

# CHOICE AND DISCERNMENT

By JOHN COSTELLO

This country is SICK, man. It is one of the sickest things that has happened. People are fed on myths, they are stuffed up to the eyes with illusions. They CAN'T think straight. They have a modicum of good will, and some of them have a whole lot of it, but with the mental bombardment everybody lives under, it is just not possible to see straight, no matter where you are looking. The average everyday 'Catlick' is probably in worse shape than a lot of others. He has in his head a few principles of faith which lend no coherence whatever to his life. No one has ever sought any coherence from him or given him the idea that he needed any.<sup>1</sup>

*Thomas Merton*

WHEN WE READ THESE WORDS Merton wrote to Jim Forest to console (!) him over the lack of results the young activist was finding in his peace efforts, it is hard to know what makes us more uncomfortable—the hard-hitting judgements or the fact that they still strike such a chord in us twenty-five years later. Merton, from his monastery, showed us that he understood the *meaning* infusing the events of modern culture and the mid-sixties Church with more sensitivity and immediacy that almost any Catholic actually immersed in the media-shaped world. He was the prophet crying from one wilderness to another.

In this same letter, Merton went on to suggest to Forest that his Catholic Peace Fellowship

is not going to stop the war in Vietnam, and it is not even going to cause very many Catholics to think differently about war and peace. It is simply going to become another image among images . . . something around which are centred some vague emotional reactions, for or against.

The reason for this, he notes, is that all people are 'brutalized' and 'the average layman and the average priest are all alike conditioned by this mentality'. The war, then, 'is a fully legitimate

way of indulging the brutality that has been engendered in them. It is not only for country, it is even for God' (p 296).

Merton goes on further to warn his young correspondent against 'striving to build yourself an identity in your work and witness. You are using it to protect yourself against nothingness, annihilation.' He concludes:

The great thing after all is to live, not to pour out your life in service of a myth: and we turn the best things into myths. If you can get free from the domination of causes and just serve Christ's truth, you will be able to do more and will be less crushed by the inevitable disappointments. Because I see nothing whatever in sight but much disappointment, frustration and confusion . . . The real hope, then, is not in something we think we can do, but in God who is making something good out of it in some way we cannot see. If we can do His will, we will be helping in this process (pp 296-297).

Merton's letter touched me deeply when I first read it years ago, and it still does. It is a personal response to Forest's psychological and moral crisis—one which many of us have felt. It was a crisis occasioned by, among other reasons, the media-induced avoidance by Catholics and their Church of a vital moral issue in American society at the time. It has remained a touchstone of discernment for me and for many others trying to read the signs of the times and respond to them with fidelity and responsibility—and not get burnt out in the process.

This letter, I believe, can be a model for us as we try to find our way in a culture that is even more media-driven now than it was in 1966. In the letter, Merton covers all the bases of a classical discernment: he names, he evaluates and he chooses a course of action.

1. He names the reality as he sees it: people are fed myths and they are ready to live by the illusions these myths create in them rather than by the reality that is there for any free and sensitive person to see.
2. Then he evaluates the effect of living by these collective illusions. It causes a 'brutalization' of consciousness, a numbing of the capacity in individuals and in the people as a whole for a genuinely moral response to their social situation, in this case, an immoral war.
3. Finally, he offers a prescription. It is less a recipe for changing the world than a principle of choice and discernment for acting

in this culture. He urges Forest to keep acting, but to live and act without anxiety and without identifying himself totally with his efforts. He tells him to act according to the mind and heart of Christ. He encourages him to see through how, even in doing the work of the gospel, we can be victimized by the myths and illusions society thrusts upon us. And, coming precisely to the point, he includes among those myths the expectation of success, of making a clear difference in society, especially in our most God-inspired undertakings which feel so worthy of response.

Merton's letter provides a map for tracking the few issues I would like to explore around discernment and choice in relation to media and our culture as shaped by the media. I would like to reflect on how we might respond in the way Merton suggests and in the spirit of Paul's message to the Romans when he says:

Do not model yourselves on the behaviour of the world around you, but let your behaviour change, modelled on your new mind. This is the only way to discover the will of God and know what is good, what it is that God wants, what is the perfect thing to do (Rom 12,1-2).

*Only light reveals darkness*

What characterizes Merton's perspective is an unusual combination of sensitivity to the cultural pressures in North America and an ability to see through them. What gives him his perspective is not simply his position apart from society in the monastery; many monks were uncritical of either the war or the culture. It is his stance in the gospel, in the light generated through the darkness of Good Friday, that allows him to cast light on the darkness in his own culture. Merton reveals the first principle of all discernment: that only love can see reality for what it is. In the gospel, only love reveals both grace and sin.

In his book *Lighten our darkness*, Canadian theologian Douglas Hall described the Christian challenge in society as the call 'to tell the truth with hope'.<sup>2</sup> The hope comes with the very dawning of the truth even though it is not always immediately known. The way of grace seems to be this: when awareness is given we are also given, however inchoatively, the grace to respond. Merton's appeal to the attitude of Christ is not an escape from reality, let alone from the dark side of his society. He stands even more deeply within reality because he takes on Christ's way of seeing and it drives him to see

the systematic denials and false affirmations that most of us exercise each day without even knowing it. His appeal to Christ is the very opposite of a narcotizing opium that avoids reality. It is a bond of love that gives him hope, a hope that releases him to enter reality more truthfully and to name prophetically the cultural forces that suffocate the minds and hearts of the average person. It is love that permits us to know our human reality in all of its truth and illusions. It is important for us to see that Merton, in addressing Jim Forest, affirmed that this stance can be taken by someone living actively in this society and its culture. It is not essentially a matter of space but of relationship.

*A people fed on myths*

To understand the relations between culture, media and the images that dehumanize rather than humanize us, it is helpful for us to see what Merton means when he refers to a people fed on myths and illusions. Clearly, he was referring to the dominant images, the subtle value systems and ways of behaving that penetrate our society and our communications culture as the air we breathe moves in our lungs and affects our whole body. He is characterizing acquired desires as opposed to natural ones, the meanings we manufacture as opposed to those that are created and discovered through our entry into the mystery of human living and relating. The images and desires we invent and then manipulate for suspect purposes (such as understanding ourselves as consumers rather than as persons) can possess an entire population and cause them to lose their appreciation of how these are artificial and quite extraneous to their more genuine needs and meanings. At the heart of *what* is discerned must be this distinction between the meanings we manufacture and the ones we discover and create, between the meanings and desires that dehumanize and the ones that make us more genuinely human.

Among the myths Merton noted as the most prominent forms of social sin in the West were: political nationalism with its militarized self-righteousness, competitive capitalism and its control by corporate élites of the media and—therefore—of the minds and feelings of ordinary people, and ‘the *obsession* of the American mind with the myth of know-how, and with the capacity to be omnipotent’ (p 295). There are certainly others. They represent cultural idolatries because they make false yet fundamental claims on the human heart. Merton wanted to tip over the tables of these myths because they were

systematically invading the temples of God's Spirit and displacing the genuine holy of holies that should reside there. Twenty-five years later, it is fair to say that the power of these destructive myths has not been exorcized from our social soul; it has intensified.

These myths, as systems of meaning, are forms of darkness and, because they are paradoxically not consciously chosen, they are forms of blindness. It is hard for us to see that we are bonded to a culture steeped in illusions that dehumanize us. It is even harder to believe we do not freely choose the social myths by which we live. In fact, we often do not even recognize that we have embraced a way of seeing and acting that we have not chosen thoughtfully. The results of living in such a land of shadows can be felt before they are named just as happiness or being in love are felt before we actually put a name on those feelings. It is not uncommon to hear of a *general* state of anxiety, depression, anger, fear or hardheartedness overcoming people, not as individuals alone but as a social group or as a whole society.

This is the level of experience that Merton is touching. It is terribly hard to identify because there is no apparent place from which to look in on it. To appreciate our problem we might ask: 'Do the fish know they are in water?' How could they? We might go farther and ask: 'If the water becomes polluted, do the fish know it is happening?' How could they if they are *all* feeling the symptoms? Out of our sense of being a free people—and from the outside—we often think of the Third World as needing economic liberation. And, until recently, we thought of the Second World as needing political liberation. But we almost never face up to our own forms of enslavement and realize that in the First World, in order to be more human, we may need *cultural* liberation, liberation from desires and fixations that enslave us. Merton suggests we are not far from this condition.

In a 1978 essay entitled 'The power of the powerless', Vaclav Havel wrote that a

person who has been seduced by the consumer value system, whose identity is dissolved in an amalgam of the accoutrements of mass civilization, and who has no roots in the order of being, no sense of responsibility for anything higher than his or her own personal survival, is a *demoralized* person.

The same holds true for a culture, for a society at large. From the viewpoint of Havel and Merton, we indeed live in a very dispirited society and our media help make us so.

The media are effectively the only public creators and carriers of the symbols and images that shape our social meanings. They form us and shape us. In general, they conspire to diminish our critical sense. They all too often deflect or dispel any human way of relating that cannot be measured in sentimental or aggressive terms. Put simply, they too rarely present action that is worthy of human persons or interpret and serve a vision of human living that can genuinely motivate us and ennoble us. The media bosses, writers and advertisers protest that this is not their responsibility; they are merely 'servants' of other people's messages and events without purposes of their own. This is simply a lie; in Merton's word, part of the myth. They are servants of corporations, they conform to the corporations' interests, and the product they deliver for the millions of dollars they receive is the minds and hearts and desires of people like us. This is a snapshot of one corner of the mythic world with which any discernment in our culture must contend.

*Episodic meaning: the unbearable lightness of being*

It is very difficult to know how we can deal with what Merton called the 'brutalization' of people even when we perceive it and protest against it. In an electronically mediated culture, we find ourselves living in systems that are like onions, layers upon layers with no core, no place where anyone can be found who is responsible for what is being done to people. Our society has forged systems that rely on illusion while themselves remaining terribly elusive. People often feel somewhat guilty but not quite responsible. The result is regularly a massive, shared feeling of powerlessness and of being positively disempowered.<sup>3</sup>

When it comes to trying to change the situation in which we find ourselves, the wisest among us fall very nearly silent. There is nothing so discouraging in Merton's letter than his view that even the truth, when it is revealed, gets filed away unrecognized by most people as only one image in the flow of other images. It is totally relativized by them and destined with the passing days to be tossed, like the 'Top Ten' pop songs, into the dustbin of history.

Unfortunately—and this helps explain our clinging to illusions that promise comfort and security—we live at a time when a coherent view of life has collapsed in the West. What we are left with is interesting fragments. Life tends to be lived out in episodes without any connecting thread, without any terms for giving it enduring meaning. As in a videotape, there are some episodes we want to

stopframe, others we are happy to skip over. We are left with an ephemeral quality to our life and meaning. It registers in us in the feeling Milos Kundera described as 'the unbearable lightness of being'. We have no anchor, no roots, no sense of continuity.

In this culture of episodic meanings, so similar to flipping channels on the TV set, adults as well as youth have major problems trusting and making commitments. Without a past that reveals some coherent meaning, I have no grounds from which to launch myself into a risky future. I can test it but I cannot commit myself to it because I do not know what I will look like at this time next year. John Staudenmeier explains the problem well in noting that

Permanent commitment is less a prediction of my future than an act of belief in my history . . . . To make a life commitment we must believe that we can create a life story whose meaning makes life's struggle worthwhile.<sup>4</sup>

The patterns of communication that dominate and form our culture systematically deprive us of any meaningfulness in life as an integrated whole.

Even our sense of sin and grace tends to become episodic. Salvation or liberation are often interpreted narcissistically, more in terms of New Age forms of self-actualization than in Christian terms of self-transcendence and love for others. In our culture, although people make desperate efforts to be nice and to be liked they frequently do not feel loved. Many do not believe in their capacity to discover the truth, to tell the truth and to live by it. In a kind of depression, they just do not make the effort. We are sometimes more like Pilate (Truth? What is truth?) than we are like Jesus (I know my Father and my Father knows me). Telling the truth is costly and many do not want to pay the price.

Believing in the truth and telling the truth invite us to change. They invite us to conversion and action. Too often, we want to avoid the responsibility of the truth because we do not believe we are strong enough to bear it and we do not really want our lives to change much. So we take refuge in half-truths, in psychologies that reduce the radicalness of the call to truth and diminish our responsibility to respond to it. It was his appreciation of this blindness of people and this sense of powerlessness in them that caused Merton to say to Jim Forest 'I see nothing whatever in sight but much disappointment, frustration and confusion' (p 297). As painful as it

is, our effort to learn discernment in our culture requires us to confront these obstacles to discerning and acting well.

*To discern is to decide and act*

It requires a particular kind of attentiveness as well as desire for change in our way of living to reveal that in many of our cultural folkways (e.g. our TV watching, our buying habits, our involvement with our work, our activism, our avoidance of solitude, etc.) we are addicts and that our imaginations are toxified. Most often, these fresh beginnings are awakened in us through events and persons who break through our fixations. Frequently enough, the blinkers are cast off because of a discontent that gives rise to a desire for something more interior, more personal, more just, more true to nature, more human. This desire is at the heart of conversion. It is also at the heart of discernment and choice. People are not able to see what they do not want to change. So we can take heart; if we are given the grace of awareness, in some fashion we are already given the grace of response.

Between 1985 and 1990, a group of Jesuits and sisters and a lay woman in Canada created and adapted the structure for a retreat entitled 'Announcing the gospel in contemporary culture'. Those who participated were encouraged to identify, analyse, pray over and make decisions in terms of many of the same themes that form the subject of this issue. Those of us planning the retreat had, after much discussion, expressed our perspective on the Christian vocation in relation to communications media in our society in the following terms:

In announcing the gospel in our present world,  
 we are called  
 to a personal active engagement with our culture.  
 This engagement requires a continuing process of  
 discernment on our part  
 leading us to a threefold action:  
 —a prophetic critique of all that tends to  
 dehumanize persons in our society,  
 —a constructive embracing of all in the  
 culture that enhances humanity,  
 —and a creative use of all forms of communication  
 that can proclaim and further the gospel.



In creating this statement it had become clear to us that this was a retreat not merely for a neutral 'exposure to issues' but for decision. As we saw it, it achieved its integrity only in being a call to discernment, to choice and to personal commitment. It encouraged retreatants to believe God was offering them the grace to 'do something' as opposed to the nothing that the feeling of powerlessness over media tends to foster in people. That 'something' could be a call to become attentive to and perhaps critical of their own use of media. It could be a call to include media issues in their teaching. Or, perhaps, to accept rather than fearfully reject invitations to TV, newspaper or radio interviews if they came. Possibly, to become more contemplative and prophetic about media abuses in our society, or even actually to use media in some form to present the good news. But for everyone, the retreat included a challenge to discernment and choice leading to *some* action inspired by God's Spirit who we believed firmly had not deserted us in our electronically mediated world despite much feeling, at times, to the contrary.

To put it simply, we concluded that prayer on this issue for dedicated Christians was prayer-for-action or it was not likely genuine prayer. We were convinced that if we do not believe we are being given the power to evangelize our society just as it is, then we will continue to be evangelized by the dark side in our society with all its myths and illusions. For us the retreat had one purpose, it was a call—gentle or challenging—to a conversion in my and our cultural action in relation to *God's* desires for our world, the world we are creating and reflecting with our media. In Merton's terms, we were encouraging a return to that contemplative centre where all action must be rooted if it is to be free and for the reign of God. But it was a call for *action* that would witness to love against the destructive myths that were keeping people enslaved.

*The dangerous memory of the Resurrection*

I am very conscious that I have given the majority of this essay over to bringing forward, in almost painful detail, our experience of culturally induced darkness. It may be that twenty-five years after Merton hung his piece of black crepe on our culture, we are witnessing the faint beginnings of new life pushing through the stones of our deadly myths. The power of the faith in technological solutions, for example, is being challenged deeply by those awakening to the crisis in our environment. It is no longer true that people at large are sheep-like believers in bigger and better machines. Similar

humble hope can be grounded in the awakening to the voices of women and to the feminine in human relating.

However, as Merton indicates, the basis of our hope cannot be hope in this or that particular action or movement but the dangerous and subversive memory of the risen Christ. To act out each day the message that Christ has died, Christ is risen and Christ will come again is first and last a way of proclaiming that, in the Resurrection of Jesus, the balance is tipped against death and the ultimate power of illusion. I am not sure how much other cultures need to have this revealed right now—but ours does. We have not begun to explore what it means for us to become genuine missionaries and revolutionaries of Christian hope to our own culture, to the lost and in some ways very discontented and spiritually hungry middle class.

Perhaps our actions are weak because we keep our eyes on success as our culture defines it. Maybe we forget in our bodies and spirits the memory of the risen Christ that should be the heart of our energy. Maybe we forget that our Christian hope is based on the scandal of the infinite God becoming one man in a small backward town in a forgotten part of an empire already beginning to die.

Maybe we lose our power because we think we already know the face of Christ. But faith says I am always open to being surprised about where I find the face of Christ. Can we be as open to being shaped by this hope as by our cultural brokenness? The signs of it will be in our lightness and the fresh forms of community that come to birth among us.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Merton: 'Letter to James Forest, February 21, 1966', in *The hidden ground of love: the letters of Thomas Merton on religious experience and social concern*, ed by William H. Shannon (Farrar, Straus, Giroux: New York, 1985), p 295.

<sup>2</sup> Douglas Hall: *Lighten our darkness: towards an indigenous theology of the cross* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976).

<sup>3</sup> In this discussion of 'elusive systems' and 'episodic meaning', I am undebted to Sr Mary Jo Leddy N.D.S. for both the terms and much of the substance of what I present here.

<sup>4</sup> John Staudenmeier S.J.: 'U.S. technology and adult commitment', *Studies in the spirituality of Jesuits*, vol 22, no 1, (January, 1987), pp 8 & 17.