

# THOMAS MERTON AND THE FUTURE OF LITURGICAL RENEWAL

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**I**N MAY 1968, THOMAS MERTON told an informal gathering of contemplative women religious at the Abbey of Gethsemani:

I think the whole thing needs to be changed, the whole idea of the priesthood has to be changed. I think we need to develop a whole new style of worship in which there is no need for one hierarchical person to have a big central place, a form of worship in which everyone is involved.<sup>1</sup>

Merton's surprisingly radical approach to the forms of Roman Catholic worship reflected a dramatic development in his own thought. His first adult experience of Roman Catholic worship occurred while he was studying at Columbia University in New York. One Sunday morning he felt an urge to attend Mass. He walked into nearby Corpus Christi church and was deeply impressed by the serious prayerfulness of those worshipping there. He recorded his reactions in his autobiography.

What a revelation it was, to discover many ordinary people in a place together, more conscious of God than of one another: not there to show off their hats or their clothes, but to pray, or at least to fulfil a religious obligation, not a human one.<sup>2</sup>

During the Mass Merton was also moved by the 'clear and solid doctrine' that was preached that day.

For behind those words you felt the full force not only of Scripture but of centuries of a unified and continuous and consistent tradition. And above all it was a vital tradition: there was nothing stupid or antique about it.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria, 1992), 134–135.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain: An Autobiography of Faith* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1998), 227.

<sup>3</sup> Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 228.

He left at the end of what was then called the Mass of the Catechumens and as he strolled down Broadway in the sun he realised: 'All I know is that I walked in a new world'.<sup>4</sup> The awe, the mystical dimension, the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, had captivated his being.

Thomas Merton was baptized as a Roman Catholic at the same church on 16 November 1938. In his early years as a Catholic, he experienced the importance of the liturgy in his own life and participated in Mass as frequently as possible—often every day. He entered the Cistercian Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in 1941. In 1949, after eight years in the monastery, he wrote to his Columbia University friend Robert Lax of his deep sense of scripture and the liturgy :

Someone should be able to find the living God in Scripture—and this is His word—and then lead others to find Him there, and all theology properly ends in contemplation and love and union with God—not ideas about Him and a set of rules about how to wear your hat. The Mass is the center of everything and insofar as it is Calvary it is the center of Scripture and the key to everything—history, everything. All the trouble going on now.<sup>5</sup>

Merton's early reactions to the liturgical reforms of Vatican II in the 1960s were largely negative. He had come to love the Latin prayers and chants of the pre-Vatican II liturgy during his 25 years as a Catholic. As an intellectual, Merton had a solid knowledge of Latin. He found it most effective to pray the liturgy in that traditional ritual language. These rich traditions, he feared, were being replaced after the council with overly enthusiastic experimentations which he judged to be trite and banal.

Liturgical music was one of the first things to change after Vatican II. Music in the vernacular for congregational participation began to be borrowed from the Protestant tradition. Some vernacular music was also being composed by Catholics, largely in the casual folk idiom. By 1964 Merton judged this to be an experience of musical impoverishment:

I passed your English-Gregorian texts to our choirmaster, who is a little cool toward Gregorian with English as I am myself. But I am not as cool as he is because I am no professional, and as far as I am concerned I think people ought to try out everything feasible and see what happens. The texts look all right but not inspiring to me.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 230–231.

<sup>5</sup> Merton to Robert Lax, 27 November 1949, in *The Road to Joy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989), 172.

<sup>6</sup> Merton to Leslie Dewart, 23 September 1964, in *Witness to Freedom: The Letters of Thomas Merton* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994), 298.

Merton's lack of enthusiasm for liturgical reform, rooted in his love and respect for tradition, had been expressed prior to the Council in a letter to his former Gethsemani novice, the Nicaraguan priest-poet Ernesto Cardenal: 'The psalms are for poor men, or solitary men, or men who suffer: not for liturgical enthusiasts in a comfortable, well-heated choir'.<sup>7</sup>

As the council began in October 1962, the first topic for consideration was liturgy. Merton reacted to these early conciliar discussions with cautious hope in a letter to an English correspondent, Etta Gullick:

Apparently they are on the liturgy now. I don't know what will come, but the whole thing seems to be making sense. Probably it is bound to bog down a bit somewhere, but it is going better than expected.<sup>8</sup>

By December 1963, following the promulgation of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, the first solemn declaration of Vatican II, Merton was less optimistic in his letter to the philosopher E. I. Watkin:

The question of liturgy is of course a very complex one, and I think it is going to disturb very many people on both sides of the question. The adaptation is not going to be easy, nor is the sweeping optimism of liturgical reformers always a guarantee of the greatest intelligence. I am afraid that inevitably much that is good will be lost, and needlessly lost, and this will be very sad. However, it is certain that there must be a warmer and more intelligent relationship between what goes on at the altar and what is done by the people. It is easy enough for you and for me to appreciate the familiar forms which have remained to a great extent unchanged since Charlemagne. It is also easy for us to understand the Middle Ages and to feel our deep indebtedness to them, and to realize the continuity of our experience with that of the Middle Ages. A vast majority of Christians in our day cannot do this, unfortunately ....

I am very content with the simple Cistercian liturgy we have, and hate to think that it may be suddenly and violently wrenched out of shape for no particularly good reason, as the needs of a monastery are not those of a parish. But the obsession with the latest 'thing' is so strong that even monks get swept away by it. And I am heartily in agreement with you in deploring this.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Merton to Ernesto Cardenal, 18 November 1959, in *The Courage for Truth* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1993), 120.

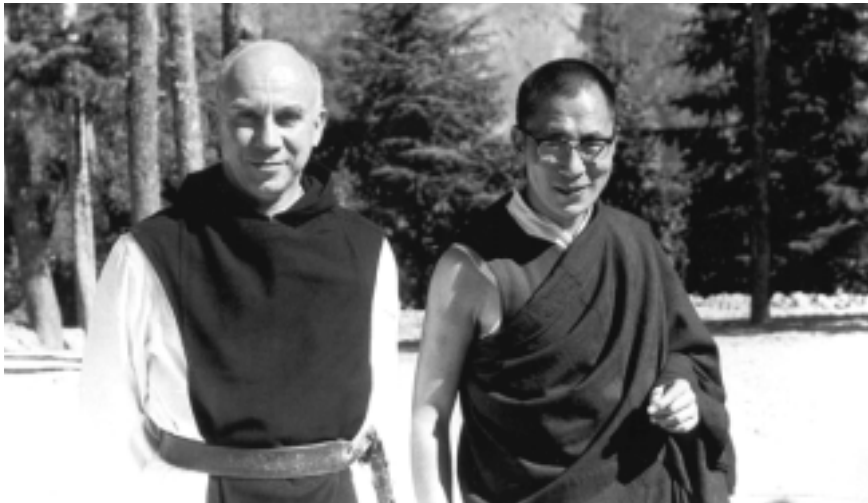
<sup>8</sup> Merton to Etta Gullick, 29 October 1962, in *The Hidden Ground of Love* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985), 355.

<sup>9</sup> Merton to E. I. Watkin, 15 November 1962, in *Hidden Ground of Love*, 584–585.

From the start, Merton had found fault with the dominant approach to liturgical reform, which seemed to favour haste over caution. His negative reactions to the rapid and enthusiastic changes in liturgical forms had many sources. Principally he feared that the contemplative dimension of public worship was being undermined through an overly activist approach. In March, 1963, he wrote to Gullick: '... I don't hold with these extreme liturgy people for whom all personal and contemplative prayer is suspect. If you make a meditation they think you are a Buddhist.'<sup>10</sup>

In fact Merton had been studying Buddhism for some time. He had found that the Zen approach to meditation to be very helpful for his own prayer and worship. To E. I. Watkin he had written in November 1962:

That is one of the standard jokes in the community here: that I am a hermit and a Buddhist and that in choir I am praying as a Buddhist (how do they know?), while others are all wrapped up in the liturgical movement and in getting the choir on pitch and in manifesting togetherness, whatever that is. Really I do not feel myself in opposition with anyone or with any form of spirituality, because I no longer think in such terms at all: this spirituality is the right kind, that is the wrong kind, etc. Right sort and wrong sort: these are sources of delusion in the spiritual life and there precisely is where the Buddhists score, for they bypass all that.<sup>11</sup>



*Thomas Merton with the Dalai Lama in 1968*

<sup>10</sup> Merton to Gullick, 24 March 1963, in *Hidden Ground of Love*, 359.

<sup>11</sup> Merton to Watkin, 12 December 1963, in *Hidden Ground of Love*, 584–585.

By 1965, Merton's fears about the loss of the contemplative dimension in liturgy were deepening. He wrote to Gullick:

It seems to me that the atmosphere in our Church ... is going to become more and more hostile to contemplative prayer. There will certainly be official pronouncements approving it and blessing it. But in fact the movement points in the direction of activism, and an activist concept of liturgy. I think the root of the trouble is fear and truculence, unrealized, deep down ....

In a word, the temper of the Roman Church is combative and 'aroused' and the emphasis on contemplation is (if there is any at all) dominated by a specific end in view so that implicitly contemplation becomes ordered to action, which is so easy in a certain type of scholastic thought, misunderstood. When this happens, the real purity of the life of prayer is gone.<sup>12</sup>

Merton also feared that the beauty of ritual language would not be respected in the translations of the liturgical texts. He wrote of this to his friend the Anglican Oxford scholar A. M. Allchin in April 1964:

I do think it is terribly important for Roman Catholics now plunging into the vernacular to have some sense of the Anglican tradition. This, however, is only a faint hope in my mind, because on the one hand so many of the highest Anglicans are outrageously Latin, and on the other, the beauty of the Book of Common Prayer, etc., is out of reach of the majority in this country now, and is perhaps no longer relevant. But the spirit and lingo of modern Roman Catholicism in English-speaking countries has been in so many ways a disaster.<sup>13</sup>

In the autumn of 1964, Merton expressed some tentative views on liturgical renewal in his own monastic community, as he wrote to the philosopher Leslie Dewart:

Actually, however, this liturgy thing has, at least in monasteries, become so much of a professional specialty that I am not one of those that can afford initiatives and declarations. I go along with it, and enjoy what is offered, but I cannot do the offering (of new texts and ideas) though people have pestered me a little to write hymns and whatnot. I don't intend to touch any of it because I think it is all extremely fluid (as it ought to be) and the flowing is usually a mile ahead of me, as I cannot keep up with the required information, attend conferences, and so on. It would be naive of me to try to contribute anything

<sup>12</sup> Merton to Gullick, 9 December 1964, in *Hidden Ground of Love*, 368.

<sup>13</sup> Merton to A. M. Allchin, 25 April 1964, in *Hidden Ground of Love*, 26.

worthwhile. I have a rather silly article on liturgy coming out in the Critic in December, but that is only a gesture of good will.<sup>14</sup>

Merton's concerns about the loss of liturgy's contemplative core were being confirmed by his own and others' liturgical experiences. He was also more and more aware of his own inadequacy in the area of liturgical history and the implementation of the reforms.<sup>15</sup> Later that year Merton noted with appreciation a growing interest in prayer and contemplation throughout the world. But liturgy was of little help in this regard as he wrote to Gullick:

There are a lot of people getting interested in prayer in this country, mostly in academic circles, and in a rather mixed-up context of psychoanalysis and Zen Buddhism. This is the area where people at the moment are most interested in our kind of contemplation. The Catholics are all hopped up about liturgy at the moment.

Over time, however, Merton began to express some more positive views of liturgical renewal. He seemed to sense more gain than loss in the changes in worship. This was clearly a change from his earlier attitudes. In his letter to friends at Pentecost, he expressed what the liturgical reforms had come to mean to him personally. He also noted that there were considerable positive results in the worship life of parishes.

I have always tended more toward a deepening of faith in solitude, a 'desert' and 'wilderness' existence in which one does not seek special experiences. But I concur with these others in being unable to remain satisfied with a formal and exterior kind of religion. Nor do I think that a more lively liturgy is enough. Worship and belief have become ossified and rigid, and so has the religious life in many cases ....

Certainly it is fine that now the liturgy is becoming more spontaneous, more alive, and people are putting their hearts into it more. (I am not saying it was not possible to enter into the old Latin liturgy, but it was hard for many.) But we need a real deepening of life in every area.<sup>16</sup>

This concern for 'depth' and Merton's more balanced view of liturgical reform was expressed again in the autumn of 1967 in his letter to a woman religious:

<sup>14</sup> Merton to Gullick, 1 November 1965, in *Hidden Ground of Love*, 373.

<sup>15</sup> Merton to Dewart, 23 September 1964, in *Witness to Freedom*, 298.

<sup>16</sup> Merton, circular letter to friends, Pentecost 1967, in *Road to Joy*, 102–103.

... I am sure that the basic thing will always remain the need for deep prayer in the heart, and the deepest and most authentic response to the word of God. We must certainly bring renewal to our liturgical worship, but we must also preserve a place for silence and for contemplative prayer. However, it must be admitted that entirely new ways of explaining contemplative experiences must be found. However, when we see the Beatles (you've heard of them in England?) going to an Indian Yogi to learn meditation, it can certainly not be said that all desire for the contemplative life is extinct in modern youth!!!<sup>17</sup>

By December 1967, Merton had celebrated some small group liturgies which gave him an even more positive attitude to some of the directions liturgical renewal was taking. He expressed this in a letter to the author John Howard Griffin: 'Such a Mass as you never saw: all joined in to give bits of the homily, to utter petitions at the prayer of the people, etc. etc. Really groovy, as they say.'<sup>18</sup> The old adage 'experience is the best teacher' proved to be true for Merton and the reformed liturgical rites. Before his death in 1968, the Trappist had come to appreciate many of the new approaches, although he remained somewhat sceptical of liturgical experiments. As he wrote to a high-school student in April 1968:

Good folk music at Mass can be a big help, but bad singing and trifling hymns are not much help. But so is bad Gregorian an obstacle rather



<sup>17</sup> Merton to Maria Blanca Olim, 16 October 1967, in *Witness to Freedom*, 198.

<sup>18</sup> Merton to John Howard Griffin, 8 December 1967, in *Road to Joy*, 139.

than a help. I think what counts is life and fervour in the celebration of the liturgy, and whatever helps that in the right way is good.

I had the opportunity to offer Mass in a home and this is a fine thing, I believe. Undoubtedly there will be more changes, but let's hope they will be really useful ones. Change for the sake of change is useless. I think a lot of progressive Catholics in this country don't really know where they want to go—but will take anything as long as it is different—and gets good publicity.<sup>19</sup>

Eight months before his sudden death, Merton expressed the startling position about liturgy and about priesthood from which I began: 'the whole thing needs to be changed'. A single presider or leader should not be so central. Instead the forms of worship should be an expression and an experience more actively involving the entire assembly.

### **Implications**

What might this shift in focus mean for the evolving shape of eucharistic ritual today and in the future? Extrapolating from Merton's thoughts quoted above, let me suggest some guiding principles for ongoing reform of the shape of Roman Catholic worship.

1. There must be a warm relationship between the altar and the people: *It is certain that there must be a warmer and more intelligent relationship between what goes on at the altar and what is done by the people.*
2. The evolution of liturgical forms must remain in flux: *I think it is all extremely fluid (as it ought to be) and the flowing is usually a mile ahead of me.*
3. More than lively liturgy is needed: *I concur with these others in being unable to remain satisfied with a formal and exterior kind of religion. Nor do I think that a more lively liturgy is enough. Worship and belief have become ossified and rigid, and so has the religious life in many cases.*
4. A real deepening must be experienced: *... we need a real deepening of life in every area.*
5. Liturgy must be a contemplative experience. *We must certainly bring renewal to our liturgical worship, but we must also preserve a*

<sup>19</sup> Merton to Philip J. Cascia, 10 April 1968, in *Road to Joy*, 366.



*place for silence and for contemplative prayer. However, it must be admitted that entirely new ways of explaining contemplative experiences must be found .... I think what counts is life and fervor in the celebration of the liturgy, and whatever helps that in the right way is good'.*

6. Changes in the forms of worship must be useful: *Undoubtedly there will be more changes, but let's hope they will be really useful ones. Change for the sake of change is useless.*

The first stages of implementing liturgical reform and renewal in the 1960s were largely external: changing the shape of the worship space and the structure of the rite; turning altars around and getting more people around ambo and altar; getting the assembly to participate actively in actions, prayers and songs; getting more people from the pews into the role of liturgical ministers; translating the Latin texts into the various vernaculars of the world; and finally creating liturgies that involved more than reading together what is written on the pages of the official texts, but rather lifted off the pages into enlivening, energized celebrations.

While many enthusiastically embraced the reforms in the years following Vatican II, others resented and resisted. They sensed a loss of the sense of sacred mystery in the new rites. Liturgical reform seemed to be about getting more people busy doing more things with, as Merton feared, a loss of the contemplative dimension in the liturgy. As many said, 'Where did the Mystery go?'

Benedict XVI responded to the desires of those Catholics who prefer the older, more solemn, more priest-centred and less participative form of liturgy by making more available the pre-Vatican II rites promulgated at the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century. This could indeed suggest a partial diagnosis of one aspect of the problem with our post-Vatican II liturgy—the loss of the experience of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.

However I question whether returning to older forms is the best or even a helpful answer to that problem. In fact I consider this retrogression to open us to ecclesiological dangers. The older forms tend to turn the People of God, the Body of Christ back into passive spectators as the priest 'says' or 'reads' the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Thus it is not just a matter of the preferred style of liturgical prayer. It is a way of being Church that is fundamentally at odds with the Vatican II vision of Church.

Thomas Merton has it right, I think, when he suggests reimagining the priesthood and the liturgy, and moving beyond older forms, be they

pre-conciliar or post-conciliar. Fluidity rather than fixity is needed for a liturgy that is founded on relationality and the active participation of the entire assembly. The new wine of Spirit simply does not belong in the old wineskins either of Trent or Vatican II. The Church needs to encourage experimentation with new shapes for eucharistic and other rituals.

What I propose below—trying to explore concretely what Merton suggested—would not replace the Vatican II or the Tridentine liturgies but would be an experimental supplement to them. Special permission and encouragement of the bishop would be granted to communities of faith interested in being centres of such exploration/experimentation, provided the priest and other ministers were properly prepared for their roles and would not replace the Vatican II or Tridentine liturgies with only these more fluid rites.

My approach to this continuing evolution of ritual forms is to discuss the current structure of the Roman rite in terms of verbs rather than nouns, with action taking precedence over form.<sup>20</sup> The verbs indicate the experience the assembly is meant to create and undergo as they actively engage with the ritual structure. The verbs of the Roman Rite are these:

1. The Entrance Rite is meant to *gather*, *open* and *quiet* the celebrating participants in an atmosphere of reverence and hospitality.
2. The Liturgy of the Word engages those celebrating in *listening* and *responding*.
3. The Liturgy of the Eucharist unfolds the verbs enacted by Jesus at the Last Supper. The Preparation of the Gifts and the Altar involve *taking*. The Eucharistic Prayer is *blessing*. The Communion Rite is *breaking* and *sharing*. And finally the Dismissal Rite involves *going*.

In this approach the creative ritual question shifts away from filling 'slots' on an unchanging liturgical planning page with a fixed structure. The new question becomes: how to energize a more fluid ritual structure into an dynamic celebration which enables all of the participants to experience the above-mentioned verbs. It means aesthetically composing, creating and choreographing the structure so that the verbs are actually experienced by the assembly, who are the proper celebrants of the ritual. What is happening matters most!

<sup>20</sup> Interestingly in John's Gospel the sense of love is always expressed in verbs, whereas in the Pauline corpus love is expressed with nouns.

The general structure of the rite remains: Gathering Rite, Liturgy of the Word, Liturgy of the Eucharist and Dismissal Rite. But there is more flexibility in the way in which the celebration is lifted off its pages and formed into an energized celebration of the Eucharistic Mystery. And the focus is not on the single presiding priest but on the celebrating assembly.

This restructuring and refocusing involves reimagining the space in which the ritual takes place, in such a way that it no longer centres on the places of ambo, altar and presider's chair: the assembly itself is centre stage—situated around, more than in front of, these three foci of the ritual action. The places for the assembly do not face forward, as in a theatre or in the traditional church arrangement. The people are facing one another—either opposite one another in a choir-stall arrangement or in a circle or semicircle. The presider is seated within the assembly in a position from which the presiding role can be exercised when needed. Rethinking the role of music and the appropriate kinds of music for ritual is also be involved. Experience shows that the assembly sings best when the music is simple, engaging and familiar, and they do not have to find pages in the songbook. Hymns that have never been innate to the Roman rite could well be avoided, except perhaps as music of praise or mediation after communion. The proper music of the Roman rite is psalmody and service music.

If the assembly is not too large, the entire group can gather in one area and process into the worship space. This makes it clear that the focus is not on the presiding priest, making his entrance in the prominent place at the end of the procession. Too often it seems as though the processional song is there to welcome the priest! If the assembly is too large for this, then the people, including the priest, may gather in their proper seats and begin the liturgy with several minutes of meditative silence. Such a period of sacred silence helps to restore the contemplative dimension that Merton feared would be lost in the renewed ritual.

***Sacred silence  
helps to restore  
the contemplative  
dimension***

Before the first reading, the one preaching introduces the scriptures of the day so as to open the ears of the listeners to the questions and situations in life addressed by the Word. This functions as a kind of tuning of the ears, waking up the consciousness really to hear God's Word in relation to life. There is silence between all of the parts of the Liturgy of the Word so that members of the assembly can assimilate the Word into their own consciousness and life. In this way listening flows more readily into responding—not just in liturgical responses and songs but in a challenge to their own existence and way of living.



There would be no assembly song at the Preparation of Gifts—only silence or perhaps soft instrumental or quiet choral music. The General Intercessions would be performed with brief intentions read by the intercessor; a moment of silence would follow each intention and then a sung invitation to prayer by the cantor ('We pray to the Lord') and a sung prayer by the assembly ('Lord, hear our prayer'). There would then be a brief silence before the next intercession.

It must be clear that, as the Rite says, the whole assembly—not just the presider—celebrates the Eucharistic Prayer. The priest's unique role must be preserved, but more needs to be done to ensure that the assembly is actively engaged. The prayer needs to be more than something said by the presider while the assembly waits to receive Communion. The assembly may also enact the gestures used by the priest: the orans posture, the extending of the hands, and a dramatic gesture at the closing doxology, with the singing of an extended and energetic Great Amen. In this way the whole body rather than just the mouth is engaged, following the Magnificat: 'My whole being rejoices in God my Saviour'. Music during Communion is either instrumental, or a refrain or mantra-like chant sung by the assembly. At the end of the distribution of the Sacrament the assembly sing either a communion meditation or a hymn of praise.

The Dismissal Rite as it now exists is too brief. In addition to always including the prayers for the blessing of the people, some words that summarise the Liturgy of the Word might be added before the Final Blessing and words of dismissal. This dismissal is followed by instrumental or

choral music rather than a congregational song. The people thus move into conversation and interaction within the worship space as the music energizes their return to 'the world'.

### ***Reimagining Priesthood***

Thomas Merton's suggestion that 'the whole idea of the priesthood has to be changed' can be seen sketched out somewhat in his late correspondence. It can be summarised in two words: eliminate clericalism. He stated this specifically in a letter to Robert Lax in June 1968.<sup>21</sup> Clericalism might be described as a kind of attitude of separateness and superiority—both within the priest himself and ascribed to the priesthood by at least some members of the assembly. It results in a distance, an aloofness and even a kind of contrariety in the attitude of the priest towards the celebrating assembly.

Merton sensed an almost universal problem with priests: that they were too busy to become persons of deep prayer such as would yield solid spirituality and preaching. In the Acts of the Apostles deacons were chosen so that the apostles could be free to pray and preach. The problem for priests, Merton judged, was,

... getting themselves disengaged from the futile routine and paperwork and 'public relations' gags and all the rest of the trivialities that have entered the life of the priest in America in proportion as he has become a business man and an operator like other business men and operators ....<sup>22</sup>

He felt this involved 'waste motion and the burden of nonsense and triviality ...'.<sup>23</sup>

Merton's advice to a diocesan priest in 1968 reflected his own evolving sense of his monastic and priestly vocation.

Couldn't you be a sort of 'underground priest' in lay clothes .... In other words it seems to me that in this Post-Conciliar period you might be called to a kind of hidden service in the sort of unofficial and informal life you desire. In short, be like a layman, live like a layman, but do some of the priestly work and service along with it .... All the more reason to get out of the ordinary patterns and yet to be a priest

<sup>21</sup> Merton to Lax, 22 June 1968, in *Road to Joy*, 185: 'you might as well all leave the clericals'.

<sup>22</sup> Merton to Ronald Roloff, 21 October 1962, in *The School of Charity: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 152.

<sup>23</sup> Merton to Roloff, 21 October 1962, in *School of Charity*, 153.

nevertheless, and work in a quiet, relaxed relationship with people you can relate to without too much difficulty. After all, you are always going to have to relate to people. See your priesthood not as a role or an office, but as just part of your own life and your relation to other persons. You can bring them Christ in some quiet way, and perhaps you will find yourself reaching people that the Church would not otherwise contact.<sup>24</sup>

### ***Liturgical Inculturation and Ritual Adaptation***

The whole project of ongoing liturgical and ministerial development could well be understood as an experience of inculturation—something affirmed by Vatican II but since somewhat neglected by the official Church. Robert J. Schreiter addresses questions of the reception and non-reception of the preached message of the gospel:

But if no attention is given to how the Gospel is being received, if no encouragement and generosity are shown toward efforts to inculturate, then communication as intercultural communication has failed .... Without this communication has not taken place.<sup>25</sup>

Experimentation with liturgical form must be allowed to proceed with greater generosity towards fluidity within the fundamental structure of the Roman rite. Church policies which close the door to such ongoing reflection and reshaping must give way to a greater local adaptation. Schreiter asserts:

Failure to communicate in this fashion is more than a flaw in a communication event. It is also a theological flaw, in that not respecting intercultural communication is casting a doubt on the ability of the culture to be able to receive the Gospel.<sup>26</sup>

While there could be some sense of a danger of breaking communion with the Church universal in such local adaptation, Schreiter calls for an appreciation of asymmetry in the communication process. This would be a process honouring both sameness and difference. He claims that expressions of the Christian message need to show a continuing ‘indeterminacy’:

This means that the message can be communicated via a variety of codes and signifiers. Indeterminacy, rather than being a defect, is rather

<sup>24</sup> Merton to Father D., 14 March 1968, in *School of Charity*, 371.

<sup>25</sup> Robert J. Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999), 129.

<sup>26</sup> Schreiter, *New Catholicity*, 129.

an important aspect of the message's fullness, for without it the message might not be able to be expressed in some cultures.<sup>27</sup>

Many of the suggestions for a more fluid form of the Roman rite of celebrating the Eucharist could be implemented in the rite authorized by Vatican II. These further explorations and experiments would honour and foster the insight of Thomas Merton offered in 1968, so close to his early and untimely death.

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<sup>27</sup> Schreiter, *New Catholicity*, 131.