

Catherine

Issue 15 • Summer 2008

A Newsletter to Promote the Cause for Canonization of Servant of God Catherine Doherty



Catherine and Thomas Merton

■ From the Postulator's Desk

As postulator for Catherine's cause, my main task is to gather material for the Church's discernment regarding her heroic living of the Gospel. This is what being declared "Venerable" actually means: the person has lived a life of heroic virtue.

One aspect of Catherine's life of Gospel intensity concerns how she inspired others to love the Lord. Such influence is another indication of the love of God present in, and working through, her.

It is my conviction that she had such an influence on Thomas Merton. Betty Schneider, who was in Harlem with Merton, told me in a conversation, that it was remarkable that Merton was so vastly influenced by her. As one of the outstanding Christians of the 20th century, and probably still the most famous Catholic monk in the world, this power to affect others in their

1950, she says, "You have made me famous in a strange fashion." (All of Catherine's letters quoted here are from our MH Archives.) It is significant, concerning Catherine's impact on Merton, that she figured so prominently in his journey in 1941 to the Trappists.

Do I need to relate in this news-



Photograph of Catherine taken by Merton at a restaurant in 1941

"I owe much to Catherine"

~ Thomas Merton, *Secular Journal*, xiv ~

Christian lives is another testimony to her holiness. Only great souls can affect great souls.

For many in my generation, we first heard of Catherine in Merton's autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain (SSM)*' published in 1948. In a letter to Merton, Feb. 6,

letter, for the younger generation, who Thomas Merton was? Perhaps. I'll simply say he was a Trappist monk who wrote prolifically and has influenced millions of people. Younger folk may be inspired by this newsletter to read some of his books. I suggest you begin with

SSM. It is one of the most providential and inspiring books of the 20th century. I know, because several months after I read it, I found myself in a Trappist monastery!

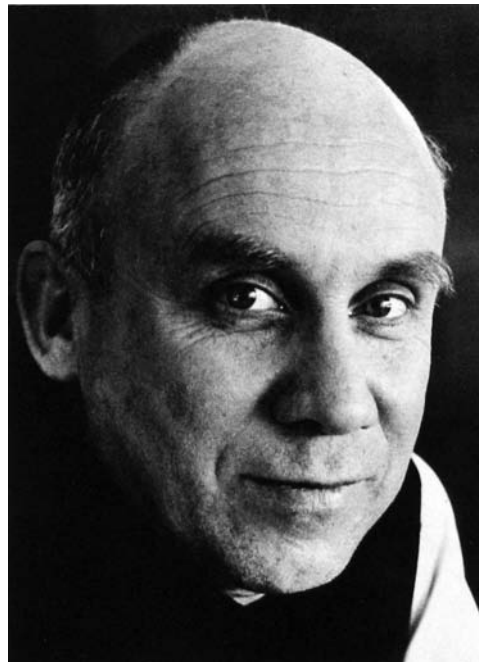
The theme I've chosen to focus upon in this newsletter is very specific but rather elusive: *What was Catherine's influence on Thomas Merton?* I say "elusive" because, even though we know a fair amount about their relationship through their writings and letters, still, the mystery remains—at least for me: What exactly did she *mean* to Merton? When Merton left Harlem he gave Catherine his *Cuban Journal*, later published as *The Secular Journal of Thomas Merton (SJ)*. In the Introduction he describes the present state (1959) of Madonna House, and adds some reflections on his relationship with Catherine. Towards the end he writes: "I owe much to Catherine" (xiv). That's my point of interest: What exactly did he *owe* her?

But first, a bit of background to their personal relationship.

Merton first met Catherine when she spoke at St. Bonaventure University in Olean, N.Y., in 1941. He had heard about her work in Friendship House (FH) when he lived in New York City, but he had never met her. On that very evening after hearing her talk, he was inspired to ask if he could come to

Harlem. Catherine said yes. (How many others had said they wanted to come and never did!) He spent “[two] weeks of evenings,” as he put it, at Friendship House in Harlem. He met Catherine again later that same year at St. Bonaventure when she came for another talk.

For the rest of that year he struggled to discern whether or not he had a vocation to FH or to the Trappists. When he finally decided upon the Trappists, she was one of the first persons to whom he wrote of his decision: “I entered the community as a postulant this afternoon. After that it will no doubt be hard, but at least I will know there is nothing keeping me from God any more—I can belong entirely to Him by simply consenting to each trial as it presents itself, and that is enough! It is everything. I only want to belong entirely to Him. I



Photograph by John Howard Griffin used on Merton’s funeral card

will never forget FH in my prayers! And pray for me! And write, sometime! Merry Christmas.” (December 13, 1941, *The Hidden Ground of Love (HGL)*, 12). They would never meet again.

So, what did he owe her?

A Spiritual Mother?

Did he consider her, in that crucial year of 1941, as a sort of “spiritual mother”? In Catherine’s letter to the Abbot upon Merton’s death (1968), she says, “Father Louis [Merton’s religious name], in some strange mysterious way I never quite understood, was in part my spiritual son.” And in a letter to Merton in 1963: “You know, of course, that I love you much in the Lord. For it was He Who brought us together in FH for such a short spell of time. In a strange manner I feel like an older sister or even mother to you. Why? I cannot tell. Maybe it isn’t even that at all—yet there is a bond.”

Was this bond mutual: Did Merton consider Catherine *his* spiritual mother? She was 19 years his senior. Is that old enough to be a spiritual

mother? In reading their correspondence I can’t get any sense that he considered her as a spiritual mother. I searched his letters to her in vain to find anything approaching such a relationship. (Still, could it have been hidden in his heart, but unexpressed?) In his letters he mostly shares his own spiritual and theological insights, but does not ask her opinion—much less guidance—on personal matters.

“An older sister?” as Catherine suggests. Perhaps.

In her letter of February 17, 1958, she expresses her own multifaceted relationship to Merton in this way:

“I have never thought of you as a celebrity. I guess you are a big one at that; but to me, in a manner of speaking, you are a son. And in another sense, a Father. And in a third, a brother. And together we seek our Beloved.”

Agreement on the Christian Life

Throughout the years he often agrees with her reflections, especially when she emphasized love as the most important aspect of any apostolate. And, as he was moving towards solitude and the eremitical life later on in his monastic vocation, he was very enthusiastic when Catherine told him of her introduction of the *poustinia* into North America: “I was deeply moved by the Poustinia project. That is ideal. It is just right. It will be a wonderful contribution. It is the kind of thing that is most needed. And though it is certain we must speak if and when we can, silence is always more important.” (*HGL*, 19-20.)

In a playful manner he considered himself a kind of honorary member of Madonna House. When permission was granted to publish *The Secular Journal*, he wrote: “But

The Little Mandate

Words which Catherine Doherty received from Christ, and which guided her life:

Arise—go! Sell all you possess. Give it directly, personally to the poor. Take up My cross (their cross) and follow Me, going to the poor, being poor, being one with them, one with Me.

Little—be always little! Simple, poor, childlike.

Preach the Gospel with your life—without compromise! Listen to the Spirit. He will lead you.

Do little things exceedingly well for love of Me.

Love, love, love, never counting the cost.

Go into the marketplace and stay with Me. Pray, fast, pray always, fast.

Be hidden. Be a light to your neighbour’s feet. Go without fear into the depth of men’s hearts. I shall be with you.

Pray always. *I will be your rest.*

I am especially glad that it keeps me in your growing spiritual family. I am a member of *Domus Domini*, at least by virtue of a manuscript which works for you in my place.” (HGL, 13) He gave the royalties of the *Journal* to Madonna House. (*Domus Domini*, House of the Lord, for a short time was the canonical name of the men’s section of Madonna House.)

Catherine was often criticized for leaving the “action” in the cities and hiding herself in the Canadian woods. Continuing on in this same letter, he gives, what I have always

“I have never thought of you as a celebrity. I guess you are a big one at that; but to me, in a manner of speaking, you are a son. And in another sense, a Father. And in a third, a brother. And together we seek our Beloved.”

considered ever since I read it, his own affirmation of what Catherine was doing up there in the forests:

“Now, as always, God’s real work remains obscure and humble in the eyes of the world. Now more than ever, we have to be suspicious of results that are achieved by the efficient, over-efficient technological means of which the world is so proud. Christ works always humbly and almost in the dark, but never more than now.

“Nothing is more important than prayer and union with God, no matter where we may be. Christ is the source and the only source of charity and spiritual life. We can do nothing without Him and His Spirit. That is why the Cross will cast its shadow, still, over your life. But then, in that shadow, you will see the Light of Christ, the Light of the Resurrection. He lives in us, and through our poverty He must reign. And I need not tell you how poor

He makes us in order to reign in us. If we knew how poor and desolate we would have to be when we began to follow Him, we would have fallen back.” (*Ibid.*)

Trusting Her Discernment

In 1941 Merton looked to Catherine for discernment about his vocation. Here is an excerpt from his unedited journal, *Run To the Mountain* (RM), Nov. 29, 1941:

“There is no question: I can’t stay at Saint Bonaventure any more; I must go and find Christ where He really is—in real poverty and real sacrifice.

Catherine in a letter to Merton, 1958

“But then, what about Friendship House: it has this one great thing: it is real poverty, it is real sacrifice; it is real love of Christ in the poor. It is holy. The work is holy. The Baroness is a saint. Harlem is full of saints. And in Harlem there is no doubt a possibility even of mar-

tyrdom, in which my sins would all vanish at once and I would be certain of pleasing God, and coming to Him as His child, spotless, clean and holy and a saint!” (464)

Her influence was so powerful that, in 1941, he went through a tremendous inner turmoil, trying to decide if he should join her apostolate in Harlem or go to the Trappists. Harlem was one of the places where he could give everything to God: “After all, there are certain points where the crisis is acute, and there the Christian is called to be—one is the cloister, the other Harlem, any slum.” (RM, 464)

“It is beginning to seem that when the Baroness came and told me again to get out of here and come to Harlem, it was right, it was time for me to go....If the Baroness came back and told me to stay, I’d stay, until somebody who knew as much as she, came along with some other idea.” (RM, Nov. 4, 1941, 451)

Encouragement

What did he owe Catherine in 1941? Encouragement—at a time when he was really adrift and without too much guidance: “In October



Friendship House Storefront in Harlem, where Merton would have entered in 1941

[1941] I was writing long letters, full of questions, to the Baroness, who was still in Canada—and getting letters just as long in return, full of her own vivid and energetic wisdom. It was good for me to get those letters. They were full of strong and definite encouragement.” (SSM, 356.)

She encouraged him in his search for God; but perhaps even more significantly, as far as his gift for the contemporary Church and world was concerned, she encouraged him *to write*.

In a letter to him, October 14, she gave this encouragement, which proved to have prophetic implications: “Go and stand up and tell everybody the tiniest bit of truth God has sent you. You must, for if that grain is to grow in the hidden soil of souls, you have to plant it. To you God has given a little bit of it. But what you plant in another soul, he will water; and how do you know if that will not grow into a mighty tree. Go ahead and tell loudly and clearly, and never mind the laughs that hurt. Keep on!”

And, in that same letter, in response to his concern that he was writing out of pride: “Pride? No, that is strange. I would never have associated pride with you. If writing is your vocation go ahead and write; but always with a prayer in your heart and diffidence in your soul, for a written word is such a potent weapon for evil and good. There cannot be any dialogue between talent of any sort and pride. Real talent is very humble because it knows its origin, and also its terrific burden. For each talent received, one has to render an account; and

such a gift as writing or painting, why, that is 100 talents; and hence will yield a hundred in return.

“Yes, again, you’ve got what it takes. You have the right approach. The shaft of God’s light is striking you straight in the face. For a while you are a little blinded by it, but soon you will learn to see fully in his light. And then, Tom, oh Tom, you will become so very small that your writing will be like fire; and like sparks of the Holy Ghost, lighting little torches everywhere to illuminate our terrific modern darkness. Do pray so very hard now. That is the way to write these fiery, startling words. Communion, Mass, and prayer, and you will get there.”

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Catherine in a letter to Merton, 1941

Meeting a Saint

After having had several years to reflect on Catherine’s influence in 1941, his comments in SSM (1948) contain, perhaps, even more penetrating insights into the impact she had on him. Time can often lend deeper perceptions to past experiences.

At the heart, then, of what I believe was the effect of Catherine upon Merton—what he owed her—was something that happened to others as well: young Tom encountered in Catherine a woman who was really *in love with God*, spoke about God with passion and intimacy as if she really *knew* God, and lived the Gospel in a profoundly incarnational way among the poor. By

her life and teaching she manifested what it was to be—as she often put it—*in love with Jesus Christ*. Many people had their lives permanently and deeply changed by having met her. In short, they had met a saint, whether they knew it or not. Merton knew it.

Stanley Vishnewski was a friend of both Catherine and Dorothy Day in the early years, and had met Merton in Harlem. He wrote a book on the Catholic Worker, *Wings of the Dawn*. In a Chapter on Friendship House he said: “The spiritual zeal of the early FH staff workers was contagious. Many a lukewarm Catholic came there for the social life, and was soon caught up in the Love of God. Tom Merton was one who

found his vocation working with the ‘B.’” (154) It was the zeal exploding from Catherine’s great heart that was the source of this contagion. As

Merton was led to the Trappists, so

too a number of people were led to the religious or the priestly life because of their FH experience.

There is a passage in Merton’s autobiography where he puts into the minds and hearts of two Friars what he surmises they were experiencing about the power of Catherine’s personality. I believe he is here expressing his own more mature understanding of what happened *to him* as a result of his meeting with Catherine. They had gone to pick up Catherine in Buffalo, N.Y.:

“We were in a restaurant having something to eat, and the Baroness was talking about priests, and about the spiritual life and gratitude, and the ten lepers in the Gospel, of whom only one returned to give

thanks to Christ for having cured them. She had made what seemed to me to be certainly a good point. But I suddenly noticed that it had struck the two Friars like a bombshell.

“Then I realized what was going on. She was preaching to them. Her visit to St. Bonaventure’s was to be, for them and the Seminarists and the rest who heard her, a kind of a mission, or a retreat. I had not grasped, before, how much this was part of her work; priests and religious had become, indirectly, almost as important a mission field for her as Harlem. It is a tremendous thing, the economy of the Holy Ghost! When the Spirit of God finds a soul in which He can work, He uses that soul for any number of purposes: opens out before its eyes a hundred new directions, multiplying its works and its opportunities for the apostolate almost beyond belief and certainly far beyond the ordinary strength of a human being.

“Here was this woman who had started out to conduct a more or less obscure work helping the poor in Harlem, now placed in such a position that the work which had barely been begun was drawing to her souls from every part of the country, and giving her a sort of unofficial apostolate among the priesthood, the clergy and the religious Orders.

“What was it that she had to offer them, that they did not already possess? One thing: she was full of the love of God; and prayer and sacrifice and total, uncompromising poverty had filled her soul with something which, it seemed, these two men had often looked

for in vain in the dry and conventional and merely learned retreats that fell to their lot. And I could see that they were drawn to her by the tremendous spiritual vitality of the grace that was in her, a vitality which brought with it a genuine and



Portrait of Merton by Victor Hammer, used with permission

lasting inspiration, because it put their souls in contact with God as a living reality. And that reality, that contact, is something which we all need: and one of the ways in which it has been decreed that we should

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Thomas Merton, from his autobiography

arrive at it, is by hearing one another talk about God. *Fides ex auditu*. And it is no novelty for God to raise up saints who are not priests to preach to those who are priests—witness the Baroness’s namesake, Catherine of Siena.”(357-58)

As I said, I believe Merton here

was expressing the effect of Catherine on him during that trip in 1941.

Peggy Parsons was a volunteer in Harlem when Merton was there. In a personal communication to me, this is how she summed up Catherine’s affect on Merton: “By the grace of the Holy Spirit, Catherine entered into Thomas Merton’s life at just the right moment. She understood where Merton was coming from in his spiritual aspirations. For Merton, as also for Bob Lax, Catherine’s vocation and pursuit of a radical Christian witness to the world, illuminated the way for them. There was no uncertainty in Catherine. She comprehended the world we lived in, and the role of the Christian and of the Church in that world.”

Of course, I can’t call Catherine a saint yet! Postulators can’t do that. But Merton believed that he had met one in Catherine. This is what he owed her. Catherine called saints “walking Gospels.” In 1941 Merton was *reading* about the saints—Theresa of Lisieux, John of the Cross, Francis of Assisi, Teresa of Avila. He was *reading* about them.

It is my opinion that in Catherine de Hueck he met his first one. After finishing Gheon’s book on the Little Flower, he said he was “knocked out by it completely.” (RM, 431). In that spiritually charged and crucial year of 1941, I believe he was knocked out by Catherine!

Testimonies & Favours Received

Prayer for Favours through the intercession of Catherine Doherty

All loving Father, through your beloved Son, Jesus, we have been taught to ask for what we need. And through his spouse, our Mother the Church, we have been instructed to pray for one another, and to ask the intercession of your servants, who have fallen asleep in Christ. Therefore, through the intercession of your servant, Catherine Doherty, we ask...

[here mention your petition.]

We ask this for your honour and glory, and in the name of Jesus Christ, your Son Our Lord. Amen.

Imprimatur: † J. R. Windle,
Bishop of Pembroke, May 1, 1993.
For private use.

Testimony about Catherine by Thomas Merton

In another passage from *SSM* (pp.342-43), where he is reflecting on his first encounter with her in Olean, 1941, I believe he is also expressing Catherine's influence on himself. He, along with the Sisters and clergy at St. Bonaventure's, was "being moved deeply" and "hearing the pure Franciscan ideal, the pure essence of the Franciscan apostolate" which he had once considered as a way to follow Christ:

"The Baroness was born a Russian. She had been a young girl at the time of the October Revolution. She had seen half of her family shot,

she had seen priests fall under the bullets of the Reds, and she had escaped from Russia the way it is done in the movies, but with all the misery and hardship which the movies do not show, and none of the glamour which is their speciality.

"The experiences she had gone through, instead of destroying her faith, intensified and deepened it until the Holy Ghost planted fortitude in the midst of her soul like an unshakable rock. I never saw anyone so calm, so certain, so peaceful in her absolute confidence in God.

"Catherine de Hueck is a person in every way big: and the bigness is not merely physical: it comes from the Holy Ghost dwelling constantly within her, and moving her in all that she does.

"When she was working in that laundry, down somewhere near Fourteenth Street, and sitting on the curbstone eating her lunch with the other girls who worked there, the sense of her own particular vocation dawned upon her. It was the call to an apostolate, not new, but

"The experiences she had gone through, instead of destroying her faith, intensified and deepened it until the Holy Ghost planted fortitude in the midst of her soul like an unshakable rock.."

no distinctive habit. She, and those who joined her, would simply be poor—there was no choice on that score, for they were that already—but they would embrace their poverty, and the life of the proletariat in all its misery and insecurity and dead, drab monotony. They would live and work in the slums, lose themselves, in the huge anonymous mass of the forgotten and the derelict, for the only purpose of living the complete, integral Christian life in that environment—loving those around them, sacrificing themselves for those around them, and spreading the Gospel and the truth of Christ most of all by being saints, by living in union with Him, by being full of His Holy Ghost, His charity.

"As she spoke of these things, in that Hall, and to all these nuns and clerics, she could not help but move them all deeply, because what they were hearing—and it was too patent to be missed—was nothing but the pure Franciscan ideal, the pure essence of the Franciscan apostolate of

~ Thomas Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*

so old that it is as traditional as that of the first Christians: an apostolate of a laywoman in the world, among workers, herself a worker, and poor: an apostolate of personal contacts, of word and above all of example. There was to be nothing special about it, nothing that savored of a religious Order, no special rule,

poverty, without the vows taken by the Friars Minor. And, for the honor of those who heard her, most of them had the sense and the courage to recognize this fact, and to see that she was, in a sense, a much better Franciscan than they were. She was, as a matter of fact, in the Third Order, and that made me feel quite

proud of my own scapular, which was hiding under my shirt: it reminded me that the thing was not altogether without meaning or without possibilities!"

Testimony of Louis Stoeckle

Louis Stoeckle was one of the earliest staff workers of Madonna House, with 24 years of "life with Catherine." He was the first Director General of Men. He lived the Little Mandate as well as anyone ever did. His testimony is very valuable.

"Do I feel that Catherine's life was of heroic nature enough to warrant this opening of a cause?"

"Yes, yes, yes! I do believe that Catherine is enjoying the Beatific Vision, or, as she would have put

it, 'gazing upon the radiant face of Christ.' By publicly placing her in the canon of Saints the Church would indeed, in my estimation, be capturing the times in which we live.

"In my opinion, formal canonization would focus the attention of the Universal Church upon a life that proclaimed to all (by word and example) that Christ is truly Risen and dwells among us, and that this dwelling is revealed to us in the fabric of our everyday lives, in the 'sacrament of the moment'. It is a message our Church needs to reinforce in the end of this century, when the focus has shifted to a lack of reverence for the ordinary, resulting in a universal disdain of Christ's pres-

ence in the Market Places of our humanity. In this instance, Catherine's recognition by the Church would highlight the hidden life of Christ lived out, even dramatically, in the latter part of this millennium by a married woman, a lay apostle, passionately in love with God.

"I am very much aware of Catherine's faults and weaknesses; but, as the poet said (to paraphrase) 'many a speck is seen on the snow.' Her foibles, faults and weaknesses, in my humble opinion, should not hinder or unduly slow down the introduction of her cause. There is an urgency to move ahead. I wish you God-speed." July 21, 1991

Pope Benedict: Truth Must Guide Causes of Saints



Address to Members of Vatican Congregation, December 17, 2007

"Through beatifications and canonizations," Benedict XVI said, "the Church gives thanks to God for the gift of those of his children who have responded generously to divine grace, honoring them and invoking them as intercessors. The Church presents these shining ex-

amples for the imitation of all the faithful, called through baptism to sanctity, which is the aim and goal of every state of life."

At the same time, he said, "ecclesial communities come to realize the need, even in our own time, of witnesses capable of incarnating the perennial truth of the Gospel in the real circumstances of life, making it an instrument of salvation for the entire world."

The Holy Father added: "Saints, if correctly presented in their spiritual dynamism and historical reality, contribute to making the word of the Lord and the mission of the Church more believable and attractive. Contact with them opens the

way to true spiritual resurrection, lasting conversion and the flowering of new saints.

"All those who work in the causes of saints are called to place themselves at the exclusive service of truth. For this reason, during the diocesan inquiry, witness statements and documentary evidence should be gathered both when favorable and when contrary to the sanctity or martyrdom of the Servants of God.

"Hence, the postulators' role is fundamental, both in the diocesan and apostolic stages of the process; their actions must be above criticism, inspired by rectitude and marked by absolute probity."

"Saints, if correctly presented in their spiritual dynamism and historical reality, contribute to making the word of the Lord and the mission of the Church more believable and attractive. Contact with them opens the way to true spiritual resurrection, lasting conversion and the flowering of new saints."

~ Pope Benedict XVI

■ Catherine in print and media

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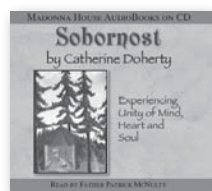
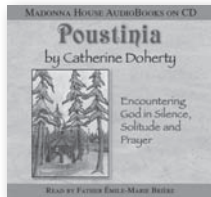
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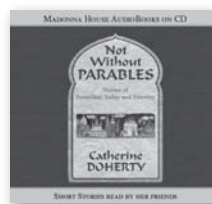
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