

THOMAS MERTON

Contemplative & Writer, 1915-1968

Feast Day: December 10

Collect: Gracious God, you called your monk Thomas Merton to proclaim your justice out of silence, and moved him in his contemplative writings to perceive and value Christ at work in the faiths of others: Keep us, like him, steadfast in the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, forever and ever. Amen.



Facts:

- May be the most influential 20th century Catholic writer
- Almost single-handedly re-awoke knowledge and wide-spread practice of the Christian contemplative tradition
- In 1938 at Columbia University in New York, underwent a dramatic conversion experience to Roman Catholicism
- Entered the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance (Trappists) at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky in 1941. Cistercians keep a vow of silence. Toward the end of his life, Merton sought further seclusion by become an eremitic monk (a hermit)
- Beginning with his best-selling auto-biography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, wrote a number of influential works on prayer, ethics, and the contemplative and spiritual life, as well as current topics of race relations, economic injustice, war, violence, and the nuclear arms race
- Became interested in the contemplative nature of Eastern religions, particularly Buddhism, and was an early pioneer of modern East-West religious dialogue and cross-fertilization
- Died in Bangkok, Thailand on December 10, 1968, by accidental electrocution from a lamp, while attending a meeting of religious leaders

Spiritual/Theological Teachings & Legacy

- First major theologian to re-frame Paul's "the flesh" and "the spirit" as the "the false self" and "the true self"—influential on an entire generation of spiritual writers
- Discipline and austerity have a valuable role in the spiritual life
- The life of prayer is at the heart of the Christian calling to discipleship
- Christian contemplative prayer and mysticism are critically important ingredients of life in the public square—the political and ethical discourse of our day need the insights gained in prayer from us as Christians
- Insisted that authentic religious experience is that which inspires and demands from us concrete love and service of our neighbor
- Corner of 4th and Walnut experience—ultimate unity and belovedness of humanity

Questions Raised by Life & Work

- What is the role of a modern day prophet? What is the value of prophets in our society today? Are we listening to them? Are we using our own prophetic voice as a community and as individuals?
- What can we find of value and connection in religious traditions other than our own?
- How much time and attention are we committing to the life-blood of our souls, daily prayer?
- How do our prayer experiences shape our daily actions and decisions?

My notes/observations/questions/prayer topics:

THERESE OF LISIEUX

Monastic & Visionary, 1873-1897

Feast Day: (Roman Catholic) 1 October

Collect: (Roman Catholic) O God, who opens your Kingdom to those who are humble and to little ones, lead us to follow trustingly in the Little Way of Saint Thérèse, so that through her life we may see your eternal glory revealed. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.



Facts:

- Born into a devout French Roman Catholic family
- Experienced a call to become a nun at a very young age
- Petitioned up the chain of command and traveled all the way to Rome to beg the pope for permission to enter a convent early, entered a strict and cloistered order at age 15
- Was overjoyed at being a Bride of Christ, but struggled greatly with the everyday challenges of living in community
- Experienced great spiritual deserts and great spiritual ecstasies
- Called herself a “plaything of the child Jesus”
- Was observed by her superiors to be spiritually gifted, and under their instruction, wrote her autobiography, *The Story of a Soul*
- Explained what she called her “Little Way,” that contrary to the usual Pauline expectations of being perfected in virtue by effort over time, Jesus delighted in cherishing us in our weakness and failure
- Died at age 24 of tuberculosis
- Beatified only 28 years after her death, and one of only 4 women named Doctors of the Church. (Teresa of Avila, Hildegard of Bingen and Catherine of Siena are the others; Therese is by far the least educated of the four)

Spiritual/Theological Teachings & Legacy

- Her Little Way of Spiritual Childhood was revolutionary—she called it taking an elevator to Jesus, because she would never be able to climb the stairs of virtue
- Deeply devoted to both the Child Jesus and the Suffering Christ on the cross
- “Jesus’ tenderness is aroused by our helplessness,”—failure and weakness as the way to deeper relationship with Jesus. Rather than disappointing God by our mistakes, they are instead the happy occasion of our being able to rely on God ever more deeply in childlike dependence and trust
- Experienced “mystical marriage” with Christ that is a strand throughout women’s mystical spiritual experience, particularly monastic women—rooted in the Song of Solomon
- Longed to be consumed by the fire of God’s love

Questions Raised by Life & Work

- Why do we believe we need to impress God or prove our virtue to earn God’s approval? How can we move away from that mindset without abandoning all commitment to spiritual growth?
- What does it mean to “enter the Kingdom as a little child” as Jesus says? How do approach that in our spiritual practices and everyday life?
- What is our relationship to our failure and weaknesses? Do we perceive God at work in them?
- What does it mean to trust God? What do we have to give up to grow in trust of God?

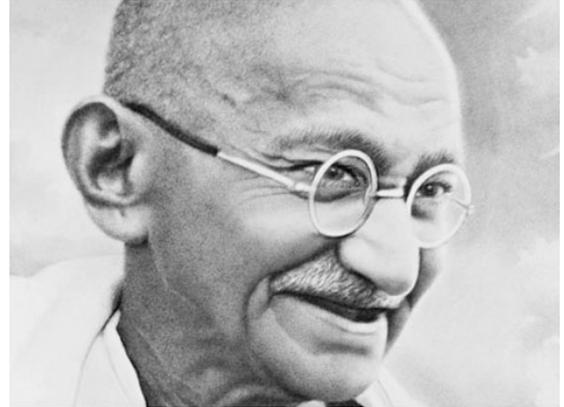
My notes/observations/questions/prayer topics:

MAHATMA GANDHI

Activist & Martyr, 1869-1948

Feast Day: (unofficial) 30 January

Collect: (unofficial: For Those Who Suffer for the Sake of Conscience): O God our Father, whose Son forgave his enemies while he was suffering shame and death: Strengthen those who suffer for the sake of conscience; when they are accused, save them from speaking in hate; when they are rejected, save them from bitterness; when they are imprisoned, save them from despair; and to us your servants, give grace to respect their witness and to discern the truth, that our society may be cleansed and strengthened. This we ask for the sake of Jesus Christ, our merciful and righteous Judge. Amen.



Facts:

- Born Mohandas K. Gandhi, leader of the Indian independence movement against colonial Britain ("Mahatma" is a title)
- Pioneered non-violent resistance and civil disobedience as means of social justice activism, and inspired generations of activists after him
- Educated as a lawyer
- Imprisoned for many years, both in South Africa where he did his first activist work, and later in India
- Was a devoted Hindu, but also had a vision of an independent India that celebrated religious pluralism
- Was a vegetarian and fasted both as a religious practice and as a political tool (hunger strikes)
- Assassinated by a Hindu nationalist on 30 January 1948, shot three times
- Counted Jesus' Sermon on the Mount as an important spiritual influence on him

- Criticized Christian missionaries in India for demanding conversion as the price of aid, while not facilitating real transformation

Spiritual/Theological Teachings & Legacy

- Called his movement *satyagraha*, which means “appeal to, reliance on, or insistence on the Truth,” also later summarized by him as “God is Truth, and Truth is God.”
- Stated his most important battle was overcoming his own demons, fears, and insecurities
- Advocated using “soul-force” as a political weapon against injustice, a sort of moral and spiritual power of truth within the soul to overcome the lack of integrity inherent in oppression
- Aim to transform or purify the oppressor, for ultimate reconciliation and coexistence
- Advocated the endurance of suffering as a means to an end—this is akin to Christ’s transformative suffering
- While commenting on how many Christians had failed to live up to Jesus’ message and teachings, said, “When the hungry are fed and peace comes to our individual and collective life, then Christ is born.”

Questions Raised by Life & Work

- What is the connection between our faith and our call to work for justice? How do we practice non-violent resistance and civil disobedience, if at all? If not, why not?
- Where are our blind spots about our own religion and culture?
- Is it possible to compromise our values in pursuit of a justice goal? (Gandhi received criticism for not condemning the Holocaust, there was suspicion he was trying to curry favor with Indian Muslims by not supporting Jews in Palestine/Israel)
- What does what and how we eat and live have to do with our faith life and political convictions? (Gandhi felt his vegetarianism was key to both)

My notes/observations/questions/prayer topics: