

MEETING THOMAS MERTON

Part II of the address given at the meeting of the
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IN THIS ATTEMPT to recall Merton, let me share with you not only a few memories of being with him, but also extracts from a few letters.

While his writings touched on numerous topics, many did contain advice about peacemaking. It is a timely theme for us as well, faced as we are by several wars and a sense of grave danger not unlike that which we were facing in the sixties.

Peacemaking was a subject about which Merton knew a great deal, not only because he had been drawn to various protest movements in his pre-monastic life, but especially because living in any monastic community necessarily involves an on-going conversion in the context of disagreement and even of conflict. This is especially true for someone with responsibility for guiding novices. One is obliged to try and overcome differences which, left unresolved, can easily reach boiling point.

The guest may imagine that the monastery he is visiting is a haven of profound peace, but his hosts have no illusions that they are already living in the kingdom of God. The borders of Hell are often right under one's feet! His experience of conflict in monastic life made Merton deeply sensitive to problems faced by people in various movements for peace and respect for human life.

One of Merton's recurring themes was the absolute necessity of compassion toward one's opponents, including those who found protesters more distressing than a profoundly destructive but familiar *status quo*. In

one letter, Merton wrote:

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...

Compassion is a quality often missing in those who see themselves as reformers. We easily become contemptuous of our opponents and even of those who have no opinion. We demand agreement. We judge others. We easily accumulate enemies.

Most people, Merton pointed out, are irritated or frightened by agitation even when it protests something – militarism, nuclear weapons, social injustice – which objectively endangers their lives and the lives of the people dearest to them. Merton noted in another letter how people “do not feel at all threatened by the bomb...but they feel terribly threatened by some... student carrying a placard...”

Merton insisted that without love, especially love of opponents and enemies, neither personal nor social transformation can occur. Love is more than an appreciative response to people we happen to find attractive or threatening. Rather, as he wrote 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. To shut out the person and to refuse to consider him as a person, as an other self, we resort to the impersonal ‘law’ and to abstract ‘nature.’ That is

to say we block off the reality of the other, we cut the intercommunication of our nature and his nature, and we consider only our own nature with its rights, its claims, its demands. And we justify the evil we do to our brother because he is no longer a brother, he is merely an adversary, an accused. To restore communication, to see our oneness of nature with him, and to respect his personal rights and his integrity, his worthiness of love, we have to see ourselves as similarly accused along with him... and needing, with him, the ineffable gift of grace and mercy to be saved. Then, instead of pushing him down, trying to climb out by using his head as a stepping-stone for ourselves, we help ourselves to rise by helping him to rise. For when we extend our hand to the enemy who is sinking in the abyss, God reaches out to both of us, for it is He first of all who extends our hand to the enemy. It is He who ‘saves himself’ in the enemy, who makes use of us to recover the lost goat which is His image in our enemy.

To bear in mind that each person is a bearer of God's image, no matter how hidden it may be, this is the beginning of peacemaking.

In another letter, Merton goes on to point out that where compassion and love are absent, actions that may be superficially non-violent can in reality mask deep hostility, contempt and the desire to defeat and humiliate an opponent. As he reminded me in one of his most insightful letters:

One of the problematic questions about non-violence is the inevitable involvement of hidden aggressions and provocations. I think this is especially true when there are...elements that are not spiritually developed. It is an enormously subtle question, but we have to consider the fact that, in its provocative aspect, non-violence may tend to harden opposition and confirm people in their righteous blindness. It may even in some cases separate men out and drive them in the other direction, away from us and away from peace. This of course may be (as it was with the prophets) part of God's plan. A clear separation of antagonists... [But we must] always direct our action toward opening people's eyes to the truth, and if they are blinded, we must try to be sure we

did nothing specifically to blind them. Yet there is that danger: the danger one observes subtly in tight groups like families and monastic communities, where the martyr for the right sometimes thrives on making his persecutors terribly and visibly wrong. He can drive them in desperation to be wrong, to seek refuge in the wrong, to seek refuge in violence.... In our acceptance of vulnerability...we play [on the guilt of the opponent]. There is no finer torment. This is one of the enormous problems of our time... all this guilt and nothing to do about it except finally to explode and blow it all out in hatreds, race hatreds, political hatreds, war hatreds. We, the righteous, are dangerous people in such a situation.... We have got to be aware of the awful sharpness of truth when it is used as a weapon, and since it can be the deadliest weapon, we must take care that we don't kill more than falsehood with it. In fact, we must be careful how we ‘use’ truth, for we are ideally the instruments of truth and not the other way around...

The peace movements of the sixties were certainly very often channels of tremendous hostility, self-righteousness and contempt for others. Merton also saw how the peace movement often tended to identify too much with particular political groups and leftist ideologies. Ideally it should stand outside all ideologies and political faction. Its actions should communicate life-giving possibilities to others no matter how locked in they are to violent structures. As he put it to me in one letter:

It seems to me that the basic problem is not political, it is apolitical and human. One of the most important things to do is to keep cutting deliberately through political lines and barriers and emphasizing the fact that these are largely fabrications and that there is another dimension, a genuine reality, totally opposed to the fictions of politics: the human dimension which politics pretends to arrogate entirely [to itself].... This is the necessary first step along the long way ... of purifying, humanizing and somehow illuminating politics...

Peacemaking, he said repeatedly, is

hardly possible without a well-formed spiritual life, with the usual elements of prayer and fasting, quiet reflection, and sacramental life. Prayer was at very top of the list. How can one love a person one will not pray for? Or, without prayer, find the strength to overcome despair? As he wrote in one letter to me:

[W]e have to pray for a total and profound change in the mentality of the whole world. What we have known in the past as Christian penance is not a deep enough concept if it does not comprehend the special problems and dangers of the present age. Hair shirts will not do the trick, though there is no harm in mortifying the flesh. But vastly more important is the complete change of heart and the totally new outlook on the world of man.... The great problem is this inner change.... [Any peace action has] to be regarded...as an application of spiritual force and not the use of merely political pressure. We all have the great duty to realize the deep need for purity of soul, that is the deep need to possess in us the Holy Spirit, to be possessed by Him. This takes precedence over everything else.

Let me read just one more letter. Here he turns to another familiar theme, the necessity of not being overly attached to achieving specific goals. He was convinced that engagement was made stronger by detachment. Not to be misunderstood as a lack of interest in achieving results, detachment meant knowing that no good action is wasted even if the immediate consequences are altogether different than whatever one hoped to achieve. This was written in 1966, during a period when it seemed to me that all our activities aimed at restraining or ending the war in Vietnam were futile:

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.

You are fed up with words, and I don't blame you. I am nauseated by them sometimes. I am also, to tell the truth, nauseated by ideals and with causes. This sounds like heresy, but I think you will understand what I mean. It is so easy to get engrossed with ideas and slogans and myths that in the end one is left holding the bag, empty, with no trace of meaning left in it. And then the temptation is to yell louder than ever in order to make the meaning be there again by magic. Going through this kind of reaction helps you to guard against this. Your system is complaining of too much verbalizing, and it is right.

The big results are not in your hands or mine, but they suddenly happen, and we can share in them; but there is no point in building our lives on this personal satisfaction, which may be denied us and which after all is not that important.

The next step in the process is for you to see that your own thinking about what you are doing is crucially important. You are probably striving to build yourself an identity in your work, out of your work and your witness. You are using it, so to speak, to protect yourself against nothingness, annihilation. That is not the right use of your work. All the good that you will do will come not from you but from the fact that you have allowed yourself, in the obedience of faith, to be used by God's love. Think of this more, and gradually you will be free from the need to prove yourself, and you can be more open to the power that will work through you without your knowing it.

The great thing after all is to live, not to pour out your life in the service of a myth: and we turn the best things into myths. If you can get free from the domination of causes and just serve Christ's truth, you will be able to do more and will be less crushed by the inevitable disappointments. Because I see nothing whatever in sight but much disappointment, frustration and confusion... The real hope, then, is not in something we think we can do but in God who is making something good out of it in some way we cannot see. If we can do His will, we will be helping in this process.

But we will not necessarily know all about it beforehand."

It is on this note of radical detachment that I want at last to address the question that is supposed to be theme of this lecture: Does Thomas Merton have something to offer people like ourselves and our children living in a new century? I realize I am preaching to the choir in saying the answer is "yes," but let me do so anyway.

What is it that keeps Merton so fresh all these years after his death? Why is he still such a helpful presence in so many lives?

In Thomas Merton we meet a man who spent the greater part of his life trying with all his being to find the truth and to live a truthful life. Though he chose a celibate vocation in an enclosed monastic environment, he nonetheless (mainly thanks to his several abbots) had a voice which was heard over the abbey walls. With tremendous candor, he exposed through his writings his own on-going struggles, that he was like the rest of us, often wracked with uncertainties, and no stranger to the temptations each of us faces.

At a time when there was little inter-religious contact, he challenged his readers to find God not only within their particular community but across national as well as cultural and religious borders. He did this while giving an example of how one could at the same time remain deeply rooted in Christian belief and faith. He was a man of dialogue, as we see in the hundreds of letters he wrote to an astonishing variety of people in all parts of the world, including Soviet Russia. We also see in him one of the healers of Christian divisions. He did this not by renouncing anything a Catholic Christian would normally believe, but by allowing himself to become aware of anything of value in other parts of

the Christian community, whether something as big and deeply rooted as the Orthodox Church or as small as the Shaker movement whose craftsmen made chairs fit for angels to sit on.

We see in him a pilgrim. As pilgrim tend to do, he crossed many borders, but the greater part of that journey was lived in a small corner of Kentucky. During his 26 years as a monk of the Abbey of Gethsemani, he rarely travelled further than Louisville. For all his felt temptations to move elsewhere, he remained a member of his particular monastic community until his dying day. He is a model of uncomfortable stability. His pilgrimage was one that didn't require hiking boots.

Merton is a model of someone with an unshakable love not only of Christ but of Christ's mother and grandmother. Whenever he had a building in need of a dedication such as his hermitage or other shelters of solitude, it was either to Mary or Anne. In the communion of saints, they were his permanent patrons. Everything he did or represents is rooted, in part, in his devotion to them.

Sometimes I am asked, 'Is Thomas Merton a saint? Might he one day have a place in the Church calendar?' I know him too well to say a glib "yes," but also too well to say "no". He was not a perfect person. We know his imperfections because he made a point of writing them down for us to read. Yet I think, in God's mercy, the answer is yes. Few people have done so much to help so many find their way toward Christ and a deeper faith. Few people have drawn so many toward the mercy of God.

Notes

Orthodox Peace Fellowship web site:

<http://www.incommunion.org>

Jim & Nancy Forest web site:

<http://www.incommunion.org/home>