individuality who forms a kind of mask for the inner and hidden self.



The outward self can “have” much, “enjoy” much, “accomplish” much, but in the end all its possessions, joys and accomplishments are nothing, and the outer self is, itself, nothing: a shadow, a garment that is cast off and consumed by decay.

That is precisely one of the main effects of the fall: that man has become alienated from his inner self which is the image of God.



The union of the simple light of God with the simple light of man's spirit, in love, is contemplation. The two simplicities are one. They form, as it were, an emptiness in which there is no addition but rather the taking away of names, of forms, of content, of subject matter, of identities. In this meeting there is not so much a fusion of identities as a disappearance of identities.

### **Called To Communion** (Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger)

...both answers can be summed up in the one statement that the Church is the dynamic process of horizontal and vertical unification. It is vertical unification, which brings about the union of man with the triune love of God, thus also integrating man in and with himself.



...only by the impulse power of vertical unification can horizontal unification, by which I mean the coming together of divided humanity, also successfully take place.



...found in Saint Bonaventure, who explains the path by which man truly becomes himself with the help of the likeness of the sculptor. The sculptor, says the great Franciscan theologian, does not make anything, rather his work is "ablatio"—the removal of what is not really part of the sculpture. In this way, that is, by means of ablatio, the nobilis forma—the noble form—takes shape.





In the same way, continues Bonaventure, man, in order that God's image may shine radiantly in him, must first and foremost receive the purification whereby the divine Sculptor frees him from that dross that conceals the authentic figure of his being, making him appear to be nothing more than a stone block, whereas the divine form dwells in him.



Reform is ever-renewed ablatio— removal, whose purpose is to allow the nobilis forma, the countenance of the bride, and with it the Bridegroom himself, the living Lord, to appear. Such ablatio, such “negative theology”, is a path to something wholly positive. This path alone allows the divine to penetrate and brings about “congregatio”, which as both gathering and purification is that pure communion we all long for, where “T” is no longer pitted against “I” and self against self. Rather, the self-giving and self-abandonment that characterize love become the reciprocal reception of all that is good and pure.



What first meets the eye is only the image of Adam, the image of man, who, though not totally corrupt, is nonetheless fallen. We see the crust of dust and filth that has overlaid the image. Thus, we all stand in need of the true sculptor who removes what distorts the image; we are in need of forgiveness, which is the heart of all true reform.



Paul expresses this happening in quite drastic terms: the old image sinks into nothingness, a new being has arisen (2Cor5:17) — it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me (Gal 2:20)



I am wrested from my isolation and incorporated into the communion of a new subject; my “I” is inserted into the “I” of Christ and consequently joined to the “I” of all my brothers.

**God Is Love** (Pope Benedict XVI)

Saint John's words should rather be interpreted to mean that love of neighbor is a path that leads to the encounter with God and that closing our eyes to our neighbor also blinds us to God.



The love-story between God and man consists in the very fact that this communion of will increases in a communion of thought and sentiment, and thus our will and God's will increasingly coincide: God's will is no longer for me an alien will, something imposed on me from without by the commandments, but it is now my own will, based on the realization that God is in fact more deeply present to me than I am to myself.



At the same time, the devotion of the faithful shows an infallible intuition of how such love is possible; it becomes so as a result of the most intimate union with God, through which the soul is totally pervaded by him- a condition which enables those who have drunk from the fountain of God's love to become in their turn a fountain from which "flow rivers of living water" (Jn 7:38).

**The Universal Monk** (John Talbot)

We deny our old self so that we might discover who we really are in God. The old self is fractured. The senses, emotions, and thoughts have become clouded and unhealthy, so the spirit is lost or sleeping.



When we dare to really let go of the old patterns completely, we are born again in the original image and pattern of God within our human being. As spirit is rediscovered, the senses, emotions, and thoughts are reborn and reintegrated in their proper place. The spirit was never gone.



The spirit is where we get to the very essence of who we are, and it is the most overlooked human faculty. The spirit is beyond senses, emotions, or thoughts. It is pure spiritual intuition. It is the part of us that simply “knows” reality.

Spiritual intuition beyond time, space, and objective senses, emotions, or forms was our primary mode of existence. We walked with an entirely expanded spiritual sense of being and knowing. ... Through sin we have turned this wonder of our being upside down and almost entirely forgotten the faculty of the spirit.



Jesus repeatedly calls us to take up our cross to follow him and says that unless we die to our self we cannot really be his follower and find out who we truly are.



When we let go of this self-identity, this old self, these things may come and go, but we remain at peace.



In the Liturgy of the Eucharist we move beyond senses, emotions, and thoughts of body and soul into a pure mystical union of spirit with Jesus that occurs through and beyond them all. This mystical union with Jesus is spirit to Spirit, essence to Essence, and being to Being that is beyond anything we can fully grasp with the phenomenal human faculties of senses, emotions, or thoughts.



Obedience means to learn to listen, to hear the deepest spirit and soul of another before we respond. Then our response can bring life rather than judgment, anger, and death.



The way out of this negative relationship spiral is to let go of your old self, with all its ego-attached ideas and agendas, and die with Christ. Then the person God originally intended us to be will be born again through the resurrection of Christ. We will become a new creation, one that is free of ego attachments and has a healthy sense of the true self.



Plus, when we have died to the old self, it is really easy to ask forgiveness for any wrongs or offenses we might have committed. If we are still hanging on to the ego-attached self, asking forgiveness is done with self-protective strings attached.

### **The Devil You Don't Know** (Louis J. Cameli)

At some level of awareness, the adversarial or struggle dimension of life does not make sense. It does not fit our understanding of how life ought to be. ... We feel that something is amiss. And that feeling finds its roots in a deeper intuition that, indeed, something is wrong. ... The experience of being a sinner includes this sense or feeling, sometimes stronger and more pronounced and at other times less so, of not being at home.



A second marker for the experience of being a sinner is a sense of inner division, a feeling of being divided within ourselves, perhaps, at times even a feeling of a war within.



A fourth marker of the experience of being a sinner is a sense of burden. ... The essential element of this sense of burden is that it takes away our freedom, our essential freedom to be ourselves. We long to have the weight lifted and to move freely.



A fifth and final marker of the experience of being a sinner is longing for a love that is complete but seemingly out of reach. We want to love and to be loved. We intuit the fullness of this love, its absolute and commanding presence that makes everything else make sense.



The complicated tangles that are related to deception have to do with a free choice to make things complicated so that they can be obscured and, ultimately, be part of the deception. ... Faced with complexity, we feel that we can never get at the truth, if, indeed, there even is truth underneath the tangle of things. ... The devil deceives by adding complexity to complexity. Jesus reveals and lives the truth by holding fast to his single, divine purpose.



The fear of the truth has to do fundamentally with a fear of consequences. If I face up to the truth, what will happen to me? ... The avoidance of pain grabs our attention and makes us quite vulnerable to the evil one's suggestions. The more effective attacks against the truth do not always involve a full frontal assault. A style that is oblique and evasive seems far more effective.



The absence of love and its correlative, truth, is a sign of the presence of the evil one.



The first step is not to accept information or data about ourselves or others as the fundamental truth of our existence. The second step is to identify God's commitment

to us and to others, a commitment that confers on us our specific identity as the beloved of God. The final step is to understand the truth of our own being and that of others in light of that identity.



Remaining both in the word of Jesus, which is truth, and in the love of Jesus, which is the very love of God, enables the followers of Jesus to integrate or bring together truth and love. This living synthesis assures them a victory over the deceptive ploys of the devil, who wants to separate the truth from love so that, because of the detachment from love, "the truth" is no longer true.



...the evil one's energies are directed to division and disunity, as he tries at all costs to divide people from God, from each other, and from their very selves.



Fear can easily make us withdraw. The devil can suggest to us that we compare ourselves to others, usually with the subplot of overestimating the progress of others and underestimating ours, so that we look very bad in comparison.



The victory over the divided self is self-knowledge that leads to self-acceptance, which, in turn, leads to self-gift-given to God in loving surrender. The evil one's interest is to maintain our internal divisions and confusions, which disable us from giving back to God what God has given to us, namely, our very selves.



Comparison-making constitutes a dangerous distraction on our journey to God because we focus less on ourselves and more on others. ... In other words, this absorption or self-satisfaction diverts us by locking us inside ourselves.



The evil one is at work both in those who intimidate and persecute God's holy ones and in the souls of those who experience being intimidated and persecuted. The

devil encourages persecutors and discourages those who are persecuted.



It is the deep discouragement that could entirely subvert their relationship with God, perhaps by foreclosing - in their minds - even the possibility of their repentance. These are painful and, at times, confusing conversations, because there is so much at stake. It is a matter of penetrating layers of the self until, ultimately, we come to the center. There and then, we learn to say yes to God in trust.



### **Strengthen Your Brothers** (J. Peter Sartain)

The life of priestly ministry entails loving from the cross in one unfolding act of self-oblation. That is why the Eucharist will always stand at the center of our ministry and at the center of the life of the Church; it is also why intercessory prayer before the Blessed Sacrament is an important part of the ministry of priests.



In every circumstance, we priests kiss the altar as a dramatic reminder of who we are and who we are called to follow, and as a proclamation to our parishioners that everything about us is for them.



...the community life created by a priest offers a countercultural and uniquely compelling response to the questions of many people. A mature priest creates and nurtures a profound experience of communion and reconciliation, stability and fidelity, and the expression of the deepest human vocation—to love.



The “I” of the priest is at work in every sacrament, in preaching the Word, in the ministry of charity and in every priestly act; but the “I” of the priest is not his personally. It is the “I” of Christ, for it is he who is at work in us, he who loves his

people through us, he who shepherds the flock for whom he gave his life. When we say “I” in ministry, Christ is the “I” who is speaking.



**The Spirit of the Liturgy** (Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI and John Saward)

For we do not see the image of God in man in such a simplistic way. The “image of God” in man is not, of course, something that we can photograph or see with a merely photographic kind of perception. We can indeed see it, but only with the new seeing of faith. We can see it, just as we can see the goodness in a man, his honesty, interior truth, humility, love—everything, in fact, that gives him a certain likeness to God. But if we are to do this, we must learn a new kind of seeing, and that is what the Eucharist is for.



**Beauty Will Save the World** (Gregory Wolfe)

“...where truth is assumed a priori not to exist, images and atmosphere will shape how most people think.”



For this reason the greatest dramas naturally involve the salvation or loss of the soul. When there is no belief in the soul, there is very little drama.



In a fallen world, afflicted by evil and stupidity, happiness can never be a gauge of fidelity to God—and our own deepest needs. To think otherwise is to confuse happiness, with its bourgeois connotations of comfort and freedom from any burdens, with blessedness, or what Catholics call the “state of grace.”





The activist mystic, on the other hand, is the supreme realist: moved by supernatural charity to see the preciousness of each individual, aware of evil and its many guises, willing and able to comfort the suffering with the assurance of divine love, the saint is the only effective “social worker.”



### **Things Hidden** (Richard Rohr)

When someone else loves you, they give you not just themselves, but for some reason they give you back your own self, but now a better and truer self.



These are not moral moments, they are transformative moments when you come to a different sense of your “I.” Our holiness is first of all and really only God’s, and that is why it is certain and secure—and always holy. It is a participation, a mutual indwelling, not an achievement or performance on my part.



We have no real being “until we have faces” to receive the other, to offer ourselves, and then to pass on our very selves in the same way. It will be experienced as depth, acceptance and forgiveness for being who we are, a quality of being that is shared, compassionate and totally gift.



Thus our concerns came with external behavior that could be pointed to, measured, defined and controlled or “brought to court” as it were. You cannot do that with “mercy, justice, and good faith” which Jesus calls, “the weightier matters of the law.”



You quite simply don’t have the power to obey the law, especially issues like forgiveness of enemies, nonviolence, humble use of power and so on, except in and through union with God.



Buber makes the I-Thou encounter the essence of reality and says, “all real living is meeting.” Emmanuel Levinas says that we are not converted by ideas but “by the face of the other.” They both understood the reciprocity of presence.



Forgiveness is probably the only human action that demands three new “seeings” at the same time. I must see God in the other, I must access God in myself, and I must see God in a new way that is larger than “an Enforcer.”



The goal of nonviolence is always winning the true understanding of the supposed opponent, not his or her humiliation or defeat. It is to facilitate reconciliation, but also to realize probably sadly, that I, like Jesus, must pay the price for this reconciliation, that “the two might become one,” as Ephesians so poetically states (2:13-18).



I am assuming and totally relying upon the Divine Indwelling to “teach you and remind you of all things.” (John 14:26)



Paul's Letter to the Romans 7:15-23

<sup>15</sup>What I do, I do not understand. For I do not do what I want, but I do what I hate.

<sup>16</sup>Now if I do what I do not want, I concur that the law is good. <sup>17</sup>So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. <sup>18</sup>For I know that good does not dwell in me, that is, in my flesh. The willing is ready at hand, but doing the good is not. <sup>19</sup>For I do not do the good I want, but I do the evil I do not want. <sup>20</sup>Now if I do what I do not want, it is not longer I who do it but sin that dwells in me. <sup>21</sup>So, then, I discover the principle that when I want to do right, evil is at hand. <sup>22</sup>For I take delight in the law of God, in my inner self, <sup>23</sup>but I see in my members another principle at war with the law of my mind, taking me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.