

Thomas Merton: The Hermitage Years Engagement & Withdrawal

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Introduction

On 20th August 1965, on the Feast of St Bernard, Merton bade farewell to the monastery enclosure with an address in which he recognised that 'ideally speaking, the hermit life is supposed to be a life in which all care is put aside.'¹ Merton had longed to be a hermit and had fought for such a possibility; his intention being to concentrate on his writings and not to become engaged with visitors and groups, including those involved in the peace movement. However, this was not to be the case. He continued receiving many visitors as well as giving talks and leading retreats for those who came to the Abbey.

During this hermitage period, Merton's thinking about the 'barbarity of the Viet Nam War' continued to expand.² At the same time he despaired about the ongoing unjust treatment of Blacks within the USA. His correspondence commented widely on these issues. By November 1962, for instance, Merton was in correspondence with Dan Berrigan about their writings and issues of peace and racial equality.³ In November 1964 Merton hosted at Gethsemani a gathering of peace activists, including the Berrigan brothers and Jim Forest, to search for spiritual roots on which to ground their 'protest'.⁴ In November 1965, responding to letters from Dan Berrigan, Jim Forest and Dorothy Day, he felt that he had to clarify his own position, writing in his journal that 'there is a certain incompatibility between my solitary life and active involvement in a movement.'⁵ He continued to support peaceful dissent, a support he struggled to maintain in the face of the immolation of peace activists, the burning of draft cards and the damage of government property.

Some years later, in 1968, Merton wrote to friends about his middle way between the shock techniques of Dan and Phil Berrigan, and those who supported war as a Christian duty to the state - including some

Catholic bishops who spoke of the Vietnam War as an act of Christian love.⁶ In midsummer 1968, Merton expressed his position very clearly:

I am against war, against violence, against violent revolution, for peaceful settlement of differences, for non-violent but nevertheless radical change. Change is needed, and violence will not really change anything; at most it will only transfer power from one set of bull-headed authorities to another.⁷

An incontestable sign

On 9 November 1965 Roger La Porte, a volunteer at the Catholic Worker House of Hospitality in Manhattan, had set himself on fire in front of the United Nations Building. Dan and other non-violent activists had to regain a peaceful momentum as public opinion was moving against those who took such radical action. In the words of Merton:

Certainly the sign was powerful because incontestable and final in itself (and how frightful!). It broke through the undifferentiated, uninterpretable noises, and it certainly must have hit many people awful hard. But in three days it becomes again contestable and in ten it is forgotten.⁸

Dan's words at La Porte's funeral spoke of a sacrifice so that others could have life, and those words ignited Cardinal Spellman's pressure on the New York Jesuits to get rid of him.⁹ Merton was distressed by this immolation and waste of life, and tried to withdraw his membership from all organizations associated with La Porte. He was also critical of the burning of U.S. public property such as draft cards, targeted by the Berrigan brothers and other members of the U.S. Peace Movement.¹⁰ For Merton there were other means of protesting, and the thought of having priests in jail in the U.S. was not a welcome proposition. Thus Merton tried to influence friends in the Peace Movement but with hardly any success. The Peace Movement was at war with the establishment, and small actions escalated into full acts of defiance against the state, such as the destruction of draft cards which carried a financial penalty as well as the possible sentencing to some years in jail. However, Dan Berrigan recognized that, after long conversations with his brother Phil, there was no other way than their chosen path.¹¹ As an American citizen he was challenging the lawfulness of the state to draft into the army young

Americans for the purpose of fighting in another country against forces that had not directly attacked United States citizens.

Unlike the Berrigans, Merton had not reached that stage of being considered an enemy of the state, but neither did he consider every state-sanctioned war just. Merton's experience was unlike that which had made the Berrigans into radicals and state criminals. While for them there was no way back, for Merton this was not the way.

On the day of the civil action at Catonsville on 17 May 1968,¹² Merton was visiting the Monastery of Christ the Desert, Abiquiu, New Mexico.¹³ He had been on the move during May 1968, passing through Nevada and California whilst giving a series of retreats and conferences.¹⁴ Merton recorded his receiving news on 22 May of the Catonsville event: – 'I heard they were arrested' was his only comment. If Merton was no longer in step with the Peace Movement throughout 1968, he continued to write against the actions of the authorities. At the start of the year he wrote about the possibilities that 'the obsessive efforts of the U.S. to contain by violence all revolutionary activity anywhere in the world only precipitate revolution. And guarantee that it has to be violent.'¹⁵ And in the same diary entry he referred to President Johnson in the following words: 'He has both the clear-sightedness and the fatal blindness of the operator who manipulates for immediate pragmatic ends and cannot see the ultimate human consequence of his manipulation.'¹⁶

Challenging the Peace Movement

He challenged the Peace Movement because he didn't agree with self-immolations, risking one's life, destroying government property, protests that expressed violence towards others, and actions that lead to priests receiving prison sentences. He did agree with them, however, in their analysis of the police and the military as agents of the state; and his opinion was very clear:

The violence that threatens us to the point of possible self-destruction is endemic in the whole of society, and more especially in the establishment itself, the military, the police, the established forces of 'order' – they are all infected with a mania for overkill, rooted in fear.¹⁷

Merton was a catalyst of God's prophetic challenges. He was an intellectual but he was not this kind of activist. Dan Berrigan, on the other

hand, for the rest of his long life continued his protest, and served many prison sentences. Aged 82, he was ushered into a police wagon in order to appear in court for trespassing on military installations, advocating for the end of armed intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan. The reality is that the period of the Cold War Letters and of his personal contact with the Peace Movement was cut short not only because of disagreements between Merton and the actions of some members of that movement, but mainly because of Merton's commitment to becoming a hermit. To be a hermit was rather unusual among the Trappists who had from their foundation developed a community life rather than the life of the more secluded, eremitic orders in Europe. As Merton sought more and more solitude, he withdrew to his cottage in the woods, paradoxically seeming to become more and more in touch with the world.

Solitude and engagement

I contend that Merton's life has a lot to offer to the contemporary practice of Christianity precisely because his search for God in solitude was combined with a wholehearted engagement with the public, political and social issues of his time. In his preface to the Japanese edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain* he wrote that:

By being in the monastery I take my true part in all the struggles and sufferings of the world. ... By my monastic life and vows I am saying NO to all the concentration camps, the aerial bombardments, the staged political trials, the judicial murders, the racial injustices, the economic tyrannies, and the whole socio-economic apparatus which seems geared for nothing but global destruction in spite of all its fair words in favour of peace.¹⁸

Merton developed an eremitical experience that was not a straightforward matter of quiet contemplation in the woods. If his Abbot thought that finally Merton would settle down as a happy hermit, he was mistaken. Not only did he continue corresponding with many people from his isolation, but he sent telegrams, had a love affair, made many visits to the local library and to have meals with friends, then travelled further afield in America and finally to the Far East. Meanwhile he poured out writings, including journals, experimental poetry, literary essays and his own criticisms of the monastic life.

Merton became a hermit at the time of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), when every religious community was asked to reconsider its charisma and apostolate in the light of the Council.¹⁹ All communities were included in the renewal portrayed in the council document about the religious life, *Perfectae Caritatis*. Vatican II stated that: 'There are communities which are entirely ordered towards contemplation, in such wise that their members give themselves over to God alone in solitude and silence, in constant prayer and willing penance.'²⁰ Further, the Council argued for the strengthening of contemplative communities in the following words: 'Their way of life should be revised in accordance with the aforesaid principles and criteria of up-to-date renewal, the greatest care being taken to preserve their withdrawal from the world and the exercises which belong to the contemplative life.'²¹ Merton's comments about *Perfectae Caritatis* were quite direct: he wrote in his diary: 'All this is based on Vatican II, which makes me wonder what is so new about *Perfectae caritatis*. The whole thing is sickening. The mechanical, cause-and-effect, official machinery of Catholicism. Dreadfully dead, putrid.'²²

After Merton's death, the Sacred Congregation for Religious of the Vatican published *Venite Seorsum*, an instruction directed to those religious in the contemplative life that impacted on the renewal of the Gethsemani community.²³ I would argue that Merton would not have liked the reiteration in *Venite Seorsum* of norms of enclosure, confession and penance. In a letter to a religious in 1964, he expressed what he had said elsewhere:

Religious life is, I am afraid, so organized and so systematized today that there is a great deal of frustration and development is often slowed down or even blocked to some extent. I think that we should all be praying for a genuine renewal and opening up of new perspectives.²⁴

The contemplative and Vatican II

Regarding contemplatives and hermits, the Council had also expressed the need of renewal, a renewal in practices and the impact of monastics on other Christians that Merton had already advanced in his way of life, combining a deep contemplation and solitude with his own support for people who sought prayer and guidance from monastic communities. Merton showed that the welcoming of others was not a source of

distraction but a much needed component of contemplative life, as required by Vatican II in its spirit of renewal. Merton's information about the council came through the likes of Sr. Mary Luke Tobin, a Loreto sister based at Nerinx, Kentucky, who was the only American woman observer at the Council.²⁵ In turn he corresponded with many people about the council sessions as issues of peace and justice, nuclear weapons and the role of the Catholic Church in the contemporary world were being discussed.²⁶ For example, shortly after moving permanently to the hermitage, he had written an open letter to the U.S. Bishops regarding war and peace and the possibilities that Vatican II offered to the world. In the letter he urged the U.S. Bishops to put love and not power at the centre of the final deliberations by the Council Fathers with the following words: 'What matters is for the Bishops and the Council to bear witness clearly and without any confusion to the Church's belief in the power of love to save and transform not only individuals but society.'²⁷

At the time of the Council, Pope Paul VI wanted a group of contemplatives to publish a letter addressing their communion with the contemporary and modern world, and Merton was asked to contribute to this.²⁸ He was not convinced about this and even suggested that as the contemplatives didn't know even what to do in their own vocation they knew even less about the modern world. However, Merton decided to contribute because Paul VI had been personally very supportive of his writings. The final draft of the 'Message of Contemplatives' was the work of Merton in collaboration with the French Cistercian, André Louf (an outstanding monastic theologian), and the Carthusian, Jean-Baptiste Porion with whom Merton had corresponded since the 1940s. In essence, their letter put forward 'their conviction that it was possible to enter into dialogue with God at an experiential level despite the obstacles put up by modern culture.'²⁹

It is clear that the Cistercians of the Strict Observance had started their renewal long before the Council, and before Merton had led the way as Novice Master of the largest contemplative community in the United States. Indeed, Merton's 1968 journey to Asia was made in order to attend a meeting of leaders of contemplative communities in Asia as part of that ongoing renewal of the contemplative life stimulated by Vatican II.

The hectic life of the hermit

Merton's contemplative heart resonated at Gethsemani and beyond, attracting ever more correspondents and visitors. Despite the many

visitors, Merton was very clear that proposed meetings were not to take place in the hermitage. Thus, in a letter of October 1967 regarding the possibility of giving conferences to lay people from Louisville organized by the local bishop, Merton summarized his feelings as follows:

I have got beyond the stage where I think these conferences can really fit into my life: if it had been ten years ago I might have undertaken more, but now I am used to solitude and I have a great deal of work of my own that is not getting done, so that when I do have to get mixed up in several days of visits, it is a real disruption.³⁰

Nevertheless, he continued to give talks to visitors to the abbey, including, in December 1967 and in May 1968, small gatherings of the superiors of cloistered convents, to whom he offered guidance as they sought to renew their religious life in the light of the Second Vatican Council. These retreats brought Merton new positive insights into the contemplative life and the religious communities living the Christian charisma of contemplation.³¹ With the first group he celebrated Mass for them at the hermitage and they 'ended up singing the song "We shall overcome" with a sense that our own revolution was well on its way! Sounds silly enough. But it was very real.'³² At the same time, alert to the problems of the world, he was continuing to develop his thoughts on the 'incredible barbarity of the Viet Nam War'.³³

Sometimes it seems difficult to comprehend the details of Merton's life during 1966-1968. This hermit who wanted solitude started travelling all over the U.S. and Asia as only Merton could do it, at speed. In the words of Lawrence Cunningham: 'Merton got the opportunity to travel and he did so at such pace that were we simply to map out his various comings and goings in the United States and Asia it would require a chapter in its own right.'³⁴

At the end of the summer of 1968 Merton travelled to Asia after several weeks in California and Alaska, always thinking about a new location for a quieter, more secluded monastic life. He considered settling as a hermit in Alaska - or in Asia so as to learn more about Eastern forms of meditation. The hermit searching for quiet and solitude seems to have been doing absolutely the opposite - a paradoxical sign of the freedom and creative spirituality of the hermit-writer engaged with the problems of his times.

The only formal request for his transfer from Gethsemani was from the Trappists in Latin America. In 1967 Brother Frederic Collins wrote to Merton from the new foundation in Chile asking him if he would move there if members of the community were to elect him as prior. Merton sent a negative reply, but added that he would consider helping for a short time in Chile.³⁵ By December Merton thought that it was possible that he would have to go to Chile and mentioned in his diary that Br. Frederic and Fr. Callistus, two Trappists living at the Chilean foundation, were going to be at Gethsemani soon, for the election of the new abbot.³⁶ By January he was set on rejecting any election to be prior in Chile or even to go there for a temporary appointment.³⁷

Conclusion

It is clear from these and many other details that Merton's desire to become a hermit did not mean any reduction in his personal creative involvement with the world around him. In his own unique way he celebrated life with friends, fellow activists and with his many correspondents, whilst engaging with the pressing issues of his day. However, the hermitage years did signal a break with certain kinds of activism and a deepening of his restless search for peace and solitude, ever closer to the God he wanted to serve all his life.

Notes

1. His address was taped. The transcript, called 'A Life Free from Care', is included in Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton: Essential Writings*, Christine M. Bochen, ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1980), pp. 67-72.
2. Journal entry, 4th January 1967 in Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain, The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 7, Patrick Hart, ed. (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1998), p. 33.
3. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (London, Sheldon Press, 1986) pp. 383-384. The first letter Merton wrote to Berrigan is dated 10th November 1961. By the end of 1962 they had exchanged at least 12 letters. Many of them are to be found in Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious and Social Concerns*, W. Shannon, ed. (London: Collins Flame, 1990), pp. 70-101.
4. This retreat is covered in detail in Gordon Oyer, *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2014). Also see Gordon Oyer, 'Inner Freedom and an Activist Conscience' in *The Merton Journal* (Advent 2018), Vol 25:2.
5. Journal entry, 20th November 1965, in Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life, The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 5, Robert E. Daggy, ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p. 317

6. Merton wrote: 'It has become "normal" to regard war – any war demanded by the military – as Christian duty, Christian love, Christian virtue, that a few like the Berrigans, in their desperation, try to show by extreme protest that it is not normal at all.' Circular Letter to Friends – Midsummer 1968 in Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy – The Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends*, Robert E. Daggy, ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989), p. 116. Daniel Berrigan's visit was reported in a letter to Sister Therese Lentfoehr S.D.S. 20th September 1962. See *The Road to Joy*, pp. 241-242.
7. 'Circular Letter to Friends - Midsummer 1968', *The Road to Joy*, p. 116.
8. Journal entry, 7th November 1965, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 313.
9. Excerpts from Berrigan's sermon and details of the Jesuits' attempts to get rid of him can be found in Jim Forest, *At Play in the Lions' Den – A biography and memoir of Daniel Berrigan* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017), pp. 90-100.
10. See, for example, the essay 'Peace & Protest' in Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), pp. 40-46. 'I do not advocate the burning of draft cards. ... There is however considerable danger of ambiguity in protests that seek mainly to capture the attention of the press, to gain publicity for a cause, and that are more concerned with their impact upon the public than with the meaning of that impact.' (p. 43)
11. In December 1967, Phil Berrigan wrote to Tom Cornell: '[Dan and I] have been led to different roads, ones which seem to us more at grips with this awful war and the insanity of our country. ... In a word, I believe in revolution, and I hope to continue a nonviolent contribution to it. In my view, we are not going to save this country and mankind without it.' Quoted in *At Play in the Lion's Den*, pp. 105-106.
12. For a full narrative of this protest when 9 catholic protestors, including Dan & Phil Berrigan, entered the draft board's offices in Catonsville, Maryland and publicly burned 378 draft files, see Daniel Berrigan, *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine* (Boston: Beacon, 1970).
13. Journal entry, 17th May 1968 in Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. VII, 1967-1968, Patrick Hart O.C.S.O. ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), p. 103
14. Journal entry, 4 May 1968, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 87.
15. Journal entry, 8 February 1968, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 51.
16. Journal entry, 8 February 1968, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 52.
17. 'Circular letter to friends – Midsummer 1968', *The Road to Joy*, p. 116.
18. Thomas Merton, *Reflections on my Work* (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1989), p. 74.
19. *Perfectae Caritatis*: 'Decree on the Up-To-Date Renewal of Religious Life', 28 October 1965; Paul VI, *Ecclesiae Sanctae* II: 'Norms for Implementing the Decree On the Up-To-Date Renewal of Religious Life', 6 August 1966 and

- S.C.R.S.I., *Renovationis Causam*: 'Instruction on the Renewal of Religious Life', 6 January 1969.
20. *Perfectae caritatis*, Section 7.
21. *Perfectae caritatis*, Section 7.
22. 24th December 1967, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 30.
23. S.C.R.S.I., *Venite Seorsum*: 'Instruction on the Contemplative Life and on the Enclosure of Nuns', 15 August 1969.
24. Letter to a Religious, 30 December 1964, in *Witness to Freedom: The Letters of Thomas Merton in Times of Crisis*, William H. Shannon, ed. (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1994), pp. 194.
25. Journal entry, 7th December 1967, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 20, note 8.
26. See 'Vatican Council, The Second', in William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O'Connell, eds., *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2002), pp. 503-508.
27. Thomas Merton, 'Open Letter to the American Hierarchy', published in the September 1965 issue of *Worldview*. Also included in *Witness to Freedom*, pp. 88-92. The quote is taken from the final paragraph.
28. Merton's original contribution sent to Dom Francis Decroix is included in Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love – Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns* (London: Collins Flame, 1990), pp. 154-159. Both Merton's original contribution and official published letter incorporating Merton's contribution are included in Thomas Merton, *The Monastic Journey* (London: Sheldon Press, 1977), pp. 169-178.
29. Lawrence S. Cunningham, *Thomas Merton & the Monastic Vision* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1999), p. 171.
30. Letter to Daniel Clark Walsh, 5th October 1967, *The Road to Joy*, p. 307.
31. A transcription of Merton's talks that were taped were subsequently published as Thomas Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux), 1992.
32. Journal entry, 7th December 1967, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 20.
33. Journal entry, 4th January 1968, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 33.
34. *Thomas Merton & the Monastic Vision*, p. 155.
35. 4th November 1967, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 12
36. 30th December 1967, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 31.
37. 4th January 1968, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 33.

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