Thomas Merton Prayer Material

Opening Prayers

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Opening Prayers

You may wish to consider using one of the following prayers of Merton’s to begin your prayer period each day. (Both come from *Thoughts in Solitude.*

O great God, source of all things, Whose infinite light is darkness to me, Whose immensity is to me as the void,

You have called me forth out of yourself because You love me in yourself, and I am a transient expression of Your inexhaustible and eternal reality. I could not know You, I would be lost in the darkness, I would fall away from You into this void, if You did not hold me to Yourself in the Heart of Jesus.

My God, I love You Whom I do not know, and I embrace You Whom I do not see, and I abandon myself to You Whom I have offended, because You love me in Jesus, who willed to identify Himself completely with me by that love which brought Him to death, for me, on the Cross.

I come to You like Jacob in the garments of Esau, that is in the merits and the Precious Blood of Jesus Christ. Pass Your hands over my head, and bless me as Your beloved child. My sinful self is not my real self, it is not the self You have wanted for me, only the self that I have wanted for myself. And I no longer want this false self. But now my loving God, I come to You in Jesus, for it is His own Heart, which is your palace and the temple where the saints adore You in Heaven.

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My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that, if I do this, you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to faced my perils alone.
Our Life as Sacred History

“Every moment and every event of every person’s life on earth plants something in the soul. For just as the wind carries thousands of winged seeds, so each moment brings with it germs of spiritual vitality that come to rest imperceptibly in our minds and wills.”

“Though it is intrinsically reasonable and right to desire mystical union with God, we so easily misunderstand what this mean that it can sometimes become the most dangerous of all desires. To desire God is the most fundamental of all human desires. It is the very root of all our quest for happiness.”

(Thomas Merton)

Our life is our sacred history. Merton wrote that what we truly are can be discovered only through our “self-awareness in a living and actual world.” Merton believed that God is present in every human experience.

Reflection:

How has your spiritual journey influenced by your early experiences?

Despite suffering tremendous losses and reverses, Merton became a singular spiritual guide for countless persons. What possibilities have been created by the defeats and difficulties in your life?

What were your first images of God? How did God become real for you?

Do you place limits on where and how you might find God?
Merton’s Epiphany at Fourth & Walnut

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, or spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream. Not that I question the reality of my vocation, or of my monastic life: but the conception of ‘separation from the world’ that we have in the monastery too easily presents itself as a complete illusion: the illusion that by making vows we become a different specie of being, pseudo-angels, ‘spiritual men,’ men of interior life, what have you.

Certainly these traditional values are very real, but their reality is not of an order outside everyday existence in a contingent world, nor does it entitle one to despise the secular: though ‘out of the world’ we are in the same world as everybody else, the world of the bomb, the world of race hatred, the world of technology, the world of mass media, big business, revolution, and all the rest. We take a different attitude to all these things, for we belong to God. Yet so does everybody else belong to God. We just happen to be conscious of it, and to make a profession out of this consciousness. But does that entitle us to consider ourselves different, or even better, than others? The whole idea is preposterous.

This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud. And I suppose my happiness could have taken form in the words: ‘Thank God, thank God that I am like other men, that I am only a man among others.’ To think that for sixteen or seventeen years I have been taking seriously this pure illusion that is implicit in so much of our monastic thinking.

It is a glorious destiny to be a member of the human race, though it is a race dedicated to many absurdities and one which makes many terrible mistakes; yet, with all that, God Himself glorified in becoming a member of the human race. A Member of the human race! To think that such a commonplace realization should suddenly seem like news that one holds the winning ticket in a cosmic sweepstake.

I have the immense joy of being man, a member of a race in which God Himself became Incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.

This changes nothing in the sense and value of my solitude, for it is in fact the function of solitude to make one realize such things with a clarity that would be impossible to anyone completely immersed in other cares, the other illusions, and all the automatisms of a tightly collective existence. My solitude, however, is not my own, for I see now how much it belongs to them – and that I have a responsibility for it in their regard, not just in my own. It is because I am one with them that I owe it to them to be alone, and when I am alone they are not ‘they’ but my own self. There are no strangers!
Then I was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin or desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God’s eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed….I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other. But this cannot be seen, only believed and ‘understood’ by a peculiar gift.”

(Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*)

*For Reflection:*

*In God’s presence, call to mind a deeply meaningful moment in your own life, a time when you experienced an unexpected, out of the ordinary, heartfelt knowledge and experience of God’s love and presence.*

*As you recall this experience, consider:*

  *What made the moment sacred? How did you recognize it as sacred?*

  *What were some of the feelings associated with the experience?*
  *What images, if any, were associated with the experience?*
  *What thoughts did you have?*

  *How did you respond to the experience? What difference did it make in your life?*

  *As you relive the experience in God’s presence, share with God any feelings that arise, and listen to God’s response. You may also want to talk with God about the extent of your openness to finding God in all things, considering whether you place limits on where and how you might find God.*
Journey to the True Self

At the heart of Merton’s spirituality is his distinction between our real and false selves and his conviction that in order to truly live, we must renounce the illusory self. The false self “is the one who wants to exist outside the reach of God’s will and God’s love;” discovering the true self means “yielding to the love of God.”

As you pray with the following passages from Merton’s writings, consider:
- What images or myths do you hold about yourself that exert a strong influence on how you are able to relate to God?
- What makes it difficult for you to yield to the love of God? What are the things that prevent you from completely surrendering to your true identity in Christ?

“For it is God’s love that warms me in the sun and God’s love that sends the cold rain. It is God’s love that feeds me in the bread I eat and God that fees me also by hunger and fasting. It is the love of God that sends the winter days when I am cold and sick, and the hot summer when I labor and my clothes are full of sweat. But it is God Who breathes on me with light winds off the river and in the breezes out of the wood. His love spreads the shade off the sycamore over my head and sends the water-boy along the edge of the wheat field with a bucket from the spring, while the laborers are resting and the mules stand under the tree.”

“Our glory and our hope: we are the Body of Christ. Christ loves and espouses us to His own flesh. Isn’t that enough for us? But we don’t really believe it. No! Be content, be content. We are the Body of Christ! We have found him because He has sought us. God has come to take up His abode in us, in sinners. There is nothing further to look for except to turn to Him completely, where He is already present. Be quiet and see that He is God.”

“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.”
The Ground of our Being

Merton wrote that our prayer should proceed from

“the realization of our nothingness and helplessness in the presence of God. This need not be a mournful or discouraging experience. On the contrary, it can be deeply tranquil and joyful since it brings us in direct contact with the source of all joy and life. But one reason why our meditation never gets started is perhaps that we never make this real, serious return to the center of our own nothingness before God. Hence we never enter into the deepest reality of our relationship with him.

“In other words we meditate merely ‘in the mind,’ in the imagination, or at best in the desires, considering religious truths from a detached objective viewpoint. We do not begin by seeking to ‘find our heart,’ that is, to sink into a deep awareness of the ground of our identity before God and in God. ‘Finding our heart’ and recovering the awareness of our inmost identity implies the recognition that our external, everyday self is to a great extent a mask and a fabrication. It is not our true self. And indeed our true self is not easy to find. It is hidden in obscurity and ‘nothingness,’ the center where we are in direct dependence upon God. But sense the reality of all Christian meditation depends on this recognition, our attempt to meditate without it is in fact self-contradictory. It is like trying to walk without feet.”

(Merton, Contemplative Prayer)

Reflect on Merton’s words and then consider:

Which images, words or phrases of Merton’s resonate most deeply with you?

Do you pray more from your “head” or more from your “heart”?

Do you experience God as the ground of your identity? How?

In what ways do you have difficulty recognizing your “nothingness and helplessness in the presence of God?”
Living in Freedom

In *He is Risen*, Merton talked about freedom in this way:

“True encounter with Christ liberates something in us, a power we did not know we had, a hope, a capacity for life, a resilience, an ability to bounce back when we thought we were completely defeated, a capacity to grow and change, a power of creative transformation…

“The first obligation of the Christian is to maintain his freedom from all superstitions, all blind taboos and religious formalities, indeed from all forms of empty legalism…

“Too may Christians are not free because they submit to the domination of other people’s ideas. They submit passively to the opinion of the crowd. For self-protection they hide in the crowd, and run along with the crowd – even when it turns into a lynch mob. They are afraid of the aloneness, the moral nakedness, which they would feel apart from the crowd.

“But the Christian in whom Christ is risen dares to think and act differently from the crowd.

“He has ideas of his own, not because he is arrogant, but because he has the humility to stand alone and pay attention to the purpose and grace of God, which are often quite contrary to the purposes and plans of an established human power structure.”

For Reflection:

*What do these words mean for your life?*

*Do you feel free to discover and be who God has created you to be?*

*If so, how did you come to know this freedom?*

*If not, what stands in the way of your achieving that freedom?*

*Is your image of God imprisoning you or making you free?*
Dialogue with Nature

Merton believed that “we are first of all part of nature” and that nature nurtures our spirituality. One writer suggested that Merton lived in constant dialogue with nature.

These following descriptions by Merton offer a way to think about what we can learn from observing nature. Read them and then for today’s prayer experience, take a walk in thanksgiving and praise.

Begin as you would any period of prayer, becoming aware of God’s presence. As you step outdoors, take a deep breath of the fresh air. Reflect how rarely you think of it as the sustainer of your life, day and night, the unceasing providence of God, whose love holds you in existence and is continually creating you.

Then, as you walk, consciously experience the use of your sight, your hearing, and your other senses, reflecting on the beauty around you, and recognizing all as gift from a loving God.

“Evening: cold winter wind along the walls of the chapel. Not howling, not moaning, not dismal. Can there be anything mournful about wind? It is innocent, and without sorrow. It has no regrets. Wind is a strong child enjoying his play, amazed at his own strength, gentle, inexhaustible, and pure. He burnishes the dry snow, throwing clouds of it against the building. The wind has no regrets.” (CGB 29)

“Real spring weather – these are the precise days when everything changes. All the trees are fast beginning to be in leaf, and the first green freshness of a new summer is all over the hills. Irreplaceable purity of these few days chosen by God as His sign! Mixture of heavenliness and anguish. Seeing ‘heavenliness’ suddenly, for instance, in the pure white of the mature dogwood blossoms against the dark evergreens in the cloudy garden. ‘Heavenliness’ too of the song of the unknown bird that is perhaps here only for these days, passing through, a lovely, deep, simple song. Pure – not pathos, no statement, not desire, pure heavenly sound. Seized by this ‘heavenliness’ as if I were child – a child’s mind I have never done anything to deserve to have and that is my own part in the heavenly spring. Not of this world, nor of my making. Born partly of physical anguish (which is not really there, though. It goes quickly). The sense that heavenliness’ is the real nature of things, not their nature, not ‘in themselves,’ but the fact that they are a gift of love, and of freedom.” (IM 218)

“The first chirps of the waking day birds mark the ‘point vierge’ of the dawn under a sky as yet without real light, a moment of awe and inexpressible innocence, when the Father in perfect silence opens their eyes. They begin to speak to Him, not with fluent song, but with an awakening question that is their dawn state, their state at the ‘point vierge.’ Their condition asks if it is time for them to ‘be.’ He answers ‘yes.’ Then, they one by one wake up, and become birds. They manifest themselves as birds, beginning to sing. Presently they will be fully themselves, and will even fly. Meanwhile, the most wonderful moment of the day is that when creation in its innocence asks permission to ‘be’ once again, as it did on the first morning that ever was.” (CGB 131)
Vocation

Merton spoke not infrequently about vocation. As you read some of the following passages on the subject from his writings, consider:

*Do I believe that God is in relationship with me and desires to be an integral part of my life or do I believe that such relationship is reserved for a chosen few? Do I understand my response to God’s call as vocation?*

*Have I made a clear choice in my life, a choice that I now understand as a response to the call of God and my cooperation with the power of grace?*

*Can I bring the experiences of my vocation to God in prayer?*

*When I reflect on my vocation do I do so with a grateful heart or is there something that may be incomplete, untested or not yet clear?*

“To conceive a call of God as an expressed order to carry out a task certainly is not always false, but it is only true after a long interior struggle in which it becomes obvious that no such constraint is apparent. It also happens that the order comes to maturity along with the one who must carry it out and that it becomes in some way this very being, who has not arrived at full maturity. Finally, the process of maturing can be a mysterious way of dying, provided that with death the task begins.”

*(Asian Journal)*

“Our vocation is not simply to *be*, but to work together with God in the creation of our own life, our own identity, our own destiny. We are free beings and sons and daughters of God. This means to say that we should not passively exist, but actively participate in His creative freedom, in our own lives, and in the lives of others, by choosing the truth. To put it better, we are even called to share with God the work of creating the truth of our own identity.”

*(New Seeds of Contemplation)*

“The [person] who loses this sense of his own personal destiny, and who renounces all hope of having any kind of vocation in life has lost all hope of happiness.”

*(No Man is an Island)*