

Thomas Merton and Current Issues in Church Renewal

By **J. Patrick Mahon**

Introduction

Thomas Merton was a complex person whose entire life was a search for meaning and the ultimate meaning, God. As Merton grew in contemplative practice, he came to understand his role as contemplative critic. Having sought and found a life of solitude which gave him the structures he needed for growth in contemplative living, he became a contemplative critic/prophet. He spoke boldly against total war, nuclear weapons, and racism. Were he alive today he would be once again a contemplative critic in the nation and in the Church.

Writing with reference to the opening of the Merton Room at Bellarmine College (now University) in Louisville, Kentucky, Merton summarized the intent of his work as a whole:

Whatever I may have written, I think it can all be reduced in the end to this one root truth: that God calls human persons to union with Himself and one another in Christ, in the Church which is His Mystical Body. It is also a witness to the fact that there is and must be, in the Church, a contemplative life which has no other function than to realize these mysterious things, and return to God all the thanks and praise that human hearts can give Him.

It is certainly true that I have written about more than just the contemplative life. I have articulately resisted attempts to have myself classified as an “inspirational writer.” But if I have written about interracial justice, or thermonuclear weapons, it is because these issues are terribly relevant to one great truth: that man is called to live as a son of God. Man must respond to this call to live in peace with all his brothers in the One Christ.¹

According to John Howard Griffin, author of *Black like Me* and Merton’s first official biographer, Merton found himself in complete agreement with Francis of Assisi’s “preach the Gospel and use words only if you have to.” Reporting that one of the sisters at the Bangkok conference had taken exception to what Merton said, Griffin wrote that when François de Grunne brought the nun’s objections to a “very tired Father Louis,” Merton responded, “What we are asked to do at present is not so much to speak of Christ as to let Him live in us so that people may find him by feeling how He lives in us.”²

Merton was also very interested not only in his own growth in the love of God – Christ living within him – but also in monastic and ecclesial renewal, especially after the Second Vatican Council. My reading of Merton continues to show me how much of his thinking in the 1960s is still very relevant for Church renewal today.

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Merton saw monastic renewal and Church renewal to be a matter of mysticism – a matter of union with God, one another and all of God’s creation. Renewal is “not a question at all of making an institution meaningful and relevant to the world. It is a question of renewing an age-old experience. The real essence of monasticism [and Christianity] is the handing down from master to disciple of an uncommunicable experience.”³ Mysticism by its very nature is grounded in “uncommunicable experience.”

Renewal is as much an issue for the Church in America today as it was in Merton’s day. The Church in America today faces a crisis and at least three issues loom large – the use of authority in the Church, the role of women in the Church, and the ordination/reactivation of married priests.

Chafing under the heavy hands of Trappist censors, Merton challenged abuses of authority. The role of women is a justice issue which has been preempted by Pope John Paul II’s declaration that the Church cannot ordain women. The pope attempted to clothe this absolute decision in the cloak of infallibility by calling it “definitive doctrine.” Third, the shortage of priests and the closing of parishes have led many to advocate the ordination of married men and the reinstatement of priests who have married. Merton was explicit on the abuse of authority in the Church, women priests and married priests.

Abuses of Authority in the Church

Merton was a loving critic. Loving the Church he had found in his search for meaning, he wanted to be a bridge-builder. When Dom Gabriel Sortais finally lowered the hammer and forbade Merton to publish on war and nuclear weapons, Merton’s abbot, Dom James Fox, allowed him to circulate his writings in mimeographed form to his friends who then gave them to their friends. Merton chafed under the heavy hand of censorship: “I rebel against being treated as a ‘property,’ as an ‘instrument’ and as a ‘thing’ by the Superiors of this Order. He [Dom Gabriel] definitely insists that I think as he thinks, for to think with him is ‘to think with the Church.’ To many this would seem quite obvious. Is it not the formula they follow in Moscow?”⁴ In an interview with Thomas McDonnell in 1967, Merton spoke of “the crisis of authority” in the Church. Little has changed and Merton’s critique is right on target today:

There can be no question that the great crisis in the Church today is the crisis of authority brought on by the fact that the Church, as institution and organization, has in practice usurped the place of the Church as a community of persons united in love and in Christ. On the one hand, love is announced and “instilled” but, on the other, it is equated with obedience and conformity within the framework of an impersonal corporation. This means too often that in practice love is overshadowed by intolerance, suspicion and fear. Authority becomes calculating and anxious, and discredits itself by nervously suppressing an imagined opposition before the opposition really takes shape. In so doing, it creates opposition. The Church is preached as a communion, but is run as a collectivity, and even as a totalitarian collectivity. . . . It may mean the complete destruction of the Church as a powerful institution.⁵

According to Merton scholar Fr. Patrick Collins, Merton often despaired of the Church ever initiating any real renewal or reform.⁶ Believing that the Church is in a “severe crisis,” Merton told Nicaraguan poet Pablo Antonio Cuadra, “I personally think that we are paralyzed by institutionalism, formalism, rigidity, and regression. The real life of the Church is not in her hierarchy, it is dormant somewhere.”⁷

Uniformity in dogma and practice has replaced unity which allows for diversity. Orthodoxy, correct belief in stated dogmas, has replaced orthopraxy, maintaining appropriate relationships based on love and baptismal unity. Merton tells Czeslaw Milosz that the Church is “a mystery that is beyond the reach of bureaucracy, though sometimes one is tempted to doubt it” (CT 82). Merton affirms Karl Rahner’s “deep concern for a new and less rigidly institutional view of the Church.”⁸

The role of the episcopacy has dwindled over the past few centuries. Vatican II gave hope for renewed collegial cooperation between and among the bishops and the pope. To preserve its hegemony, the Roman Curia wasted no time in taking the initiative to recapture the role of preeminence it enjoyed before the Council. The fact that there were Russian observers at the Council gave Merton hope. He had studied Eastern Christian, particularly Russian, mysticism. He believed that the “clarification of the ‘collegiality of the bishops’ was a welcome one,” commenting: “I am very drawn to the Russian idea of sobornost [the doctrine of the Spirit acting and leading the whole Church into truth] which seems to me to be essential to the notion of the Church, in some form or other. I do not know how this can be gainsaid. Collegiality is a step in that direction” (HGL 104). When it came to dealing with perceived abuses of authority, Merton was no shrinking violet. After Pope John XXIII issued his encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*, which Merton had influenced, Merton wrote to Dom Gabriel and told him it was a “good thing that Pope John didn’t have to get his encyclical through our censors” (HGL 274). Shortly thereafter, the Order lifted the censorship mantle. Much more could be said about Merton and his reactions to abuses of church authority; however, that would take us beyond the purpose of this article.

The Role of Women in the Church

Merton’s most mature thought about women and specifically about their role in the Church can be found in *The Springs of Contemplation*,⁹ transcripts of discussions Merton had with contemplative women religious whom he had invited to the monastery for retreats in December 1967 and May 1968. Merton’s remarks show that he had been influenced by the writings of Mary Daly, feminist theologian from Boston College. Writing to Marie Cantlon, an editor at Harper and Row, Merton gave a thumbs-up to Daly’s groundbreaking book, *The Church and the Second Sex*, in which Daly excoriated the patriarchal policies of the Roman Catholic Church:

Mary Daly has given us a hard-hitting, highly original, and even revolutionary little book unmasking the latent anti-feminism of so much Catholic thinking and practice. The real impact of the book is not just in the area of crass and obvious discrimination, but in its “exorcism of the mystique of the eternal woman.” She has brought out with relentless and sometimes infuriating clarity how this supposed idealization of women in fact masks a mutilation of human persons – both men and women. She writes with such passion that some readers might think she was advocating conflict and competition between the sexes: actually,

she is talking about the more difficult and important work of achieving authentic partnership on a personal level. I am grateful to her for many new insights.¹⁰

Merton told the women religious that the feminine mystique accounts for the problems they are having with Rome. The mystique is “an instrument of oppression.” Merton tells the women religious that they must liberate themselves by breaking “out of this image, this view that you can’t make your own decisions because you’re passive and mysterious and veiled and different. . . . Before the advent of cities and armies, society tended to be matriarchal and egalitarian. A ‘hierarchical, priestly society’ emerged ‘with men at the top’ and has led to the exploitation of women in the Church and society” (*SC* 163-64). Merton also identifies misogyny in the Church and charges that “Many men and a lot of clerics are really women-haters” (*SC* 171). Merton would certainly critique the patriarchal, hierarchical Church and its continued exploitation of women by treating them as second-class citizens and denying them full participation in the sacramental life of the Church. Yet, he disagrees with Mary Daly and indeed with many in the women’s priest movement today. In his approach Merton is quite forward-thinking and quite relevant today:

Whether a solution to the problem is for women to be priests, I don’t know. I leave that to you to figure out. . . . In her argument, Mary Daly is considering a masculine form of hierarchical setup and saying that women have to get into this place that men have made for themselves in the hierarchy. I don’t think that at all. I think the whole thing needs to be changed, the whole idea of the priesthood has to be changed. I think we need to develop a whole new style of worship in which there is no need for one hierarchical person to have a big central place, a form of worship in which everyone is involved. (*SC* 175-76)

Priesthood Today

The issue of the ordination of women segues into a discussion of married secular clergy. Again, we see the timeliness of Merton’s thought for today. In 1981, Dutch theologian Edward Schillebeeckx set forth his theory that priesthood emerges from within the Christian community. For Schillebeeckx,

priesthood is the emergence of ministry from below driven by the social dynamics of the primitive Christian communities. He maintains that this original ministry gradually developed a cultic dimension which subsequently became the dominant characteristic. In particular circumstances he would say that the sacramental needs of the community could mandate the celebration of the Eucharist by a designated, non-ordained member of the faithful.¹¹

Following Schillebeeckx’s lead, in 2007 the Dutch Dominicans addressed the issues of the priest shortage and the emerging sense of priesthood. In “Toward the Church of the Future,” they proposed “a revised theology of ministry coming from Vatican II”: “the time is at hand for parish communities to designate laypersons to preside at Eucharist in place of priests – a form of ordination from below. It also declared that current church law, which bars women and married men from priestly service, stems from a ‘historically outdated philosophy of humankind and an antiquated view of sexuality.’”¹²

Given his comments on women in the priesthood, Merton would be pleased with this development. Merton believed that priests should be able to marry; however, he did not “think that the solution is for a lot of priests to get married. . . . I think the solution is for priests *to be able* to get married if they want to” (SC 175). Merton rejects the idea that “you can’t have personal fulfillment without marriage” (SC 241). Nevertheless, priests should be allowed to marry: “The other part of this, which I think is perfectly true, is that celibacy should be optional for the secular clergy. Because there is just no reason why not. If a priest wants to stay celibate, fine, but if not, there’s no reason why he shouldn’t be married” (SC 241). Merton accepted the invitation to be an advisor to the National Association for Pastoral Renewal in April 1967. (NAPR was an organization of inactive married priests and lay people who were interested in Church renewal.) Merton wrote:

This problem [married secular clergy] must be faced, though many would prefer to ignore it in the hope that it might just go away. There is no hope of it “going away.” It will become more and more urgent from day to day and I think everyone realizes more or less that it involves the future of the Church in the modern world. That is why some find it so frightening: they are still not ready to admit that drastic change in many fields is required if the Church is to continue her mission successfully.¹³

In the same acceptance letter, Merton opined that the hierarchical priesthood has divided Christians into two classes: “those who take their faith most seriously and are consequently celibate, and ‘second class Christians’ who have to marry but who make up for it by trying to maintain some vestiges of a monastic spirituality even in lay life, and bringing up one or two children for the priesthood or the cloister.”

Merton also discussed celibacy in his 1967 interview with Thomas McDonnell. The interviewer reminded Merton that he had written in “Day of a Stranger” that he saw no reason why a man cannot “love God and a woman at the same time.” Merton replied in part: “First, I would like to say this about celibacy and solitude. To regard them and to undertake them in a spirit of perfectionism is a blasphemous waste of time. That is why it makes so much sense for many priests today to prefer a serious married life to a futile perfectionism in celibacy.” Citing Camus, Merton considers celibate life to be “a life of radical absurdity” (McDonnell 37). “The real point of marriage is not just sexual fulfillment but a communion of persons” (McDonnell 37). Merton concludes:

The celibate condition, in the course of time, has become encrusted with pious lies which hide its real meaning, its real tragedy, and its real nobility: the nobility of its damn foolishness. This is not a masochistic answer, because the peculiar level of acceptance I speak of is not a matter of human ingenuity but of grace. It is God’s mercy and gift. That is where the absurdity becomes a center of peace and finally makes a little sense: there and only there. (McDonnell 37)

The reader should note that Merton endorses married life for secular clergy who wish to marry while maintaining the celibate tradition of monastic life. Many of his comments were written after his brief romantic involvement with his nurse, M., which gives a vital perspective to his views in 1967, one year before his untimely death. Struggling over the relationship he had developed with M., Merton realized for the first time in his life that he was capable of being loved by a woman.

Nevertheless, at a time when there was an exodus of priests from the active ministry, Merton, after much soul-searching, opted for solitude and monastic celibacy. (A full account of Merton's struggle over his relationship with M. can be found in *Learning to Love*, his journal from 1966.¹⁴)

Merton's Approach to Renewal

Perhaps more important than Merton's specific views on these three subjects was his application of non-violent principles to renewal/reform. Merton enunciates deep principles for living in harmony as we attempt to renew the Church. He reminds us first of all to stop pointing fingers and to look within: "So instead of loving what you think is peace, love other men and love God above all. And instead of hating the people you think are warmakers, hate the appetites and the disorder in your own soul, which are the causes of war. If you love peace, then hate injustice, hate tyranny, hate greed – but hate these things in *yourself*, not in another."¹⁵ Many others have understood this principle, including Alexander Solzhenitsyn: "The battleline between good and evil runs through the heart of every man."¹⁶

Merton further elucidates on these principles in his essay "Blessed Are the Meek."¹⁷ The entire article is worth careful study. Here we can only summarize the key principles. First and foremost, nonviolence is not a tactic; it is a way of life. Nonviolence, in our case, is directed toward the transformation of the Church. It goes beyond self-interest and reaches for the common good. Like Mother Teresa, we should shun the "fetishism of immediate visible results" (*FV* 22). We should avoid drawing lines in the sand. The purpose is to engage the adversary in meaningful dialogue where the truth that each person holds is sought and respected. Merton asks, "are we willing to *learn something from the adversary*?" (*FV* 23). Nonviolence requires true humility. Much of the acrimony in the now heated debates in the post-conciliar Church comes from writing off others. Liberals write off bishops as abusers of authority. How could bishops have a piece of the truth? You cannot trust the hierarchy. With this attitude dialogue is impossible. At the same time, conservatives are writing off liberals as people who have badly misinterpreted the intent of Vatican II. Liberals have a piece of the truth that conservatives must respect.

Merton had the innate ability to peel back the layers of the onion until he found what was in common. He calls for us to take a contemplative stance based on prayer and action – actions consistent with our prayers and beliefs. Merton stresses the need for humility:

The mission of Christian humility in social life is not merely to edify, but *to keep minds open to many alternatives*. The rigidity of a certain type of Christian thought has seriously impaired this capacity, which nonviolence must recover. Needless to say, Christian humility must not be confused with a mere desire to win approval and to find reassurance by conciliating others superficially. (*FV* 24)

Finally, Merton believes that hope – Christian eschatological hope – is the cornerstone of nonviolent efforts to renew the Church. We hope to become the Church we wish to see.

Conclusion

Merton, if he were weighing in on these matters today, would cut to the chase. The Church is a community of persons united in the love of the Risen Christ and it should reflect the compassion

of Christ. The community should select its liturgical leaders – male and female, married and unmarried – from the community. This does nothing other than replicate the practice of the early Church. Leaders thus chosen would have the responsibility of leading the community in worship and in service. In all matters, the nonviolence of Christ must be present in renewal efforts.

1. Thomas Merton, “Concerning the Collection in the Bellarmine College Library,” in Thomas Merton, John Howard Griffin, and Monsignor [Alfred] Horrigan, *The Thomas Merton Studies Center* (Santa Barbara, CA: Unicorn Press, 1971) 14-15.
2. John Howard Griffin, “In Search of Thomas Merton,” *Thomas Merton Studies Center* 22.
3. Thomas Merton, *Preview of the Asian Journey*, ed. Walter H. Capps (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 34.
4. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 64 [11/14/1960].
5. Thomas P. McDonnell, “An Interview with Thomas Merton,” *Motive* 28 (October 1967) 36; subsequent references will be cited as “McDonnell” parenthetically in the text.
6. Patrick W. Collins, “Thomas Merton on Ecclesial Reform and Renewal,” *In the Vineyard* 5.20 (16 Nov. 2006); 5.21 (30 Nov. 2006); 6.1 (4 Jan. 2007); see <http://www.votf.org/vineyard/archives.html>.
7. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993) 192; subsequent references will be cited as “CT” parenthetically in the text.
8. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 497; subsequent references will be cited as “HGL” parenthetically in the text.
9. Thomas Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani*, ed. Jane Marie Richardson, SL (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1992); subsequent references will be cited as “SC” parenthetically in the text.
10. Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994) 173-74.
11. Thomas J. McGovern, *Priestly Identity: A Study in the Theology of Priesthood*; <http://www.christendom-awake.org/pages/mcgovern/priestident1.htm> [retrieved February 5, 2011].
12. Robert J. McClory, “The Dutch Plan,” *The National Catholic Reporter* (December 14, 2007); http://www.natcath.org/NCR_Online/archives2/2007d/121407/121407a.htm [retrieved February 5, 2011].
13. “Statement on Clerical Celibacy,” *The Merton Seasonal* 4.3 (Autumn 1979) 8.
14. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997).
15. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 122.
16. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, 2001; [rhttp://thinkexist.com/quotes/alexander_solzhenitsyn/4.html](http://thinkexist.com/quotes/alexander_solzhenitsyn/4.html) [retrieved May 10, 2011].
17. Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 14-29; subsequent references will be cited as “FV” parenthetically in the text.