

Thomas Merton: Contemplation in Action

by Terrence A. Taylor

Thomas Merton (1915-1968) was a member of a Roman Catholic monastic community that embraced silence, yet he spoke volumes about the most important spiritual issues of our day. He was an enormously complex man who sought silence, solitude and contemplation while at the same time living an active life that led him to friendships with hundreds of people scattered throughout the world. Although his movement and communication was quite restricted for the 27 years that he was a member of the Cistercian order, he played a key role in shaping historical events by speaking out on important moral issues of his day. His leadership established him as a model for how people of faith from all walks of life can immerse themselves in a spirituality that will naturally give rise to concerns for their fellow human beings and for all of God's creation.

This silent monk spoke powerfully and eloquently on three extremely important aspects of spiritual life: contemplative spirituality, social justice, and inter-religious dialogue. Merton recognized the individual importance of each of these, but he understood better than most people that inter-religious dialogue and work for social justice are not separate from spirituality but must grow out of it in an organic way.

Climbing a Seven Storey Mountain

Thomas Merton was born in 1915 in the south of France. Both of his parents were artists who traveled a great deal, and the young Merton was shuffled from house to house, from country to country, in a way that gave him little opportunity to learn what the word "home" meant. Being orphaned early in life only heightened this sense of displacement.

During his adolescent and teenage years, Merton spent considerable time in boarding schools in France and England. He was extremely bright and his academic prowess at his English school earned him a scholarship to Cambridge University in the early 1930's. Unfortunately, he devoted more time to carousing than to studying during his first year of college, and in the process impregnated a young woman. His mother's family made a settlement with the young woman and whisked Merton off to the United States where they could keep a closer eye on him.¹

In 1935 Merton enrolled at Columbia University where he earned both a bachelor's and master's degree in English. At Columbia he was deeply influenced by the poet and scholar Mark Van Doren who became his mentor. While still a student, Merton embarked on a nascent career as a writer, composing novels, essays, reviews and poetry over the next decade. Not much of what he wrote in those years was published. After graduating he took a teaching position at St. Bonaventure College in upstate New York and began work toward a doctorate.

Despite a nominally Anglican upbringing, religion was apparently not a significant part of Merton's youth. That began to change during his years at Columbia. He underwent a gradual conversion experience that led him to baptism in the Roman Catholic Church and the desire to become a priest in the Franciscan Order. The Franciscans initially accepted Merton, but on hearing the story of his Cambridge years

they withdrew their acceptance. He found himself in despair until a friend suggested that he make a retreat at the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani, a Trappist monastery about fifty miles south of Louisville. Merton made a visit there during Holy Week of 1941.

He was deeply moved by the piety and strict discipline of this place (*Life* magazine once referred to the Trappists as "the Marines of the religious orders"). The monks at Gethsemani rose in the middle of the night and prayed at roughly three-hour intervals throughout the day. They observed silence unless talking was unavoidable. The monks slept in an unheated dormitory room, devoted themselves to hard farm labor and ate a meager vegetarian diet. Their lives appeared to be completely devoted to prayer and penance.

Merton was so impressed that after returning to St. Bonaventure he made application to the monastery and was accepted in the late fall of that year. He gave his few possessions to charity, burned some of his manuscripts and entrusted others to the care of his friends. He left for Gethsemani with the intention of completely abandoning his old way of life.

Renouncing the Life of a Writer, and Becoming a Best Seller Author

When Merton entered Gethsemani on December 10, 1941, he believed that his career as a writer was over. He thought that he was giving his life completely to prayer. But almost immediately after entering the monastery he was given a variety of writing assignments. One of these was to craft his autobiography, a task he did not initially wish to undertake. In obedience he accepted the assignment, and when the book was published in the autumn of 1948 under the title of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, it became a word-of-mouth bestseller, with 600,000 copies purchased in its first twelve months. Since then it has never been out of print.

At the time his autobiography was published, most monks received mail only a couple of times a year, and even those letters – limited for the most part to family members – were censored. The monks read no newspapers or magazines and certainly did not listen to the radio. Regarding news, they were essentially dead to the world.

For Merton, things were different. The phenomenal success of this Augustine-like autobiography made him a "spiritual celebrity" and mail began to pour in from the famous and not so famous. Two things resulted from the popularity and critical acclaim accorded *The Seven Storey Mountain*. First, Merton came to be seen by the public as a popular authority on the spiritual life. Second, those who corresponded with him began to share news with him, news that fed an interest in social justice that had developed during his student days in New York.

Contemplation, Silence and Solitude

In the books and articles he published on spirituality during the 1950's and 60's Merton's major focus was on contemplative spirituality, silence and solitude. Christine Bochen writes that "He taught the way of contemplative prayer, a prayer of wordless presence, inviting readers to penetrate below merely surface existence to live life's Mystery.² She also notes that "...Merton used the term contemplation in two ways: to name silent wordless prayer and to name the actual experience of God in prayer."³

Merton felt that two things were essential to the practice of this kind of prayer: solitude and silence. Solitude would remove the distractions of human contact and the pressure of demands from the outside world. Silence would provide a powerful tool for making a wordless encounter with God for those who embraced it. Merton also pointed out that contemplative prayer was not a new concept. It was, in fact, one of the oldest and most revered methods of prayer in the history of the Christian community.

In an odd paradox, Merton found that contemplation, silence and solitude were lacking in the monastery he called home. Because there was so much work to do and so much time devoted to the Divine Office, there was little time for personal prayer. Solitude was almost unheard of. The monks prayed together, worked together, ate together, and were only allowed to spend time in their dormitory cubicles at specified times in the day or when they were ill. The silence so clearly associated with the Cistercian order had been undercut by the extensive use of an elaborate sign language. That silence was further eroded by the introduction of noisy farm machinery into the monastery's economy.

Merton worked hard through his nearly three decades as a monk to increase the amount of prayer time, solitude and silence available to monks at Gethsemani. Today all three of these aspects of the spiritual life are important elements in daily life at the monastery, and far better understood and practiced by many of the faithful outside of it.

Merton: Instrumental in the Post WWII Spiritual Awakening

In the 1950's when Americans were beginning to awaken to the fact that their long sought after material affluence was not bringing them fulfillment, Merton's championing of contemplative prayer was received as a liberating revelation. At a time when Americans were being urged to speed up their lives, Merton was inviting them to slow down. The message he shared was simple: don't just do something, sit there!

As people were finding new and faster methods of communication, Merton urged silence and interior reflection. In a spiritual environment that taught Americans that spirituality meant going to church on Sunday or using only officially sanctioned prayer methods, Merton led a departure into individual prayer free of formulas and pre-fabricated words.

His musings on contemplative spirituality soon began to appeal to those outside the Catholic Church as well. Faculty members and seminarians from the Baptist and Presbyterian seminaries in Louisville began to make visits to Gethsemani where they dialogued with Merton about contemplative spirituality. His books were purchased by Christians of virtually every denomination, and by non-Christians as well.

On March 18, 1958, standing on a street corner in the heart of Louisville, Merton had a revelation that crystallized for him the significance of the change he was undergoing. He finally understood that even though most people thought of monks as holy men, they were in fact no more or less holy than people in the secular world.

“ In Louisville, on the corner of 4th and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I was theirs ... There is no way of telling people that they are walking around, shining like the sun.”⁴

By figuratively breaking down the walls that separated monks from lay men and women, Melton also invited people in the outside world to share in a type of contemplative spirituality that he believed was available to all people, not just "holy" men and women in religious orders.

Embracing Peace and Justice in the shadow of War and Racism

In the late 1950's Merton was also coming to see more clearly that if he really loved God in the deep and personal way he said he did, he was obliged to do much more than spend time praying and writing about prayer.

He recognized that the love of God must be expressed in concern for all of humanity. This notion is at the heart of the Gospel. When Jesus is asked what is the greatest of the commandments, he immediately responds that we must love God with all of our being, but without pause he adds that it is just as important that we love our neighbors as ourselves. Merton began to examine carefully what it meant to love his neighbor as himself.

He found himself in a time beset by fear and social upheaval. The advent of the hydrogen bomb raised the prospect of apocalyptic mushroom clouds that could end life on earth. Americans were learning that "Negroes" in the South were no longer willing to accept a century-old system of apartheid that kept them separate and very unequal. People throughout the world were beginning to come to grips with the horrors of the Holocaust and the failure of Christians to take action well within their power. A tiny country called South Vietnam gained attention in the news.

In a letter to Dorothy Day, co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, Merton wrote "...I don't feel that I can in conscience, at a time like this, go on writing just about things like meditation, though that has its point. .. I think I have to face the big issues, the life-and-death issues."⁵

Using Spirituality to Face Life and Death Issues

For Merton the biggest of the big issues was war. War threatened the sanctity of life. War dehumanized everyone associated with it. He learned from reading Mahatma Gandhi that transcendent truth and the power of nonviolence are closely associated with genuine faith. The kind of politically tainted faith most Americans knew in the 1950's actually posed a threat to our salvation. Merton wrote,

“Is faith a narcotic dream in a world of heavily armed robbers, or is it an awakening? Is faith a convenient nightmare in which we are attacked and obliged to destroy the attackers? What if we awaken to discover that we are the robbers, and our destruction comes from the root of hate in ourselves?”⁶

He answers his own questions by writing, "Theology today needs to focus carefully upon the crucial problem of violence."⁷ The answer to the problems of violence, war, and injustice, wrote Merton, is the practice of active nonviolence.

...Nonviolence seeks to "win" not by destroying or even humiliating the adversary, but by convincing him that there is a higher and more certain common good than can be attained by bombs and blood. Nonviolence, ideally speaking, does not try to overcome the adversary by winning over him, but to turn him from an adversary into a collaborator by winning him over.⁸

The Power of Moral Leadership

Merton clearly saw that the power in his hands was that of moral leadership, and the leadership he could best provide would be delivered through his writings. One of the first concerns he addressed was the threat of nuclear war. He realized that the use of nuclear weapons against civilian populations amounted to genocide and he said as much. Catholic Church leaders attempted to silence him for saying this, asserting that it was not the business of a monk to speak out against nuclear war. Merton struggled against this myopic view and ultimately was permitted to speak out publicly.

Merton decried racism and poverty. In an important essay published at the dawn of the 1960's Merton asserted that if Americans didn't address the problems of racism and poverty in our cities they would soon erupt in violence. The famous Lutheran theologian Martin Marty chastised him for making such a seemingly reckless prediction. Then, as our cities exploded with rage later in the decade, Marty had the wisdom and decency to apologize to Merton in print, calling him a prophet.

As the 1960's flowed on into a cascade of war and assassination, Merton became in many ways the conscience of the peace movement that opposed the Vietnam War. He became a friend and mentor to individuals like Daniel Berrigan, James Forest, and James Douglass, all of whom went on to become major figures in international peace movements. Merton supported the Catholic Worker Movement and corresponded frequently with Dorothy Day. He had planned to host a retreat for Dr. Martin Luther King and other leaders of the Civil Rights Movement in 1968. Those plans were ended by an assassin's bullet on April 4th of that year.

A Quest for Unity

Perhaps the final crowning achievement in Merton's contemplative life was his realization of our unity with persons of all faiths and cultures. Merton wrote that we are all one already, we just do not realize it.

He said, "If I can understand something of myself and something of others, I can begin to share with them the work of building the foundations of spiritual unity."⁹ And again, "If I can unite in myself the thought and devotion of Eastern and Western Christendom, the Greek and the 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."¹⁰

On a mission related to unity in the fall of 1968, Merton made his first extended trip out of the monastery in nearly thirty years, traveling to Asia to attend several conferences and to meet with spiritual leaders of other faiths. Along the way he had three friendly encounters with the Dalai Lama, who took the time to teach him basic principles of Tibetan Buddhism. After visiting with the Dalai Lama, Merton traveled on to Sri Lanka and ultimately to Thailand where his life's journey came to a sudden end.

On December 10, 1968, on the exact anniversary of his entrance into Gethsemani, he was killed in a freak electrical accident in Bangkok. In a final irony, the body of this monk who had spoken out strongly against the Vietnam War was returned to the United States aboard a plane carrying the bodies of those killed in that war.

Merton: A Model for How to Seek a Completely Spiritual Life

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing Christians in the new millennium is how to protect our lives from being divided into distinctly secular and spiritual parts. The deeply spiritual person soon discovers that is almost impossible to separate spirituality from our everyday lives. As Thomas Merton so well understood, the world persistently calls on us to abandon our core values and spiritual practices to embrace the secular values of efficiency, speed, and greater income. We cannot abandon this secular world, but Merton himself provides us with a model for how to go about seeking a life that is fully spiritual within that demanding secular context.

God calls on us to not limit our spirituality to Sunday mornings, and the scattered times in our day when we say grace or bedtime prayers. God befriends us with a call to a life that is infused with transcendent love. When we return that love we soon see that we are integrally connected to all other human beings – in fact to all of God's creation. That vision of connectedness inevitably leads us to be the Kingdom of God to the world around us.

Thomas Merton tried to travel a life path that would lead him to a destination where he could fully integrate into his life the love of God, compassion for others, and unity with men and women of all faiths. He never reached that level of full integration, as none of us will in this life, but for him and us the journey is the destination. He writes, "Our vocation is not simply to be, but to work together with God in the creation of our own life, our own identity, our own destiny..."¹¹

In living out that destiny, it means much to have the example of someone who not only talked the talk, but walked the walk. As Matthew Kelty, a fellow monk of Gethsemani, said about Merton on the thirtieth anniversary of his death, "[Merton] is patron of all who would dearly love God, who would go deep to search for his light and beauty, who would do his will, whatever and whenever. In such an enterprise Merton is our friend and advocate. And protector. And guide."¹²

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*

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¹Although the fate of the child is unknown, Merton made financial provisions should he or she ever come forward.

²Christine Bochen. *Thomas Merton: Essential Writings*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000: 51.

³Ibid .. 35.

⁴Merton, Thomas. *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. NY: Doubleday, 1966: 156-157.

⁵*The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*. William H. Shannon, ed. NY: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1968: 140.

⁶Merton, Thomas. *Faith and Violence*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968: ix-x.

⁷Ibid.: 3.

⁸Ibid.: 13.

⁹Merton, Thomas. *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander: 82*.

¹⁰Ibid.: 12.

¹¹Merton, Thomas. *New Seeds of Contemplation*. NY: New Directions, 1962: 30.

¹²Kelty, Matthew. "Touched by Fire: An Anniversary Homily" *The Merton Seasonal*. 24: I, Spring 1999: 17

¹³Merton, Thomas. *Thoughts in Solitude*. NY: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1958:83.

Terrence A. Taylor is the Assistant Director of The Thomas Merton Foundation. He is also the editor of A Thomas Merton Curriculum. Mr. Taylor also leads retreats that help individuals bring Merton's contemplative spirituality, concern for social justice and interest in inter-religious dialogue into their own lives. He can be contacted at (502) 899-1952 or via e-mail at ttaylor@mertonfoundation.org.