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In Search of a Way: Redefining the Silent Land

The Second Vatican Council, convened in the spirit of *aggiornamento*, or "bringing up to date," assessed and redefined the role of the Catholic Church in the context of a global, modern society—raising fundamental questions regarding many aspects of the Catholic faith.[1] Father Geoffroy de la Tousche reflects on this key event in Catholic history, noting, "the [Second Vatican Council] enabled a revival of her mission in the context of the contemporary world, so as to build bridges with this new world."[2] However, it is human nature to resist change, especially changes to a complex framework of Catholic influence rooted deeply in structures of tradition and power. The directives enumerated in the "Decree of the Religious Life: On the Accommodated Renewal of Religious Life" was particularly challenging for strictly contemplative religious orders such as the Cistercians, whose foundations of "enclosure, silence and solitude"[3] were incompatible with Vatican II's aim to build bridges with the world. Through the lens of selected works by the Cistercian monk and writer, Thomas Merton, whose life in the monastery coincided with the historical event of Vatican II, this essay seeks to evaluate the viability of the contemplative religious order in light of Vatican II's recommendations for religious renewal. Tracing through Merton's experiences, progressing from strict monasticism in

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[1] Christopher Butler, *Theology of Vatican II*. (Maryland: Christian Classics, Inc., 1981), 6.
[2] Marc Cardinal Ouellet, *The Relevance and Future of the Second Vatican Council*. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2013), 38.
[3] Thomas Merton, *The Life of the Vows: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 6*, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (Minnesota: Cistercian Publications, 2012), 218.

his *Life of the Vows*, to an epiphany in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* of the false illusion of the religious life, and finally his recommendations for contemplative religious renewal in *Contemplation in a World of Action*, Merton's life can be viewed as a microcosm not only to study methods of contemplative renewal, but also as a testament to the viability of compromise and redefinition of Catholic tradition in the context of modern society. However, in the larger context of Catholic history, contemplative traditions such as the *Spiritual Exercises* in the Society of Jesus, were relevant both pre and post Vatican II and gives perspective on effective contemplative methods within a religious order. Bridging conflicting Vatican II and Cistercian philosophies in the effort of religious renewal is at the core, a search to redefine the relationship between the monastery and the world and identify the value of contemplation in the modern society.

Thomas Merton, a Cistercian monk at the Trappist Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky, wrote many texts throughout his lifetime concerning his thoughts on the Cistercian religious order. His writings pertaining to the strict religious life of the Trappists are particularly dynamic for study due to the development of Thomas Merton's view of the ordered life as seen in the chronological transformation in his writings "from strict monasticism to emphasis on the spiritual journey as a way to find one's 'authentic self,'"[4] In light of the post-Vatican II religious backdrop of Merton's life, the progression of his view on the monastic life mirrored the crisis that the church was going through as attempts to modernize the Church faced friction with preserving tradition. Merton's early works provide a first-hand glimpse into the Cistercian religious life as it had developed by the mid 20th century, and his later works express his honest reservations and challenges to the structures of contemplative religious societies. Merton's

[4] Peter Tyler, "Thomas Merton." In *Journey to the Heart: Christian Contemplation Through the Centuries*, edited by Kim Nataraja. (New York: Orbis Books, 2011), 398.

development frames the progression of Catholic thought on religious renewal for the contemplative religious order pre and post-Vatican II, as well as provides insight into ways in which contemplation must adapt.

Merton's book *The Life of the Vows* is a collection of Merton's talks as a novice master, given to prepare and instruct young men in the Benedictine vows of obedience, stability, and conversion of manners. Through this text, an understanding of the Cistercian contemplative order in the context in which early Merton experienced can be defined. The defining characteristic of the Order of the Cistercians of the Strict Observance, commonly called Trappists, lies in that "[f]or contemplatives the obligation to enclosure, silence and solitude is even more strict than for other orders."[5] For Cistercians, contemplative silence, "the silence of loving adoration, pure prayer,"[6] is the means by which they can live a life that is "more divine, more truly spiritual, more according to a man's inmost needs…In itself {it is} more perfect."[7] By completely rejecting the political, cultural, and even ecclesiastical structures of the world, which ultimately is the root causes of sin, Cistercians live a radical, separate existence. In this way, Cistercians strive to detach "from the main roots of sin"[8] and imitate Christ most effectively, "putting off the world—renouncing one's old ways; putting on Christ—acquiring new ways."[9] After his conversion to Catholicism as a young man, Thomas Merton found spiritual solace in the quiet, contemplative life of a Cistercian—"putting on Christ" by striving to attain the highest level of spiritual purity, separate from the world.

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[5] Merton 2012, 218.
[6] Ibid., 127.
[7] Ibid., 127.
[8] Ibid., 190.
[9] Ibid., 283.

Within the structure of the Cistercian religious order, Merton thrived for many years, until he came to a realization that he writes about in his *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, which marks the beginning of a Merton who views the contemplative life in a different light. He writes, "In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people that they were mine and I theirs… It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream."[10] Merton writes about this experience as an epiphany, almost as if he had undergone a conversion—a conversion in which he profoundly experiences a love of humankind that he had been denied as a Trappist detached from the world. The figurative wall built up in his heart and the literal walls of the monastery dissolves in the moment he recognizes the illusion, the lie of the "separate holy existence."[11] He realizes that the strict black and white, binary mentality of the religious life that is fundamental to the Order of the Cistercians of the Strict Observance is but a false illusion in which men of the vows are lifted up on a pedestal as spiritual men, a "different species of being, 'pseudoangels.'"[12] This moment in Merton's life fittingly coincided with a dynamic event in Catholic history—the convening of the Second Vatican Council from 1962-1965, which resulted in the papal issue of four constitutions, three declarations, and nine decrees broadly concerning the redefinition of the relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the modern world. With a new perspective on the contemplative life and the talk of *aggiornamento* circulating in the halls of Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome and

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[10] Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966), 156.
[11] Ibid., 156.
[12] Ibid., 156-7.

within the religious societies, Merton recognizes with clarity the unsustainability of the current practices of Cistercian contemplative life in light of the Vatican II's efforts of religious renewal.

Thus Merton's *Contemplation in a World of Action,* published in 1965, is the labor of his search to redefine his contemplative experience as a Cistercian and his attempts to leverage the call for renewal by Vatican II with the ways of the contemplative life. In "Openness and Cloister," Merton defines the struggles that contemplative orders face in regards to renewal. The crux of the problem is that "[contemplatives] must consider how, and to what extent, they can be 'open to the world' without losing their identity as contemplatives."[13] When the key, defining characteristic of the Cistercian response to the call to live like Christ involves "turn[ing] away from the world to God, because the world is opposed to God,"[14] being 'open to the world' is contrary to their founding philosophy. When a contemplative interprets this directive of Vatican II to be 'open to the world', this means to them an "involvement in the affairs of people outside the cloister, identification with them in their desires, problems, struggles, dangers: it means vital concern about a world of total war, genocide, race riots, social injustice, misery, poverty, violence, lust, every kind of disorder."[15] These sins are distinctively the products of the world—the world that contemplatives have left to lead a separate life, unaffiliated with the structures that perpetuate and encourage sin. For the Cistercian religious order, religious renewal attacks the very core of their existence and jeopardizes the relevance of their way of living like Christ—of being Disciples of Christ. Thus, what is the role of the contemplative who has rejected the world in a Catholic society attempting to "build bridges" with the world? How can the contemplative

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[13] Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action.* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1971), 131.
[14] Ibid., 131.
[15] Ibid., 131.

orders define the relevance of their existence in the context of a religious renewal movement that, at face value, contradicts their fundamental beliefs and identity?

With these conflicts in mind, Merton attempts to bridge the world and the monastery in his recommendations for renewal for the contemplative orders in "Openness and Cloister." His motivations are unique because on the one hand, Merton loves the human race and considers that "it is a glorious destiny to be a member of the human race…a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate,"[16] although it is a race that has fallen to sin. But on the other hand, Merton loves the contemplative society in which he finds peace and joy of his spiritual dimension, although he realizes its inherent faults and limitations. Merton loved the world and loved the monastery—two polar institutions he strived to connect through redefining contemplation to be of benefit to all sinners—men of the world and men of the monastery alike. Hence, he emphasizes that a change of perspective on behalf of the contemplative orders is first necessary: "In the light of the Council it is no longer possible to take a completely negative view of the modern world. It is no longer possible, even for contemplatives, to simply shut out the world, to ignore it, to forget it, in order to relish the private joys of contemplative Eros."[17] He calls for the literal and figurative walls of the monastery—the walls that have both kept the world out of the contemplative life, but also the fruits of the contemplative life out of the world—to be shortened. His challenge for the contemplative orders is a "twofold need for 'openness' … Contemplatives need to be more 'open' for their own good and for the renewal of their contemplative life …But also assuming that the contemplative life itself is authentic, others need to share in its advantages."[18] There is something that contemplative societies can give to the

[16] Merton 1971, 157.
[17] Ibid., 135.
[18] Ibid., 137.

Church and the world; Merton reinserts value into the contemplative life by defining it in what way their separate spiritual existence can benefit the men and women of the world. His vision for a mutually beneficial relationship between the cloistered monastery and the world is "for contemplatives to share with others their privilege of silence, worship, and mediation, their ability to listen more deeply and more penetratingly to the Word of God"[19] and for the world to give to the monastery a "saner contact with contemporary reality."[20]

Although the Cistercians faced friction with the Vatican II directives for religious renewal, there were other religious orders whose contemplative traditions were not jeopardized in the light of Vatican II. Within the Jesuit religious order, the backbone of the contemplative tradition is the *Spiritual Exercises*, a valuable method of Jesuit contemplation both pre and post Vatican II. Analyzing the *Spiritual Exercises* as a case study of a contemplative tradition viable throughout a wide range of historical moments gives insights into ways in which Cistercian contemplation can be redefined in the spirit of Vatican II. Composed by St. Ignatius of Loyola from 1522-1524, the *Spiritual Exercises* aims exercitants closer to God though a structured progression of contemplation and prayer. It aims to serve as a tool through which one can align him or herself to the purpose of the Jesuit religious order—to promote the "glory of God and the good of souls."[21] The sustainability of the *Spiritual Exercises* as a contemplative tradition can be traced to three distinctive parallels between the *Spiritual Exercises* and Vatican II documents. Although the *Spiritual Exercises* were written more than 450 years before the Second Vatican council, several facets of Vatican II are woven into the mesh of the *Spiritual Exercises* that have

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[19] Merton 1971, 137-138.
[20] Ibid., 137.
[21] George E. Ganss, S.J., ed., *Ignatius of Loyola: The Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 294-5.

sustained the longevity and relevance of the *Spiritual Exercises* as a fruitful and insightful form of contemplation.

First, the contemplation of the *Spiritual Exercises* is intended for the spiritual deepening of men and women both inside and out of the monastery. Written by Ignatius while he was still a layman and prior to formal theological training, the *Spiritual Exercises* were intended to be of benefit not solely to Jesuits, but to individuals of all walks of the religious life to gain insight and deepening in their own spiritual journey. This inclusion is made explicit in the way that St. Ignatius of Loyola details recommendations for the "exercitants"[22] of special circumstances. For example, he recommends that a "person who is involved in public affairs or pressing occupations but educated or intelligent may take an hour and a half each day to perform the Exercises,"[23] while the Spiritual Exercises "should be adapted to the disposition"[24] of "someone who is uneducated or has a weak constitution."[25] Not only are the benefits of the *Spiritual Exercises* made available to laypeople, but also special care is given to recognize and account for the diverse educational and commitment abilities that a layperson may have. The *Spiritual Exercises'* commitment to the spiritual growth of Christians outside of the monastery mirrors the Vatican II's statement that "[t]his Council exhorts Christians, as citizens of two cities."[26] Christians are dual citizens of the world and citizens of the city of God—a citizenship without borders that is recognized within the Jesuit religious tradition, which respects the integrity of the spiritual life of Christian men and women in society.

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[22] Ibid., 126.
[23] Ibid., 127.
[24] Ibid., 126.
[25] Ibid., 126.
[26] Walter M. Abbott, S.J.,ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966), 242-243.

Second, the *Spiritual Exercises* has its sources firmly rooted in Scripture, mirroring Vatican II's aim " return to the sources of all Christian life."[27] A key component of the Spiritual exercises is the imaginative immersion of oneself into the narrative of the Jesus story in the Gospel texts of the Bible. Hence, the root source of the Christian faith is distilled to the receiver of the Spiritual Exercises through a thorough imaginative meditation on the Christ story, based on scripture that is read by the giver of the Spiritual Exercises. The receiver of the *Spiritual Exercises* is challenged to put him or herself into each stage of Jesus's life—not only to feel the pain Jesus felt and walk the paths Jesus walked, but also to smell, to hear, to taste, to touch, to see the details and the nuances of each Biblical scene. For example, in the third week of the *Spiritual Exercises,* the exercitant is asked to reflect upon the Last Supper by first, "imagining the place…to see in imagination the road from Bethany to Jerusalem, whether it is broad, or narrow, or level…[to] imaging the room of the supper, whether it is large, or small, or arranged in one way of another."[28] Through imagination, the exercitant is put into the story, experiencing it not as an onlooker from above, but within the drama and emotions of each moment. Entering into the Last Supper scene, the exercitant is able to "bring oneself to grief, sorrow, and tears"[29] as he or she "considers[s] what Christ our Lord suffers in his human nature, or desires to suffer, according to the passage being contemplated."[30]

Lastly, Ignatian contemplation inherently celebrates the communal aspects of contemplation and the potential for the fruits of contemplation to be of benefit to the world beyond the monastery or retreat house in which the exercitant takes the *Spiritual Exercises*. Even during the period of the *Spiritual Exercises*, the person receiving the *Spiritual Exercises* is not in

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[27] Butler 1981, 18.
[28] George E. Ganss, S.J., ed. 1991, 167.
[29] Ibid., 167-8.
[30] Ibid., 167-8.

complete solitude, but assigned a mentor and "giver of the exercises," whose experiences and wisdom provides a degree of accountability and guidance to the exercitant. Ignatius of Loyola defines a specific role of the giver of the Exercises who "should encourage and strengthen the exercitant for the future, unmask the deceptive tactics of the enemy of our human nature, and help the retreatant to prepare and dispose himself or herself for the consolation which will come."[31] With the mentorship of the giver of the Exercises, the exercitant is guided in his or her contemplation in the correct direction. Upon reaching the last meditation of the *Exercises*, "Contemplation to Attain Love," the one undertaking the *Exercises* must bridge his or her contemplation within the larger picture of society and "consider how God dwells in creatures; in the elements, giving them existence; in the plants, giving them life; in the animals, giving them sensation; in human beings, giving them intelligence; and finally, how in this way he dwells also in myself, giving me existence, life, sensation, and intelligence."[32] The fruits of contemplation, as defined by the *Spiritual Exercises* is to enrich the existence of all that God has created. Hence, contemplation should manifest itself through action: "Love ought to manifest itself more by deeds than by words."[33] Modern views of the relationship between contemplation and action in the Jesuit tradition closely mirror these words of St. Ignatius. As Andy Otto writes on the Ignatian Spirituality website,"[b]eing a contemplative in action means that your active life feeds your contemplative life and your contemplative life informs your active life."[34] There is a feedback loop in the relationship between contemplation and action that promotes measured action, action that is grounded in contemplation. Infused in the *Spiritual Exercises,* as a whole is

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[31] George E. Ganss, S.J., ed., 1991, 123.
[32] Ibid., 177.
[33] Ibid., 176.
[34] Andy Otto, "Contemplatives in Action," *Ignatian Spirituality*, April 30, 2013, accessed April 26, 2015, http://www.ignatianspirituality.com/16166/contemplatives-in-action/#sthash.3ii35pTk.dpuf.

the celebration of communal experience of God as well as the invitation for all to be enriched by the fruits of the *Spiritual Exercises*.

The *Spiritual Exercises,* which have provided the structure of spiritual growth and maturity in the Jesuit tradition has maintained its integrity in the midst of many waves of religious renewal, still lives and breathes contemplative wisdom today. Through the structure of Jesuit communities, universities, and missions, the method of contemplation of Saint Ignatius of Loyola continues to have a wide range of influence. The *Spiritual Exercises* is remarkable in the ease in which it has been adapted to fit different needs. For example, at Santa Clara University, Professors Denis J. Moberg and Martin Calkins wrote a paper called "Reflection in Business Ethics: Insights from St. Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises,*" which is a testament to the relevance of the Ignatian contemplative tradition to enrich organizations of modern society. Noting that "the structure of the *Spiritual Exercises* has features that are central to the contemporary discourse in business ethics"[35] there are four main areas highlighted in this paper that can inform improved ethics in business: "focus on moral ends, engagement of the emotions and imagination, use of role modeling, and the requirement of a social response."[36] Ignatian contemplation has the potential to even transcend the structures of Christianity from which it originated, and enlighten disciplines such as business ethics with the benefits of Ignatian contemplation.

From its foundations, the contemplation of the *Spiritual Exercises* is written in the spirit of Vatican II, which has directly influenced its longevity as a contemplative tradition. The most important idea the Cistercian contemplative order can gain from the integration of Vatican II philosophies within the *Spiritual Exercises* is the way in which the relationships between silence

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[35] Martin Calkins and Dennis J. Moberg, "Reflection in Business Ethics: Insights from St. Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*," *Journal of Business Ethics* 33: 257-270, 2001. 258.
[36] Calkins and Moberg 2001, 262.

and conversation, action and contemplation, and openness and cloister are defined. The *Spiritual Exercises* are taken away from the distractions of society, in a retreat center, a monastery, or even a quiet space, yet isolation is not practiced in contempt for the world, but in hopes to improve one's presence in the world. The *Spiritual Exercises* are not practices of complete solitude, absolute silence, guarded cloister, and sole contemplation—but of strategic solitude, measured silence, partial cloister, and contemplation to inform action. There are no extremes in the *Spiritual Exercises*—replacing the monastery/world binary found in the Cistercian tradition is love and flexibility in the Jesuit tradition.

In moving forward with a strategic plan for religious renewal, Merton crafts a definition of how contemplation can be best adapted to fit the rhythm of modern society in "Contemplation in a World of Action." He asserts that "[w]e are living through the greatest crisis in the history of man; and this crisis is centered precisely in the country that has made a fetish our of action and has lost (or perhaps never had) the sense of contemplation. Far from being irrelevant, prayer, mediation and contemplation are of the utmost importance in America today."[37] The fruits of the silent land—the silent joys and inner spiritual growth through prayer and mediation—is not solely an activity for the monastery, but for humankind to center themselves in a tradition that has become irrelevant as a result of "modernization." Modernization, with the scientific, technological, and cultural advancements it has brought, also radically changed the rhythm of society to one in which action is fetishized and contemplation disregarded. In contrast with a society of action, "[t]he real purpose of meditation… is the exploration and discovery of new dimensions in freedom, illumination and love, in deepening our awareness of our life in

[37] Merton 1971, 164.

Christ."[38] In this way, the actions can be grounded in contemplation and given more meaning and spiritual direction.

Religious renewal is a difficult task because in some cases, it brings into question the very roots of a person's "search of a way." In search of a way, Cistercians isolate themselves from the chaos, sin, and lust of society and live a silent, cloistered life. In search of a way, Pope John XXIII calls the Second Vatican Council for *aggiornamento*, and to revive the Catholic Church in the context of a society radically different than the society in which the Catholic Church established its roots and traditions. However, when two methods of searching for a way collide, there is a potential for friction, for argument, but also for transformation, compromise, adaptation, and the laying of groundwork for new paths in this great search of a way for humankind to experience the divine. The silent land, the land of reflection and contemplation was put in the crossfires of religious renewal following the Second Vatican Council, and faced the threat of irrelevance in a society that has progressed drastically. However, contemplative life still has an important role and legacy today. As demonstrated by the *Spiritual Exercises* inspired contemplative tradition of the Jesuits, contemplation has the potential to be a viable practice of Christian mysticism and also have positive influences in the secular realm, as shown by modern adaptations of Jesuit contemplative thinking in business ethics. The Cistercian contemplative tradition has the potential for its own unique legacy of contemplation that will rise out of redefining the silent land to one that can exist both inside and out of the monastery—opening the joys and blessings of contemplation to the world.

[38] Merton 1971, 164.