

Thomas Merton and Giorgio La Pira: a Friendship for Peace

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The holy mayor

‘Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become “the father of many nations”, according to what was said, “So numerous shall your descendants be.”’

Romans 4.18

This phrase from St Paul’s letter to the Romans concerning the role and character of Abraham in history can be taken to represent the guiding principle for the human, spiritual and social action of Giorgio la Pira (1904–1977), one of the most prominent figures of post-war Italian politics and culture.

Born and raised in a humble Sicilian family, La Pira became professor of Roman Law at the University of Florence and mayor of the city. His involvement in politics was always in accord with his committed Christian faith which came from his membership of the tertiary order of the Dominicans. His often quoted ‘Hope against hope’ is the key to his work for peace in the world, for he was constantly aware of the cultural, religious and political barriers which make solutions difficult. He was strongly convinced of God’s action in history and of the necessity of unifying the Abrahamic faiths. La Pira believed that Christians, Jews, and Muslims should meet in a process of peace and he saw the Mediterranean as the equivalent of Lake Tiberias where Jesus showed us the possibility of breaking barriers by walking on the water. Such a reunification under the name of the same God would affect other faiths because as La Pira saw: ‘The

Middle East today is the core around which the political history of the world moves: peace or discord in Jerusalem are and will always be the symptoms that reveal peace and discord in nations.’¹

La Pira was mayor of Florence from 1951 to 1958 and then again between 1961 and 1966, and made the city a symbol of peace, promoting the ‘Mediterranean meetings’, four important conferences involving the Mediterranean countries and the mayors of the major capitals of the world, with the aim of ‘unifying the cities in order to unify the nations’. He was in touch with the most important figures in politics and culture of the day, and travelled widely on his mission of peace, convinced of the prophetic vision of Isaiah: ‘They shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks.’ (Isaiah 2.4). Thanks to this, and also to the work he did for the poor of Florence animated by deep Christian piety, prayer and a contemplative spirit, Florentines called him ‘the holy mayor’. He is honoured as a Servant of God by the Catholic Church and the process of his beatification has begun.

The way of Isaiah

Giorgio La Pira received a copy of Thomas Merton’s essay ‘Christian Ethics and Nuclear War’ in 1961, and Merton had also sent a copy to the editor of the monthly *Rocca* of the Pro Civitate Cristiana. However the essay was not published at the time, despite the insistence of La Pira, as the writings of the Trappist monk on nuclear war were censored by the seniors of his order. Thus La Pira was aware of Merton’s commitment against war and especially global war and he arranged to meet him at Gethsemani on a trip to the USA in 1964 when he was at Philadelphia, the sister city of Florence, meeting with international political figures, such as U-Thant, the General Secretary of the United Nations.

The meeting between La Pira and Merton took place on October 16. Merton described La Pira as ‘ebulliently Christian, but a very

good head too'² and said that he 'impressed everyone he met'.³ The following day La Pira met Adlai Stevenson, American ambassador to the UN and former presidential candidate. Merton wrote to his friend W.H. Ferry suggesting La Pira for the conference he was organizing on the encyclical *Pacem in terris*.⁴ The meeting at Gethsemani started a deep friendship between them, rooted in their faith and in a common commitment to peace at a time when it was seriously threatened by American foreign policy.



Photograph of, left to right, Thomas Merton, Vittorio Citterich (who accompanied La Pira), and Giorgio La Pira at Gethsemani 16 October 1964

At the beginning of November 1964 La Pira sent Merton a telegram in Latin expressing a feeling of deep spiritual communion: 'Aperit vobis Dominus portas Paradisi sicut nobis aperistis portas Monasterii. Orate pro Florentia et pro nobis'. ('May God open the gates of Paradise as you opened to us the door of the monastery. Pray for Florence and for us'). The answer came back in French (La Pira had a limited knowledge of English) in which Merton thanked him

and expressed the joy of all the monks for his visit to their 'desert', considering it a gift of divine providence. Moreover, he expressed his whole-hearted approval of the 'theology of history' according to which God reveals himself through the events of imperfect people, going on to say that it is then our obligation to trust him with faith and prayer.⁵ La Pira agreed, recognizing that the alternative could only be the total destruction of mankind. Isaiah had already seen 'this irreversible course of universal history'⁶ which drives irresistibly towards the 'mouth' of peace in spite of all the obstacles between people. Political action must aim at the fulfillment of God's design.

In Merton's response he declared that he did not understand what the Vatican was saying about peace and that he was afraid of the belligerent attitude of the American government and its attempts to hide the serious danger of a nuclear war. Merton and La Pira were seriously worried about the foreign policy of Lyndon Johnson who they saw as labouring under the disastrous illusion that the Vietnam war and military action in the Dominican Republic would free the world from communism. La Pira sent Merton some thoughts which he had already expressed to the City Council in Florence in which he condemned American actions and also expressed his concerns about major changes which were about to be made to Scheme 13, the precursor of the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*. As a result of the correspondence, both felt the need to write to the Holy Father to express frankly what the commitment of the Church should be to achieve an authentic peace process. In a letter Merton sent to his friend on 3 June 1965 he stated the following:

Il faudrait au contraire aller encore plus loin que Joan XXIII et Paul VI dans leur encycliques. Mais enfin, si on ne va plus loin, il ne faut pas en toutes les renverser.⁷ (We must go further than John XXIII and Paul VI in their encyclicals. But if we don't go any further we must not overturn everything that has been gained)

La Pira saw in Merton an authentic messenger of peace, 'bearing the face and the name of Jesus',⁸ and was happy to hear of his possible visit to the UN and the White House, praying for grace to fulfill that 'itinerary of salvation' which might be connected to other peace actions in world capitals. He considered this as continuing his own recent journey to Palestine in a spirit of faith and universal brotherhood similar to the command to be 'witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1.8). La Pira sent a letter to Robert Kennedy, copied to Merton, stressing his worries about the worsening situation in Vietnam and inviting him to sustain the historical and political message of his brother John: 'if we don't extinguish the war we will set this planet ablaze'. He addressed him as a sincere friend and expressed the need 'to cross the borders of the new world' and transcend ideology. He asked him to correspond with Merton who was writing intensively on peace. In the senator's reply he talked about 'the soul of hope' in the disarmament process, which La Pira saw as the only way to peace, the way of fulfilling Isaiah's vision of swords changed into ploughshares.

Merton had been corresponding with significant figures, including members of the Kennedy family since December 1961. To Ethel Kennedy, wife of the senator, Merton wrote:

It seems to me that the great problem we face is not Russia but war itself. War is the main enemy and we are not going to fully make sense unless we see that. Unless we fight war, both in ourselves and in the Russians, and wherever else it may be, we are purely and simply going to be wrecked by the forces that are in us.⁹

Convinced of Merton's desire to contribute to 'pacifying, unifying, and civilizing the world'¹⁰ La Pira worked intensively from Florence to build a way of world salvation very much in tune with Merton's employment of essays, letters, and contacts with relevant people. La

Pira used to repeat 'ut unum sint' ('they shall be one') to express his sense that the need was for the meeting of peoples on the lines indicated by Merton for the unification of men as an epiphany of God. They were both animated by the same commitment to peace in the world, aware of the serious dangers to peace from conflicts due to historical and ideological reasons or just pure affirmation of power. They were firmly convinced that the problem of war had to be faced at its root cause by encouraging the authentic nature of people, especially their spiritual dimension, through meetings, dialogue, and the widest possible diffusion of writings. That way consciences would be moved and new options be opened to those who have responsibility for the destiny of the world.

Florence, the injured city

La Pira was aware that Florence was a privileged place for people to encounter one another and its message of peace, because the city belonged not just to Italy but to the whole world. Its beauty, history, art and its cultural life make the city a crossroads for civilisation. It is a city where intellectual debate and the development of thought have always reached the highest levels. La Pira himself found in the city the opportunity of friendship and support from some of the most important representatives of Catholic thought of the 60s and 70s, such as Giuseppe Dossetti and Father Ernesto Balducci. The latter, a cultured writer enlightened by a deep ecumenical vision, wrote a beautiful preface to the Italian edition of *Faith and Violence*, about which Thomas Merton was very enthusiastic.

The last contact between Merton and La Pira was a telegram sent 18 January 1967, two months after the disastrous flood of Florence. La Pira wrote in English: 'Beg you send us few lines for book on recent flood of Florence and meaning Florence in world Please Urgently La Pira.' Merton answered with a letter and a short essay he composed

the same day in which he spoke of his deep love of Florence and his anguish at the news.

Wherever disaster strikes at man, all men feel themselves threatened. But when disaster strikes at Florence, the knife is too close to the heart of our civilization. The shock and the alarm are universal: the worth and the very identity of our world are called into question. Florence calls all men to solidarity against the forces of unreason and death that would betray and dishonor in man the image of God.¹¹

Conclusion

The short meeting at Gethsemani in October 1964 and the correspondence that followed were enough to establish between them an authentic friendship based on a strong respect for each other. Merton called La Pira ‘a very prominent Catholic politician in Italy, close to Paul VI’¹² and, in a letter to the young Italian student Mario Falsina, who had asked Merton who were the Italians who had impressed and influenced him most, he wrote that, besides Dante, the great saints and several writers such as Montale and Quasimodo, ‘I add that I am glad to be a friend of La Pira.’¹³ Even though he was eleven years older than Merton, La Pira used to write to him as ‘beatissimo padre’ (very blessed father) and signed the letters ‘filialmente’ (as a son). These are the expressions of a humble and devoted man who found in his American friend the fullness of a person committed to action in the world out of the silence of an intense spiritual life. Their relationship is a testimony of humanity, intellect and faith and represents for us a precious heritage in the modern world.

In a letter from La Pira to the director of the Thomas Merton Center in May 1973 he wrote that he had an indelible memory of his visit nine years before and of the importance of the meeting for him. He expressed his belief that ordinary everyday life cannot be

sustained unless on the other arm of the scales there are ‘weights of contemplation and prayer, the weights of purity and grace!’¹⁴

Notes

1. *Il grande lago di Tiberiade – Lettere di Giorgio La Pira per la pace nel Mediterraneo (1954–1977)*, a cura di M.P. Giovannoni (Firenze, 2006), p.125.
2. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love – Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. W.H. Shannon (San Diego, New York, London: Harvest/HBJ, 1985), p.219.
3. Patrick Hart (ed.), *The School of Charity – Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction* (San Diego, New York, London: Harvest/HBJ, 1990), p.251.
4. *The Hidden Ground of Love*, p.219.
5. Letter of Thomas Merton to Giorgio La Pira, 13 November 1964.
6. Giorgio La Pira, ‘Spes contra spem’ in *La Badia* no. 11, December 1990, p.58.
7. Letter of Thomas Merton to Giorgio la Pira, 3 June 1965.
8. Letter of Giorgio La Pira to Thomas Merton, 16 June 1965.
9. Thomas Merton, *Cold War Letters* (New York: Orbis Books, 2006), p.27.
10. Letter of Giorgio La Pira to Thomas Merton, 8 July 1965.
11. A brief essay of Thomas Merton about the flood of Florence sent to Giorgio La Pira, 18 January 1967.
12. *The Hidden Ground of Love*, p.219.
13. *The Road to Joy – Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends*, ed. R. E. Daggy (San Diego, New York, London: Harvest/HBJ, 1993), p.149.
14. Letter of Giorgio La Pira to the Director of the Merton Center, 29 May 1973.

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