

Thomas Merton and the Kennedys

By **Thomas Spencer**

In November 1960, Thomas Merton wrote in his journal that he voted for John F. Kennedy for President. When Kennedy's victory was announced, he added that he was "not surprised and not especially impressed either," but felt Kennedy "ought to make a reasonably good President – with the aid of his brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts, uncles, etc."¹ The election of the first Catholic President captivated the monastery. "Kennedy's inauguration speech was read in refectory today," Merton noted on January 22. "Clear and intelligent enough. The country has a good president – it remains to see what the country will do about it" (*TTW* 89). On February 2 he sardonically observed, "every time President Kennedy sneezes or blows his nose an article about it is read in our refectory" (*TTW* 92).

Merton took more than just a passing interest in Kennedy's presidency and it was not simply because Kennedy was Catholic. Prior to Kennedy's election Merton was already familiar with the Kennedy family through his good friend Dan Walsh. Merton met Walsh at Columbia University in the 1930s and it was Walsh who suggested Merton become a Franciscan after he confessed a possible interest in a religious life, and later pointed him toward the Holy Week retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani that would lead to his entrance there in late 1941. The two soon became close friends.² Walsh was a professor at Manhattanville College when he first met Ethel Skakel. Ethel entered Manhattanville in 1945, and enrolled in Walsh's philosophy class. By the time she graduated, Walsh had become a friend and mentor. In 1950 Ethel married Robert F. (Bobby) Kennedy and Walsh was a confidant to both Ethel and Robert during their courtship. When their first child Kathleen was born one year later, they asked Walsh to be her godfather.³

Ann and George Skakel, Ethel's parents, were affluent and generous philanthropists who lived in Greenwich, Connecticut.⁴ George Skakel made his fortune as founder of the Great Lakes Carbon Company. Ann, a devout Irish Catholic from Chicago, attended secretarial school and was an accomplished typist. The Skakels were benefactors of many Catholic organizations, including the Trappists of Gethsemani. Dom James Fox, Abbot of the Abbey of Gethsemani, was a frequent visitor to their home in Connecticut and christened it "*Regina Laudis*" ("The Queen of Praise"). Ann reportedly used the Latin phrase on her personal stationary. The retreatants' chapel at Gethsemani was later named in their honor, a testament to their financial generosity and devotion to the Trappists.

Ann Skakel enjoyed collecting books and she assembled a large library of works by Catholic writers in their Greenwich home. By the early 1950s she was familiar with Merton's writings and through Walsh she volunteered her assistance as a typist. Merton, who did not yet have a full-time secretary, graciously accepted. He told her how delighted he was to hear she would be willing to "add to all of your kindness to us [Trappists] the work of mimeographing."⁵ Two weeks later he told her he remained forever thankful for her "positive eagerness to help a struggling



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Trappist author.”⁶ Over the next several years Merton sent her book manuscripts to type as well as writings and other information that she requested for her personal use. When she asked for a copy of his forthcoming *Ascent to Truth*⁷ he sent her a draft that was still being edited.⁸ On another occasion he sent her 100 copies of the recently published *Sign of Jonas*.⁹

Merton was appreciative of her assistance and she was equally grateful. In her one extant letter to Merton she thanked him for sending a copy of his conferences to the scholastics on St. Bernard of Clairvaux, as well as some Trappist bread and a doll that the abbot asked him to pass along. She acknowledged the generosity of the Trappists and stated she was sharing the bread with friends with the message “to digest it well as it was made by a man full of grace who had offered his life to God.” She told Merton she found his writings “inspiring.”¹⁰

Ann Skakel’s willingness to assist Merton may have stemmed from other motives as well. Brother Patrick Hart, who later served as Merton’s secretary, notes that Ann Skakel was an enthusiastic collector of unpublished manuscripts by Catholic authors (Oppenheimer 74-75). She offered her secretarial services to other writers besides Merton and in that way acquired annotated, unpublished copies that she kept and bound. She had other secretaries type the manuscripts. Ann and George Skakel were killed in a private plane crash in October 1955. At the time of her death, Ann Skakel had acquired a significant number of unpublished manuscripts from various authors, including at least five from Merton (*The Sign of Jonas*, *The Ascent to Truth*, *No Man Is an Island*, *Last of the Fathers*, *Silence in Heaven*) (Oppenheimer 74-75).

John Kennedy’s election in 1960 occurred the same year that Dan Walsh left Manhattanville to accept an appointment at Gethsemani as head of the philosophy department. It also coincided with a period in Merton’s life where he was becoming more involved with world issues. No cause was more important to him at the time than nuclear disarmament. During the first two years of the 1960s Merton wrote his prose-poem *Original Child Bomb*¹¹ dealing with the bombing of Hiroshima, and authored a Prayer for Peace that Congressman Frank Kowalski requested and read before Congress, prior to a vote on whether to rescind the ban on atmospheric testing.¹² Throughout John Kennedy’s presidency the possibility of a nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union appeared very real, as the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 would attest.

Walsh kept Merton informed of Kennedy and Merton no doubt paid more attention to Kennedy’s policies because of Walsh. Although Walsh was not as close to John Kennedy as he was to Robert, he did see the President at Kennedy family gatherings and he had a high opinion of him. Following JFK’s assassination in 1963, he stated in an interview that Kennedy ranked with Pope John XXIII as one of the “saints of the 20th century” (Woolsey). Walsh sent Merton published articles and editorials by more conservative Catholics and others who were critical of Kennedy’s foreign policy for not being tough enough on the Soviets. Such editorials put Kennedy’s policies in a more favorable light and showed him to be moderate and cautious in the quest for world peace.¹³

In the summer of 1961, Merton sent Ethel and Bobby Kennedy a personal note and a prayer to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. In the letter Merton stated he was offering the daily sacrifice of the Mass for their family. It is not clear what prompted him to send the prayer, but Merton’s prior association with Ann Skakel and Dan Walsh’s relationship to Ethel and Bobby were undoubtedly factors. Ethel, a devout Catholic like her mother, appreciated Merton’s thoughtfulness. She had considered

becoming a nun while attending Manhattanville and was a member of the Legion of Mary. She sent Merton a sincere thank you and called his prayer “beautiful.”¹⁴

Merton used the opportunity of Ethel’s reply to write her a lengthy letter concerning Congress’s proposed resumption of atmospheric nuclear testing.¹⁵ Merton expressed the hope that every precaution would be taken to prolong the ban. He argued that the proliferation of nuclear weapons would endanger the peace of the world. He concluded his rather serious letter by attaching what he described as a “gruesome poem about extermination camps.”¹⁶ He noted that in “the last line . . . I say what seems to me needs to be said about nuclear war.” While Merton did not identify the poem in the letter, it is clearly “Chant to Be Used in Processions around a Site with Furnaces.”¹⁷ The final line of the poem reads, “do not think yourself better because you burn up friends and enemies with long-range missiles without ever seeing what you have done.” Merton hoped Ethel would share his thoughts with the President. He noted in the letter that since he had the privilege of communicating “with you, who are so close to the President,” he would leave it entirely to her whether to bother the President with his ideas. He promised to write a more “cheerful” letter later and added that Dan Walsh talked a great deal about her and Bobby.

Ethel Kennedy replied enthusiastically to Merton in late October, stating how delighted they were to hear from him and what she called his complete “endorsement” of the President’s views on disarmament. She referred Merton to President Kennedy’s speech at the United Nations in September, 1961, which she felt would answer all the questions he had raised in his letter. She added a personal note saying how much she and Bobby looked forward to hearing from him. She signed it “your loving child, Ethel.”¹⁸

Merton did hear Kennedy’s UN speech, which was read in the refectory. The speech denounced renewed Soviet nuclear testing but held out the belief that peaceful agreement between the Soviet Union and the United States was possible. Merton devoted two pages to it in his journal and referred to it as an “admirable speech” that captured the complexity of the affair. He concluded his reflection on the speech by stating, “I have one task left. To pray, to meditate, to enter into truth . . . and thus to make my contribution to world peace” (*TTW* 165-66 [9/30/61]).

In December 1961, Merton sent Ethel another letter, part of what would become his collection of “Cold War Letters.”¹⁹ He referred to the President’s speech in Seattle, which he liked, and praised Kennedy’s decision to grant an interview to *Izvestia*, the Soviet news agency. He stressed the necessity of working with the Soviets to prevent “possible accidents that might trigger a nuclear war,” but went on at great length to explain his premise that “the great problem we face is not Russia but war itself.” Merton struck a pessimistic tone when he stated that part of the reason war is such a problem is America’s “moral decline.” He remained supportive and stated the President could do more than any one person to “help salvage the life of reason, by maintaining respect for intelligence and humanist principles” (*HGL* 444-46; *CWL* 26-29).

Merton’s Cold War letter to Ethel Kennedy marked a low point in his optimism for the prospects of peace and the hope that anyone, even Kennedy, could do anything to bring it about. Writing to his good friend “Ping” Ferry on January 16, 1962, he stated “I have little confidence in Kennedy, I think he cannot fully measure up to the magnitude of his task” (*HGL* 205). Over the next year, however, he became more optimistic and his opinion of Kennedy improved, due in part perhaps to the influ-

ence of Dan Walsh and his own correspondence with Ethel. Writing to his Brazilian translator Sister Emmanuel two days earlier, he had professed, “I think Kennedy is all right, and his brother is a good man. I know his brother’s wife” (*HGL* 187). In another letter to her he praised Kennedy for keeping “his wits about him” during the Cuban missile crisis (*HGL* 189 [11/2/62]). Still, some decisions frustrated Merton. When Kennedy announced that the United States would not supply Great Britain with Skybolt missiles, but would instead sell them Polaris missiles, Merton responded cynically in his journal, “Much, much better!” Pondering the thought of Minutemen missiles ready to take off “with good old solid fuel” he concluded, sarcastically “Happy New Year!” (*TTW* 287 [1/8/63]).

In March 1963, Dan Walsh was invited to go to the White House to deliver a series of lectures to “official families.” Robert Kennedy asked Walsh if Fr. Louis might be available to give a similar set of talks at a later date. Walsh thought it could be arranged if Bobby asked the abbot directly. Merton was in favor of it initially but after pondering the idea he changed his mind. He asked himself, “And what do I want giving talks in the White House?” It is not known if Robert Kennedy tried to arrange the talks or if Merton simply refused the invitation, but the proposal never materialized (*TTW* 305 [3/19/63]).

Merton’s next communication with Ethel occurred two months later, when he sent her a draft of a book on peace that he had intended to publish. The Abbot General, who ordered Merton to cease all publishing on issues of war and peace, stopped the publication. Merton did not identify the title but it was undoubtedly *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*.²⁰ He asked Ethel if the President “might have five minutes to spare looking at it.” He added that he believed the President handled the “Cuba business” (missile crisis) very well, and expressed his support for Bobby’s handling of Civil Rights as Attorney General. Merton also requested a favor of Ethel. He noted that his friend Fr. Bruno James, an English priest who ran a “sort of home-made university” in the slums of Naples, was in the country and he thought Ethel “might enjoy meeting him” (*HGL* 446-47 [5/14/63]). James was founder of the John Henry Newman College at the University of Naples and Merton had a high opinion of him. He described him to one correspondent (Etta Gullick) as a “mystic” and thought he was a “genuinely holy man,” although he admitted that James had been the object of criticism for his unconventional ways (*HGL* 356 [1/18/63]). Merton requested that Harper and Bros. send Ethel a copy of James’s autobiography. James was trying to raise support and funds for his project and Merton believed that Ethel might be of some help.²¹

John Kennedy’s tragic assassination in November 1963 saddened Merton as it did most Americans. In his journal he noted it left one “bewildered and slightly sick.”²² He reflected on Kennedy as a good President, “vigorous, honest, fairly shrewd” (*DWL* 37). He continued to write about the assassination and what he described as the “unconsciousness of the whole thing” in the days following Kennedy’s death (*DWL* 40 [11/30/63]).

Shortly after the President’s death, Merton penned letters both to Ethel and to Jacqueline Kennedy, expressing his deep sorrow and offering words of spiritual comfort. He told Ethel he had just come from offering Mass for the President and referred to JFK as “one of the best and most promising Presidents we have had for a long time” (*HGL* 447 [11/23/63]). Merton philosophized that it would be easy to call what happened “the will of God,” but to him the whole affair served as a reminder “that our moral condition is very hazardous . . . when those who attempt to do right and uphold justice are menaced and even killed” (*HGL* 447-48). He added that “we must certainly pray

and work hard for this country, to try and bring it through the critical times” (*HGL* 448).

His letter to Jacqueline, done at Dan Walsh’s suggestion, was similar in tone. He referred to the “greatness” of her husband and the far-reaching “scope and integrity of his work.” Most of all he tried to console her with words of encouragement. He paid special tribute to her contribution and how she affirmed all the things that President Kennedy stood for. He said, “I would like . . . to thank you simply for existing and for being you, and say how much your bravery has meant to us all here, as a manifestation of Christian strength.” Merton noted how sick she must feel from all the noise and confusion and offered the thought that “Our faith demands of us that we find meaning in meaninglessness these days.” He affirmed, “you have my prayers and have had them all along” (*HGL* 449-50 [11/27/63]).

In the years following John Kennedy’s death, Merton corresponded with Ethel Kennedy on two more occasions. In January 1965, Ethel wrote Merton thanking him for an autographed copy of his new book, *Seeds of Destruction*, that Dan Walsh had given to them “in direct violation of your specific instructions not to give it to us.” Ethel said they were delighted to have it and it was “front and center” in Bobby’s library. She also stated that Walsh had mentioned Merton might send one of his new abstract drawings and said they would be “delighted” at the prospect of owning a Merton.²³ Merton’s reply to Ethel noted that Walsh had given them the book against his instructions, because it had been “signed for him personally,” but he professed to be “glad” that he did so (*HGL* 448 [2/26/65]). Merton may also have been reluctant in passing the book on to the Kennedys from a concern about how the first essay in the book would be perceived by Robert and Ethel, especially his reflections on JFK’s assassination. The essay, “Letters to a White Liberal,” dealt with civil rights, the struggle for Black equality and the recently passed Civil Rights Act of 1964. At one point in the essay Merton referred to John Kennedy’s assassination and noted it stemmed from hatred and violence, the same kind that exists in the South regarding race. Because of this deep-seated hate, Kennedy’s death was in “some sense inevitable.” Merton stated it was something JFK did not understand or “he would have gone into Dallas that day with less confidence and better protection.”²⁴

The art work Ethel referred to in her letter was Merton’s exhibition of abstract drawings that was touring the country after its initial opening at Catherine Spalding College in Louisville. Merton joked to Ethel that there were some senators who thought the exhibition was “yet another Red plot afoot to addle the American mind.” He noted that the exhibit was in Milwaukee and soon to go to St. Louis and Atlanta. He asked Ethel if she might know a group, organization or place where the exhibit could be shown in Washington. He enclosed some copies of the drawings and told her when the exhibit appeared in Washington she could select one, thus having the distinction of owning “a Merton” (*HGL* 448). Any proceeds from the sale of the drawings were to go to a scholarship for a young African-American girl at Spalding College. Merton’s drawings were exhibited in Washington, but other friends and not Ethel Kennedy arranged it.²⁵

On June 6, 1968, Merton was going to the monastery with his laundry when he heard the tragic news that Robert Kennedy had died from a gunshot wound suffered two nights before in Los Angeles.²⁶ His journal entries reflect his depression at the tragedy and what he saw at the “degradation and totalism on part of the whole country” (*OSM* 127). He immediately sent Ethel a telegram and followed it up two weeks later with a lengthy and personal letter. He told Ethel there was something particularly “awful and traumatic” about his death since “Bobby represented a very real hope for the

whole country and for the world.” Merton said he was so disillusioned that he doubted if he would vote at all in the Presidential election. He offered his hope that “God is bringing peace in the middle of all the wretched agony of this.” He told her he was saying Masses for Bobby and extended his love and blessings to her and the entire family (*HGL* 449 [6/22/68]).

In the weeks following Robert Kennedy’s death Merton sent a general letter to “Friends” and stated he had been asked by several magazines to write something concerning the assassination. He refused due to what he described as his suspicion of a “growing ritual cycle: murder, public acts of contrition, deploring violence, gestures of appeasement, then everything goes on unchanged and presently there is another assassination.” He thought at such a time “silence is more decent.”²⁷ His closeness to Ethel and Bobby and to Dan Walsh may have also played a factor in his reluctance to write publicly about the tragedy. Merton reflected further in his letter to friends that the Kennedys “did offer something of an image of what Americans like and approve of: what they identify with.” He again commented on the violence in America, calling it a threat and “endemic in the whole of society” (*RJ* 115-16). He reiterated rather strongly his continued opposition to war, violence and violent revolution. He added that the “problems of man can never be solved by political means alone.” He asked his friends to pray and “to do what God asks of us” (*RJ* 117).

In November 1969, nearly a year after Merton’s sudden death in Bangkok, Dan Walsh received a noted from Ethel Kennedy informing him she could not attend the dedication of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine College. She told Walsh, “I know how much he meant to Bobby and me and I would like very much to be with you . . . and especially because I do believe that religion has such a vital role to play in our American education today.” She stated “only the needs of the children keep me from being there with all of you.”²⁸

Thomas Merton’s decade-long correspondence with Ethel Kennedy and his interest in the Kennedy family was brought about by various motives. His friendship with Dan Walsh and prior association with Ann Skakel were major factors. It also was a time in his life when he was taking a greater interest in the politics of the country, and this too no doubt played a role.²⁹ Yet Merton’s interest in the Kennedys was as much personal as it was political. Through Ethel Kennedy he did his best to influence the President and Robert Kennedy on vital issues of public policy. But at the same time his letters reflect a genuine admiration and respect for the Kennedys that transcended politics. Like millions of other Americans, Merton saw in the Kennedys a promise and a hope for a better and more peaceful world.

1. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 89; subsequent references will be cited as “*TTW*” parenthetically in the text.
2. See Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 218-21, 259-65.
3. See Bill Woolsey, “JFK, Pope John Called Saints of 20th Century,” *Louisville Times*, 11 January 1965; subsequent references will be cited as “Woolsey” parenthetically in the text.
4. Background on Ann and George Skakel can be found in Laurence Leamer, *The Kennedy Women: The Saga of an American Family* (New York: Villard, 1994); see also Jerry Oppenheimer, *The Other Mrs. Kennedy: Ethel Skakel Kennedy – An American Drama of Power, Privilege and Politics* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994) 19, 20, 28, 74-75 (subsequent references will be cited as “Oppenheimer” parenthetically in the text).
5. Merton to Ann Skakel, 10 September 1951 (archives, Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY [subsequent references will be cited as “TMC” parenthetically in the text]).

6. Merton to Ann Skakel, 25 September 1951 (TMC archives).
7. Thomas Merton, *The Ascent to Truth* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951).
8. Merton to Ann Skakel, 15 October 1951 (TMC archives).
9. Daniel Walsh to Ann Skakel, 8 February 1955 (TMC archives).
10. Ann Skakel to Merton, 11 October 1953 (TMC archives).
11. Thomas Merton, *Original Child Bomb* (New York: New Directions, 1962).
12. See Thomas Spencer, "And God's Forgiveness": Frank Kowalski and Merton's Prayer for Peace," *The Merton Seasonal* 31.4 (Winter 2006) 9-13.
13. Clarence Manion, "Kennedy Cuban Policy Attacked by Distinguished American Catholics," *The Manion Forum*, 23 August 1963; sent to Merton along with editorials in *The Knoxville Journal* and *The Manchester Union-Leader* and a 21 March 1962 piece by William F. Buckley in *The National Review* (TMC archives).
14. Ethel Kennedy to Merton, 23 August 1961 (TMC archives); Merton's preceding letter is not extant.
15. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 443-44; subsequent references will be cited as "HGL" parenthetically in the text.
16. This material is omitted from the published text of the letter.
17. Thomas Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 1963) 43-47; Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 345-49.
18. Ethel Kennedy to Merton, 30 October 1961 (TMC archives).
19. Thomas Merton, *Cold War Letters*, ed. William H. Shannon and Christine M. Bochen (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006); subsequent references will be cited as "CWL" parenthetically in the text.
20. Thomas Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, ed. Patricia A. Burton (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004).
21. Msgr. Bruno James's papers are housed in the Georgetown University Libraries Special Collections; the online description of the Collection contains a brief biography: see <http://gulib.georgetown.edu/dept/specialcoll/cl1135.htm>.
22. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 36 [11/23/63]; subsequent references will be cited as "DWL" parenthetically in the text.
23. Ethel Kennedy to Merton, 18 January 1965 (TMC archives).
24. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964) 7.
25. See Roger Lipsey, *Angelic Mistakes: The Art of Thomas Merton* (Boston: New Seeds, 2006) 161-65.
26. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey. Journals, vol. 7: 1967-1968*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998) 126; subsequent references will be cited as "OSM" parenthetically in the text.
27. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 115 [Midsummer 1968]; subsequent references will be cited as "RJ" parenthetically in the text.
28. Ethel Kennedy to Fr. Dan Walsh, 4 November 1969 (TMC archives).
29. See, for example, Shawn Quinn, "Thomas Merton and Presidential Politics," *The Merton Seasonal* 36.3 (Summer 2011) 23-31.