

# American Catholicism meets the Social Gospel

## Merton's introduction to *No More Strangers* in context

James G. R. Cronin

The polarised position of American Catholicism has its roots in the mid-1960s in the wake of the ecumenical council of Vatican II (1962-65). The first rumblings of polarisation is symbolically represented by Philip Berrigan's *No More Strangers*, published in 1965. My intention in framing Thomas Merton's introduction, reprinted here, is to put his essay into its historical context.

On the dust jacket of the first edition of *No More Strangers*, introduction by Thomas Merton, a gold typeface on a dark background visually communicates the urgency of the book's message, published in America at the height of Civil Rights marches and the Vietnam War, in words by Clement James McNaspy, S.J., charismatic associate editor of *America* magazine:

**This is a profoundly Catholic book without ceasing to be Catholic.** Without lapsing into stylish and facile breast-beating, Father Berrigan focuses on the scandalous gap between professed Christian principles and the failures of Christians to address themselves to today's inequalities.

**No serious Christian can read this book without re-examining his social commitments** and being shattered out of any comfortable adjustment to evil. On the race question, this may well be the most deeply disturbing book ever written by a white man. And on the implications of Christian witness, I have seen nothing in English to match it.

In white typeface, two statements stand out: 'This is a profoundly Catholic book without ceasing to be Catholic' and 'No serious Christian can read this book without re-examining his social commitments.' The second statement emblazons the front cover of the 1966 paperback with an extract from Merton's introduction on the back functioning as a blurb. In other words, American Catholicism meets the Social Gospel of Protestantism. This is the point of departure for Thomas Merton's introduction to Phil Berrigan's first book.

The book occurs at a watershed moment. It is amongst the last to publish censorship permissions, notably an imprimatur or permission to publish from Cardinal Francis Joseph Spellman, Archbishop of New York (1939-67). The Catholic Church officially ended its policy of censoring books in 1966.

The origins of *No More Strangers* goes back to the 'peacemaker's retreat' hosted by Merton at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, so masterfully reconstructed by Gordon Oyer.<sup>1</sup> In October 1964, Phil Berrigan wrote to Merton in preparation for the forthcoming retreat. The letter survives in the Merton archive at Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky.<sup>2</sup> In this letter, not dated, Phil asks Merton to write a 'foreword', presumably this introduction, to his book, and he suggests institutionalism as a retreat agenda item. Merton's introduction follows up on Phil's prompt as Merton is actively thinking through for Americans what it means to be 'Church' in the wake of Vatican II. What is at stake in this essay is emerging differences between the religiosity of American Catholicism with its overemphasis on otherworldliness and a new social impetus, through ecumenical dialogue, that sees the Gospel as being socially engaged.

In his introduction, Merton advocates for the socially engaged Gospel, viewing clericalism as a departure from the community of all believers that characterised early Christianity, connected to Jewish traditions and practices, which was recognised and reclaimed by Vatican II for Christian heritage. Catholic social teaching, initiated by Pope Leo XIII's pontificate (1878-1903), recently recalled at the election of his successor Leo XIV on 8 May 2025, was a response by the modern papacy to confront industrial capitalism and the growth of new ideologies such as socialism and Marxism. Merton was very aware of Catholic social teaching and seems in this introduction to have had in mind the French worker-priest movement (1944-54). Dominican priest Jacques Loew, who began working on the docks of Marseille in 1941, initiated the movement. In the industrial cities of France, Italy, and Belgium worker-priests went into factories and shared the labour of secular workers. The movement was short-lived because the religious institution feared that worker-priests could be corrupted by Marxism, which was a palpable political threat in Europe during the Cold War. Pope Pius XII (1939-1958) had sought to face down the perceived threat of communism in the 1950s while Pope Paul VI (1963-78) sought to live with communism rather than overtly embrace it. Worker-priests had a lasting legacy as they contributed to informing the social documents of the Second Vatican Council and so were a catalyst for change within the institutional Roman Catholic

Church.

As a young Josephite priest, Phil Berrigan rose to prominence in Washington, D.C., Baltimore, and New Orleans for his outspoken criticism of racism. Early on, Berrigan's writing closely mirrored that of Martin Luther King, Jr., his contemporary. *No More Strangers* demonstrates Phil Berrigan's appreciation of Roman Catholicism in the context of social justice and his belief in human potential for social transformation. In 181 pages Berrigan showcases his distinctive writing style, characterised by clarity, directness, and a strong moral compass. The book primarily addresses the issue of racism and the mistreatment of African-Americans, emphasising the importance of empathy and challenging dehumanisation. Berrigan urges his readers to reflect on their own biases and to actively work towards creating a more just and equitable society.

Daniel and Philip Berrigan were featured on the cover of *Time* for the 25 January 1971 issue. The cover story entitled 'Rebel priests: The curious case of the Berrigans', encapsulated how the brothers were viewed in mainstream America as challenging the *status quo* through anti-war activism, particularly against the Vietnam War. Even Paul Simon sang about Father Dan: 'And when the radical priest / Come to get me released / We was all on the cover of *Newsweek*'.<sup>3</sup> Though Merton was not as often in contact with Phil Berrigan as he was with his brother Dan, nevertheless Merton influenced Philip's motivations, but over time, Merton struggled to understand Phil's means. The Berrigan brothers epitomised the Catholic Left in the American media who took an active posture on civil disobedience. They did not rule out the use of violence towards property if that property was being used for what they perceived as being immoral ends. Their actions included the infamous 'Catonsville Nine' incident in 1968 when Phil, Dan, and others burned Vietnam War draft files in Catonsville, Maryland. In 1980, Phil poured blood and hammered on warheads at a General Electric nuclear missile plant in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania. While he was convicted and imprisoned for this action, his witness ignited the international Plowshares Movement. Phil Berrigan was nominated twice for the Nobel Peace Prize. He died from cancer on 6 December 2002, at his home in Maryland.

These two separate traditions, the pious otherworldliness of American Catholicism and the activist Social Gospel tradition, still sit uneasily together and this tension partially explains a growing polarisation within American Catholicism that Latin American Pope Francis (2013-25) had difficulties bridging and that North American Pope Leo XIV (2025-) may yet have to confront.

### Notes

1. Gordon Oyer, *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest: Merton, Berrigan, Yoder, and Muste at the Gethsemani Abbey Peacemakers Retreat* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2014).
2. Section A- 'Berrigan, Philip Francis, 1923-2002', 1964/October/no?, Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, KY.
3. Paul Simon, 'Me and Julio Down by the Schoolyard' (1972), Columbia Records.

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At the Society's study day at Mirfield on 27th September led by Paul Pearson, Gary Hall (r) was presented by Paul with his 'Louie' International Award of the ITMS which is given 'to an individual who has made a significant contribution on an international level to the promotion of Merton's writings (in English or in translation) and to the presentation of his ideas.'



The text of Paul's presentation, 'Redeeming the Rhinoceros: Thomas Merton – Prophet and Social Critic' will be included in the next edition of the Journal.