

Treasures of Spirituality: Thomas Merton and Douglas V. Steere

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Introduction

Thomas Merton's commitment to peace is well known. A fine book on that subject is *The Root of War Is Fear: Thomas Merton's Advice to Peacemakers*, by Merton's longtime friend and colleague in the peace movement, Jim Forest. It focuses primarily on 1960–1968, the last eight years of Merton's life, and on his relationship with Forest.¹ However, others were important in this story, among them two Quakers, A.J. Muste and Douglas V. Steere. The aim of this article is to examine the way in which Merton and Douglas Steere (1901–1995), especially in their correspondence, explored issues that included peace but also – and to a greater extent – the practice of the spiritual life. There is a detailed and fascinating biography of Steere by E. Glenn Hinson, who was himself profoundly affected by both Merton and Steere.² The role of Steere within the world-wide Society of Friends is indicated by the fact that he and his wife Dorothy were designated as the Quaker observer-delegates at Vatican II. Steere was for most of his working life a professor of philosophy at Haverford College, a leading liberal arts college outside Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. From 1932, when he became a Quaker, the Society of Friends was a crucially important context. At the same time, early Catholic influences are evident. He wrote his dissertation in 1931 on mystical experience, focussing on Baron Friedrich Von Hügel.³ Extensive ecumenical engagement, including with Catholic figures, characterised Steere's life.⁴ Thus, when he met Merton for the first time, in 1962, the connection they both felt was not a surprise. Nonetheless, it proved significant.

Constructive spiritual connection

It was at the request of John Heidbrink, a Presbyterian minister who was Secretary for Church Relations of the American Fellowship of

Reconciliation, that Douglas and Dorothy Steere visited the Abbey of Gethsemani in February. Heidbrink felt that the Steeres could encourage Merton in his peace initiatives.⁵ Merton recorded on 5 February 1962: 'Douglas Steere and his wife were here this morning and I had a pleasant chat with them. I liked them both and she especially struck me as a very spiritual person and a very typical Quaker, or what one imagines to be so. Very simple, direct, earnest, completely good.'⁶ Among the topics covered were the work of Dom Bede Griffiths, a Cistercian in Kerala, India, who set up a Christian ashram, and whose approach Steere admired. Hinson's biography of Steere noted that during the visit Douglas and Dorothy made to Gethsemani, which lasted an hour and a half, they touched on common interests such as spirituality, encountering those of other faiths, and the possibility of starting an American branch of *Una Sancta*, an ecumenical movement initiated by Fr. Max Josef Metzger in 1938 in Germany.⁷

Not everything that was discussed brought agreement. While Steere was a supporter of *Una Sancta*, Merton articulated his 'total distrust of all movements and organisations', and argued that it was preferable to 'simply do what *Una Sancta* does without making any declarations or statements or drawing up constitutions etc.'⁸ On theologies of peace, Steere suggested to Merton that there were men in the Pentagon who had a much more prudent and sober view of nuclear war than some theologians. This struck Merton as very significant. Benedictine spirituality also featured in the conversation. Steere had gained great benefit from Benedictines, notably from his long-term friendship with Fr. Damascus Winzen, dating back to the 1930s, at the Maria Laach Benedictine Abbey in the Rhineland. A comment by Steere that some he met there had been in favour of Hitler, confirmed Merton's impression that 'the liturgy people tend to lean towards totalitarianism.'⁹ Steere spoke positively about the Carmelite Fr. Wilton McNamara, who set up hermitages in North America, and this led to discussion of possibilities for contemporary monasticism. Merton wrote that he had been 'frank': he told the Steeres that Gethsemani was good, but had 'nothing specific to offer'. In Merton's view, the most important thing said in the conversation with the Steeres was about Albert Schweitzer's idea that women might be the most effective force for resisting war.¹⁰

Douglas Steere recorded his own 'Notes on Conference with Thomas Merton, February 1962'.¹¹ He wrote that Merton had spoken about difficulties he had increasingly faced when Baptist and Methodist seminary teachers started bringing their students to Gethsemani. This

grew to the point where it seemed Merton was giving seminars and 'the authorities' told him to bring them to an end. Merton's struggles with authority were not confined to this area. When Steere thanked Merton for his writings on peace, Merton responded that he had been in 'some real difficulties' with his position, since 'the authorities' found what he contended for problematic - 'so touchy'.¹² More broadly, on nuclear deterrence, Merton 'saw little hope from the ordinary methods of waking people up to the present danger. It may have to come by a terrible accident, by something almost apocalyptic.' It was Dorothy who referred to Schweitzer: he had told Dorothy in 1957, in Gunsbach, that 'women who were close to the source of life' might finally be the ones calling a halt to 'this threat to wipe out all life'. In Steere's 'Notes' he recorded that Merton 'brightened to this as to almost nothing else on this issue', and considered 'it might well come this way'.¹³

In their conversation on monastic life, and Douglas Steere's interest in 'a fresh outburst of spirituality', Merton was doubtful about current spiritual developments, at least in America. At Gethsemani, he stated, life was 'energetic, the monks being mostly American and liking to get things done'. He hoped that lay people might be able to take initiatives and build into their lives a place of silence. Merton was eager to hear news of Bede Griffiths and in that context he 'deplored that we had gone in so rough shod to these older cultures who often had the most precious treasures of spirituality to share with us'. Griffiths showed a better way, and Merton hoped that the Steeres could help to put him back in touch, as he had written to Griffiths but had received no reply. At the end of the conversation, Merton gave the Steeres some of his articles and begged them to come again, to bring others 'most informally', and to stay in the guest house. In turn, Douglas Steere promised at Merton's request that he would send Quaker literature, such as John Woolman's *Journal* and the *Journal* of George Fox. Steere concluded his 'Notes' by describing how Merton 'saw us out to the door of the monastery and sent his blessings with us'.¹⁴ A strong and constructive connection had been forged.

Continuing correspondence on spirituality

Although the correspondence began a year after this initial visit, the warmth evident during the conversation in 1962 remained. In a letter of 7 March 1963, Steere wrote: 'It was so kind of you to send me the copy of the *Thomas Merton Reader* through your publisher and I read it with great joy and appreciation.' Some things he read, Steere continued, 'were quite new to me'. Steere had also appreciated Merton's 'little book' on

spiritual direction and was glad to see Merton making a proper distinction between spiritual direction and psychotherapy, which had become confused.¹⁵ He hoped Merton would go further into this subject. Both Douglas and Dorothy expressed to Merton that they were 'so thankful for the things you have written on peace'. The biennial Council meeting of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation (IFOR) was due to be held in the Netherlands, and Steere assured Merton that his contributions would be remembered. Douglas and Dorothy sent 'warmest greetings' and 'deepest esteem'.¹⁶

In a further letter, of 23 April 1963, Steere thanked Merton for his 'wonderful letter', in which Merton spoke of a forthcoming 'peace retreat'. Steere had recently been at Harvard for a Roman Catholic-Protestant colloquium and had found 'a most generous temper there on both sides'. He was 'hardly prepared for the rate at which this friendliness has come!' Gustave Weigel, SJ, a theologian at Woodstock College, Maryland, had said in a speech that 'things were moving at such a rate that he thought within a short time the Jesuits might even join the Roman Catholic Church!'

More personally, Steere was pleased that Merton was researching the Catholic Archbishop and theologian François Fénelon, whom Steere had found 'a person of real insight and of great courage', but who had suffered for his desire to do justice to the mystic, Madame Guyon.¹⁷ Two papers Merton had written on Fénelon were despatched by him on 16 May and - in a reply on 13 June - Steere was impressed by how Merton had shown Fénelon being 'belittled' by the French establishment. 'How seldom', Steere continued, were voices like Fénelon's acknowledged by 'those in power', something Steere believed Merton knew 'from the inside'. Moving to present voices, Steere described the death of Pope John XXIII as 'a great blow to us all'.¹⁸

Glenn Hinson outlines how in this period Steere was active in making East-West connections, most notably at a colloquy - on the subject of Christian Peace - held in the Czech spa town of Karlovy Vary in 1962. This event was attended by leading theologians and church leaders from the eastern and western blocs, and was indicative of the high esteem in which Steere was held. A fellow-Quaker, A.J. Muste, a staff member of IFOR, carried the main administrative load. John Coburn, Dean of Episcopal Theological Seminary, Cambridge Mass., who was to feature in connections between Steere and Merton, spoke of the conference as 'extraordinary' and expressed his deep gratitude to Steere for all that had taken place, including the spiritual experience of preaching in a Czech Brethren church when he felt he was 'in the presence of the holy'. There

was widespread euphoria following the success of the colloquy. But Steere did not want to let matters rest. Through the IFOR, he arranged for Jan Lochman and Josef Smolik, distinguished members of the Comenius Faculty at Charles University in Prague, to lecture in the USA. As part of that, Smolik visited and spoke with Merton about conditions in Europe and what students were thinking.¹⁹ Peace was a shared conviction.

Reports from Rome

Given the role that he and Dorothy had as Quaker Observer-Delegates at Vatican II, Steere was keen to keep Merton informed regarding Council events. On 30 September 1963, Steere wrote from Hotel Boston, via Lombardia, Rome, to 'my dear Tom'. Previous letters had been 'Dear friend' or something more formal. The opening of the Council was, Steere reported, 'the greatest public spectacle that I have ever witnessed'. He did not think that its magnificence could be matched anywhere in the world. Steere was struck by Pope Paul VI's willingness, 'for the first time almost in history', to acknowledge publicly 'error and wrong' on the part of the Catholic Church in occasioning the separation that took place at the Reformation. His words seemed to Steere to go beyond the 'welcome home suggestion', implying that all the movement would be on one side. It was also fascinating for Steere to see that as bishops and cardinals made their views known, the picture was anything but monolithic. Steere asked if there were people Merton suggested meeting to discuss prayer and spiritual direction. One name that emerged was the German Redemptorist and ecumenist Fr. Bernard Häring, widely seen as the foremost Catholic moral theologian of his time.²⁰

A month later, on 26 October 1963, Steere reported again. The various Observers at the Council were having fruitful discussions. There had been a concert at which the Papal establishment was 'never more regal'; Steere did not quite know what this had to do with 'the Galilean!' Further reports to Merton followed, and on 16 April 1964 Merton thanked Steere for his letters. Merton described Fr. Häring as 'a marvellous person', and suspected he had a hand in *Pacem in Terris*, by John XXIII. Another contact in the conversation at this point was Fr. Godfrey Diekmann, who taught theology at St. John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota, and who helped move the Catholic Church to celebrate Mass in English. Discussions were beginning about a possible small gathering at St John's Abbey, Collegeville, to discuss prayer. Merton had not yet asked about the possibility of attending, but he was fairly certain his Abbot, Fr. James Fox, would refuse him permission. He was conflicted: he did not want to

be travelling around, because if he did 'the last vestiges of a monastic life will just go out of the window.' On the other hand, it would be 'a great joy' to meet others and discuss important things.²¹

The letters from Steere during his time in Rome were generally upbeat. On 19 April 1964 he wrote saying he knew Merton would be delighted that Fr. Häring had been made Secretary of the Committee of the Council where issues of peace and war would come up. As far as Steere knew, Häring was as near to being 'a revolutionary Christian pacifist' as Steere had found in the Catholic Church. Karl Rahner, Steere added, was also willing to see pacifism as a recognised position in the Church. But all of this was adding to Merton's tensions, as seen in his reply on 28 April 1964. The thought of travelling was going to be 'a real temptation'. It seemed that Häring felt it was important for Merton to come to the Collegeville conference. But Merton was uncertain.²² The tension continued for some months, until in February 1965 Merton wrote to Steere to say he had now told Fr. Diekmann he would be unable to be at Collegeville. Writing this letter had been a 'melancholy experience'. The decision had not been Merton's. By that time Merton wanted to come, but the Abbott's decision was final.²³

The Steeres did their best to offer Merton pastoral care in this situation. The letter Merton wrote about the Abbot's ruling was delivered while Douglas was away and Dorothy read and forwarded what she called the 'anguished letter' from Merton. In her comments to Douglas, she wondered what, if anything, could be done. Merton's letter, she wrote, 'speaks for itself', with its tone conveying the sense of 'how difficult it is for him to accept the discipline of the Abbot'. She knew that the kind of gathering due to take place was one Merton 'would so appreciate'. Her instinctive thought was whether the Abbot might re-think his decision, perhaps an indication of how her Quaker view was at some distance from monastic realities. The person she suggested Douglas might approach was Barnabus Ahern, an American Catholic theologian who was influential in promoting biblical scholarship, including at Vatican II.²⁴ Dorothy discerned in Merton a longing to see 'if there is any chance that the Abbot's mind might be changed', although perhaps Merton did not have that expectation. Along with the specific issue of the conference, Dorothy was moved by what 'a human person' Merton was, and 'how very warm and loving he is, as always'. She concluded: 'I feel so deeply thankful for his friendship and I think we [she and Douglas] must be sure to go and see him before too long. He sounds hungry for real friendship with people who share the same longings.'²⁵

Dimensions of spirituality: Collegeville and the Council

The Collegeville conference took place – 31 August–7 September 1965 – and Douglas Steere sent Merton a summary of what had been discussed. Merton was grateful and reiterated that he would very much have wanted to be present. He stated that he firmly disagreed with the theology behind the decision that prevented him, and considered that a ‘negative and short sighted view of the monastic life actually ends up by stifling the Spirit.’ At the same time, he acknowledged ‘some very real danger of activism in the contemplative life’. He hoped Steere might have the opportunity to ask Fr. Häring ‘whether the monastic orders should naturally maintain their principle of separation from the world and even from active parish work’ or ‘apostolic work’. While Merton saw that involvement could be open to abuse, it seemed to him that forbidding ‘all initiative in this direction is going to harm the monastic life.’ However, he added, ‘God has His own ways of getting things done!’ The warmth which Dorothy spoke about was fully present in this letter. Merton wrote that he remained ‘deeply united to you and to all my friends in Christ. The frustrations of the situation here will not hurt me. I know the power and value of the cross – at least I hope I do somewhat.’ He considered that in the hermitage he had come to ‘fulfilment of my monastic vocation’,²⁶

In reply, on 20 October 1965, Steere thanked Merton for his letter and assured Merton of the belief held by him and Dorothy that blessing would come to Merton, that he was often in their thoughts, that they were sure Merton’s life would be a blessing to ‘all with God’s help!’ Steere’s own deep experience was reflected in his next sentence, that ‘God is always there and always willing but how seldom we let Him in!’ Steere gave a further report on the Collegeville conference. It had been composed of Catholics, with Fr. Diekmann an important figure, and non-Catholics, such as the Episcopalian, John Coburn, as well as those from Presbyterian, Lutheran, Disciples of Christ, and Russian Orthodox traditions. Jean Leclercq, a French Benedictine who gave attention to *lectio divina*, and the practice of reading slowly and meditatively, had impressed Steere. Leclercq commended such prayerful reading in meeting God.²⁷ Steere had encountered it with the ‘Coptic fathers’; he commented that for most moderns slow reading would need a remedial course. On the Council, Steere said there had been a discussion on peace and war, and he thanked Merton for his ‘fine letter to the American bishops. There were not many in American circles, Steere lamented, who ‘were of much use’. He was happy that he often saw Merton’s ‘old friend Sister Mary Luke’. She was superior general of the Sisters of Loretto, one of the largest communities

of religious women in the United States.²⁸

Another significant contact Steere made was with Cardinal Leo Jozef Suenens of Belgium. In a conversation with Suenens, as reported to Merton in a letter dated 20 October 1965, Steere had asked the Cardinal ‘whether it would not be a wonderful thing if one of the women auditors addressed the Council before it closed.’ Steere then mentioned Sister Mary Luke as a good person to do this. Suenens apparently ‘brightened up’ and said he was seeing the Holy Father next week and would ask him. In 1964, Suenens had complained to his fellow bishops that half of humanity, women, had no representation at the Council and the Cardinal had met Mary Luke and encouraged her to take up an invitation she received to the Council. Realistically, Steere added, nothing might come of his suggestion that she might speak, but ‘it would be a fine thing if it happened.’ What did happen was that on 27 October, just one day before the promulgation of the document on the renewal of religious life, *Perfectae Caritatis*, Mary Luke was able to give an address at a private meeting convened by Cardinal Suenens and she commended this work.²⁹

The Collegeville conference led to the setting up of an Institute for Contemporary Spirituality and on 25 March 1968 Steere was able to let Merton know that the Institute was ‘going on in a very creative way’. There were ‘magnificent people’ involved and Steere was delighted with the spirit of the exchanges. He asked Merton whether a meeting of the group, which normally numbered 22 or 23, could come to Gethsemani. In Merton’s reply, written on 29 March 1968, he said that he looked forward to seeing Douglas and Dorothy when they were in Louisville in March 1969. He also hoped to host a meeting of the Institute group, with dates in the process of being negotiated. Merton’s death on 10 December 1968 meant those hopes were not realised.

Conclusion

This essay has drawn mainly from Merton-Steere correspondence to show the way in which the spiritual experiences of Merton, and of Steere, a Quaker, combined with their evident friendship, created ‘treasures’ which they mutually appreciated and from which spiritual benefit could be gained. There were affinities, too, through their peace commitment and their interest in wider Catholic affairs, but above all, for Douglas, and for Dorothy, the connection with Merton was at a profound spiritual level. In his last letter to Merton, Douglas Steere spoke of Merton’s life of prayer and the way it was practised ‘with burning intensity’ in Merton’s intercessions. Following Merton’s death, it was Steere who was asked to

write the Foreword to Merton's *The Climate of Monastic prayer* (1969), republished as *Contemplative Prayer*.³⁰ The Ecumenical Institute of Spirituality continued, Steere continued to write, and visits to Gethsemani took place in 1979 and 1996. Douglas Steere had died the year before this second visit, but the impact remained of these ecumenical pioneers of the spiritual life.

Notes

1. Jim Forest, *The Root of War is Fear: Thomas Merton's Advice to Peacemakers* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016).
2. E. Glenn Hinson, *Love at the Heart of Things* (Wallingford, Penn.: Pendle Hill Publications, 1998). Hinson utilised Steere's unpublished journals. For Hinson and Merton, see Ian Randall, 'Thomas Merton and Baptist Spirituality', *Merton Journal*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2023), pp. 3-11.
3. Douglas V. Steere, ed., *Spiritual Counsels and Letters of Baron Friedrich Von Hügel* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1964).
4. E. Glenn Hinson, ed., *Spirituality in Ecumenical Perspective* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993). This book of essays is to honour Douglas Steere. See especially, for Merton and Steere, E. Glenn Hinson, 'Ecumenical Spirituality', pp. 1-14.
5. Douglas V. Steere, 'Report of meeting with Thomas Merton', 6 February 1962, in Hinson, *Love at the Heart of Things*, pp. 211, 222.
6. Thomas Merton, *Turning toward the World: The Pivotal Years*, Journals, Vol. 4: 1960-1963, ed., Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), p. 199.
7. Hinson, *Love at the Heart of Things*, 313. See C.B. O'Duffy, *Una Sancta: Why Are We Still Separated?* (San Jose, CA: Resource Publications, 2025).
8. Merton, *Turning toward the World*, pp. 199-200.
9. It is not that Fr. Winzen was one of the 'liturgy people'. His thinking was embodied in his *Pathways in Scripture: A book-by-book guide to the spiritual riches of the Bible* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Word of Life, 1976).
10. Merton, *Turning toward the World*, p. 200.
11. Douglas V. Steere, 'Notes on Conference with Thomas Merton, February 1962-1968', *The Merton Annual*, Vol. 6 (1993), pp. 23-29, for Steere's account.
12. Thomas Merton, 'The Root of War is Fear', *The Catholic Worker*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (October 1961), p. 1.
13. In his notes, Steere recalls that Merton spoke of the striking book on *Women and the Salvation of the World* by the Orthodox scholar Paul Evdokimov (*La femme et le salut du monde*), first published in 1958.
14. Douglas V. Steere, 'Notes on Conference with Thomas Merton, February 1962-1968', *The Merton Annual*, Vol. 6 (1993), pp. 23-29, for Steere's account.

15. Thomas Merton, *Spiritual Direction and Meditation* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1960).
16. This 'Correspondence, 1962-1968', appeared in *The Merton Annual*, Vol. 6 (1993), pp. 29-53. I have not footnoted each page reference in this article.
17. The *Autobiography of Madame Guyon* was first published in French in 1720.
18. The Pope had died on 3 June 1963.
19. Hinson, *Love at the Heart of Things*, 212-217; Merton, *Turning toward the World*, p. 296. Smolik visited on 22 February 1963.
20. His book, Bernard Häring, *A Sacramental Spirituality*, had just come out (London: Sheed and Ward, 1962).
21. For more see Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990), Thomas Merton to Fr. Godfrey Diekmann, 13 February 1965, pp. 264-265 cf. Thomas Merton, *A Vow of Conversation: Journals, 1964-1965* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York, 1988), p. 147.
22. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage*, Journals, Vol. 5: 1963-1965, ed., Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997), p. 100.
23. Merton, *A Vow of Conversation*, p. 147.
24. See John P. Collins, 'A Passionist Friendship: Barnabas Ahern and Thomas Merton', *Merton Annual*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (2009), pp. 17-29.
25. Dorothy to Douglas Steere, 23 February 1965, in Hinson, *Love at the Heart of Things*, p. 314.
26. Merton to Steere, 14 September 1965.
27. See Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1961).
28. Elizabeth McCloskey, 'More than a Footnote: The Footprints of Mary Luke Tobin at Vatican II', *The Merton Seasonal*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Summer 2007), pp. 10-33.
29. Megan S. Enninga, 'Eternal Hope: The Story of Sr. Mary Luke Tobin and Other Women who Participated in Vatican Council II' (2007): School of Theology and Seminary Graduate Papers/Theses, 754. https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/sot_papers/754
30. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971).

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