

Merton's Guidance for the Spiritual Journey

Prayer is a mystery and it lies at the heart of our spiritual growth and development. Jesus prayed often and taught his disciples to pray. Prayer is often misused and misunderstood. Merton was devoted to prayer but never taught a method of prayer.

"Our discovery of God is, in a way, God's discovery of us.... We only know Him in so far as we are known by Him, and our contemplation of Him is a participation in His contemplation of Himself. We become contemplatives when God discovers Himself in us." ("New Seeds of Contemplation" p41)

"But as long as there is this sense of separation, this awareness of distance and difference between ourselves and God, we have not yet entered into the fullness of contemplation." (nsc285)

Six Principles from the Writings of Merton (adapted from A.T.Padovano)

1. Sanctity is nothing more than becoming ourselves:

1.1. *"For me to be a saint means to be myself. Therefore the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self." (nsc33)*

1.2. *"To desire God is the most fundamental of all human desires. It is the very root of all our quest for happiness." (nsc186)*

2. Effort and difficulty are adversaries of spiritual development:

2.1. *"I have seen many men enter monasteries with an earnest, devouring hunger for God, for contemplative experience. And I have seen them leave the monastery beaten and frustrated by the very intensity of their unfulfilled desires." (nsc187)*

3. The acceptance of vulnerability:

3.1. *"We have to accept ourselves, whether individually or collectively, not only as perfectly good or perfectly bad, but in our mysterious unaccountable mixture of good and evil." (nsc119)*

4. Acceptance of where we are in life:

4.1. *"Why should joy excite me or sorrow cast me down, achievement delight me or failure depress me, life attract me or death repel me, if I live only in the Life that is within me by God's gift?" (nsc163)*

5. Learn to befriend your emotions by enriching your experience:

5.1. *"Even when we enter into the contemplative life we still carry our passions and our sensible nature along with us like a store of unprotected gasoline. And sometimes the sparks that fly in the pure darkness of contemplation get into that fuel by accident and start a blaze in the emotions and the senses... But the danger is that you will attach the wrong kind of importance to these manifestations of religious emotion." (nsc259)*

6. Reject the tendency to organise life rigidly; trust its rhythm and let go:

6.1. *"For in the course of each day the duties of our state, the claims made on us by those around us, the demands on our energy, our patience, and our time, all make known to us the will of God and show us the way to realize ourselves in Him by losing ourselves in charity." ("No Man is an Island" p68)*