

Reflections on *The New Man*, Image and Likeness

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In this chapter Merton poses a crucial question, “Who can comprehend or explain the mystery of what it means to awaken to one’s own reality as an existential consequence of the fact that we are loved by Reality Itself?” (p. 54) It is through understanding ourselves as the image and likeness of God that we begin to understand this mystery.

Man is a part of creation. But is there something that separates us from all other created beings? Some would say that there isn’t. But I believe, for many of them, this is a reaction to Man’s unfortunate abuse of creation that has resulted from his ignorance or defiance against his place in the created order.

Merton begins this chapter by discussing the relationship between God and his creation. Creation praises God simply by existing. He states, “It was not because they praised Him that He looked at them: they praised Him because they were seen by Him.” (p. 51) And later, “By simply being, they would be able to say: ‘God knows us. God looks at us. He loves us and He has blessed us.’ Their being was their obedience to His option.” (p. 52)

But he points out that God breathed into Adam. This “breath” would give actuality, existence, and movement (p. 52), a kind of “inspiration” (p. 53). Adam would be an “inspired” being, able to see as God sees, love as God loves, and be moved by the Spirit of God (p. 53). Man’s deep union with God would place him in a unique position in creation. As an inspired being, Man was given rule over the rest of earth, (Gen. 1:26).

But beyond the seen world, man has a place in the unseen world. Psalm 8 describes man in a unique position in this world, as well. Being made “a little lower than the heavenly beings” (v. 5) man was the “least glorious” as Merton states (p. 57). However, Merton is quick to suggest that it is possible that this low state also makes the spirit of man the most cherished and favored by the love of God. The Psalmist’s declaration of man’s spiritual position is made in his question to God, “Who is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?” (v. 8). He continues by affirming, “You...crowned him with glory and honor. You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet: all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the sea.”

In Job’s complaint to God, we see this same understanding of God’s unique attention he gives to man.

What is man that you make so much of him, that you give him so much attention, that you examine him every morning and test him every moment? Will you never look away from me, or let me alone even for an instant?

Unlike any other of God's creation, whether in the seen, physical world, or the unseen spiritual world, man has a unique position. Unlike any other creation, man has a foot in both worlds. Man has God's attention. As Merton puts it, he is the "ontological center of creation" (p. 57).

As I contemplated this assertion, I quickly became aware of the awesome responsibility that has been given to man. I was reminded of *The Return of the King*. Denethor served as a steward over Gondor, possessing the authority to rule. However, he was not the King. He ruled while waiting for the King's return. He was charged with the responsibility to rule according to the nature & will of the King, not his own. As the ruler he had freedom, but this freedom was to be in relationship to his King.

In this story, we first meet Denethor in the final days of his stewardship. What is discovered is a misuse of his power. He had ruled according to his own nature, and his own will. The kingdom had fallen from its original glory. He is now living in the madness and corruption of his own power, refusing to acknowledge the true King upon his return.

What a picture of man in his current state. We have misused our power and abused our resources. As Merton states, "the world is...exploited for the glory of man, not for the glory of God. Man's power becomes an end in itself. Things are not merely used, they are wasted, destroyed. Men are no longer workers and 'creators' but tools of production, instruments for profits" (p. 60).

It is because man has misunderstood his relationship to God, possessing the divine image, man has been a poor steward of the world he has been given to rule. Merton points us to two interpretations of this divine image. One asserts that Man resembles God as a worker, ruler, creator, and father (p. 58-59). The other sees man's divine image in his contemplative union with God. Man is a thinker, seer, and prophet (p. 60). St. Augustine points to a self-realization (*memoria*) where we find not only ourselves, but also the light by which we see ourselves as we really are. This vision of ourselves broadens out into love beyond ourselves and to God. (p. 60-61).

It seems to me that both of these interpretations are correct. Two sides of the same coin? In our inward journey, we find the life and light of God, the *apex mentis* or the "spark" of the soul. Out of this, love wells up in us and out of us into our actions.

The inward journey can be a dangerous one, though. Outside of the context of seeking the image and likeness of God in us, one does not find the real self. Merton claims that we must understand both the image and likeness. He asserts the image is found in the soul's structure, while the likeness of God is effected in the soul in a spiritual experience with him; St. Augustine's, *memoria*. (p. 61) "The *resemblance of God* will be perfect when the vision of God is perfect." (Augustine, *De Trinitate*, XIV C.15 n. 23) Therefore, this is more than knowledge of God, or knowledge of self, as we understand it. It only comes from a deep union with God.

The Fathers have made similar distinctions between the image and the likeness of God. Image is in our nature, while likeness is imparted by grace. The *imago creationis* is the image of God

that was in Adam. The *imago recreationis* comes into being in those baptized and sanctified by the Spirit. The image of God is also described as the seat, or throne, of God's presence in the soul. This throne can remain empty.

Here's the rub. Often our attempts to be like God, to be holy, or to be a good Christian fall short. We recognize that we are created in His image. As Christians, this has been taught to us as a fundamental truth. However, we must also allow the likeness of God, to be worked into us, through us, and out of us by the grace of God. It is much more than the Platonic awakening to spirituality that would distinguish spirit from matter. Far more than spirits living in a material world, we are one integrated being: spirit, soul, and body. Our stewardship of resources, our relationships with others, our lives all come from finding ourselves in God and in community.

Man does not fully know himself so long as he is isolated in his own individual self-hood. His identity comes to light only when it fully confronts the "other".... The Spirit of God, penetrating and enlightening our own spirit from within ourselves, teaches us the ways of a freedom by which alone we enter into vital spiritual contact with these around us. In this contact we become aware of our own autonomy, our own identification. We find out who we really are. And having made the discovery we are ready for the love and service of others.