

Pope Paul VI (Giovanni Battista Montini) and Thomas Merton

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The correspondence between Thomas Merton and Giovanni Battista Montini, later Pope Paul VI, extends from June 1949 to June 1968. This article will look at the letters and address the three main topics covered: Merton's attempts to leave Gethsemani and join the Camalodensian order; Paul VI, Merton and the 60s peace movement; and Paul VI's Message of Contemplatives.¹

The early letters: Trappist or Camaldolese?

'I will continue to pray that Almighty God may bless your studies and labors with a rich harvest of spiritual fruit amongst your readers'.² With these words of blessing in his first letter to Thomas Merton, Giovanni Battista Montini expressed his thanks for the copy of *Seeds of Contemplation* that the Trappist monk had sent him. Thus was born the friendship between the two. Sending books to major figures in the Church was something Merton did, as he wrote in a letter to Jacques Maritain: 'We are preparing specially bound copies of *The Seven Storey Mountain* and a new book, *Seeds of Contemplation*, for the Holy Father. I have already written to Mgr Montini'.³ This letter to Maritain also reveals the difficult period of crisis within his monastic life that the Trappist monk was going through. It shows the beginnings of his desire for a more intense spiritual life and for greater solitude by leaving the Trappists and becoming initially a Carthusian and ultimately a Camaldolese.

The exchange of letters moved into a second phase when Merton sent his latest book *No Man is an Island* to Montini who was by then Archbishop of Milan. Their mutual friend, Dom Anselmo Giabbani (1908–2004), General of the Camaldolese Congregation of the Order of Saint Benedict from 1951 to 1963, was aware of Merton's desire to leave Gethsemani and join a community of Camaldolese monks. The major obstacle came from the Trappist Order superiors and not from Dom Giabbani, who would have been ready to accept him among the Camaldolesi to launch a foundation in America.⁴ Merton asked for spiritual and fraternal assistance from Montini writing that:

I am firmly determined never to renounce this desire for solitude and to do everything within my power to follow what I believe to be the voice of God. If it were possible for me to convince my Superiors of the real desirability of my change to Camaldoli, matters would be much simpler.

Merton believed that the obstacle of his superiors in the Order might be over-ruled: 'A strong word of approval or encouragement from someone like your Excellency would be of very great assistance, if such a thing can properly be asked. I also wonder whether it would be advisable to take some initiative in Rome'. He went on:

In any case, I am sure that if our Father Abbot [Dom James Fox] here did not have to take the whole responsibility for the decision on himself, and if there were chances of someone in a high position viewing my case with positive favor, he would much more easily assent to my leaving for Camaldoli. I believe the only reason why he really refuses is that he does not want to be criticized and blamed.

He concluded the letter, 'My superiors all seem to recognize that I am more of a hermit than a cenobite'.⁵

Montini's friendly response on 20 August 1955 was written from the ancient Camaldolese monastery the Hermitage of St Bernard in Gussago, where 'St Bernard put me in front of the monastery of Our lady of Gethsemani in a thought so vivid that I hope it will give to my reply some light emanating from him'. He discussed Merton's problem.

Rev. Fr. Giabbani had hinted to me with much reserve... the idea which had sprung up in your mind of leaving... Gethsemani to go to Camaldoli in Arezzo in search of the still deeper and fuller silence and solitude of the divine Word.

He continued: 'You ask me for advice; and I hesitate to give it' but went on to give his reasons why the Trappist monk should not leave Gethsemani. This was firstly because he might be going from a 'house in which religious life is flourishing and blessed' for 'another which would find it difficult to offer you what you desire'. The second consideration was that perhaps:

the Lord has given Fr. Merton a capacity for good, a mission to fulfil, a service to provide, which a change of place would ruin. The Lord, I think, has bound your liberty by giving your present religious life a fruitfulness which does not belong to you alone, it belongs to the souls, it belongs to the Church.

Thirdly Montini talked about the path to perfection and how the search for it 'turns not to modification of the exterior conditions of life, but to the interior conditions of feeling and spiritual orientation.' He concluded 'it seems to me that your post for sanctification is where you are now, there you can have solitude, silence, peace and

fervor, and from there you can give to many souls that which God has given you: the interior encounter with Him.⁶

Merton's reply to Montini of 1 October 1955 was a decided letter of disagreement: 'This May, after long consideration ... I have decided to apply through Dom Giabbani for a transitus'. Despite refusals by Abbot Fox, Merton wrote, he had not only continued asking for the transfer to Camaldolesi but also obtained an affirmative response from the community of Frascati, which was willing to accept him disguised as an: 'unknown American priest ... and not as a writer at all'. But despite this decisiveness within Merton's mind there was still room for him to hear Montini's suggestion and he continued:

In the meantime, I am writing to hear the decision of my Superiors which will hardly be revolutionary. I would be very surprised if they counselled a transfer to Camaldoli of Frascati. Whatever they permit, I will do, trusting in their judgement ... It seems to me, as I meditate and pray over this problem that has come to a head after so many years that Our Lord has willed me to go through this as a purification and that the time has at last come for a more or less definitive settlement. It may be that He is asking of me the complete sacrifice of all hope of a more simple, and monastic and contemplative life – more silence and solitude.

He shared with Montini the awareness that there is no perfect community and that even Gethsemani had its faults like all others, highlighting the 'lack of silence, due to the presence of so many machines constantly in operation'. But even that, he thought, might fall within the concept of a 'spiritual test': 'It may be that God is asking of me the acceptance of a milieu characterized by many features which seem to me to be eminently undesirable'.

And here, surprisingly comes a hard, accurate, but also unexpected reflection about the meaning of being a missionary, almost as if he felt that the time had come to review and accept it:

But these features are precisely those of an American milieu, features which grate on my European sensibilities. If it is true that a missionary must sacrifice his homeland and hereditary outlook to settle in a new land and adopt the viewpoint of those among whom he has settled, how much more true is it, perhaps, that God asks of me the full acceptance of the American religious outlook, even though it may seem in many ways superficial and silly – especially since I am after all half American by blood and American by nationalization.

Then in the second part of the letter Merton began a sort of 'whirlwind' of excuses for what he has done in recent years, involving, inappropriately, sections on those with whom he lived, especially the superiors and confreres of the Order. But he ended

It is not exaggerated humility, but plain truth, which prompts me to assure your Excellency that I am a very poor piece of work, a miserable person without virtue and not a very good religious but one totally unworthy of the respect which is sometimes paid to him.⁷

Shortly after this letter to Montini, Merton wrote to Dom Gabriel Sortais, on 18 October 1955, communicating to him his definitive renunciation of his exit from the Trappists to enter the Camaldolesi Order: 'I am now quite convinced that God does not want me to be Camaldolese', citing the help of Montini and others who had advised him that: 'it would be most imprudent for me to leave Gethsemani'.⁸

Peace and social issues

On 18 June 1963, almost eight years after his last correspondence with Cardinal Montini, Merton wrote in his journal:

The Conclave begins tomorrow, for the election of a new Pope. I very much doubt if they will find anyone as good as Pope John. However, among those 82 cardinals there ought to be a good one. ... I do not speculate much. I like the German cardinals but they do not have a chance. I like Card. Montini of course ... and would not be surprised if he were the next Pope.⁹

The wish became reality. On the day of Montini's election Merton recorded:

Cardinal Montini was elected on the 6th ballot. It was announced in Chapter and I offered my Mass for him. I think he has the makings of a great Pope ... The blessing of Pope Paul VI was clear and strong and very slow, and it was so moving that I did not feel like eating. It is good to have seen this day.¹⁰

With these sentiments a new phase began in the correspondence between Merton and Montini. On 19 July 1963, Merton noted in his journal: 'Yesterday came a personal letter from Pope Paul, thanking me for my letter of congratulation on his election, signed by him and conveying or rather 'lovingly imparting' upon me and the novices 'our special fatherly Apostolic blessing'.¹¹ Earlier on 10 July 1963 he had responded to the receipt at Gethsemani of the card containing the blessing of Pope Paul VI.¹²

I was very moved at the Holy Father's charity, and it helped me to be much more humble toward the Church,



Crucifix given to Thomas Merton by Paul VI

recognizing my debt and obligation to her. I am too prone to get angry when I think the Church slow and stolid and inert, that she does not respond to the human needs of the times, etc. I suppose it is natural for one to be impatient with plumes and *Sedia gestatoria* and *cappa*

magna etc. But the humanity of the Popes and their love does come through! There is a little tremor in the first of the capital P's for Papa. I hope he does not have a weak heart – will pray that he be preserved for us! The 'P' of Paulus is magnificent, though it looks more like a 'G'. The downstroke is sharp and firm, and the sweep of the circle is graceful and strong too. That first letter took all the ink.¹³

On 26 July Merton wrote again to Paul VI, to tell him of his plans for the novices to help them: 'to become true contemplative monks, men of God, totally devoted to the love and contemplation of Jesus Christ, and deeply concerned, at the same time with all the interests of His Church in the troubled time in which we live'.¹⁴

Merton had already published his first article on peace. By January 1963 the final version of the book *Cold War Letters*¹⁵ had been clandestinely circulated among friends. It was also being drafted in final form for an article 'Letter to a white liberal',¹⁶ which would constitute a part of *Seeds of Destruction*.¹⁷ Merton told Pope Paul VI his concerns on world peace, justice and charity, and the rights of African-Americans.¹⁸ A letter to Sister Therese Lentfoehr reveals his hope for the new Pope:

Pope John will, I think, be impossible to equal. No one can replace such a man. As time goes by we will see how extraordinary he really was. I have no doubt he was one of the great saints of our time. Am very happy to have a beautiful signed picture of him over the vesting table in the novitiate chapel. Pope Paul will, however, be good in a different way. Bright, energetic, experienced, and I think holy also. Maritain thought very highly of him years ago when he was in the Secretariat, and whatever slight contacts I have had with him have always impressed me favorably...¹⁹

Earlier he had written to her: 'Pope Paul ... did I tell you he wrote me a personal letter & sent me an autographed picture? I expect great things from Pope Paul & this session of the Council...'.²⁰ To Maritain he wrote: 'Pope Paul is splendid, and I think that with great strength and wisdom he will go far beyond what anyone had hoped. We can thank God for giving us such a one'.²¹

In Merton's letter to the Holy Father on 6 February 1964 he wrote initially about the renewal of monastic life – arguing that a solitary life and intellectual contact with the world should go together – but ended with the atomic threat which the Catholic hierarchy: 'do not seem to be able to estimate at its full seriousness, and in its objective reality'.²² The theme of peace is the main purpose of the next letter dated 16 May 1965 in which Merton wants to thank the Pope for the kind words used in favour of peace as expressed in the Encyclical *Mense Maio*, released on 29 April 1965: 'beautiful words on peace, so warm and so urgent, spoken to us'.²³

This praise of the new Encyclical is a bit perplexing because for the first Encyclical – *Ecclesiam Suam* – Merton was not so affectionate towards Paul VI:

Now in this one we are back to the safe course, precise notes of condemnation (for existentialism), prime duty to 'guard the deposit', the 'structure' of the Church must be left untouched (the curia of course!), what matters now is reform in the sense of returning to what we have always had, etc. Danger of paying too much attention to 'the world' – danger of rash experiments, dangers of placing false hope in a charismatic renewal. In a word the danger of change. Something has frightened him badly, so badly that he is now solidly and permanently (?) with the conservatives and we can all get back into our shelters. And watch what we say!²⁴

On the other hand, Merton was less critical when Paul VI went to the United Nations building in New York on 4 October 1965, where his speech was one of the most important of his pontificate. There he launched a cry rather than an appeal: 'no more war, no more war!' On the speech Merton wrote that

those American Catholics who are working for peace ... thank your Holiness for this great act which has been so significant and has done so much to remove the scandal of a certain silence and hesitation on the part of the Church in America, with regard to the crime of total war'.²⁵

The Message of Contemplatives

In August 1967 Merton received a letter from Dom Francis Decroix Abbot of Frattocchie in which he requested that Merton participate with others in drafting a 'message of Contemplatives in the world'. This had been an initiative of Paul VI – who had suggested that Merton be involved – and would be read during the Synod of bishops to be held for the first time in the history of the Church in Rome in September 1967. On receipt of the invitation Merton responded by expressing the joy of participating in this moment of spirituality but also his embarrassment at the Holy Father's request because: 'It puts us all in a difficult position. We are not experts in anything'. However Merton wrote 'rapidly and spontaneously' the intense and direct letter we today known as the 'Message of Contemplatives to the world'.²⁶

From the Message what stands out is the desire of monks, although aware of their own inadequacy, to be able to speak the 'language of modern man.' They want to:

speak to modern man as his brothers, as people who are in very much the same difficulties as he is, as people who suffer much of what he suffers, though we are

immensely privileged to be exempt from so many, so very many, of his responsibilities and sufferings. And we must not arrogate to ourselves the right to talk down to modern man, to dictate to him from a position of supposed eminence, when perhaps he suspects that our cloister walls have not done anything except confirm us in unreality.²⁷

Merton adds that in the Message the most important thing to highlight is what is meant by contemplation and prayer, and what essential keys of human experience they are.

We must be careful not to present prayer as a mere formal duty or to emphasize prayer of petition The contemplative life should not be regarded as the exclusive prerogative of those who dwell in monastic walls. All men can seek and find this intimate awareness and awakening which is a gift of love and a vivifying touch of creative and redemptive power, that power which raised Christ from the dead.

We should now be sure to: 'emphasize today that prayer is a real source of personal freedom in the midst of a world in which men are dominated by massive organizations and rigid institutions which seek only to exploit them for money and power'.²⁸

Merton also wrote to Paul VI a summary of what he had intended to communicate in the Message bringing together what was developing in his mind as a contribution to the renewal of the contemplative life.

[B]ut there is a division of opinions between those who think that the interior life will be renewed if external protection is guaranteed (strict enclosure etc.). Others see the importance of a deep interior renewal to be attained

by a return to ancient sources in spirit, while keeping in mind the mentality and special needs of modern man. It appears to me that both views have to be considered: silence and enclosure should indeed be maintained, but at the same time there must be new elements of openness and dialogue, better instruction, and greater freedom for monks to participate in conferences and other useful meetings. In my own experience I realize the fruitfulness and importance of dialogue with visitors who come to the monastery and who belong to non-Catholic or even non-Christian traditions of spirituality.

Merton proposed a possible solution:

... that the Order ... would maintain its strict contemplative character, but that individual members of it who might feel called to offer themselves for active work, for instance in a mission field, for several years, should not be prohibited or discouraged, but should be encouraged to do so, with the possibility of returning to their monasteries after a few years of active work. It is possible that their own religious vocations might benefit from this experience.²⁹

This courageous proposal sounds a bit like a personal appeal, but if understood as a general idea could open great prospects for the renewal of religious life today.

Later in his journal Merton noted with a sense of disappointment:

the Message of Contemplatives – dutifully printed in the *Osservatore*, with the usual picture of a monk with his hood up and his back to the camera – has been totally and utterly forgotten – dropped into a well of

silence as if it had never been which is proper and right. The whole idea was silly.³⁰

I would like to conclude this article with a piece on the monastic contemplative by Merton.

The contemplative life is unfortunately too often thought of in terms purely of 'enclosure', and monks are conceived of as hothouse plants, nursed along in a carefully protected and spiritually overheated life of prayer. But let us remember that the contemplative life is first of all life, and life implies openness, growth, development. To restrict the contemplative monk to one set of narrow horizons and esoteric concerns would be in fact to condemn him to spiritual and intellectual sterility.³¹

Notes

1. The first period of the correspondence comprises unpublished letters written in Italian from Montini to Merton dated 23 June 1949, 13 October 1949, 28 March 1953, and 20 August 1955, and letters from Merton to Montini dated 25 April 1955, and 1 October 1955. © Merton Legacy Trust.
2. Letter 23 June 1949. © Merton Legacy Trust.
3. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth, The Letters of Thomas Merton to Writers*, selected and edited by Christine M. Bochen (Harvest Book, Harcourt Brace & Company: New York, 1994), p.23.
4. The Camaldolese life was established in the USA in 1958 with the construction of the New Camaldoli Hermitage community in Santa Lucia near the hills of Big Sur California.
5. Letter 25 April 1955. © Merton Legacy Trust.
6. Letter 20 August 1955. © Merton Legacy Trust.
7. Letter 1 October 1955. © Merton Legacy Trust.
8. Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity. The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, selected and edited by Br. Patrick Hart (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich: New York, 1993), p.92.
9. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years*, edited by Victor A. Kramer (Harper San Francisco: San Francisco, 1996), p.331.

10. *ibid.*, p.332.
11. *ibid.*, p.340.
12. From the Vatican 10 July 1963. © Merton Legacy Trust.
13. *Turning Toward the World*, pp. 340–1.
14. Letter 26 July 1963. © Merton Legacy Trust.
15. Thomas Merton, *Cold War Letters*, eds Christine M. Bochen and William H. Shannon (Orbis Books: New York, 2006).
16. *Turning Toward the World*, p.341.
17. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (Farrar Straus and Giroux: New York, 1964).
18. Letter 26 July 1963, note 14 above.
19. Thomas Merton, *A Life in Letters. The Essential Collection*. selected and edited by William H. Shannon and Christine M. Bochen (Harper One: New York, 2008), p.95.
20. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy*, pp.197, 247.
21. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth*, p.40.
22. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love. Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, selected and edited by William H. Shannon (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich: New York, 1995), pp.487–9.
23. Letter 16 May 1965. © Merton Legacy Trust.
24. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 5, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: Harper, 1998), pp.136–7.
25. Letter 15 October 1965. © Merton Legacy Trust.
26. *The Hidden Ground of Love*, p.154; text pp.154–8.
27. *ibid.*, p.155.
28. Letter 22 August 1967. © Merton Legacy Trust.
29. Letter 11 October 1967. © Merton Legacy Trust.
30. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain. The End of the Journey*, edited by Patrick Hart (Harper San Francisco: New York, 1998), p.8.
31. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Image Books: New York, 1968), p. ix.

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