

Image & Likeness: A reflection from the writing of Thomas Merton

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As a reflection, I suppose I ought to "reflect" what is going on in me as a result of reading this piece. I am lifted up and excited about what life is about - what Life is about rather. I started a while back using the convention of capitalizing Life when I refer to it as it is supposed to be, as the Life of God in us or our Life in Him and from Him. I am encouraged about that Life tonight.

The culmination of my thoughts on this writing, which I will give first, is that it is the very center of what we need to know in order to live this Life we have been given by God. What is this whole "Christian thing" about anyway? If you know how to think, read that Image & Likeness chapter in *The New Man* and you'll have the basic idea - *recreationis*.

I called it in my notes, the re-Adamization of mankind. We have been and are being drawn back into our original relationship with the Father. This is amazing. I'll go on from here and draw from particular quotes in the selection, commenting on them.

"It was not because they praised Him that He looked at them: they praised Him because they were seen by Him."

This statement is huge to me. It speaks to our need to *do something* in order to get God's attention, so that He will then look at us and be impressed. This desire and the resulting lifestyle are deadly. They put us in a situation which has no good end for us. We can't do something big enough for Him to "see" or good enough to impress Him. This is the performance-based life that we have inherited from our spiritual forefathers. Let us reject it and move forward.

"By simply being, they would be able to say: 'God knows us. God looks at us. He loves us and He had blessed us.' Their being was their obedience to His option."

I was very excited by this sentence until I read later that it seems he is referring to only animals here. Well, crap. But I don't think so. I think there is a measure of this which is true, must be true of us as well. From our original state, it must have been like this for us - no trying or striving, none of that. We only lived, and lived with the Life that He gave us. Since this is what we're moving back toward, it would seem that the more striving and motion we attach to our spiritual lives even now, the more we keep ourselves away from the original state. Something to think about anyway.

"The life of Adam, that is to say the 'breath' which was to give actuality and existence and movement to the whole person of man, had mysteriously proceeded from the intimate depths of God's own life... He was created as a 'son' of God because his life shared something of the reality of God's own breath or Spirit... Adam's very existence was to be a kind of 'inspiration.'... Adam, then, was meant from the very first to live and breathe in unison with God... in Paradise ecstasy is normal."

This group of observations state, for me, the very core of what our life is about. It not only speaks of one person, Adam, but of mankind in general, it's origin and intention, our intended state of being. The very existence of men sprang from the depths of God's own Life essence. It was merely like He was drawing a picture to look at of something beautiful. It was more like He was, in a way, cloning Himself - sharing His Life in reality.

He mentions also in this paragraph the idea of *natural vs. supernatural* gifts or parts of Adam's nature. I'm not sure this is the most helpful thing, unless you then go on, which he does a bit later referring to some of the Fathers, to explain that his original nature WAS supernature, and that there really should be no such distinction. Perhaps it is much like the distinction we place on "sacred" vs. "secular" today. Although there really is no distinction in ontological reality, we see it because of our separation from ourselves. We are broken and not fully integrated within ourselves and therefore do not see or perceive properly. So, to Adam, nature is supernature. There is no difference. Simply to live for him was our highest view of ecstatic mystical contemplation - that which we seek and never feel is attainable. Walking around, everyday Adam was who we rarely dare to dream we can ever be.

This all brings me back to a notion put forth by Jewish mystic Martin Buber when he proposed the nature of Adam's "sin" in Genesis to be that of Adam wanting to do good instead of him wanting to disobey God. This is a fairly radical idea, but it connects deeply with me. Adam listened to the serpent who told him that in order to know good and evil, and subsequently to do good, he needed to eat of the fruit. What was the big deal - bigger than simply breaking a command? It was that Adam was already ultimately and intrinsically good. He shared the very nature of God! BUT, he was, as another statement on our reading says, perfectly unconcerned with himself. He did not need to know if he was good or bad, he simply was good and was so purely so that seeing it wasn't necessary.

So, he heard this word saying that he needed to do something in order to be seen by God as doing and being good, and listened to it, and acted on it. We've been living that way ever since. We are cursed with the idea that we have to be constantly seeing ourselves doing good and measuring it. I suppose we believe that God measures with the same stick as we do. We balk at the idea of being "unconcerned" with ourselves. How can this be? Don't we have to watch ourselves at all time and make sure we're doing the right thing?

"They were given to him to be his super-nature, for man, the child of God, was created to be in the highest sense a superman. He was to live, in fact, as a god."

This thought is not unfamiliar to me and I immediately went into logic when hearing it and wrote the following in the margins: *"Children of a thing are of the same nature and kind as the thing itself. This is not blasphemy for it does not usurp the created order, it affirms it."*

"Everywhere he looked, Adam was beset by light, and wonder, and understanding... This, in the plan of God, was to have been our own condition."

And this is what our whole life should be aimed at - allowing God to restore this condition in us, in our siblings,

and in the whole world. I contend this is more a passive than an active thing, but of course it is both - the two not being mutually exclusive. Simply because we are being active and intentional doesn't mean to say that we are shutting out the passive and the contemplative - they are meant to act as one integrated whole.

He begins to speak about "image" and how to understand it, using the analogy of a blurry photograph. I found that very helpful - our lives outside God as a blurry photograph - moving into focus as we come into union with Him, so that then, "likeness" also takes hold and Lives.

*"Here however it is a question not only of a **notional identification** but of a **union of the whole soul and the whole person with God**. This is the end for which we were created in God's image."*

These are two ways that Christianity looks at itself: as a "religion" in which we identify ourselves with a creator by assenting to beliefs and obeying commands or as a reconstructive life in which we are being more and more metaphysically unified with the source of our existence, thus becoming, holistically, who and what He created us to be. To believe or to Live - which one? I choose Living - at least living my way into Living.

I resonate with his observation about the distinction of Spirit (pneuma), Soul (psyche), and Body (sarx), even Mind (nous). All manner of Platonic accusations come flying when things like this are said. I'll only say that all distinctions of this kind aren't necessarily Platonistic or Gnostic. We see them in Scripture, and we must at least consider that they are real in some way. They are, in the very least, a good way for us to talk about and come to an understanding of how we function in relation to God.

"But that summit (the pneuma - spirit) has been transformed. Though remaining essentially the same, it has acquired an entirely new and different modality by the fact that the Spirit of God is present within it. The pneuma is then no only man's spirit alone, but man's spirit united with the Spirit of God... deified or transfigured spirit of man... The actions of this pneuma are strictly our own, and yet at the same time they belong to God."

There it is, the capstone, the reality which makes one "a Christian." Not ultimately creeds or doctrines or behaviour, etc. Ultimate reality - the union of our spirit's with the Spirit of God so that we become real human persons again. We are again "one spirit with Him." (1 Cor. 6:17)

"We find out who we really are. And having made the discovery we are ready for the love and service of others."

Actualization, once again, flows from Realization. Our mind is reformed around the real knowledge of who we are in God, who God is in us, we are transformed, and as this happens, we can Love with the eternal Love of God, which will also then be our Love.