A Conversation with Dr Hildegard Goss-Mayr

Detlev Cuntz

Hildegard Goss-Mayr was born on 22 January 1930 in Vienna, where she still lives, and is an Austrian peace activist and author. At an early age she was influenced by her father, Kaspar Mayr, who persistently advocated nonviolence in the years before World War II. She studied philosophy, philology and history in Vienna and in New Haven, Connecticut, and was the first woman to achieve a doctorate at the University of Vienna, *summa cum laude*. In 1958 she married the French peace activist Jean Goss (1912–1991) and on his 100th birthday on 20 November 2012 she, together with Jo Hanssens, published a Festschrift, *Jean Goss, Mystiker und Zeuge der Gewaltfreiheit* (Patmos).

Since 1953 she has dedicated her life to the nonviolent resolution of conflict through her work with the International Fellowship of Reconciliation (IFOR), of which she is now the honorary president. In the 1960s their engagement on behalf of nonviolence led the Goss-Mayrs to Latin America and in the 1980s and early 1990s to the Philippines, where they helped to establish nonviolent liberation groups. In Latin America they also came into contact with Adolfo Pérez Esquivel and Dom Helder Câmara, who both accepted advice from them.

Between 1962 and 1967, Thomas Merton and the Goss-Mayrs carried on a lively correspondence. In October 1965, Merton and Hildegard also enjoyed a longer encounter at the monastery of Gethsemani in Kentucky, which she recounts in this interview. The following year, in a letter to William Robert Miller, editor of *Fellowship*,

the publication of the American Fellowship of Reconciliation, Merton named Hildegard Goss-Mayr as his candidate for sainthood.

At Hildegard's request, Merton wrote an article entitled 'Blessed are the Meek,'[1] which appeared in an IFOR publication in May 1967, and this interview refers a number of times to that essay.

The interview was conducted on 21 February 2013 in Vienna.[2]

Detlev Cuntz (DC): How did you first come into contact with Thomas Merton?

Hildegard Goss Mayr (HGM): I was employed as Field Secretary by IFOR, and had to travel frequently to the United States to raise money for our work; it involved giving a lot of lectures. It must have been around the end of 1958 or the beginning of 1959, when I was on a lengthy lecture tour of the United States and was making contact with the various peace groups and with Jim Douglas, who, with his wife, had started a Catholic Worker community that was staging demonstrations and protest actions against the transport of nuclear waste from the production of bombs. Whenever the 'White Train' came by, they made a protest. We later worked with Jim Douglas during the Council in Rome; he was finishing his theological studies there during the time of preparation and the first session of Vatican Council II.

Jim Douglas already knew Thomas Merton quite well, and he invited me to join him on a visit to the monastery at Gethsemani. I believe at that time Merton was already living at his hermitage in the monastery grounds; he showed it to us, and after that we went for a walk of three hours or so in the woods, during which we had an intense conversation. It is something I have never forgotten, as I became profoundly aware of his deep wisdom and spirituality. Our discussions were anything but superficial. Essentially, we spoke at great depth about peace work and Jesus' nonviolence. It was an unforgettable experience.

The letters and correspondence that followed have shown that a deep bond had been created between us. We wrote to one another frankly and trustingly, even about our difficulties. Merton told us about the trouble he had in getting his writings published when they dealt with the themes of war and peace and the question of nonviolence. We ought not to forget the times in which all that took place. The Cold War was at its height and people engaged in the American peace movement were roundly denounced and defamed. Some of them were persecuted and branded as pro-Communist; it was really a witch-hunt. I remember especially the Berrigan brothers and the people from the Fellowship of Reconciliation, all of whom were in great difficulty.

As early as 1955 we crossed the Iron Curtain and tried to set up an East–West encounter in Vienna. We participated in Communist youth festivals, and that caused a lot of concern for fear we were letting ourselves be drawn in. It was a hard time, a very hard time. Consequently, people who were against war – later the Vietnam War in particular – had to state very clearly why they were against it. They had to show, from the profoundest level of the Sermon on the Mount, what path Jesus had shown us, and that if we are baptized into Jesus we are also obligated to follow his way and make it present in the world. This deep rootedness in the Sermon on the Mount was evident in Thomas Merton as well.

DC: What impression, what aura did you receive from Merton in your conversation with him? Were there surprising moments?

HGM: I was very impressed with his humility, something that sounds 'soft' in German. We prefer to speak of modesty and openness. He was not like some theologians with whom we had spoken, who always looked down on us as laity and lectured us. Merton spoke to us as equals joined together in Christ,

and I sensed that in him from the beginning. That was truly beautiful, and it was an encouraging and profound experience. He was certainly not a hangdog type; he radiated great joy.

DC: Which of Merton's works had you read at that time, and what impressed you about them?

HGM: Mainly I had read his early autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. He often sent us mimeographed copies of writings he was not allowed to publish, especially those concerning peace work and nonviolence. He was having a lot of trouble getting his peace writings published. We had already offered to visit the Abbot General of the Cistercians of the Strict Observance (Trappists), Dom Gabriel Sortais, in Rome. Like many French clerics, he was of course in favour of defence against the threat from the East, but I think we were still able to make the importance of Merton's ideas on nonviolence clear to him. However, he fell ill soon after that and was replaced by another Abbot General. Still, it may have been of some use.

DC: In one of the letters Merton wrote you, I read that you had asked him if he would be prepared to undertake a mission trip to Brazil with you. If I recall rightly, Dorothy Day was also going to be on that trip. Can you tell me what the purpose of the trip was to be?

HGM: IFOR used to hold an international council every three years to establish the focal points for the next triennium. In the early 1960s the focus was especially on the social revolution in Latin America. My husband and I had suggested that we should first travel through Latin America for a few months to learn something of the expectations of the people there, and whether it would be possible to open a middle way, given the tension between the wars of liberation using guerilla tactics

on the one side and supporters of the status quo on the other, which had really put the mass of the poor in a drastic situation.

So in 1962 we first travelled through all of Latin America for four months and wrote a report. In 1964 we returned to Brazil for a year, and in 1970 we went to Mexico to establish some groups dedicated to nonviolence. Dorothy Day was also interested, but her stay with us that year was brief. In 1966, in Montevideo, the first international ecumenical gathering took place with the theme 'Violence or Nonviolence as the Path to Liberation.' After that we were constantly being invited to seminars in nearly every country on the continent of South America.

We thought it would be important for Thomas Merton and Dr Martin Luther King Jr, to be able to spend some time with us there as well. So the correspondence with Merton was about our feeling that it would be important – for the churches there as well – to hear testimony from a man of such spiritual gifts.

DC: In his letter to you Merton indicates that, on the one hand, he would probably not receive permission from his superiors for such a trip, and on the other hand he did not think that he, as a Trappist monk, was really called to apostolic work – apart from his writing – outside the cloister walls. Still, he wanted to remain deeply united with the project in prayer and contemplation.

HGM: I think this was always a point of discussion between him and some of the nonviolent groups. He emphasized and gave powerful witness to the contemplative and spiritual basis for nonviolence. For him, actions were always in danger of being too hasty because of a desire to achieve quick successes. He rejected that absolutely. He also said in the article we published that we must work tenaciously and patiently to bring the other side to change its mind and that we must also change our view of ourselves in order to come to a solution together. That was his way.

DC: For Merton, commitment to nonviolence and social peace was always also bound up with the contemplative side.

HGM: For us in IFOR those were two poles we always linked together. Merton's charism was to emphasize the contemplative side, and in doing so he really contributed to a deepening and clarification of Jesus' nonviolence, something that was highly necessary. Especially in the Roman Catholic sphere it was still a profound task, and one could always appeal to his words and example.

DC: You have already referred to Merton's article, 'Blessed are the Meek,' which he wrote for you for publication in your journal, *Christ in der Welt*.

HGM: In that article, which is about the Sermon on the Mount, he wrote about the goal of human community. Jesus died for all, no matter whom, and the reign of God is for everyone. Therefore the life and attitude of every person must be accorded respect. Then he says that the Sermon on the Mount – the Beatitudes – is the theological basis for nonviolence, and that nonviolence, on the one hand, must not be passive, cowardly, or obsequious, because in that case it would be a temptation to people simply to accept what is and to do nothing. The other temptation is to conquer the opponent with violence or force. Between these, he says, lies the power of human poverty, that is, to welcome the power of God into our poverty and out of that power to allow love, justice, and truth to work their way with both sides, to work in us and in the others as well.

DC: In that article Merton writes: 'Christian nonviolence is not built on a presupposed division, but on the basic unity of man. It is not out for the conversion of the wicked to the ideas of the good, but for the healing and reconciliation of man with himself, man the person and man the human family.'

HGM: Yes, here he says quite clearly that the goal must be the reconciliation, unity, and healing of humanity.

DC: But Merton was also intent on showing that nonviolence has something to do with one's internal attitude, and that is why the contemplative aspect is so important. If I myself have so much potential for violence in myself, how can I advocate nonviolence on the part of others?

HGM: I think he believed that one must recognize one's own potential for violence as well as that of others, but to try to uncover it through the power of Jesus, the power of love. I myself must experience conversion, but I must also help the other to get free of her or his unjust attitude so that reconciliation will be possible.

DC: What also seems to have been important to Merton was that it is not about being right, but that 'becoming whole' in nonviolence must be in the foreground for both.

HGM: Yes, one must not try to impose one's own opinion on the other. I think the Vietnam war was a terrible problem for him, because he had learned a great deal about the terrible things that were happening there, and I believe it had stirred him to the depths of his soul.

DC: I want to refer to another quotation from Merton, in which he says: 'Without solitude of some sort there is and can be no maturity. Unless one becomes empty and alone, he cannot give himself in love because he does not possess the deep self, which is the only gift worthy of love. And this deep self, we immediately add, cannot be *possessed*. My deep self is not "something" which I acquire, or to which I "attain" after a long struggle. It is not mine, and cannot become mine. It is no "thing" – no object. It is "I."' I think what Merton is saying here is that we must each work on our own selves, that is, give

up the superficial self in order to find the true self so as to be able to surrender oneself in love for the other.

HGM: Yes, each must go through that process for oneself. But Merton also wanted Christians to bring about the reign of God in their own place and time, and so he did not exclude effective external work and the remaking of the world. He says that love, humility, self-surrender, and our continuing remaking of ourselves also help the other. It is this connection between people in evil and in good; the evil emerges as well. I sensed what emanated from Hitler, but in Merton's presence one also sensed what emanated from him. That means we are creating nonviolence not only for ourselves but for the sake of building up the reign of God in ourselves and around us. We have to reshape the world and build the reign of God in the situation in which we live. We begin with ourselves, but we must not wait until we ourselves are holy; otherwise nothing will change. This dynamic and process are interlinked. Through our commitment we ourselves grow. If I do not succeed in acting nonviolently I have to consider what is still false in me, and so I will grow in my commitment.

DC: So how do you see the fact that, on the one hand, there are the contemplative monks, one of whom Merton was, people who place their emphasis more on prayer and contemplation, and on the other hand there are Christian activists for peace. Can these two groups mutually enhance one another and make their lives more fruitful in the sense of the Sermon on the Mount?

HGM: I believe we need each other; one group has a more powerful charism of contemplation and the other of action. But when, for example, we have worked in difficult situations we have always asked communities of contemplatives to sustain us in prayer because we need these spiritual people if we are

to do external work. If I am alone in a very difficult situation I know that I am not alone; I am sustained by the Body of Christ and the people who pray for us and carry us with them.

Merton certainly had a primary sense of his contemplative vocation, but it was always very important to me that he was a person who knew the 20th century and in his previous life had experienced the heights and depths of that century. That was also very persuasive to the many young people who experienced through him the call to the cloister, for he was not someone remote or distant; he was someone who knew the world with its positive and negative sides. He had lived it himself, just as we do. But he had also sensed the emptiness and the negative nature of those attitudes, and he helps us to take a step toward a new way of living. That is why his earlier life was so important.

DC: I want to quote Merton again: 'And if the spirit dwells in us and works in us, our lives will be a continuous and progressive conversion and transformation in which we also, in some measure, help to transform others and allow ourselves to be transformed by and with others, in Christ.' Merton emphasizes again and again that simply on the basis of our selves we cannot achieve anything at all. That brings me back to the question whether nonviolence is at all possible without a religious basis. Am I, simply in and of myself, in any way capable of practicing nonviolence, or do I need the power of God, of the Holy Spirit, or as Paul says, 'it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me'?

HGM: Yes, what Merton says there was also very important for us as an aid to many conversations during Vatican II, when, in chapter five of *Gaudium et Spes*, we expanded on the theme of nonviolence and tried to bring these bases into the picture. We must have spoken with 200 bishops. The majority of Western

bishops were for armament, even nuclear armament, against Communism. That was at the time of the Cuban crisis. In that moment it was very important to show how nonviolence is rooted in the Gospel, and Thomas Merton was certainly a great help in that. He himself made documents available for the use of the Council.

DC: Would you say that nonviolence is appropriate in every individual case? Or could one imagine situations, for example in Hitlerian Fascism, in which violence *should* be used in order to prevent the creation of even more victims?

HGM: I think the major difficulty is that people do not know what nonviolence is. And if one does not know it and does not want to be a coward, one must turn to violence. Unfortunately the church, except possibly for St Francis, the Mennonites, the Quakers, and other peace churches, has neglected to tell people that there is another power, another force. If the church had taught people how to apply that power it would have been evident from the outset where the difficulties and conflicts lay. Then efforts could be made to prepare people very differently

DC: But is it not the case that, if the assassination attempt against Hitler on 20 July 1944 had succeeded, a great many further human sacrifices could have been avoided?

HGM: Perhaps yes, perhaps no: that is always the question. If I cut off one head of a seven-headed dragon, a new one always grows in its place. Merton says that if we do not achieve a process of rethinking there can be no solution. Then a new dictator will arise, one way or another, because there has been no rethinking. If we uncover this spiral of violence we reveal our inability to achieve real solutions, and that has to enter into our awareness. We already have many experiences along those lines. I am thinking of Martin Luther King Jr, 'Solidarity',

Gandhi, the Philippines. We have to expand that path. But that can only happen if consciences and opinions are educated, and that in turn requires a deep rethinking, as Merton says. The officers who acted against Hitler certainly followed their best convictions, but they knew no other way.

DC: I want to quote again from 'Blessed are the Meek': 'Christian nonviolence is nothing if not first of all a formal profession of faith in the Gospel message that the Kingdom has been established and that the Lord of truth is indeed risen and reigning over his Kingdom, defending the deepest values of those who dwell in it.' That again expresses how important it was for Merton that the Christian message be the basis and precondition for nonviolent action, and that it must not emerge from some egocentric need ...

HGM: ... otherwise it may turn back on itself, if one understands nonviolence only as a method or technique and it does not immediately succeed. Then one does not have the strength to carry on. However, I think one must also see that there are humanists who do not know God and yet have such great respect for human beings that they acquire the power to persevere. Still, most of the major actions are carried out by Buddhist monks, Christians like Martin Luther King Jr, or Hindus like Gandhi, people who also repeatedly withdraw into prayer.

DC: Once more from 'Blessed are the Meek': 'Here it must be remarked that a holy zeal for the cause of humanity in the abstract may sometimes be mere lovelessness and indifference for concrete and living human beings. When we appeal to the highest and most noble ideals we are more easily tempted to hate and condemn those, who, so we believe, are perversely standing in the way of their realization.' Isn't that statement current even and especially today, when we get the impression that the institutional churches are often concerned only with

maintaining abstract principles, with the result that the fates of individuals are frequently ignored?

HGM: Yes, it is this fundamentalism and fanaticism that is so powerful again today, whether in Islam or, for example, in many fundamentalist Christians. They do not understand that what is at stake is individuals, that every person has her or his own history and his or her own path.

DC: Let me quote Merton from 'Blessed are the Meek' once more: 'The temptation to get publicity and quick results by spectacular tricks or by forms of protest that are merely odd and provocative but whose human meaning is not clear may defeat this purpose. ... Conversely, our authentic interest in the common good above all will help us to be humble, and to distrust our own hidden drive to self-assertion.'

HGM: For example, in France we discussed the idea of 'fasting to the death' to end nuclear power, that is, the topic of self-destruction. We talked about it a long time. The result was that we believed we had the right to risk our lives, under certain circumstances, if we were persecuted and under duress. But to destroy one's own life: that is not ours to do. So a 'fasting chain' was created, whereby groups fasted against armaments, taking breaks in turn, and the groups who had wanted to fast to the death accepted that way as well.

But Merton also thought that carrying out spectacular actions was not enough to achieve real repentance. On the other hand, when the Berrigan brothers poured blood on draft files it certainly caused people to reflect, and it had no damaging effect. It really is important to address the public, but what is crucial is *how* I do it and that in doing so I do not condemn others. I am thinking, for example, of the military base in Stuttgart where atomic weapons were stored. There were repeated demonstrations and the people who lived there

did not understand it. Then one day a group of musicians sat down in front of the entrance to the base and played a concert. People came, listened, and then the musicians explained to them why they were playing: so that there may be no more destruction, but instead peace may come and the healing power of music can have its effect. You have to develop a lot of creative ideas. I remember, too, how in the Philippines women brought flowers, cigarettes, and cola to the soldiers in the tanks and said 'come down to us; don't move against the people, you are part of us.' They simply found ways to reach the hearts and consciences of others, and that requires practice.

It is about the humility to know that I am not important, but as Paul says, it is not I who live, but Christ lives in me. One must sense in every situation what is necessary here and now, what can really be an impulse to rethinking, and then one must really know the other side as well. After all, Merton also said that we must truly put ourselves in the other's position. Why does that other person behave that way? Certainly it is out of egoism, etc, but do we also think of that person's upbringing, the tradition in which she or he grew up, or the suffering he or she has experienced and that has made this person so bitter? We have to think ourselves into the other person if we are to find access to a turning point.

DC: My most sincere thanks to you, Frau Dr. Goss-Mayr, for this very interesting and inspiring conversation.

Notes

1. See also Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), pp.14–21.
2. The interview, in German, was originally published in August 2014 as a contribution in W. Müller, D. Cuntz, eds, *Kontemplativ leben: Erinnerungen an Thomas Merton,* Münsterschwarzach 2014. This is an edited version of the translated interview commissioned by the International Thomas Merton Society for *The Merton Annual* and which will appear in Volume 27. The translator was Dr. Linda Maloney.

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