

# Thomas Merton's Enduring Influence

Anthony Padovano

Thomas Merton died forty years ago on a pilgrimage of hope. He died on a journey that was inconceivable when he entered the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1941. To assess how he still influences us we need to keep in mind both 1941 and 1968.

In 1941, the three greatest evils of the twentieth century were in the ascendancy: Nazism, Soviet Communism, and the emerging Holocaust. In 1941, Catholicism appeared unchangeable even in minute details. It worked brilliantly for those totally loyal to it but it gave little regard to inclusivity and diversity.

In 1941, a pious convert entered a very conservative community convinced that Catholicism and Cistercian contemplation were sufficient in and of themselves to overcome the evils of the twentieth century. No other Christian Church and no other religion were necessary or even helpful. *Seven Storey Mountain* is repelled by Anglican Christianity and Buddhism, even though Merton's parents were married Anglican and, indeed, Buddhism made more of non-violence and contemplation than did Catholicism.

And, so, the paradoxes, ironies and contradictions begin. They will mark Thomas Merton's journey from 1941 until his death.

Without change, there is no life and creativity.

Pre-conciliar Catholicism did show signs of change but they were very much

intra-system and intra-institutional. In the 1950s, Pius XII reformed the Holy Week Liturgy and liberalized the rules for fasting before Communion. It is indicative of how unchanging Catholicism was that these innovations caused astonishment. More tellingly, Pius encouraged Catholic acceptance of the previously censured approach of interpreting the Bible in a modern, critical manner.

These changes were initiatives of the papacy rather than of the Church at large. They dealt with Catholic issues and were not intended to influence the non-Catholic world.

## Vatican II and Merton

Vatican II (1962-1965) created a very different Church. Merton moved joyfully in this new ecclesial current. In 1941 he would have been very uncomfortable with this movement and would have distanced himself from it.

When Merton died in 1968, a new Catholicism was in place and is still substantially intact forty years later.

The way we view Church, the Modern World, Liturgy and Scripture (the four major Constitutions of Vatican II) is strikingly different from the 1941 models Merton followed when he joined the Cistercian Community. There were three other Vatican II documents which renewed the face and heart of Catholicism (the Decree on Ecumenism, the Declaration of Religious Liberty and the Declara-

tion on Non-Christian Religions).

These seven statements would have deeply disturbed Merton in 1941. Ironically, they developed themes intuitively present in him even then, although he was not yet aware of them or able to recognize them.

A word about each of these statements may align them with Merton and enable us to chart his legacy better some forty years after his death.

The Constitution on the Church moved the emphasis from the Church as institution to the Church as mystery, from the Church as hierarchy to the Church as the People of God, from the Church as papal to the Church as collegial. Merton defined his role as a contemplative, finely attuned to mystery, and as an ardent disciple of Christ with all the egalitarian resonance that implies for a Church that is people-centered and, of course, collegial.

When readers turn to Merton now, they seek to find in him an exploration of mystery and discipleship.

The Constitution on the Church in the Modern World cited the horror of war and the nobility of peace-making and nuclear disarmament. Merton had learned from Dorothy Day, from the pacifist early centuries of Christianity and from Buddhism, the urgency of non-violence and its spiritual power. These concerns were clearly stated in his opposition to the Vietnam War and in his rejection of America's military-industrial complex.

When readers turn to Merton now, they seek to find in him support for a world without violence and a global community without nuclear weapons.

The Constitutions on Liturgy and Scripture called for a Church of simplic-

ity rather than baroque ritual, a Church of active participation in worship and direct encounter with the Word of God. Vatican II made Liturgy a communal celebration and recognized Scripture as superior to the teaching of the Church. Merton affirmed simplicity in his life and in the ritual and architecture of Liturgy. Scripture sparked his vocation and sustained it far more immediately than Church teaching did.

When readers turn to Merton now they seek in him simplicity for their life and faith, and they find in him the bracing directness of Scripture. One of Merton's most arresting books, relatively unknown and underrated, is *Opening the Bible*.

*When readers turn to Merton now, they seek him out for a sense of comprehensiveness and inclusivity, for a world view that finds a place at the table for all people of good will*

The Decree and Declarations on Christian unity, religious liberty and world religions encourage what Merton instinctively endorsed more than a decade before they became Church policy. Merton met with non-Catholic Christians and non-Christian believers through the 1950s, a time when such contact was considered wrong and scandalous. He himself was deeply Catholic, a Cistercian after all, and immediately Christian. But he understood

through his life that faith was an act of freedom and conscience. Coercion was never in the vocabulary of his religious discourse. All this we accept today with equanimity, assuming this was a matter of course when Merton first moved in these directions.

When readers turn to Merton now, they seek him out for a sense of comprehensiveness and inclusivity, for a world view that finds a place at the table for all people of good will, certainly for all Christians. The table is a table of freedom; one takes one's place there because one wishes and because one is made to feel worthy.

All this expansiveness is in Merton, years before the Church got there officially. It is still there years after the Church made it universally normative and even in the face of the Church's sometimes timid implementation of these teachings.

### Conclusion

Forty years after his death, Merton is a harbinger as well as a reminder of the magnitude of Vatican II and of the enormous creative potential in it. People do not, however, turn to Merton for this reason primarily. He leads them to the abiding conciliar issues we have discussed but they seek him rather as a prophet and for his authenticity. People find in Merton someone who is reliable, a truth-teller regardless of the cost, a mystic who does not take them down exotic roads but through familiar by-ways where mysticism has a human heart and a recognizable face.

A prophet addresses the future even though the prophet spoke long ago. In this sense Merton is fresh and new, offer-

ing us a future by requiring a commitment from us in the present. Merton is not for people who prefer to be casual Christians or for those indifferent to the human depths within them.

We must not neglect, of course, the fact that Merton is a superlative writer and that people turn eagerly and often to his books. Of these many books, I believe that four are pre-eminent and speak to us today with uncommon force. They deal with spiritual autobiography (*Seven Storey Mountain*), mysticism (*New Seeds of Contemplation*), commitment and community (*Sign of Jonas*), and faith (*Asian Journal*). All the conciliar themes we addressed are in these books even though three of them were written before the Council: collegiality and contemplation, non-violence and simplicity, the centrality of Scripture and the priority of conscience, breath-taking inclusivity and dazzling diversity.

Forty years after his death, we find wisdom from a life begun in Europe, nurtured in America, completed in Asia. Thomas Merton remains relevant and compelling, hardly dated by the passage of time, for the most part enriched as the long years since his death accumulate. There may be no other person in the last two centuries who can be a better companion than he for all who go on pilgrimage to find the truth and one another and God.

**Dr. Anthony T. Padovano** is a professor of literature and philosophy at Ramapo College of New Jersey, and author of 28 books. He has doctorates in theology and literature and lectures world-wide. To find out more, visit his website at [www.apadovano.com](http://www.apadovano.com).