

Essential Suffering

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Spring 2003

Department of Religion Undergraduate Thesis

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Introduction

Prayer can take place anytime, anywhere, and can be about anything. Prayer is our way of connecting to a power greater than us and hoping that it will interject and carry out our hopes and desires. In Christian prayer we can direct our wants to deceased relatives, the Saints, the Virgin Mary, and Jesus, but most often times the conversation is held with God as our audience. Some pray for comfort, others for peace. Some pray for the rest of humanity and others for their own desires. Prayer most often times consists of thanking God for what we have been given and asking Him to continue to bless us with His gifts. We may be meditating on the divine nature and its attributes or pleading for God to improve our current situation. And if we are not fully content with our situation, we must be suffering. When Christians suffer they look to God to alleviate their pains (whatever forms they may take). A cycle develops. We suffer, we pray, we are eased, we praise God and know him better. Our relationship with our Creator builds through the progression of this cycle. In the Christian tradition the theology of prayer develops in direct interaction with the experience of suffering. Suffering is, thus, integral to Christian spirituality.

In order to demonstrate the centrality of suffering to the theology of Christian prayer, I have chosen three prominent Christian contemplatives: St. Augustine, St. Julian of Norwich, and Thomas Merton. They represent different settings in time and history. All are Catholic, yet there are still formidable differences in their experiences. Augustine was a convert, Julian was devout her entire life, and Merton was an agnostic turned believer. Through a careful reading of their literary works, the present examination investigates the following important questions which accentuate the centrality of

suffering to the traditions of Christian prayer: 1) What is the manner in which these individuals suffer? (What are they going through mentally and physically?) 2) How did these individuals pray and what was the methodology and context of their prayer? 3) How did prayer help them or what were the negative effects? 4) Did prayer help them to cope with their suffering and bring them closer to God?

St. Augustine was born November 13, 354 A.D. He lived in a small African town, which was under Roman rule. This is at a time when the Roman Empire was split between Christianity and the old pagan gods. Augustine's mother was a Christian but his father was a pagan. His family scraped together money so Augustine would be able to be educated. His education brought him to Carthage where he acquired a love for philosophy and rhetoric. It was in Carthage that he joined a religious group, which rivaled Christianity, called Manicheism. The Manicheans believed that they were merely pawns to a greater force and, therefore, could not be blamed for any wrongdoings; they were torn between the powers of good and evil. After almost a decade of association with the group Augustine began to see through the Manicheans and slowly broke ties with them. In 384 A.D., he was offered a high profile position as the professor of rhetoric for the imperial court of Milan. It was in Milan that Augustine met the bishop Ambrose. After speaking with Ambrose and hearing several of his sermons, it became apparent to Augustine that Christianity was what he was seeking. Augustine retired to the countryside to sort out his inner-conversion and in 387 A.D., right before Easter, he was baptized a Christian. He returned to his hometown with his friends and formed what today could be considered a monastery; a retreat based on prayer and Christian conversation. In 391 A.D., he visited the region of Hippo and the people there pleaded

for him to become a priest. He remained there for the rest of his life, eventually becoming bishop, preaching, writing, and refuting factions opposed to Christianity.¹

St. Julian of Norwich was born in England in 1342 A.D. It is believed that she was a Benedictine nun. Eventually she would be considered one of the premier English mystics of the fourteenth century. In 1373 A.D., when she was thirty years old she became deathly sick. As she lay on her deathbed, she prayed to renew her spiritual life and passed into a trance while contemplating the crucifix. While in this trance she had a vision of Christ's suffering. The trance contained sixteen visions in all, but all would be grounded and related to her first. Julian miraculously recovered from her illness. It would be fifteen years later that she would come to fully understand what happened to her and another five years passed before she documented the occurrence. St. Julian's book is twenty years of contemplation on one event.²

Thomas Merton was a monk and prominent writer born in France January 31, 1915 A.D. His father (a New Zealander) and mother (an American) were both artists. He spent his youth traveling around with his parents and was always drawn to the architecture of cathedrals and monasteries. Merton studied briefly at Cambridge University in England before going on to receive a master's degree from Columbia University. It was during his time at Columbia that he gradually changed from an agnostic to a devout Roman Catholic. Upon graduation he began teaching in Harlem in the heart of New York City. In 1941 Merton went on an Easter retreat to a Trappist

¹ All biographical information for Saint Augustine taken from: Saint Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, ed. Jack K. Ryan (New York: Image Books, 1960).

² All biographical information for Saint Julian of Norwich taken from: Saint Julian of Norwich, *The Revelation of Divine Love.*, trans. M.L. del Mastro (Liguori: Triumph Books, 1994).

monastery in Kentucky. While on the visit he decided that this is where he belonged and decided to stay. He served as a master to students and novices, but loved solitude. In seclusion he would write poetry, meditations, and works of social criticism. In 1948 Merton was ordered by a superior to publish his works; some of which became bestsellers. Merton's social criticisms concentrated on public awareness of racism, economic injustice, and militarism. Merton was fascinated by the parallels between Oriental mysticism and Western tradition and gained permission to attend an ecumenical conference of Buddhist and Christian monks in Bangkok, Thailand in 1968. While attending the conference Merton was accidentally electrocuted by a fan in his shower and died.³

Given the basic biographical data above we can now look more intricately at the inner workings of these individuals' lives. I have broken up the focus into two sections for each of the contemplatives: suffering and prayer. In these chapters you will find several similar characteristics in which these individuals both suffered and prayed, however, the matter in which they came to suffer and pray are brought forth in different ways. The end result is a correlation between the individual's prayers defined by how they have suffered.

³ All biographical information for Thomas Merton taken from: Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company Publishers, 1948).

Chapter 1: St. Augustine

Suffering

It is quite apparent that life to St. Augustine was suffering. His suffering was deeply rooted in his sin. Sin to Augustine was inescapable. It was not his sin in general that he suffered from, but rather each particular, separate sin. In his book *Confessions* Augustine goes into great detail about his life plagued with sin. He stretches as far back as his infancy and continues to recount sin after sin until he is caught up to the moment he is writing. Fortunately for Augustine he is able to identify the sin that causes the suffering in his life. He suffers from pride, ambition, ingratitude, frivolity, vanity, conceit, deceit, lying, and dishonesty. These are all things that humankind comes into conflict with at some point during our lives; however some of us fail to admit it. These are all minor in the scope of Augustine's concerns. His main battles deal mostly with lust and his addiction to the falsity in theology and philosophy. The temptations that these sins provoke are more than his body and mind can cope with.

Augustine sees the seeds of sinfulness planted in his infancy. He is careful in his observations because he cannot remember his own infancy. Augustine relies on what he observes of the present infants around him and guesses at his own correlation to their actions. Infancy is a time when we are thoughtless yet already sinful. We have no way of articulating our exact needs. An infant makes demands on everyone and thanks no one, and if their demands are not met in a prompt fashion the child plagues its caretakers with its obnoxious cries. From the day a child is born it falsely learns to rely on humankind to fulfill their needs and is blind to the true provider. Augustine reflects,

The comfort of human milk nourished me, but neither my mother nor my nurses filled their own breasts. Rather, through them you gave me an infant's food in accordance with your law and out of the riches that you have distributed even down to the lowest level of things. You gave me to want no more than you gave, and you gave to those who nursed me the will to give what you gave to them. By an orderly affection they willingly gave me what they possessed so abundantly through you. It was good for them that my good should come from them; yet it was not from them but through them.⁴

The provisions of God is something that Augustine realizes later in life, it is unbeknownst to children. The idea of God is beyond the comprehension of an infant and though a child may be able to recite the entities that make up God (as humans know him), they are still ostracized from knowing God as a provider. Thus as the child grows there is less and less their caretaker can do for them and only as an adult do they come to the understanding (for some) to turn their wants, desires, and pains to God for alleviation.

While still a young boy a grave illness fell upon the young Augustine. He had been taught of the eternal life promised by God. When death seemed imminent his mother pleaded that he should receive the sacrament of baptism to secure the fate of his soul. Augustine's health took a fortunate turn and he recovered from the illness.

Augustine's baptism is deferred until a later time. Augustine recounts the event,

The mother of my flesh was distraught-for she most lovingly was bringing forth my eternal salvation in her chaste heart and in faith in thee and would have at once hastened to arrange that I be initiated into the sacraments of salvation and be washed in them, I first confessing you, Lord Jesus, for the remission of my sins. However, I immediately recovered from that illness. So my cleansing was delayed, as if it must

⁴ Saint Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, ed. Jack K. Ryan (New York: Image Books, 1960), pp. 46-47.

needs be that I would become yet more defiled if I lived, for indeed the guilt and defilement of sins committed after that cleansing would be greater and more dangerous.⁵

This is a prime example of how humankind seeks out God in times of woe and suffering when there is nowhere else to turn. William Mallard, author of *Language and Love*, attributes the suffering of Augustine to the two different worlds he is living in. The first is that of his father who desires prestige and fortune for Augustine, the other is that of his mother who wants Augustine to live his life for God. The two worlds are contradictory of one another and place a directional stress on the path Augustine is seeking. Mallard observes the event of Augustine's almost baptism as a seed that has already been planted in young Augustine. The teachings of his mother Monica had subconsciously worked into the child's reasoning. Mallard states, "The issue was survival, not on earth, but in heaven. Dying children have cried for medicine; this one cried for the sacrament."⁶ No physician or medicine known to Augustine's family was capable of curing his illness. God was the obvious choice to them (and the only choice left), but once the adversity they were facing left them God's help was no longer needed at that point in time. Once the suffering was gone so too was Augustine's desire for God's salvation. It is not uncommon for Christians (both devout and non-practicing) to act in the same manner as Augustine. Granted the situation is not always concerning death; i.e. deadlines, money troubles, etc. There is comfort in knowing that you can lay your worries and burdens before Him and the individual may do so until their suffering is no longer present.

⁵ Saint Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, ed. Jack K. Ryan (New York: Image Books, 1960), pp. 53-54.

⁶ William Mallard, *Language and Love: Introducing Augustine's Religious Thought Through the Confessions Story* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), pp. 20.

Regardless, is it not worse that Augustine denied Christ in favor of not being held accountable for his sins until after his youth? Augustine does admit to having some decent qualities as a child, which he entirely attributes to God. He blames his childhood sins, which he considers less significant versions of a worldly adult life, but sins nonetheless, to "misdirection" from his gifts and toward the material world.

In his young adulthood Augustine enters what he seems to consider the most wild and sinful part of his life. He wrote, "I dared to run wild in different darksome ways of love. My comeliness wasted away. I stank in your eyes, but I was pleasing to myself and I desired to be pleasing to the eyes of men."⁷ Augustine mistook his lust for the worldly body of a woman for pure love. Later in life he is convinced that sex is only meant for procreation and even then the relationship must be built upon a loving rational partnership. In addition to his sexual escapades, Augustine is also quite concerned with an incident where he and his friends stole pears from an orchard. The stolen fruit served him and his friends no other purpose than for being mischievous. These instances bear a remarkable resemblance to Adam and Eve's fall into sin.

The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, "You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die"". "You will not surely die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it." ... "Then the Lord God said to the

⁷ Saint Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, ed. Jack K. Ryan (New York: Image Books, 1960), pp. 65.

woman, "What is this you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate".⁸

Augustine's sexual encounters are those that are not pure as God intended, but rather out of lust for the worldly bodies. Like Adam and Eve took fruit that did not belong to them (God's fruit), Augustine and his friends took fruit that did not belong to them (a neighbor's fruit). Mallard also notes the similarities of the Garden of Eden story and that of Augustine's pear tree encounter. Taking the image a bit farther Mallard compares the tree to Augustine's soul, "Fruit not of the best, there in the darkness, green, disappointing, fit for pigs, yet highly prized, highly desired by someone."⁹ Mallard is indicating that God has a desire for His creation despite our wretchedness. Augustine realizes this as well, though later in life. The evils and suffering that befall us may or may not be a result of our own production, but through the recognition that we are desired we can begin to seek God who desires us. The Bible lists the sufferings that befall Adam, Eve, and their subsequent offspring as a result of their sin.

To the woman he said, "I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which, I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,' 'Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce you thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the

⁸ Robert G. Hoerber, ed., *Concordia Self-Study Bible: New International Version* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986), Gen. 3:2-6, 3:13.

⁹ William Mallard, *Language and Love: Introducing Augustine's Religious Thought Through the Confessions Story* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), pp. 30.

sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.¹⁰

Augustine's sexual escapades went on unabated, a "hell of lust"¹¹ that he again attributes to a misdirection of the love for God ("I sought for something to love..."¹²). Another kind of love grew within Augustine, a love for theater. Augustine and his classmates were thrown into teachings of philosophy, rhetoric, and theater that contained disastrous morals. All this was done as a means to grow into successful lives. Augustine realizes the misfortune of his education. He ponders, "Why is it that a man likes to grieve over doleful and tragic events which he would not want to happen to himself?"¹³ Augustine was taught that suffering was entertainment and was ignorant to the fact that the same sorts of ailments were befalling him.

Tears and sorrow, therefore, are objects of love. Certainly, every man likes to enjoy himself. But while no man wants to be wretched, does he nevertheless want to be merciful? Now since mercy cannot exist apart from grief, is it for this sole reason that grief is loved?¹⁴

If we have done nothing wrong in our lives there is not need for God to show us mercy. Without sin we are in perfect harmony with God; however the Original Sin committed in the Garden of Eden plagues us and we are not capable of a life without sin. Humankind must be mindful of our sins and grieve them. Once we are mindful of our mistakes we

¹⁰ Robert G. Hoerber, ed., *Concordia Self-Study Bible: New International Version* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986), Gen. 3:16-19.

¹¹ Saint Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, ed. Jack K. Ryan (New York: Image Books, 1960), pp. 77.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 78.

¹⁴ Ibid.

must confess our sins and pray for mercy thus relieving us of our suffering state.

Augustine begins to understand that God has love for our souls much purer than we have for ourselves, because God himself does not suffer from our sorrows.

Augustine's mother does not share the same freedom from suffering as God does. She, a devout Christian, was very much pained, not by her own sins, but by the sins of her son. Monica often lamented for her son's perdition. She suffered not on her own accord, but for fear of the effect Augustine's sins would have on his eternal soul. Mallard points out that though Monica was devout there were some errors to her method of teaching Augustine. Incidents such as the deferment of Augustine's baptism are examples of Monica's misinterpretation of God's desires. Therein lie the sins that cause suffering to a seamlessly righteous person. Augustine tells, "My mother, your faithful servant, wept more for me than mother's weep over their dead children's bodies"¹⁵. Due to Monica's grievous state and dedication to prayer for her son she was granted a vision. In this vision she is standing on a "rule" and is greeted by a stranger. She tells the stranger how distraught she is over her son's deviant behavior and failure to become a good Christian. As Augustine retells the vision the stranger "bade her rest secure, and instructed her that she should attend and see that there she was, there was I also"¹⁶. Monica turns to see that Augustine is standing along with her on the very same "rule". Augustine uses this story to convey that despite all of his wrongdoings, God has a plan for his salvation, and part of His plan is brought forth through Monica, just as the milk from her breast that made him grow strong as an infant.

¹⁵ Saint Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, ed. Jack K. Ryan (New York: Image Books, 1960), pp. 90.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 91.

As a grown man Augustine, still not converted, has finally turned towards God for truth but is still caught up in his sinful ways. Augustine is in pursuit of public status and religious truth (through the false religion of Manicheism). He is rocked by the death of a close friend and is left wallowing in grief. His friend had received baptism before his illness took over and warned Augustine that he must no longer indulge his ignorance.

Augustine says,

Am I able to hearken you, who are truth, and turn my heart's ear to your mouth, that you may tell me why weeping is sweet to those in misery? ... Yet unless we could weep in your ears, no trace of hope would remain for us.¹⁷

Death of a friend or family is something that all humankind encounters at some point in their lives. Our bodies may be wracked with sobbing and heartache. What warrants this physical and emotional reaction? Is it fear for what is to become of our loved one's soul? Is it the reminder of how fragile life is? Our flesh is weak; the physical and emotional pain we encounter is beyond human repair. Augustine is trying to convey that our suffering is only cured in conversation with God. Our hearts must cry out what we are tormented by, like a child who has fallen down must tell its parents where they hurt. This sparks Augustine to investigate the fleeting presence of worldly things and the unending presence of God. He finds that misery is everywhere when there is nothing eternal to depend on. Mallard indicates what he believes is the root of evil. He says, "The pinpointed source of evil is one kind of flaw and one kind only, namely, a flaw or a

¹⁷ Saint Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, ed. Jack K. Ryan (New York: Image Books, 1960), pp. 98-99.

breakdown in a rational, free will.”¹⁸ Free will is a gift of God. The wrongdoings and sins that are a result of our poor decisions can be attributed to the fact that humankind was given free will. Our free will has resulted in the evils of sin, which to Augustine caused suffering. Therefore Augustine’s suffering can related back to the initial gift God gave.

Augustine once again becomes stricken with illness. This time, considering himself a Christian but remaining unbaptized, he gives credit to God and Monica’s prayers for his recovery. Upon his recovery he continues his public oratory with a fresh sense of direction. He and his friends were walking to a speaking engagement when a drunken beggar approached them. This deeply troubled Augustine and he told his friends that what he saw in the drunk was the same thing he saw in all men “the many sufferings arising from our own madness”¹⁹. Just as the drunk reveled in his drunkenness so too did Augustine in the acts of his sin. And as the drunk will have a hangover so too did Augustine have pained feelings of his wrongdoings. Augustine was finally able to see God with his mind instead of his mind’s eye. His lack of humility keeps him from surrendering to the teachings of Christ. He blames the weight of his sins without remorse or confession (especially his sexual habit) from keeping him from the true Christian goal: to know God. Our sins can have the same reaction on us. It can be easier to ignore or justify our sins instead of confessing them. In the end that route is more destructive. The weight of our sins will be too much for us to bear and soon we, like Augustine, will suffer

¹⁸ William Mallard, *Language and Love: Introducing Augustine’s Religious Thought Through the Confessions Story* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), pp. 99.

¹⁹ Saint Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, ed. Jack K. Ryan (New York: Image Books, 1960), pp. 141.

from heartache, distraction, pride, ambition, ingratitude, conceit, deceit, dishonesty, frivolity, lust, and falsity of theology.

Mallard believes that Augustine found resolution in his life through grace and love. It is by his love for God that grace is received. Augustine was not able to conquer all of his sins but he found alleviation in God. He came to the conclusion that it is only by God's grace that we will have salvation. But as for our suffering in this life, we can turn to God with our prayers and praise and His healing powers will be able to calm us and better understand the path he has chosen for us.

Prayer

The prayers of Augustine are spoken as if he were talking to God face to face. He spends the majority of his prayers asking questions to God and proceeds to answer the questions himself. Dr. A. D. R. Polman begins his book *The Word of God According to St. Augustine* by explaining the reason why it is necessary to pray to God. He states,

Even those devoted can never be led to the contemplation of the intelligible world by reason alone, since their souls have become so blinded by the darkness of error and by the pollution of their bodies that they have forgotten the world. Before the Fall, God spoke directly to man's soul but this privilege has been forfeited.²⁰

At one point communication with God was easy and we were able to determine exactly what God wanted for us. Our free will has destroyed the convenience of such a communication and we must now rely on the reverence of our prayer. The basis for Augustine's prayers are to give thanks for what God has given him, in reverence of His loving works, and praise for His mercy. In one of Augustine's prayers he shows that prayer not only is defined by suffering but the lack of prayer can lead to more suffering,

²⁰ A.D.R. Polman, *The Word of God According to St. Augustine*, trans. A.J. Pomerans (Grand Rapids, MI: 1961), pp. 18.

he says, "You command me to love you, and grow angry and threaten me with mighty woes unless I do."²¹ This is reminiscent of what I mentioned in my earlier section on suffering. Christians are obligated to remain in conversation with God in good times as well as in times of suffering. God wants our attention at all times, not only when it is when we are in need.

Augustine's viewed the teachings of this world as vain. It deeply troubled him that he was constantly seduced by and delighted in these vanities. Augustine contributes his sin not to his lack of will but to the weakness of his flesh. He prays,

Who is the man who will reflect on his weakness, and yet dare to credit his chastity and innocence to his own powers, so that he loves you less, as if he had little need for that mercy by which you forgive sins to those who turn to you²²

It is not by our own powers that we can be redeemed. To a non-believer this would not be a problem because they would be under the impression that they dictated their own future. Augustine realizes that it is by God's grace alone that we will be saved. "For it is by grace that you have been saved, through faith and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God."²³ It is by Augustine's confessions through prayer that he is able to let God know of his weakness and willingness to remedy his sins. It is by God's gifts that Augustine exists and that he exists is a gift from God in itself. God is all-powerful and all knowing but requires the admission of our sins. The prayer of Augustine is not only

²¹ Saint Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, ed. Jack K. Ryan (New York: Image Books, 1960), pp. 45.

²² Ibid., pp. 74.

²³ Robert G. Hoerber, ed., *Concordia Self-Study Bible: New International Version* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986), Eph. 2:8.

finely constructed words but also from what is in his heart. "Behold my heart's ears are turned to you, O Lord: open them and say to my soul: I am your salvation"²⁴ Dr. Polman stresses the value of heartfelt prayer. He knows that Augustine's spiritual advancement and ultimate salvation depend on it. He says,

The world with its symbols and education awakens us and counsels us to turn inwards, not in order to make us feel sinful and force us to throw ourselves penitently upon God's mercy, but rather for the sake of immortality and the majesty of the intellect and the number by which alone man can advance to the contemplation of the truth and wisdom of the eternal Word, and hence to salvation.²⁵

Augustine is persistent in seeking God's mercy and knows that it is not attainable by his own works. Through faith and pious prayer Augustine feels that the sins that caused him to suffer will be forgiven because of God's mercy.

But you, O Lord, abide forever, and you will not be angry with us forever, for you have mercy on earth and ashes, and it has been pleasing in your sight to reform my deformities. By inner goods you aroused me, so that I did not rest until you stood plain before my inner sight. By the secret hand of your Physician (Jesus) my swelling wound subsided, and day-by-day my mind's afflicted and darkened eyes grew sounder under the healing salve of sorrow.²⁶

²⁴ Saint Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, ed. Jack K. Ryan (New York: Image Books, 1960), pp. 46.

²⁵ A.D.R. Polman, *The Word of God According to St. Augustine*, trans. A.J. Pomerans (Grand Rapids, MI: 1961), pp. 20.

²⁶ Saint Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, ed. Jack K. Ryan (New York: Image Books, 1960), pp. 168.

Chapter 2: St. Julian of Norwich

Suffering

The sufferings of St. Julian of Norwich are documented in the book *The Revelation of Divine Love*. This is the only information we have on her life. She received sixteen visions while near death in the anchorage of the church of St. Julian in Norwich. These showings were meant for all but were given to Julian as a mediator of the divine love of God. She comments,

And therefore, I beg you all for God's sake, and advise you for your own profit, stop looking at the wretch to whom this revelation was shown. Intently, wisely and meekly, look at God, Who because of His courteous love and unending goodness wills to show it to all of us in general, for our comfort.²⁷

We, however, are going to look at the "wretch" and how these showings affected her.

We can only guess as to how Julian suffered before these showings. As an anchoress of the parish she lived in a small cell and relied on passerby's alms and food and clothing donations. Julian's goal was to love God better; she never ceased at trying to reach this goal. She suffered physically while receiving the visions and suffered mentally and emotionally upon contemplation of what she had seen. Julian's life was centered on God and spent in prayer.

²⁷ Saint Julian of Norwich, *The Revelation of Divine Love*, trans. M.L. del Mastro (Liguori: Triumph Books, 1994), pp. 16.

The visions Julian received were a result of three requests she asked of God. The first is that she wanted to enter into the spirit of Christ's passion. She wished she could have been with Mary Magdalene and the other lovers of Christ at the time of Christ's Passion. She states, "I might have seen with my own eyes the passion our Lord suffered for me, and I could have suffered with Him, as the others who loved Him."²⁸ It was Julian's desire that she could be an eyewitness to the love that God had for her and the rest of humanity. She did not want to move through this life as an idle pawn in God's ultimate plan. Julian wanted to know exactly what it meant for Christ to sacrifice himself for humanity. The second of her requests was to have God inflict a sickness upon her that would bring her to the brink of death but not take her from this life. Julian had no will to die; truly she wanted to live out her days in efforts of trying to love God more. She wanted pain, terror, temptation, the last rites of the church, and for everyone to believe that she would truly die. She says,

I asked all this so that by it I might be purged, by God's mercy, and afterward live more for the glory of God, because of that sickness. I also hoped it would assist me in my death, for I desired to be soon with my God and Maker.²⁹

Julian hoped that the temptation and pain of death would cleanse her of any doubt or tentativeness towards God. She also understood that she could not join God in His kingdom until it was His choosing. Julian's third request was the petition that she felt most adamant about. "Unlike the first two petitions, which I had made with a condition, I

²⁸ Saint Julian of Norwich, *The Revelation of Divine Love.*, trans. M.L. del Mastro (Liguori: Triumph Books, 1994), pp. 62.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 62-63.

asked this third gift very strongly and without any condition."³⁰ She asked that God would grant her three "wounds" in her life; the wound of true contrition, the wound of natural compassion, and the wound of full-hearted longing for God. It is obvious that Julian is not content with herself as a Christian. She is a poster child for all Christians who desire to improve themselves. It may appear as if she is challenging God, however, that is not the case. She is not questioning His existence, mercy, or love, but merely trying to achieve her goal of knowing God better. The surprising thing about Julian is that she is actively seeking suffering. She may have considered herself to be suffering in her life before the visions and most likely continued to suffer afterwards, this we do not know. It is clear that she considers the only way she can improve her Christian life is to suffer more and to suffer the extremes both physically and mentally.

Julian's wishes were granted after she had put all but the third petition from her mind. She suffered a sickness in her body that stay with her for three days and nights. On the fourth night she received the rites of the Church because they feared that she would not live to see the morning. She survived the night and spent three more days in ailment. The fourth day after the rites brought Julian terrible pains and she lost all feeling from her middle down. Her curate was sent for and he told her to fix her eyes on a crucifix he was holding. She explained that everything else went black except for the cross and she was relieved of all of her pain. Here began her first vision. Julian saw Christ being crowned with the crown of thorns. She witnesses the blood coming from his head. The Virgin Mary was also present which convinced Julian of Christ's mother's superiority to all humankind. Julian described the vision as, "vivid and lifelike, hideous and dreadful, yet

³⁰ Saint Julian of Norwich, *The Revelation of Divine Love.*, trans. M.L. del Mastro (Liguori: Triumph Books, 1994), pp. 63.

sweet and lovely.”³¹ It is difficult for Julian to witness the suffering that has fallen upon her savior and at the same time she is glad to have the greatest gift of God before her. She felt the hurt that I child would feel for the death of a parent. This is the most comfortable vision she will have. All other visions are rooted in this showing.

The second showing was the discoloration of the face of Christ. Blood pours over his face and dries leaving his natural flesh stained. Julian describes, “It was a symbol and an image of our foul deeds, which our fair, bright, blessed Lord bore for our sins,”³² Julian, much like Augustine, comes to the realization that life for us is sin and suffering; that our flesh is weak and we are not capable of preventing our sinful nature. She says, “man fell so deeply and so wretchedly by sin, there was no other help to restore man but through Him who made man.”³³ Julian and Augustine also share the belief that humankind will only be redeemed by God’s grace. She is pleased to know that though what she is witnessing is troubling to her eye that it is God’s will that she should endure what she sees. God would not have shown her if he did not think it to be good. Julian contemplates,

This vision was a lesson to my understanding that the continual seeking of the soul for God pleases Him greatly. For the soul may do no more than seek, suffer and trust, and this disposition is wrought in the soul that has it by the Holy Spirit³⁴

“Seek” and “trust” sound like positive attributes to the soul. “Suffer” is a word that carries a negative connotation. God as our creator is in control of all the entities that

³¹ Saint Julian of Norwich, *The Revelation of Divine Love.*, trans. M.L. del Mastro (Liguori: Triumph Books, 1994), pp.72.

³² Ibid., pp.77.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 78.

compose us, both physically and metaphysically, including the soul. God, who loves his creation, would not include a negative aspect to His composition. He wants our souls as much as our souls want Him. Seeking God pleases Him because we can grow towards knowing Him better. Trusting God makes us comfortable in relying on Him. By suffering we better understand God's loving compassion and healing nature. William Inge talks about the role of trusting God in his book *Studies on English Mystics*, he says,

The attitude of a mystical writer in presence of the evil that is in the world is an important test how far we may regard Him as a trustworthy guide. For of all the charges that have been brought against the mystics, perhaps none is more possible to justify than the accusation that they have an inadequate sense of the havoc wrought by sin.³⁵

The third vision is of all that God has created. Julian sees that all He has made is unchanging and good. God has complete control over all that happens in His creation. Julian comments, "I also saw for a fact that nothing is done by chance or accident, but everything comes to pass in the foreseeing wisdom of God."³⁶ That is to say that all of our sufferings are also a part of God's wisdom. God knows of our pains, they are an invitation to be in conversation with Him. God will not present us with a challenge that we are not capable of facing; He only hopes that we will not try to face it alone. Inge goes on to talk about the role that suffering and sin play in the life of a growing Christian. He states,

Julian shares the essential optimistic conviction, which may also found in St. Augustine, that every stumbling-block may by God's grace be turned

³⁵ William Ralph Inge, *Studies of English Mystics*, St. Margaret's Lectures, 1905 (1906, Reprint, Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1969), pp. 63-64.

³⁶ Saint Julian of Norwich, *The Revelation of Divine Love*, trans. M.L. del Mastro (Liguori: Triumph Books, 1994), pp. 79.

into a stepping-stone, so that our sins, in being conquered, may bring us nearer to God.³⁷

This is Julian's ultimate goal. She, as seen in the earlier chapter on St. Augustine and in the later chapter on Thomas Merton, is shown that failure to escape sin can and should be looked upon in a positive light and used to pursue God.

The fourth showing is the physical abuse that Christ endured and the vast amounts of blood that flowed from his body as a result of his abuse. Much like the first vision Julian is disturbed yet calmed to bear witness to the beating of Christ. Julian says, "it pleases Him when we accept in simple, homely fashion His blessed blood to cleanse ourselves from sin."³⁸ To see the hot blood of Christ pouring from his gaping wounds would indeed be troubling. Julian lets us know that it is because of Christ's suffering that we are able to live our lives with minor sufferings.

The fifth showing is the victory of Christ's passion over the devil's malice. It has relatively little to do with Julian's sufferings but shows that because of God's sacrifice it is we who are freed and the devil that suffers. It is a transfer of suffering. Our potential woes are relieved and cast upon the devil. The sixth showing is of God giving full honor to his faithful and loving servants. Julian considers the honor given to her,

For it seemed to me that all the pain and the painful labor that could be suffered by all living men could not deserve this thanks full of honor that one man, who has freely served God, shall have.³⁹

³⁷ William Ralph Inge, *Studies of English Mystics*, St. Margaret's Lectures, 1905 (1906, Reprint, Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1969), pp. 65.

³⁸ Saint Julian of Norwich, *The Revelation of Divine Love*., trans. M.L. del Mastro (Liguori: Triumph Books, 1994), pp. 81.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 84.

Julian knows that though we suffer Christ has taken away the magnitude as to what we are capable of suffering.

The seventh showing gives us the best understanding on how Julian defines her own suffering and how she feels God wants us to react in the face of suffering. This vision has Julian alternating between feelings of well-being and woe.

I was transformed and left to myself in depression, weary of my life and irked with myself, so that I kept the patience to go on living only with difficulty. There was no comfort and no ease for me, except faith, hope, and charity, and these I had in reality, though I had very little feeling of them.⁴⁰

It is difficult for Julian to see her worth in this life. She has been witness to the glories of God and now is thrown back into her idle life. She looks at what she has accomplished in her lifetime and realizes that all she has done, all she has sacrificed is miniscule in the reflection of God's works. This perturbs her, feeling like she should be capable of more but surrendering to the fact that ultimately we must submit to the works of our creator. Julian has faith in what God has shown her and the hope that she will one day again be in the presence of God. His good graces and charity will not forsake humanity. She is weary and irked because it is hard to trust in what cannot be seen. Julian knows why she is given these polar opposite emotional surges.

This vision was showed to me to teach my understanding that it is profitable for some souls to experience these alterations of mood – sometimes to be comforted and sometimes to fail and to be left to themselves. God wills that we know that He keeps us ever equally safe, in woe as in well-being.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Saint Julian of Norwich, *The Revelation of Divine Love*, trans. M.L. del Mastro (Liguori: Triumph Books, 1994), pp. 85.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 86.

As aforementioned, nothing escapes the wisdom of God. He knows of our good times and our bad times. She states that God, fully aware of our conditions, will not forget us. It is our duty to ask for His presence in well-being and in woe. Julian also sees that though our feelings may vary from one end of the spectrum to the other they are all rooted in God's love.

Sometimes He allows us to suffer misery, but both well-being and woe express the same love. For it is God's will that we hold ourselves in His comfort with all our might, for bliss is everlasting, while pain is passing and shall be reduced to nothingness for those who shall be saved. Therefore, it is not God's will that we follow the feelings of pain, sorrowing and mourning on their account, but that we immediately pass beyond them and hold ourselves in the endless delight that is God.⁴²

The suffering that befalls us is not a condemnation from God but a mere reminder that we have fallen from his comfort. He wants us to remain in His presence with all of our ability, to praise Him and love Him.

The eighth showing encompassed the last pains of Christ and his impending death. The pain felt by Christ is matched in Julian's body. She watches as his body begins to sag on the cross, his flesh drying out, his wounds growing deeper. She experiences two kinds of thirsts; one bodily to remedy her weak flesh and one spiritual to know God. Julian says,

This showing of Christ's sufferings filled me full of pain. I knew well that he had suffered only once, but that He willed to show His suffering to me, and to fill me with the experience of it, as I had previously desired. During all the time I was experiencing Christ's pain, I felt no pain except

⁴² Saint Julian of Norwich, *The Revelation of Divine Love*, trans. M.L. del Mastro (Liguori: Triumph Books, 1994), pp. 86.

His." ... "I thought. Is any pain in hell like this? And I was answered in my reason; hell has another pain, for despair is there. But of all the pains that lead to salvation, the greatest is to see your love suffer. How could any pain be greater to me than to see Him, who is all my life, all my bliss and my joy, suffer? Here I felt truthfully that I loved Christ Himself so much more than myself that there was no pain that could be suffered like the sorrow I had to see Him in pain.⁴³

The pains Julian experiences are like none any other human has suffered. We can have sympathy and imagine the torment Christ suffered but we were neither witness to the occasion nor felt what Christ was feeling as Julian did. The closest thing to this prolonged death any of us have experienced would be to sit by the side of a loved one's deathbed. Imagine the inner torment that eats at you not knowing how you can alleviate their pain. God knows this pain. It was his son that was crucified on the cross. There has never been a suffering so great yet so necessary for our salvation. Julian's love for God and Christ is so great that she feels more pain in this instance than her own bodily death would bring.

The ninth through the twelfth showings are joyful for Julian to witness. They speak of the glories of heaven and Christ's heart cut in two for pouring out love to all of humanity. Christ speaks to Julian and tells her that if it were necessary for him to suffer more for her and all of humanity he would. Christ asks Julian if she would like to see his mother. Julian is shown the progression of Mary from the meek and simple to the glorious Saint whom Christ reveres over all humankind. Julian is also granted a vision of the all-sovereign God.

⁴³ Saint Julian of Norwich, *The Revelation of Divine Love*, trans. M.L. del Mastro (Liguori: Triumph Books, 1994), pp. 89.

The thirteenth showing is given to Julian in hopes that she will acknowledge all that God has provided humanity. God also wants her realize that we only know sin from the suffering it brings us. That is why God allows for sin. It keeps us within a prayer's reach of Him. We are not alone in our sin and suffering. God is with us.

The fourteenth showing is about how God is the foundation of prayer. I will talk more about this showing on the following section on prayer.

The fifteenth vision is about how we will be the recipients of God's sudden salvation. We will delight in the glories of heaven with Jesus as our prize. Julian says,

For frequently I looked at the woe that is here, and the well-being and blessedness that being is there. And if there had been no pain in this life except the absence of our Lord, it seemed to me sometimes that that was more than I could bear.⁴⁴

Julian, having seen glorious visions, sees nothing but suffering in her present life.

Despite all that she says, even the absence of God's presence is so painful that life in this world is not worth living. Julian now requires the presence of God and Christ in her life to help her continue to go on living until she can be with them in heaven. She states,

Therefore, though we are in so much pain, woe and discomfort that is seems to us we can think of absolutely nothing except the misery we are in or that we feel, as soon as we can, we pass lightly over it and count it as nothing. And why? Because God will is to be known. For if we know Him and love Him and reverently stand in awe of Him, we shall have patience and peace and dwell in great rest, and all that He does will be a great delight to us. This our Lord showed in these words: Why, then, should it distress you to suffer a while, since it is My will and for My glory?⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Saint Julian of Norwich, *The Revelation of Divine Love*, trans. M.L. del Mastro (Liguori: Triumph Books, 1994), pp. 175.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 178.

In Julian's vision God admits that it is His intention that we should suffer. God wants to show us His compassion and His love. He cannot do that if we have no need for Him. God's will puts us in a position where we need to be saved. In order to be saved we must seek out God, trust in Him, and worship Him; all of these through prayer.

Julian's final showing was of the blessed Trinity. Her vision solidifies that God will conquer evil and bring humanity to salvation. After Julian's initial fifteen visions she doubts what she has just seen. She realizes that she is a wretch and should not need visual confirmation for the glories God revealed to her. Her final showing came in a dream, which included temptations by the devil. Julian was given the strength to overcome these impending temptations. Her visions are finalized with a glimpse as to God sees our condition. She says,

I have the meaning of three of our Lord's ways of looking. The first is the expression of suffering, as He showed it while He was with us in this life, dying. And though this sight is mournful and full of sorrow, yet it is glad and merry, because He is God.⁴⁶

Julian's visions were a step in her ultimate goal of knowing God better. In her opinion she was able to gain much needed knowledge about how God views us, wills for us, and explanations for ways in which He operates. The showings serve as a blueprint for the remainder of Julian's life. As this book is the only insight we have into her life we can only guess how she spent the remainder of her life after surviving her near death

⁴⁶ Saint Julian of Norwich, *The Revelation of Divine Love.*, trans. M.L. del Mastro (Liguori: Triumph Books, 1994), pp. 187.

experience. We do know that the showings provided her with rejuvenation for her spiritual life, much of which would be spent in prayer.

Prayer

There is no documentation of any of Julian's prayers. It is believed that while she was living in the anchorage at the church of St. Julian that she was under the rule of Saint Benedict. The guidelines provided by the rule Saint Benedict along with the direction Julian was given in her fourteenth vision give us a fairly accurate insight as to what her prayer consisted of.

The Rule of Saint Benedict says this about reverence in prayer,

Whenever we want to ask some favor of a powerful man, we do it humbly and respectfully, for fear of presumption. How much more important, then, to lay our petitions before the Lord God of all things with the utmost humility and sincere devotion. We must know that God regards our purity of heart and tears of compunction, not our many words. Prayer should therefore be short and pure, unless perhaps it is prolonged under the inspiration of divine grace. In community, however, prayer should always be brief; and when the superior gives the signal, all should rise together.⁴⁷

We know that Julian lived in a small cell off of the church so the community prayer would not apply to her. Like Augustine her prayer would have consisted of reverence and humility while speaking from the heart. Also like Augustine her prayer is given with the recognition that it is not by her words or deeds but by God's grace that she shall receive salvation. This is how Julian recounts her method of prayer.

⁴⁷ Saint Benedict, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, ed. Timothy Fry, O.S.B. (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), pp. 29.

And at that same time our custom of praying was brought to my mind, how, for lack of understanding and experiencing love, we use many means [intercessors, reasons for God to grant our prayers]. And then I truly saw that it is more to the honor of God and more real pleasure to Him to have us pray, full of faith, to Him in Himself, of His goodness, and cleave to Him by His grace, with real understanding, made steadfast by love, than if we used all the means the heart can think of. For if we use all these means it is still too little and not full honor to God. But His goodness encompasses all of them, and in it nothing at all is lacking.⁴⁸

Julian shows that to honor God is the greatest way we can pray. Nothing is excluded from our prayers because God can hear our hearts as well. If you pray for something that you truly do not believe, God will know. Julian also states that we need to have faith that God will grant what we are asking. We must also understand that they will be answered at a time chosen by God.

Julian knows that prayer is an important facet to her connection with God. She knows that He is all-knowing and all-powerful, but she also knows that she must make and active effort towards this connecting relationship.

As truly as there is in God a property of compassion and pity, so truly is there in Him a property of thirst and longing. By virtue of this longing in Christ, we have to long for Him in response. Without this response, no soul comes to heaven.⁴⁹

We are to tell God the joys and sorrows of our heart. We cannot be the recipients of His grace otherwise. We must call out in prayer our desire to know Him, even if we are unsure of whether or not God is listening or will react. Julian knows what it is like to have an uncertainty of prayer. She says,

⁴⁸ Saint Julian of Norwich, *The Revelation of Divine Love*, trans. M.L. del Mastro (Liguori: Triumph Books, 1994), pp. 68-69.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 107.

But still many times our trust is not full, because we are not sure that God hears us as we think He does, both because of our unworthiness and because we feel absolutely nothing, for we are frequently as barren and dry after our prayers as we were before them. And this folly in our feelings is the cause of our weakness. I have felt this way myself.⁵⁰

Again we must be reminded that God answers prayers when He sees fit. Julian was fortunate to be able to have visions that confirmed questions about God, yet she too does not know if she is praying correctly or if her prayers are pleasing in God's eyes. Our prayer should not be selfish but God alone dictates what is and is not acceptable. Julian gives direction on how to pray, "We should pray in such a way that our will is turned toward the will of our Lord, rejoicing. That's what He intends when He says, "I make you will it".⁵¹ God Himself told Julian that He is all that she is. He is all that we are. Everything comes from God, our wants, desires, sufferings, and prayers. They are all dictated by God's will and he wills us to will.

Julian was fortunate to receive vision and verbal instruction from God as to how she should live her life. In these showings He allowed Julian to experience sufferings equal to those of Christ, understand the feelings God has for his creation, learn what God requires of us, and was taught how she should pray. Even with this knowledge she is not capable of redeeming herself. She learned, just as Augustine did, that it is only by God's grace through our faith that we will be saved. She says,

Prayer makes the soul one with God. For though the soul, restored by grace, is always like God in nature and substance, it is often unlike Him in condition, because of sin on man's part. Then prayer is a witness that the

⁵⁰ Saint Julian of Norwich, *The Revelation of Divine Love*., trans. M.L. del Mastro (Liguori: Triumph Books, 1994), pp. 122.

⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 124.

soul wills as God wills. It comforts the conscience and fits a man for
grace.⁵²

⁵² Saint Julian of Norwich, *The Revelation of Divine Love*., trans. M.L. del Mastro
(Liguori: Triumph Books, 1994), pp. 126.

Chapter 3: Thomas Merton

Suffering

The suffering that Thomas Merton encounters deals largely with his relationship with God. Initially Merton had only a vague understanding of the role God played in his existence and life. After he had come to the realization of the importance of God in his life his curiosity switched to attempting to understand his existence in God's ultimate plan. Merton goes on to grasp a very deep understanding of faith within Catholicism and from there continues to ask important questions of Christianity and the transcendence of God's grace among the rest of the world's religions. Lawrence Cunningham, author of *Thomas Merton and the Monastic Vision*, describes Merton's life with words such as, "solitude, obscurity, and emptiness."⁵³

Much like the previous contemplatives I have discussed Merton's reflection of self prior to his present understanding is not held in high regard. The son of two nomadic artists Merton was raised in an atypical family life. His parents survived by means less than the standard of common living. Merton was moved around the world and lived in various countries thus keeping him from identifying to a certain nationality or lifestyle. The effect of such a lifestyle led to him having an independent mindset even before engaging in the solitude of the monastery at Gethsemane. In his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton identifies the root of his misunderstanding of his place in life, in essence his suffering. He states, "I was the prisoner of my own violence and my

⁵³ Lawrence S. Cunningham, *Thomas Merton & The Monastic Vision*, The Library of Religious Biography, ed. Mark A. Noll, Nathan O. Hatch, and Allen C. Guelzo (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), pp. 35.

own selfishness.”⁵⁴ Through much of his life Merton was content to go with the flow of his parent’s decisions, during his youth through his formative years he was obedient to authority. Cunningham points out that much like Augustine Merton too is torn between separate worlds. He obeys his parents lifestyles and teachings but has a desire to experience the things that have been excluded from his life. As a child through his young adulthood it was his nature to engage himself in things that pleased him and rarely contemplated the matters of life outside his experience. Merton’s sufferings came to him as naturally as anyone else but he did not know how to cope with them until he found relief in God.

The first suffering of Merton’s recollection came early in his youth. His mother had grown ill and he was not allowed to see her in her failing condition. One day a letter came from the hospital addressed to him, it was from his mother. In the letter she explained that she was dying of stomach cancer and that she would never see him again. This is a tremendous concept for a child to comprehend. Merton poured over the letter trying to extract some understanding. Nothing of this earth could explain as to why he should be forever separated from his mother. Soon after he received the letter his mother passed. Merton reflects,

A tremendous weight of sadness and depression settled on me. It was not the grief of a child, with pangs and sorrow and many tears. It had something of the heavy perplexity and gloom of adult grief, and was therefore all the more of a burden because it was, to that extent, unnatural. I suppose one reason for this was that I had more or less had to arrive at the truth by induction.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company Publishers, 1948), pp. 3.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 16.

Merton was a child thrust into comprehending the loss of a loved one with little more comfort from a letter from his soon to be dead mother. He questions why such a thing must happen instead of selfishly thinking of his own feelings.

Merton spends the next decade of his life continually moving around. He exchanges between living with his father and with relatives and friends. He spends much of these years both in and out of school, resulting in a stunted education. The education Merton received at this time was from the various places he lived and the simple pleasures he encountered those communities and nature. It was eventually decided that education would be important to his future and he was enrolled in schools in England. While in school he received word that his father had fallen ill and family and doctors were not sure of the problem and even less certain that he would survive. It eventually was determined that his father had a tumor on his brain. Medical knowledge of that time did not know how to remedy such an affliction. After many months of suffering his father passed away. Merton recalls, "The sorrow of his great helplessness suddenly fell upon me like a mountain. I was crushed by it."⁵⁶ Once again the death of a family member rocks Merton. By the age of seventeen he has suffered the loss of both of his parents. He mentions how it never occurred to him to pray for either one of them. Merton has questions that are unanswered and remain unanswered until he is received into the Catholic Church.

As a student Merton delved deep into whatever books he could get his hands on. He read classics, philosophy, poetry, and fiction. Reading was his pastime and his focus

⁵⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company Publishers, 1948), pp. 91.

because he envisioned he would eventually become a writer. As well as reading Merton had a fancy for travel, most likely due to his constant scenery change as a child. It was on a trip to Rome where Merton became intrigued with the mosaics of churches. This interest sparked his curiosity in the man whom men called Christ. On this very same trip Merton was overcome by what seemed to be the presence of his father. Merton himself does not even attempt to explain the occasion, but he recalls quite clearly how the moment affected him.

The whole thing passed in a flash, but in that flash, instantly, I was overwhelmed with a sudden and profound insight into the misery and corruption of my soul, and I was pierced deeply with a light that made me realize something of the condition I was in, and I was filled with the horror at what I saw, and my whole being rose up in revolt against what was within me, and my soul desired escape and liberation and freedom from all this with an intensity and an urgency unlike anything I had ever known before.⁵⁷

It is here that Merton first recognizes his dissatisfaction for his own lifestyle. He drinks, smokes, lusts after women and he relies falsely on the notions he gets from the literature he reads. These are all similar traits that had plagued Augustine before his conversion. It is at this point that Merton realizes that he must look beyond his books, his teachings, and even himself for the answers he is looking for. He begins to see the actions of his life in a whole new light.

What could I make of so much suffering? There was no way for me, or for anyone else in the family, to get anything out of it. It was a raw wound for which there was no adequate relief. You had to take it like an animal. We were in the condition of most of the world, the condition of men without faith in the presence of war, disease, pain, starvation, suffering, plague, bombardment, death. You just had to take it, like a dumb animal.

⁵⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company Publishers, 1948), pp. 124.

Try to avoid it if you could. But you must eventually reach the point where you can't avoid it any more. Take it. Try to stupefy yourself, if you like, so that it won't hurt so much. But you will always have to take some of it. And it will all devour you in the end. Indeed, the truth that many people never understand, until it is too late, is that the more you try to avoid suffering, the more you suffer, because smaller and more insignificant things begin to torture you, in proportion to your fear of being hurt. The one who does most to avoid suffering is, in the end, the one who suffers most: and his suffering comes to him from things so little and trivial that one can say that it is no longer objective at all. It is his own existence, his own being, that is at once the subject and the source of his pain, and his very existence and consciousness is his greatest torture.⁵⁸

Merton begins to understand that you cannot avoid your sorrows. If you do such a thing they will come back to haunt you with multiplied force. Instead of turning our back from the ills that befall us we must accept what pains are inflicted and cope with them. Our afflictions can be physical, mental, and spiritual. Merton sees that we must have faith that all will be well. With this faith our sufferings can be reconciled.

Merton's studies brought him to Columbia University where he encountered several people with an identical zeal for life. These friends and he would exchange their views on religion and recommend different books to each other. During this time Merton also began to attend church. The architecture that was reminiscent of the cathedrals and monasteries he remembered from his travels abroad in his youth drew him in. Through all these means Merton began contemplating Christianity, more specifically Catholicism. The books he read made him thirst for the grace of God. Then one day Merton was struck with an urge to go to Mass. He cancelled his usual plans of visiting the girl he was interested in and getting drunk. The experience changed him and from the moment he

⁵⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company Publishers, 1948), pp. 91-92.

walked out the church doors his eyes were opened in a new way. It was not long before he walked to the church and told the priest he wanted to become Catholic.

Merton was given the proper texts to study in preparation for his entrance into the Church. Speaking about his baptism he says,

The essential thing was to begin the climb. Baptism was that beginning, and a most generous one, on the part of God. For, although I was baptized conditionally, I hope that His mercy swallowed up all the guilt and temporal punishments of my twenty-three black years of sin in the waters of the font, and allowed me a new start. But my human nature, my weakness, and the cast of my evil habits still remained to be fought and overcome.⁵⁹

Merton realizes that though he has made an important decision in his life he must continue to improve his condition. The old sin remains behind waiting to tempt him. Merton knows that it is by God's grace that he will be able to suppress the evils of his past.

Merton, now a Catholic, is troubled when the joy of his baptism ceases to be a novelty anymore. He still attends Mass and prays regularly but there are new concerns on his mind other than his own salvation. A war was raging over seas and there was the possibility that America would soon be joining in the efforts to combat the Nazis. The situations being what they were Merton felt a calling to devote more time to the good in his life. He felt called to join a monastery or become a priest.

Merton made his decision known to a few people. One of his friends suggested that he take a trip to a monastery he had been to. It was a Trappist monastery in Kentucky. Merton went to this monastery on an Easter retreat. The effect it had on him

⁵⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company Publishers, 1948), pp. 245-246.

was as profound as his first time attending Mass. He decided that he wanted to become a member of the Trappists of Gethsemane and he was accepted. The time he spent within the monastery taught him to love God more, worship Him with all his might, and to pray in a way that pleases God.

Prayer

Prayer is very important to Merton, as it is to all Christians. He did not know how to pray, nor did he pray, until right before his baptism into the Christian faith. As a monk at Gethsemane he has learned to harness the true aspects of prayer the way God wills us to pray. Merton knows that it is the power of prayer that is responsible for his being worthy of God's salvation.

But in the economy of God's love, it is through the prayers of other men that these graces are given. It was through the prayers of someone who love God that I was, one day, to be delivered out of that hell where I was already confined without knowing it.⁶⁰

At Gethsemane Merton fashioned his life around prayer. As a monk he learned to engage himself in a deeper form of prayer which entailed celebration of the liturgy and meditation on the scriptures. Merton spent the majority of his time in a hermitage on the grounds of the monastery. Cunningham talks about the power the words Merton spoke had, the words he attained through meditation and prayer. He states,

My conviction is that because Merton not only believed but existentially struggled with experiencing and articulating the foundations of belief and the conversion of consciousness in a life set apart from the world, he was able to express some powerfully authentic words that could speak to

⁶⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company Publishers, 1948), pp. 110.

others in the world who also sought some sense of the transcendent in their own lives as a source of sustenance for authentic living.⁶¹

Like Julian of Norwich Merton's personal revelations became the teachings to the general Christian population. His reflection on his sufferings allowed others to hone in on their similar sufferings and pray about them. Meditation and prayer became one for him. He says,

Monastic prayer, especially meditation and contemplative prayer, is not so much a way to find God as a way of resting in him whom we have found, who loves us, who is near to us, who comes to us to draw us to himself.⁶²

Prayer is not just a temporary connection we have with God. His intention is that we remain prayerful at all times. Victor Kramer tells what he has gathered from observing Merton's prayer.

It is fundamental for man to be alone in his nothingness before God. Merton reminds us through these solitary meditations that if man is to cultivate a spiritual life at all, then the only way for him to do so is to crucify his own life.⁶³

Merton finds that his suffering is deferred while he is in prayer, and when you are in constant prayer suffering is almost absent. Merton's prayer comes from his heart as well as his mind. He thinks and feels what he prays about, it is the heart of monastic life.

Merton believes that you must have confidence in your prayer and humility is necessary.

Merton recognizes the association between his prayer and suffering.

⁶¹ Lawrence S. Cunningham, *Thomas Merton & The Monastic Vision*, The Library of Religious Biography, ed. Mark A. Noll, Nathan O. Hatch, and Allen C. Guelzo (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), pp. 197.

⁶² Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (Garden City: Image Books, 1971), pp. 29.

⁶³ Victor A. Kramer, *Thomas Merton*, Twayne's United States Author Series, ed. Warren French, no. 462 (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984), pp. 68.

Sometimes prayer, meditation, and contemplation are “death” – a kind of descent into our own nothingness, a recognition of helplessness, frustration, infidelity, confusion, ignorance.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (Garden City: Image Books, 1971), pp. 34.

Conclusion

The three contemplatives discussed all shone through with similar qualities. They all wanted to know God. They asked for sickness, they asked for humility, they asked for His mercy and His love. From the moment they became Christians they never stopped seeking God. They all admitted to the weakness of their flesh. They all except that Christ died for them in order that they might be saved. And they all came to realize that it is by the grace of God that they will be saved. Two questions remain to be answered. 1) Were their prayers beneficial to them? And 2) Did their prayer help them to cope with their suffering and bring them closer to God?

Their prayers were beneficial. Prayer is what pleases God. They could talk to God because God listens. They were required to praise God for His works and for their salvation. There was no false pretences for them. God takes our prayers seriously because we are His love, His creation. It is a parent/child relationship as we are told in Matthew 6:9-13 in the Bible and he tells us that our prayers will be answered in John 15:7. Richard McBrien lists the types of prayers and their functions in God's eyes.

Prayer may be differentiated by reason of its purpose. Thus, there is the prayer of adoration, whose immediate end is the praise and glory of God; the prayer of thanksgiving, which gives gratitude to God for blessings received; the prayer of contrition, which expresses sorrow for sin; and the prayer of intercession, or petition, which asks God for blessings upon oneself or others.⁶⁵

These contemplatives used all of these types of prayer. St. Julian blessed the Lord for her visions that led to a better understanding of God's love and mercy and eventual

⁶⁵ Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1994), pp. 1065.

victory over all evil. St. Augustine grieved heavily for his sins committed and pled with God to forgive him and show him mercy. Merton believes he was prayed into God's loving arms and as a monk at Gethsemane prayed for others.

St. Augustine, St. Julian, and Thomas Merton all overcame the plagues of their life. Augustine and Merton, whose lives could have been mirrors, suffered through many years of misdirection and question. They sorted through philosophy and held deep discussion among friends in order to find an answer. The answer found them. Their prayers to God led God to provide them with great gifts. St. Julian's pursuit pleased God and He granted her wish, He killed her body and resurrected her soul, that she might live on to continue to love her creator. The cycle of their sufferings and progress in knowing God continued through their lives but the sorrows were miniscule compared to the glories because with each suffering came prayer, and with each prayer came a closeness to God and with every moment with God came the reassurance of their salvation by means of His grace.

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