



session one

THE ECOLOGY OF PARADISE

OPENING REFLECTION

PSALM 148:1–5A

Alleluia!

Praise the Lord from the heavens,
praise him in the heights.
Praise him, all his angels,
praise him, all his host.

Praise him, sun and moon,
praise him, shining stars.
Praise him, highest heavens
and the waters above the heavens.
Let them praise the name of the Lord.

INTRODUCTION TO THE TEXTS

Contemplative living calms our souls' inner weather as we attend to what truly matters and "forget our vain cares and enter into our own hearts."

Contemplatives co-create with others a climate for relationships of mutual peace and justice. They unite themselves with those who are creating new ecologies of kindness and interdependence among all beings.

Merton revered nature as a mirror and sacrament of an inner paradise of the heart. Nature was a channel of "heavenliness" that aroused his potential for wholeness

in the midst of his life's complexities. Nature mirrored for Merton the paradise of integrity within himself to be regained by acts of love and service to all beings. He sensed that the sacred place he had always been searching for was as close as his own inner heart if he tilled it with "freedom, spontaneity, and love" and received the "new seeds of contemplation" that "every moment and every event" of his life were planting in his soul (*New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 14).

MERTON'S VOICE

FROM *NO MAN IS AN ISLAND*

All nature is meant to make us think of paradise. Woods, fields, valleys, hills, the rivers and the sea, the clouds traveling across the sky, light and darkness, sun and stars, remind us that the world was first created as a paradise for the first Adam, and that in spite of his sin and ours, it will once again become a paradise when we are all risen from death in the second Adam. Heaven is even now mirrored in created things. All God's creatures invite us to forget our vain cares and enter into our own hearts, which God Himself has made to be His paradise and our own. If we have God dwelling within us, making our souls His paradise, then the world around us can also become for us what it was meant to be for Adam—his paradise. But if we seek paradise outside ourselves, we cannot have paradise in our hearts. If we have no peace within ourselves, we have no peace with what is all around us. Only the man who is free from attachment finds that creatures have become his friends. As long as he is attached to them, they speak to him only of his own desires. Or

they remind him of his sins. When he is selfish, they serve his selfishness. When he is pure, they speak to him of God. (pp. 115–116)

ANOTHER VOICE

TEILHARD DE CHARDIN, *THE DIVINE MILIEU*

We must try everything for Christ; we must hope everything for Christ. *Nihil intentatum* (nothing not tried). That, on the contrary, is the true Christian attitude. To divinize does not mean to destroy, but to sur-create. We shall never know all that the Incarnation still expects of the world's potentialities. We shall never put enough hope in the growing unity of mankind.

Jerusalem, lift up your head. Look at the immense crowds of those who build and those who seek. All over the world, people are toiling—in laboratories, in studios, in deserts, in factories, in the vast social crucible. The ferment that is taking place by their instrumentality in art and science and thought is happening for your sake. Open, then, your arms and your heart, like Christ your Lord, and welcome the waters, the flood and the sap of humanity. Accept it, this sap—for, without its baptism, you will wither, without desire, like a flower out of water; and tend it, since, without your sun, it will disperse itself wildly in sterile roots. (pp. 154–155)

REFLECT AND DIALOGUE

What images, words, or sentences in the readings most resonate with your life's experiences? In what ways do they connect with your life?

Who or what in your life makes you feel as if you are living in paradise now?

What role does the "chorus of living things" have in your life?

To paraphrase a line by American poet Mary Oliver, what do you plan to do with the rest of your one wild and precious life?

CLOSING

Conclude with one of the meditations on pages 54–56 or with a period of quiet reflection.



session two

ENTERING PARADISE: THE PILGRIMAGE TO HUMAN KINDNESS

OPENING REFLECTION

PSALM 96:1–3

O sing a new song to the Lord,
sing to the Lord all the earth.
O sing to the Lord, bless his name.

Proclaim his help day by day,
tell among the nations his glory
and his wonders among all the peoples.

INTRODUCTION TO THE TEXTS

Whether we travel to Jerusalem, Mecca, or Salt Lake City, whether we return to the church where we were married or visit the house where our mothers were born, pilgrimage to places of sacred beginnings is an important component of our lives. We journey to places that represent a “golden time.” For contemplatives, however, the real pilgrimage is not a “return” but a “going forward” to the Eden within our hearts where the “meaning, order, truth, and salvation” implanted in us by God can flourish to full harvest.

Merton considered one of the holiest pilgrimages he could make was his inner journey toward “the stranger as our other self.” Merton’s inner journey toward deeper relationships was catholic and communal