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Thomas Merton: Twenty-five Years After

By THOMAS P. RAUSCH

*How did it
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ON DEC. 10, 1941, three days after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Thomas Merton (born in 1915) entered the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky. Trappist life at that time was extremely rigorous, and Gethsemani was one of the strictest houses in what is officially known as the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance.

In spite of the difficult life, Merton, or Brother Louis as he was now known, thrived at Gethsemani. But he quickly found that the writer he had left behind "in the world" had followed him into the monastery. His first abbot, Dom Frederick Dunne, whose father had been a bookbinder, encouraged Merton to write. He wrote pious lives of Cistercian saints, but also poetry, and before long was working on his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

When this book was published in 1948, shortly before Merton's ordination to the priesthood, it quickly became a best seller. Today, much of it strikes us as narrow, at times even arrogant. It reflects the triumphal style of the pre-Vatican II church. Merton is intolerant of other churches and smug about his own escape from the "world." Here and in some of his other early writings he makes it appear that the monastic life is the only path to holiness.

But Merton's own conversion did not end with his becoming a Catholic or with entering the monastery. As a young monk, he struggled to find the time and solitude for prayer that was hard to come by in a busy and crowded monastery like Gethsemani. For several years he wrestled with the idea of transferring to the Carthusians. His desire for a life of greater solitude never left him and in the last eight years of his life, he spent more and more time in a hermitage he had his novices construct at some distance from the monastery.

But by this time Merton had changed considerably. In an important essay entitled "Is the World a Problem?" written several years before his death in 1968, he parodied the pious image he had drawn of himself in *The Seven Storey Mountain*: "I have myself become a sort of stereotype of the world-denying contemplative—the man who spurned New York,

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spat on Chicago, and tromped on Louisville, heading for the woods with Thoreau in one pocket, John of the Cross in another, and holding the Bible open at the Apocalypse." More importantly, the essay argued that the world was *not* the problem, for the world is not a reality outside of ourselves: "It is a complex of responsibilities and options made out of the loves, the hates, the fears, the joys, the hopes, the greed, the cruelty, the kindness, the faith, the trust, the suspicion of all" (see *Contemplation in a World of Action* [1971], pp. 143-146).

In his marvelously direct language Merton stated simply: "That I should be the contemporary of Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Vietnam and the Watts riots, are things about which I was not first consulted." Our world is a given, a responsibility we cannot avoid: "It is only in assuming full responsibility for our world, for our lives and for ourselves that we can be said to live really for God."

Quite a change for the man who in his early days in the monastery so congratulated himself on his escape from the world. How did it happen that this rather literary contemplative became also a social critic, a prophet who during the 1960's, as the United States struggled with the questions of racial justice, nuclear war, the growing conflict in Vietnam, poured out a flood of articles on all of these issues and became a kind of unofficial chaplain to the peace movement? What changed him so, turned him around?

MERTON HIMSELF points to an experience one day in 1958 when he had gone into town on an errand: "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, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. . . . The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream" (see *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* [1966], p. 140). The experience for Merton was a very real one, though given his skill as a writer, perhaps more dramatic for the telling. But on a deeper level, this new appreciation of the world he had sought to leave behind him represented the fruit of the contemplative life to which he had so completely given himself. It also marked the flowering of a concern for the disadvantaged and the poor that had characterized his life prior to entering the monastery.

In 1949 Merton published what was to remain one of his greatest works, a book with the title *Seeds of Contemplation*. It opens with a beautiful image of the sum total of our experience planting within each of us the seeds for a new and richer life: "Every moment and every event of every man's life on earth plants something in his soul. For just as the wind carries thousands of invisible and visible winged seeds, so the stream of time brings with it germs of spiritual vitality that come to rest imperceptibly in the minds and wills of men."

The seeds of Merton's later social activism were planted early in his life. According to Edward Rice, a class-

mate of Merton's at Columbia University in the 1930's, Merton had taken an unpopular position as early as 1931 when he was at Oakham, an English secondary school. He had defended Gandhi, who was already beginning to challenge the British Empire's hold on India, in an argument with a football captain at the school.

MERTON'S CONCERN for racial justice was already evident when he was teaching at St. Bonaventure University in Olean, N.Y., after his conversion to Catholicism in 1938 and his graduation from Columbia. During that time he met Catherine de Hueck Doherty, "the Baroness." This woman, born into an aristocratic Russian family, had founded a lay Catholic community in Harlem called Friendship House. Merton spent considerable time there in the year before he entered the monastery and even considered joining the community. The experience of working with the poor in Harlem seared into his memory the destructive evil of racism, memories that surfaced powerfully in his autobiography: "Here in this huge, dark, steaming slum, hundreds of thousands of Negroes are herded together like cattle, most of them with nothing to eat and nothing to do. All the senses and imagination and sensibilities and emotions and sorrows and desires and hopes and ideas of a race with vivid feelings and deep emotional reactions are forced in upon themselves, bound



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'I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers.... The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream.'

inward by an iron ring of frustration: the prejudice that hems them in with its four insurmountable walls."

Years later the black activist Eldridge Cleaver, in prison at Folsom, N.M., was given *The Seven Storey Mountain* to read. He was greatly moved by Merton's account of his days in Harlem, even if he could not accept Merton's monastic life, which reminded him too much of his own life in prison. But Merton spoke to him powerfully: "Despite my rejection of Merton's theistic worldview, I could not keep him out of my room. He shouldered his way through the door. Welcome, Brother Merton. I give him a bear hug." Cleaver copied out Merton's description of Harlem and would reread it when he felt the need to rekindle his own indignation.

MERTON'S EARLY WRITINGS were for the most part devoid of social content; passages like the one that had so moved Eldridge Cleaver were an exception. He was still in his world-denying state of mind. Merton traveled outside Kentucky for the first time in July 1952 to check the site for a possible monastery in Ohio. It was his first airplane flight. While he and his abbot, Dom James Fox, were waiting at the airport in Cincinnati for a flight, Merton thought that the airport "seemed to be infected with some moral corruption that had been brought in by the planes from New York."

But Merton began to change radically after his 1958 experience in Louisville at Fourth and Walnut. As he began reaching out to others through the mail, his correspondence as well as his friends began to accumulate. One of these contacts was to involve Merton ever more deeply in the peace movement. It was a contact with Dorothy Day.

Merton had first met Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker movement and a convinced pacifist, when she spoke at St. Bonaventure's. But it was only a brief meeting, and Merton had shortly after entered the monastery. As James Forest has written, "If Merton at the time was the main symbol of Catholic withdrawal from the world, this often-jailed woman was the main representative of Catholic immersion in the world" (see *Living with Wisdom: A Life of Thomas Merton* [1991], p. 123). He wrote Dorothy Day in 1959 about her involvement in the peace movement: "I am deeply touched by your witness for peace. You are very right in going at it along the lines of *Satyagraha* [literally "truth-force," Gandhi's word

for nonviolence]. I see no other way, though of course the angles of the problem are not all clear.... Nowadays it is no longer a question of who is right, but who is at least not criminal, if any of us can say that anymore." Like Gandhi, whom they both admired, Merton says that internal peace must be the basis for any active peace work; therefore prayer was essential.

In the years that followed, Merton began writing about peace, particularly in regard to the threat of nuclear war. His *Disputed Questions*, published in 1960, related the possibility of nuclear war to the contemporary alienation from God. Reading William Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* inspired his "Chant to Be Used Around a Site With Furnaces," an anti-poem chronicling the efficiency of those who ran the Holocaust. That was followed by "Original Child Bomb," a poem about the development and use of the bomb dropped on Hiroshima on Aug. 6, 1945.

In September 1961 he sent to *The Catholic Worker* an expanded version of a chapter first published in his *Seeds of Contemplation*, titled "The Root of War Is Fear." This was followed by a number of other articles published in *The Catholic Worker* and other journals. These articles gave high visibility to Merton's strong anti-war stance. He began to get himself in trouble with the censors of his order, and to become the target of considerable criticism in the Catholic press.

In March 1962, an article in *The Washington Catholic Standard* described Merton as "an absolute pacifist" and said that he was making "unwarranted charges about the intentions of our government towards disarmament." Merton was not really a pacifist. He had a sympathy for what today some liberation theologians would call revolutionary violence. In his *Faith and Violence* he wrote: "If the oppressed try to resist by force... which is their right—then theology has no business preaching nonviolence to them."

But the Catholic Church in the early 1960's was not yet ready to hear the message of nonviolence that Merton was preaching. As the pressure from his religious order to curtail his anti-war writings grew, he resorted, with the support of his abbot, Dom James, to the Russian technique of *samizdat* or self-publication. He circulated to friends a mimeographed book-size collection of recent writings, known as his *Cold War Letters*.

On April 27, 1962, Merton received from Dom James a letter from the abbot general in Rome, Dom Gabriel

Sortais, forbidding him to continue writing on the subject of war. Merton found himself in a quandary. Should he obey the abbot general, as his vow of obedience required, or should he continue his public protest? Ultimately he decided to obey. He had been faithful to his conscience and to his vows, and he felt that public protest would be futile, serving only to confirm those who were against him in their prejudice. But he continued his *samizdat* publishing.

Merton felt vindicated when in April 1963 Pope John XXIII, who had called the Catholic Church throughout the world into the Second Vatican Council, published his own letter on peace, the famous encyclical *Pacem in Terris*. Now the church's highest authority was saying some of the same things that Merton had been saying. Rather than stressing blind obedience to authority, the Pope stressed the responsibility of each individual to protect life and uphold morality: "If civil authorities legislate or allow anything that is contrary to the will of God, neither the law made nor the authorization granted can be binding on the conscience of the citizens since God has more right to be obeyed than man" (No. 51).

Shortly after the encyclical was published, Merton wrote the abbot general, saying that "it was a good thing that Pope John didn't have to get his encyclical through our censors," and asked if he could resume his peace writing, specifically his current project on *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*. The abbot refused, but died a short time later; and in the new climate that was beginning to be felt in the church, his successor was eventually to show himself more open to Merton's writings on peace.

By this time Merton had become a kind of unofficial chaplain to the peace movement. He corresponded with Dorothy Day and contributed articles to *The Catholic Worker*. James Douglass, a graduate of Santa Clara University, met Merton while he was teaching at Bellarmine College in Louisville. Douglass's writings were to give an intellectual foundation to the Catholic peace movement. Merton began meeting with various activists at Gethsemani. In November 1964 he brought a group of them together at his hermitage for retreat. James Forest, originally a Catholic Worker, went on to become the president of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation. Daniel Berrigan, Jesuit activist and founder of the Catholic Peace Fellowship, came with his brother Philip Berrigan, as well as veteran peace activist A. J. Muste, Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder and Thomas Cornell, a young Catholic Worker editor and activist who helped organize the first draft-card burning rally of the Vietnam era in 1962.

THE GROWING involvement of the United States in the war in Vietnam was to put particular strains on Merton. He was horrified when in November 1965 Roger LaPorte, a 21-year-old former Cistercian novice and Catholic Worker volunteer, immolated himself in front of the United Nations building in New York in protest of the

war in Vietnam. Merton withdrew his name from the list of sponsors of the Catholic Peace Fellowship. His response was too hasty and he later apologized; certainly those in the Peace Fellowship did not condone LaPorte's action. Some activists criticized Merton's monastic solitude and withdrawal. Even Dan Berrigan seemed to imply that Merton should join them, though he later acknowledged that Merton was right to remain where he was. Merton, though he suffered greatly through this episode, realized that he was right to remain in his monastery. As Michael Mott points out, to have left Gethsemani to win the approval of his friends would have been to give in to the false self, which needed the confirmation of others, rather than to continue living the life he had chosen so carefully, which enabled him to be the person he really was (see *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* [1984], p. 429).

How did Merton come to discover his true self, to be so at home with who he was that he could resist the considerable pressure put on him in the anger and frustration of those days so confused by the war in Vietnam? The answer must be found in the contemplative life that had first drawn Merton to the monastery.

THE TRUE MERTON, Merton in his maturity, is the Merton who was shaped by his life of solitude and

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In his writings, Merton foreshadowed four concerns that would become the agenda of the church in the final decades of the 20th century: racial harmony, ecumenism, nonviolence and ecology.

contemplation. He was never perfect, this passionate and enthusiastic man who only two years before his untimely death fell madly in love with a young nurse and struggled once again with the whole question of love and affectivity in his life. But he remained very much the contemplative critic he had become. And in the concerns reflected in his writings, Merton foreshadowed to a considerable extent what would become the agenda of the church in the final decades of the 20th century. Let us consider four of those concerns: racial harmony, ecumenism, nonviolence and ecology.

1. *Racial Justice.* We have already seen something of Merton's concern for racial justice in his reflections on Harlem in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Rereading some of his essays on the struggle of African-Americans for justice and inclusion in the American dream, written in the 1960's and included in his *Faith and Violence*, one is struck by how prophetic he was. He called attention to a growing emphasis on black identity, a concern which he called "ethnocentric" rather than "racist." He noted how the U.S. establishment would neutralize the Black Power movement by sucking its leaders into government or academe, as has so often happened. In another essay on religion and race, he warned against the ever-present tendency in the United States to confuse Christianity with Americanism. And in a letter to a Southern churchman he said in a few brief words what many Christians today still have not grasped: "The Church is Christ present in the world to reconcile the world to Himself" (see *Faith and Violence* [1968], p. 149).

IT IS EASY now to see these writings as set in the context of the struggle over civil rights for blacks in the 1960's. But they are just as pertinent and challenging today, when in spite of a new sensitivity to the need to find ways to live in an increasingly diverse society, to recognize difference and see multiculturalism as a value, racial tensions are on the increase throughout the world. We need only remember the most recent outbreak of rage in Los Angeles in 1992, not confined to Watts, as in 1965, but spread over much of the city, a city in which at the time of the first Rodney King trial one out of seven Angelenos speaks at home a language other than English. Or see on television and in the newspapers the skinheads and neo-nationalists in Germany and other European countries.

2. *Ecumenism.* Merton's comments on other Christian

churches in *The Seven Storey Mountain* are decidedly unecumenical, even arrogant. They reflect both the zeal of the recent convert who has finally found a spiritual home after a long and arduous search and the apologetic Catholicism of the time in which he was writing. But as he grew in his own spiritual life he came to realize that the real sources of division were not so much in doctrines or dogmas as within the human heart. In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* he wrote: "If I can unite in myself the thought and the devotion of Eastern and Western Christendom, the Greek and Latin Fathers, the Russians with the Spanish mystics, I can prepare in myself the reunion of divided Christians. From that secret and unspoken unity in myself can eventually come a visible and manifest unity of all Christians."

Merton's ecumenical interests broadened to include the great religions of the world. He sought out scholars of the great religious traditions, Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist and Hindu, and entered into dialogue with them through letters. Always Merton was the student, eager to learn whatever he could and from whomever he could. He saw monasticism, with its emphasis on experience and inner transformation rather than doctrine, as a natural meeting place between East and West. At the same time, Merton did not dismiss genuine religious difference, or take refuge in what he termed a "facile syncretism" (see *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* [1968], p. 316).

Perhaps the greatest lesson Merton had learned about ecumenical and interreligious encounter was one that he had learned from Bramachari, an Indian guru he met during his years at Columbia University, even before his conversion to Catholicism. Merton had become enthusiastic about Eastern mysticism after reading Aldous Huxley's *Ends and Means* and was reading whatever he could get his hands on. But Bramachari pointed him in a different direction. He praised several of the Christian classics and encouraged Merton to read in his own tradition. In the years that followed, Merton did precisely that. When he entered into dialogue with others, he could always do so with great openness and a sense of security precisely because he was so deeply rooted in his own tradition.

3. *Nonviolence.* Involved as Merton was in the peace movement of the 1960's, it would be a mistake to see him as a kind of monastic peace activist. He was a critical thinker who saw the inadequacy of the just war theory in the age of nuclear weapons and recognized that much contemporary violence was a species of "white-collar"

crime. His analysis of the roots of violence, with its recognition of "institutional violence," sometimes foreshadows the liberation theologians who would come after him.

But his approach to peace, as to all other issues, was precisely a religious one. The great impact he had on so many in that turbulent decade was in no small part due to his ability to articulate a spirituality of peace. He was convinced that those who resist force by using force would be contaminated by the very evil they were resisting, and if successful, would become just as ruthless and unjust themselves (see *Faith and Violence*, p. 12).

IN AN ESSAY entitled "Blessed Are the Meek" (*Faith and Violence*, p. 14-29), written in response to Roger LaPorte's self-immolation, Merton set forth the principles of nonviolence as an exacting discipline. Christian nonviolence is founded theologically on the Beatitudes. Those who would practice it must be willing to reject all unjust and abusive uses of power; they must be for others, especially the poor and the underprivileged; they must avoid the self-righteousness that so easily can infect those involved in a moral struggle; they must be willing to give up the fetishism of seeking immediate results, as does the power structure against which they are struggling.

Most of all, there must be an absolute refusal of evil, including dishonesty, and they must be willing to recognize and admit the truth in their opponents and their opponents' positions. Merton was convinced that nonviolence could not be conceived as a tactic to be used to obtain peace as a political end, no matter how laudatory. Nonviolence would succeed only if it was the pursuit of truth. He had learned this lesson from Gandhi, and cited his words as a summation of the whole doctrine of nonviolence: "The way of peace is the way of truth . . . truthfulness is even more important than peacefulness." Merton insisted that the nonviolent resister was not fighting for "his" truth or "her" conscience, but for *the* truth, the truth common to both the resister and the adversary, and so the resister was actually fighting for everybody.

Thus, like so much else in Merton's life, his nonviolence was an expression of the spirituality which flowed out of his contemplation and the sense of the connectedness of all things that was its fruit. Nonviolence must give up all particular truths, no matter how much cherished, for Truth itself, the Truth which is God.

4. *Ecology*. Another area in which Merton was ahead of his time was concern for the environment, or as we would say today, for ecology. Merton had an almost Franciscan love for nature. One has only to read his journals to appreciate how much he loved the woods of the monastery and the knobs or small hills rising above the green fields and rolling Kentucky countryside. He could easily spend hours in the woods in prayer and contemplation, and some of his richest poetic images were derived from his natural surroundings. One of his most beautiful essays is "Rain and the Rhinoceros" (first published in

Holiday magazine and reprinted in Merton's *Raids on the Unspeakable* [1966]), a meditation written in his hermitage during a rain storm. It is both poetry and social criticism in the spirit of Henry David Thoreau.

When Merton entered Gethsemani, the monks were still farming in the simple style of their French ancestors. They used horse-drawn wagons. Their buildings, many constructed in the 19th century, were in a state of disrepair, and the monastery was in debt. All that changed after the war, with its influx of new vocations and the election of Dom James Fox as abbot in 1948. Dom James, who had graduated at the age of 21 from the Harvard Business School, wanted to provide for the monastery a sound financial base. He began to use the techniques of modern agricultural science to improve the farm and established a food-processing business, known as Gethsemani Farms, which produced for sale cheeses, fruitcakes, bacon and smoked hams.

Merton was not happy with these developments. He complained that the noisy tractors, which the revenues from his books were helping to buy, were disturbing the monastery's silence. In a poem modeled on Joyce Kilmer's "Trees," he parodied the cheese business: "I think that we should never freeze/ such lively assets as our cheese,/ a cheese which may at Christmas wear/ a suit of cellophane underwear." More importantly, finding dead birds in the fields and woods, he became increasingly concerned about the reliance on chemical fertilizers and insecticides. According to his principal biographer, Michael Mott, he managed to have Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* chosen for refectory reading, only to have it withdrawn at the objections of the cellarer, the monk in charge of the monastery's agribusiness. Here again Merton was ahead of his church. Catholicism would not officially address the subject of the environment as a moral issue until Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* in 1987.

Racial justice, ecumenism, nonviolence and peace, ecology—if there is any thread that brings together these concerns of Merton, it is, I think, a dynamic orientation toward one of the great lessons of his contemplative experience, what Msgr. William Shannon calls an "intuition of the ultimate unity of all reality." While he never made, nor could he make, the Eastern denial of the difference between subject and object, between God and the world, between creature and creator, he had a deep sense of the origin and end of all creation in God. As Monsignor Shannon says: "The world, though distinct from God, is not yet separate from God. An implicit nondualism runs through Merton's writings, even the earliest, a nondualism that becomes more and more explicit as he turns to the East" (see *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Storey* [1992], p. 281). Perhaps we too can learn from this deep intuition of Merton, nourished by his prayer and contemplation, of a fundamental unity which ought to embrace all of us, whether as churches, as peoples or as human beings who are part of the natural world that nourishes and sustains us and a moral world we help to create. ■

