

## Thomas Merton and the Army that Sheds No Blood

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Here it is a presentation on Thomas Merton, a FOR member and writer whose books were very widely read and who was himself a conscientious objector.

Me too! I left the US Navy as a conscientious objector, after two years in uniform. I served as IFOR General Secretary in 1977-1988.

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One of Thomas Merton's lesser known publications is a small booklet hand-printed in Verona, Italy in 1962 and issued by New Directions: *Clement of Alexandria: Selections from the Protreptikos*. Just 750 copies came off the press. It's long out-of-print but search and you still find used copies at an attractive price.

The Clement booklet appeared just two years after publication of a related book, *The Wisdom of the Desert*, Merton's collection of stories and sayings from the initiators of Christian monasticism, the monks who, from the fourth century onward, populated the wastelands of the eastern Mediterranean.

Both books reveal Merton's attraction to the early Church and its writers. Clement was among the earliest. He was born in Athens about 150 AD, at the end of the Apostolic Age.

He later made his home in Alexandria, the most cosmopolitan city of that period, where he became a renowned Christian teacher and apologist and later came to be regarded as one of the Fathers of the Church, that community of respected theologians of the early centuries who were not only scholars but articulate mystics.

Merton found in Clement a kindred soul — “one of the Fathers I like best, with whom I feel the closest affinity,” as he records in a journal entry made in the summer of 1961. The word Merton uses most frequently in regard to Clement is “serene.” The “serene interior light” of Clement's writings reminded Merton of the Gospel of St. John and the Pauline epistles — “the light which burned clearly in the souls of the martyrs, kindled by the agape of the primitive Church.” Merton sees Clement as someone “who fully penetrates the mystery of the ... Risen Christ. ... a victory over death, over sin, over the confusions and dissension of this world, with its raging cruelty and its futile concerns, a victory which leads not to contempt of man and of the world, but, on the contrary, to a true, pure, serene love, filled with compassion, able to ‘save’ for Christ all that is good and noble in man, in society, in philosophy and in humanistic culture.” And Clement wrote his serene words, Merton points out, not in the desert but in the city, “amid its crowds.”

In presenting the case for Christ to his well-educated pagan contemporaries, Clement drew from various wells, not only from the Gospels, Paul's letters and other Christian sources, but also from the work of the Greek philosophers, especially Plato. As Merton

writes, "Clement was not a fanatic, but a man of unlimited comprehension and compassion who didn't fear to seek elements of truth wherever they could be found, for the truth, he said, is one. ... The full expression is to be found most perfectly in the Divine Logos, the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ."

Clement's theology, Merton stresses, is a theology of light, the nature of which is to banish darkness.

What Clement is not, Merton adds, is a Christian publicist, an ad man "with a bag full of spiritual slogans" or "a salesman representing a particular nation or culture." Nor is he a self-promoter, using the Christian religion to draw attention to himself. Clement sees himself, a Christian philosopher and educator, as having a vocation to introduce others to "the true teacher, the Logos of God."

Merton noted that Clement, even though recognized as one of the Church Fathers and regarded as a saint on some church calendars, has been, at least for western Christians, a somewhat controversial figure. At the beginning of the 17th century, Clement of Alexandria's name was removed from the Roman Martyrology by Pope Clement VIII, an act later endorsed by Pope Benedict XIV, on the grounds that too little was known of Clement's life, which in fact is true of nearly all the saints of the early church.

For Merton, himself no stranger to controversy, Clement's being half-in-half-out of the calendar of the saints was perhaps an attraction. Like Groucho Marx, Merton was nervous about belonging to any club that would have him for a member. But the real attraction for Merton was the purity of Clement's apologetics. Clement's writings, said Merton, were "a great treasury of authentic and profoundly Christian thought ... whose culture, urbanity, simplicity, faith and joy welcomed all comers to the school of Christian philosophy."

"The whole moral philosophy of Clement," Merton writes, "can be summed up by his conviction that Christ is the true Master, the one who guides his disciple in every aspect of the Christian life." Without the light of Christ, Merton continues, we human beings are little more than fowl being fattened in the dark for the butcher's knife. But in Christ "everything is significant, everything comes to life, even the most simple and ordinary task acquires a spiritual and supernatural dimension."

It is hard to think of anyone about whom Merton ever wrote in more glowing terms. His little book about Clement was a modest effort to make this all-but-forgotten name better known to readers of our own time, nearly nineteen centuries later.

Not least appealing to Merton was the purity and challenge of Clement's writings about war and peace. One line, as Merton translated it, provides a synopsis. The Church, Clement declared, is "an army that sheds no blood."

The final page of Merton's translation of excerpts from Clement's *Protreptikos* is headed "Soldiers of Peace." The text is brief. Let me read it to you:

*Now the trumpet sounds with a mighty voice calling the soldiers of the world to arms, announcing war:  
And shall not Christ who has uttered His summons to peace even to the ends of the earth  
Summon together His own soldiers of peace?  
Indeed, O Man, He has called to arms with His blood and His Word an army that sheds no blood:  
To these soldiers He has handed over the Kingdom of Heaven.  
The trumpet of Christ is His Gospel. He has sounded it in our ears and we have heard Him.  
Let us be armed for peace, putting on the armor of justice, seizing the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation,  
and sharpening the "sword of the spirit which is the Word of God."  
This is how the Apostle prepares us peaceably for battle.  
Such are the arms that make us invulnerable.  
So armed, let us prepare to fight the Evil One.  
Let us cut through his flaming attack with the blade which the Logos Himself has tempered in the waters (of baptism).  
Let us reply to His goodness by praise and thanksgiving.  
Let us honor God with His divine Word:  
"While thou art yet speaking," he says, "here I am."*

The Church may once have been "an army that sheds no blood" but few would have thought so in the Middle Ages. Even so, Merton's translation doesn't lose the bright edge of the original Greek text. Sadly, while certainly there are a great many Christians today who give an impressive witness to being part of such an army, it's not a remark many would apply to contemporary Christianity as a whole. For centuries Christians, by the millions, have been combatants in practically any war one can think of, killing each other when not killing non-Christians, and by and large doing so with the blessings of popes and other leading clergy — if not, as happened with the Crusades, at their actual summons.

Merton's vision of peace was similar to that of Clement of Alexandria. He wanted to revive in Christianity, that is in each of us, those strengths that would equip us to become once again part of an army that sheds no blood.

Merton himself gave witness to wanting to be such a person well before becoming a monk. One of the many surprises in his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, is Merton's thorough recounting of his decision, despite his disgust with Hitler and Nazism, to be a conscientious objector. As he explained:

*[God] was not asking me to judge all the nations of the world, or to elucidate all the moral and political motives behind their actions. He was not demanding that I pass some critical decision defining the innocence and guilt of all those concerned in the war. He was asking me to make a choice that amounted to an act of love for His truth, His goodness, His charity, His Gospel. ... He was asking me to do, to the best of my knowledge, what I thought Christ would do. ... After all, Christ did say, "Whatsoever you have done to the least of these my brethren, you did it to me." [SSM, 111-2]*

Remarkable words! One very rarely heard anyone saying such things in the modern world, least of all when World War II was underway or in the years that immediately followed, which is precisely when *The Seven Storey Mountain* was published. In their struggle to be accepted in a society whose default setting was anti-Catholic, Americans Catholics were notable for being more red-white-and-blue than many of their neighbors, a people doubly grateful to have found a home in the United States. Not that Merton was being critical of his adopted country. But it wasn't every day a Catholic writer, or indeed Christians from other major churches, talked about their behavior, in wartime no less than peacetime, being modeled on Christ's example. Against whom did Christ raise a deadly weapon? No one. How many were killed by Jesus Christ? Not a single person. Christ both taught and practiced love of enemies. He rescued people from death. Far from killing others, he was renowned for acts of healing. Dying on the cross, he forgave his executioners. Having risen from the dead, he said to his disciples, "Peace be with you."

Those who would cut Merton in two — the "early Merton," author *The Seven Storey Mountain* and various books of the late-Forties through the Fifties, versus the "later Merton," author of *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* and all the other books he wrote in the Sixties — overlook how much that became major themes in Merton's later writing and work, not only regarding peace but his rejection of racism and his ability to connect with people from non-Christian religious traditions were already clearly expressed in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. There is development, of course. His early parochialism and convert zeal evaporated. His understanding of what it meant to "be in the world but not of it" was gradually transformed. Merton had come to baptism not because of Christianity but because of Christ — "the Christ of the martyrs," as he stressed in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, describing his first mystical encounter with Christ when he was in Rome at age eighteen.

*The Seven Storey Mountain* is an account of conversion. What Merton was to discover, once his autobiography was out of his hands, is that conversion is never finished. It is on-going process.

A significant part of Merton's conversion in the last two decades of his life was his realization that a monk, in his place of relative refuge, is sometimes capable of seeing the world with a clarity that eludes those who are in the midst of the world, and not just to see what is happening but to attempt to speak up in a way that might prevent disaster. It has to do with the second of the two Great Commandments: love of neighbor. If you see your neighbor rushing towards a precipice and fail to warn him, his death may be more on your hands than his. He was blind — you were not.

Almost anyone who knows anything about Merton is likely to recall that moment of illumination when, in 1958, he waited for the light to turn green at a busy intersection in downtown Louisville. In a moment that contained all the time in the world, he saw those around him as bearers of the divine image, as persons loved by God, each of

them as dear to God as anyone in any monastery. He knew not one of these strangers by name but the fate of each of them became a matter of eternal significance.

That transfigured moment helps us better understand the final decade of Merton's life. Msgr. Bill Shannon, the general editor of Merton's correspondence, told me that after that event Merton's letter-writing took off. It seemed he was writing to just about everyone in the phone book, from popes to the authors of banned books, from great scholars to high school students, from politicians to people like me who sometimes went to prison for acts of protest.

Just three years later, in 1961, shortly before his book on Clement was issued, Merton submitted his first article to *The Catholic Worker*. Its editor, Dorothy Day, was an outspoken pacifist who saw the works of war as being the polar opposite of the works of mercy. It was not, in her view, a coherent life to feed the hungry one day and drop bombs on them the next.

The piece Merton submitted, "The Root of War is Fear," was an expanded version of a chapter he had just finished writing for a forthcoming book, *New Seeds of Contemplation*. In it he observed:

*It does not even seem to enter our minds that there might be some incongruity in praying to the God of peace, the God who told us to love one another as He had loved us, Who warned us that they who took the sword would perish by it, and at the same time planning to annihilate not thousands but millions of civilians and soldiers, men, women and children without discrimination. ... It may make sense for a sick man to pray for health and then take medicine, but I fail to see any sense at all in his praying for health and then drinking poison.*

In several introductory paragraphs written especially for *The Catholic Worker*, Merton saw "war-madness" as "an illness of the mind and spirit that is spreading with a furious and subtle contagion all over the world."

One has to recall that, at the time Merton was writing these observations, there were many Americans, Catholics prominent among them, who seriously repeated such apocalyptic slogans as "Better Red than dead" and "The only good Red is a dead Red." Uttering such bumper-sticker sentences passed for moral discourse. Just a month before Merton's essay was published in *The Catholic Worker*, October 1961, an essay by a distinguished Jesuit ethicist, Fr. L.C. McHugh, was published in *America* magazine in which the author argued that it was morally unobjectionable to kill your next-door-neighbor in defense of your private fall-out shelter. Meanwhile advocates of nuclear war were promoting the benefits of launching a first-strike nuclear attack on the Soviet Union — a "preemptive" war. Scores of US nuclear weapons tests were occurring, first in Nevada and then, after the weapons became too destructive for open-air detonation in United States, in the Pacific Ocean. Millions of children in US schools took part in "duck-and-cover" drills to learn how hiding under their desks with the hands over the back of their necks might save their lives in the event of a nuclear

attack. The “war-madness” Merton spoke of was truly a mass psychosis. The world Stanley Kubrick satirized in “Doctor Strangelove” was the actual world in which we were living. There was a poster on my room at the Catholic Worker that bore the simple message, “Get Ready to Die.”

Here is Merton’s description of the times in that first *Catholic Worker* essay:

*On all sides we have people building bomb shelters where, in case of nuclear war, they will simply bake slowly instead of burning quickly or being blown out of existence in a flash. And they are prepared to sit in these shelters with machine guns with which to prevent their neighbor from entering. This in a nation that claims to be fighting for religious truth along with freedom and other values of the spirit. Truly we have entered the “post-Christian era” with a vengeance. Whether we are destroyed or whether we survive, the future is awful to contemplate.*

Merton went on sketch out a vision of how Christians should respond to the dangers facing us in the post-Hiroshima world:

*What are we to do? The duty of the Christian in this crisis is to strive with all his power and intelligence, with his faith, his hope in Christ, and love for God and man, to do the one task which God has imposed upon us in the world today. That task is to work for the total abolition of war. There can be no question that unless war is abolished the world will remain constantly in a state of madness and desperation in which, because of the immense destructive power of modern weapons, the danger of catastrophe will be imminent and probable at every moment everywhere. Unless we set ourselves immediately to this task, both as individuals and in our political and religious groups, we tend by our very passivity and fatalism to cooperate with the destructive forces that are leading inexorably to war. It is a problem of terrifying complexity and magnitude, for which the Church itself is not fully able to see clear and decisive solutions. Yet she must lead the way on the road to the nonviolent settlement of difficulties and toward the gradual abolition of war as the way of settling international or civil disputes. Christians must become active in every possible way, mobilizing all their resources for the fight against war.*

These basic ideas of Merton’s never wavered. As a writer aware that many people had great respect for his work and that he was one of the relatively few whose voice might make a difference, and also aware that he might not be given an extended opportunity to say what was on his mind before his superiors hit the off switch, he plunged ahead with other writings, including a poem — “Chant to Be Used Around a Site for Furnaces” — that ends with the commandant of Auschwitz addressing the reader: “Do not think yourself better because you burn up friends and enemies with long-range missiles without ever seeing what you have done.”

Merton wasn’t finished with Eichmann and his like or the implications of the death machine such bureaucrats served. In *Raids on the Unspeakable*, noting psychiatrists had found Eichmann perfectly sane, Merton had this to say:

*The sanity of Eichmann is disturbing. We equate sanity with a sense of justice, with humaneness, with prudence, with the capacity to love and understand other people. We rely on the sane people of the world to preserve it from barbarism, madness, destruction. And now it begins to dawn on us that it is precisely the sane ones who are*

*the most dangerous. It is the sane ones, the well-adapted ones, who can without qualms and without nausea aim the missiles and press the buttons that will initiate the great festival of destruction that they, the sane ones, have prepared. ... No one suspects the sane, and the sane ones will have perfectly good reasons, logical, well-adjusted reasons, for firing the shot. They will be obeying sane orders that have come sanely down the chain of command.*

Merton's peace writings provoked a good deal of criticism. Given the climate of the time, it's not surprising that some — many of them Catholics — saw him as having become “a Communist dupe,” a frequently-used phrase in those days. A monk, it was said, should write about prayer and meditation, the rosary and fasting, not about such issues as war. Who does Thomas Merton think he is? What happened to the author of *The Seven Storey Mountain*?

It was quite a storm and achieved its goal. Merton, having been accused of writing for “a Communist-controlled publication,” that is *The Catholic Worker*, was silenced. Merton's Abbot General, Dom Gabriel Sortais — a Frenchman who was in many ways an outstanding and courageous individual — decided to unplug the microphone. Merton had just finished writing a full-length book, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, when he received a letter from the Dom Gabriel ordering him not to continue publishing articles on war. Only six months had passed since the publication of Merton's first peace essay in *The Catholic Worker*.

As the focus of these reflections is Merton's vision of peace, not his troubles in trying to communicate that vision, I am not going to relate all that followed. It's another story. To sum it up, Merton obeyed the order in the sense that *Peace in the Post-Christian Era* was not published in book form in his lifetime. But Merton's abbot, Dom James Fox, made it possible for *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, and also a collection of Merton's letters, *Cold War Letters*, both to be published by the monastery in mimeographed editions that were privately circulated, widely read and proved influential. Dom James decided the such privately circulated books were not covered by the silencing order, only work sold commercially on the open market. On the inside cover of both of the mimeographed books was the notation: “Strictly confidential. Not for Publication.” Using various pen names, Merton also continued to write and publish shorter pieces on war and peace, using such by-lines as Benedict Monk. Who else but Thomas Merton could have written something signed Marco J. Frisbee?

Eventually, after Dom Gabriel's death late in 1963, quite a lot of what Merton wanted say about peace to people whose only access to his writings was via book stores was published in such volumes as *Seeds of Destruction*, *Raids on the Unspeakable* and *Faith and Violence*.

It is noteworthy that the not-quite-silenced Merton did all this without abandoning his vocation or his religious order or publicly denouncing his abbot general. His actions reflected his conviction that he would do very little good for peace in the world if it was at the cost of scandalizing and alienating his own community.

Throughout those next several difficult years, what Merton was able to do without interruption, in his own name and also without the heavy burden of censorship, was to carry on a great deal of significant correspondence with people like Dorothy Day, Daniel Berrigan, Tom Cornell, myself and others deeply engaged in efforts to prevent war or reduce conflict. These were never letters of the how-are-you-I-am-fine variety. The full text of nearly all them is available in *The Hidden Ground of Love*, and now exist, in an abbreviated form, in a section of the one-volume anthology, *Thomas Merton: A Life in Letters*. Meanwhile, Orbis Books has brought out trade editions of both *Cold War Letters* and *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, plus my own book, *The Root of War is Fear: Thomas Merton's Advice to Peacemakers*.

Correspondence is important work. Evelyn Waugh so admired Merton-the-letter-writer that he once advised Merton to give up writing books in order to have more time for correspondence. Letters matter — certainly Merton's did. I can recite by heart parts of certain letters Merton sent me. Through his letters, Merton played the role of spiritual father to many people deeply engaged in the world.

In my own case, I don't know how I would have gotten through that nightmarish time without those letters. Peace work is not always, or even often, peaceful. Peace groups attract all sorts of people. The peace activist is at least as subject to passions and vanities as anyone else. There are countless opportunities for self-righteousness, self-pity, arrogance, ambition, neglect of relationships, and despair. The religiously-motivated peace activist can come to decide that the Church is not worthy of his or her presence. Ideology can take the place of spiritual life and faith. Attending the liturgy, participating in eucharistic life, praying the rosary, prayer of any kind, going to confession, fasting — all such things can be seen as unimportant or even a waste of time. In such a context, more than most others, the peacemaker is desperately in need of the kind of patient guidance I was fortunate enough to receive from Merton, who was motivated by a genuine vision of peace and not simply driven by anger at the makers of war.

One of Merton's main stresses was to acquire a deeper compassion. Without compassion, he pointed out, protesters tend to become more and more centered in anger and, far from contributing to anyone's conversion, can actually become an obstacle to changing the attitudes of others. As he put it in one of his early letters to me:

*We have to have a deep patient compassion for the fears of men, for the fears and irrational mania of those who hate or condemn us.... [These are, after all] the ordinary people, the ones who don't want war, the ones who get it in the neck, the ones who really want to build a decent new world in which there will not be war and starvation.*

Another letter that came to mean a great deal to me went to a level deeper, from compassion to love. This one was sent to Dorothy Day:



*Persons are not known by intellect alone, not by principles alone, but only by love. It is when we love the other, the enemy, that we obtain from God the key to an understanding of who he is, and who we are. It is only this realization that can open to us the real nature of our duty, and of right action.*

Not least important to me was a letter I received at a time when I was feeling that the work we were doing was having no positive impact whatsoever. Here is a brief extract from his response, written in 1966:

*Do not depend on the hope of results. When you are doing the sort of work you have taken on, essentially an apostolic work, you may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all, if not perhaps results opposite to what you expect. As you get used to this idea, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself. And there too a great deal has to be gone through, as gradually you struggle less and less for an idea and more and more for specific people. The range tends to narrow down, but it gets much more real. In the end, it is the reality of personal relationships that saves everything.*

These letters are really about stages of conversion. Merton won his original renown for a book about conversion. It's hardly surprising that he realized that, for all of us, conversion is ultimately our only hope. To become a peaceful person, to live in a way that contributes to peace, to live in a way that helps save life rather than in a way that contributes to the killing of others, to live in such a way that others may decide to live differently -- that is an extraordinary achievement. Indeed it is never fully achieved. It's an ongoing process, as all conversion is. Along the way we make mistakes, some of them serious. Repentance, confession, reconciliation, and many fresh starts are needed.

This was true in the early Church and remains true in our own time. All armies are built one-by-one. This is also especially true of the army that sheds no blood.

Though his own commitment was obvious, it's striking that Merton never demanded that anyone, Christian or otherwise, was obliged to "join the army that sheds no blood." You will never find him insisting that a Christian is duty-bound to be a conscientious objector. He had great sympathy for those who felt they had no viable nonviolent alternative to taking part in bloodshed. Also, with his aversion to labels, it is hardly surprising that he avoided calling himself a pacifist. Yet again and again Merton made clear his conviction, echoing Clement of Alexandria, that the highest form of Christian discipleship presupposed the renunciation of violence.

This is how he put it in an important passage included in "The Christian in World Crisis", an essay included in *Seeds of Destruction*:

*The Christian does not need to fight and indeed it is better that he should not fight, for insofar as he imitates his Lord and Master, he proclaims that the Messianic Kingdom has come and bears witness to the presence of the **Kyrios Pantocrator** [Lord of Creation] in mystery, even in the midst of the conflicts and turmoil of the world. [p 129]*

Merton's good friend, Clement of Alexandra, could have written the same words.