

Birmingham retreat

**Readings for the “Thomas Merton’s Advice to Peacemakers” retreat in Birmingham, Alabama, 30 March - 2 April 2017**

*On the last day of January 1915, under the sign of the Water Bearer, in a year of a great war, and down in the shadow of some French mountains on the borders of Spain, I came into the world. Free by nature, in the image of God, I was nevertheless the prisoner of my own violence and selfishness, in the image of the world into which I was born. That world was the picture of Hell, full of men like myself, loving God and yet hating Him; born to love Him, living instead in fear and hopeless self-contradictory hungers. Not many hundreds of miles away from the house where I was born, they were picking up the men who rotted in rainy ditches among the dead horses ... in a forest without branches along the river Marne. — The Seven Storey Mountain, 3.*

\* \* \*

One of the saints who most inspired Merton was Francis of Assisi, whose radical witness to the Gospel included opposition to all killing. In a declaration that resonated for Merton, Francis once explained to his bishop why the members of his community renounced ownership of property:

*If we held property, armed force for protection would become necessary. For property gives rise to lawsuits and to wars which in various ways destroy all love of God and of our fellowmen. Our membership, therefore, will not hold property.*

Francis founded a movement not only of celibate brothers and sisters but also created a “third order” of lay people, married and single. The rule forbade members to possess or use any weapons of war, in effect a vow that obliged them to be conscientious objectors. During the Fifth Crusade, Francis himself gave an example of unarmed peacemaking, traveling to Egypt to meet with one of Christendom’s chief opponents, Sultan Malik-al-Kamil.

\* \* \*

Despite his strong Franciscan bent, at times even Merton felt the powerful tides that were drawing so many others to become soldiers, including his own brother, John Paul. After seeing a film about the impact of the Blitz on London, Merton wrote in his journal:

*For the first time in my life, I think, I momentarily wanted to be in the war.... Bombs are beginning to fall into my own life.... [The film] was propaganda, but good propaganda.... For the first time I imagined that maybe I belonged there, not here.<sup>1</sup>*

What especially brought the horror of city bombing home to him was a picture of a bombed-out London clothing shop in which he had once purchased a gray herringbone tweed suit.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Run to the Mountain: The Journals of Thomas Merton 1939-1941* (RM), entry dated 27 October 1940, 244-5.

\* \* \*

The industrial impersonality of war horrified Merton:

*There is not even much hatred. If there were more hatred the thing would be healthier. But it was just filthy, this destruction.... This is just a vile combat of bombs against bricks, attempts to wipe out machines and to bury men lying in tunnels under tons of stone and rubble. It is not like a fight, it is like a disease...<sup>2</sup>*

Even in the placid countryside surrounding Olean, where he was then teaching, Merton, in a modern echo of St. Francis, saw strands of connection with war:

*The valley is full of oil storage tanks, and oil is for feeding bombers, and once they are fed they have to bomb something, and they generally pick on oil tanks. Wh echo erever you have oil tanks, or factories, or railroads or any of the comforts of home and manifestations of progress, in this century, you are sure to get bombers, sooner or later. Therefore, if I don't pretend ... to understand the war, I do know this much: that the knowledge of what is going on only makes it seem desperately important to be voluntarily poor, to get rid of all possessions this instant.<sup>3</sup>*

\* \* \*

Merton's inner wrestling with war found expression in a novel he wrote while teaching at Saint Bonaventure's, *My Argument with the Gestapo*. The story followed Merton's imagined return from America to war-ravaged London. Though coming from America, Merton sees himself as a stateless person.

"I have lived in too many countries," he explains, "to have a nationality." Why do you come back, he is asked. "Not to fight," he says. He admits he has come to write. "What will you write?" "I will say that ... the things I remember are destroyed, but that does not mean as much as it seems, because the destruction was already going on before, and destruction is all I remember."

Later the question is posed: But isn't the war Germany's fault? "In the sense that they began fighting it, yes." Doesn't that mean Germany is guilty? "I don't know the meaning of the word guilty, except in the sense that I am also guilty for the war, partly." But is it not nations rather than persons that are guilty of war? "Nations don't exist. They can't be held responsible for anything. Nations are made up of people, and people are responsible for the things they do." In that case, he is told, Hitler is the guilty one. "He might be. Only I don't know enough about it. He might be more guilty than any other one person, but he isn't the only person guilty of the war.... All I know is, if anything happens to the world, it is partly because of me."

The narrator explains to an officer who is interrogating him:

---

<sup>2</sup> Journal entry dated 28 November 1940, 264.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., entry dated 16 June 1940, 231-2.

*You think you can identify a man by giving his date of birth and his address, his height, his eyes' color, even his fingerprints. Such information will help you put the right tag on his body if you should run across his body somewhere full of bullets, but it doesn't say anything about the man himself. Men become objects and not persons. Now you complain because there is a war, but war is the proper state for a world in which men are a series of numbered bodies. War is the state that now perfectly fits your philosophy of life: you deserve the war for believing the things you believe. In so far as I tend to believe those same things and act according to such lies, I am part of the complex of responsibilities for the war too. But if you want to identify me, ask me not where I live, or what I like to eat, or how I comb my hair, but ask me what I think I am living for, in detail, and ask me what I think is keeping me from living fully for the thing I want to live for.<sup>4</sup>*

The question of how to respond as individuals should the U.S. join the war was the subject of many conversations Merton had with close friends. For Merton it was a question that had to be answered not in terms of political or ideological theories or the accidents of national identity but in terms of being a follower of Christ, who killed no one, waved no flags and blessed no wars. This led him to formulate a response — conscientious objection — that, for a Roman Catholic at that time, was unusual, to say the least. As he explained to his draft board in March 1941:

*As a Franciscan Tertiary I am bound to follow a rule which is intended to help me imitate in every detail the lives of Christ and Saint Francis, who did not kill men, but went among the sick and the poor doing good. Christ told us we must love our enemies, and Saint Francis wrote in the Rule of the Tertiaries that they must love peace and heal all discord. I cannot conceive how killing a man with a flame thrower, a machine gun or a bomb is compatible with a life of Christian perfection along these lines...*

Merton wrote of his willingness to undertake non-combatant duty under certain conditions:

*[I am willing to serve so long as it involves] no part in the machinery that produces the death of men. Merely being a non-combatant member of a combatant unit is not enough.... I am willing and eager to serve in any post where the work is saving lives and helping those in suffering: ambulance work, hospital work, air raid protection work, etc. I do not ask for any position that would necessarily be remote from the line of fire, or "out of danger."*

Here is how Merton described his conscientious objector stand in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, published three years after the war ended:

*[God] was not asking me to judge all the nations of the world, or to elucidate all the moral and political motives behind their actions. He was not demanding that I pass some critical decision defining the innocence and guilt of all those concerned in the war. He was asking me to make a choice that amounted to an act of love for His truth, His goodness, His charity, His Gospel.... He was asking me to do, to the best of my knowledge, what I thought Christ would do.... After all, Christ did say, "Whatsoever you have done to the least of these my brethren, you did it to me."<sup>5</sup>*

---

<sup>4</sup> MAG, 160-61.

<sup>5</sup> SSM, 311-12.

What Merton had to say about conscientious objection was not at all what readers, especially Catholics, were used to hearing.

\* \* \*

The book included a poem, “To My Brother, Missing in Action,” written after John Paul Merton became a casualty of war in April 1943. One of Merton’s best works, it is not only an expression of grief for his brother but a cry of anguish for all who inhabit the cruel world of battlefields:

*Sweet brother, if I do not sleep  
My eyes are flowers for your tomb;  
And if I cannot eat my bread,  
My fasts shall live like willows where you died.  
If in the heat I find no water for my thirst,  
My thirst shall turn to springs for you, poor traveller.*

*Where, in what desolate and smokey country,  
Lies your poor body, lost and dead?  
And in what landscape of disaster  
Has your unhappy spirit lost its road?*

*Come, in my labor find a resting place  
And in my sorrows lay your head,  
Or rather take my life and blood  
And buy yourself a better bed —  
Or take my breath and take my death  
And buy yourself a better rest.*

*When all the men of war are shot  
And flags have fallen into dust  
Your cross and mine shall tell men still  
Christ died on each, for both of us.*

*For in the wreckage of your April Christ lies slain,  
And Christ weeps in the ruins of my spring:  
The money of Whose tears shall fall  
Into your weak and friendless hand,  
And buy you back to your own land:  
The silence of Whose tears shall fall  
Like bells upon your alien tomb.  
Hear them and come: they call you home.<sup>6</sup>*

---

<sup>6</sup> SSM, 404.

\* \* \*

Reminders of war frequently entered the monastic enclosure. The noise and vibrations of artillery practice at nearby Fort Knox literally shook the hills of Gethsemani. In his poem “The Guns of Fort Knox” Merton meditated on

*Explosions in my feet, through boards  
Wars work under the floor. Wars  
Dance in the foundations.*

The poem concludes:

*Guns, I say, this is not  
The right resurrection. All day long  
You punch the doors of death to wake  
A slain generation. Let them lie  
Still. Let them sleep on,  
O Guns. Shake no more  
(But leave the locks secure)  
Hell’s door.<sup>7</sup>*

\* \* \*

Hell’s door was being made all the wider by the development of weapons of mass destruction, especially the hydrogen bomb, yet many people failed to see hell’s door for what it was. As Merton wrote to the philosopher Erich Fromm in 1955:

*I feel that the blindness of men to the terrifying issue [of nuclear war] we have to face is one of the most discouraging possible signs for the future.... Fear has driven people so far into the confusion of mass-thinking that they no longer see anything except in a kind of dim dream. What a population of zombies we are! What can be expected of us?*

*It seems to me that the human race as a whole is on the verge of a crime that will be second to no other except the crucifixion of Christ and it will, if it happens, be very much the same crime all over again. And then, as now, religious people are involved on the guilty side. What we are about to do is “destroy” God over again in His image, the human race.... Any person who pretends to love God in this day, and has lost his sense of the value of humanity, has also lost his sense of God without knowing it. I believe that we are facing the consequences of several centuries of more and more abstract thinking, more and more unreality in our grasp of values. We have reached such a condition that now we are unable to appreciate the meaning of being alive, of being able to think, to make decisions, to love.<sup>8</sup>*

---

<sup>7</sup> *The Strange Islands* (SI), 21.

<sup>8</sup> HGL, letter dated 13 March 1955, 311.

Little by little the world, its beauty and its troubles reshaped Merton's spiritual life. In his journals Merton records several intense experiences of God opening his eyes in a life-changing way. One of the most significant happened on 18 March 1958. On an errand that brought him to Louisville, Merton was standing at a busy downtown intersection waiting for the light to change:

*In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed by the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream.... This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud ... It is a glorious destiny to be a member of the human race, though it is a race dedicated to many absurdities and one which makes many terrible mistakes: yet, with all that, God Himself gloried in becoming a member of the human race. A member of the human race! To think that such a commonplace realization should suddenly seem like news that one holds the winning ticket in a cosmic sweepstake.... There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.... There are no strangers.... If only we could see each other [as we really are] all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed.... I suppose the big problem is that we would fall down and worship each other.... The gate of heaven is everywhere.<sup>9</sup>*

This awakening marked the opening of a greater compassion within Merton. The consequences became obvious in the years that followed.

\* \* \*

In late August 1961, Merton wrote in his journal:

*I have been considering the possibility of writing a kind of statement — "where I stand," as a declaration of my position as a Christian, a writer and a priest in the present war crisis. There seems to be little I can do other than this. There is no other activity available to me.... If I can say something clear and positive it may be of some use to others as well as to myself. This statement would be for the Catholic Worker. As a moral decision, I think this might possibly be a valid step toward fulfilling my obligations as a human being...*

Two or three weeks later Dorothy received Merton's first-ever prose submission to The Catholic Worker, "The Root of War Is Fear." It turned out to be a chapter from the book he was then writing, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, which was a revised and expanded edition of an earlier work, *Seeds of Contemplation*. This particular chapter had been just a few pages in the earlier edition, its meditative paragraphs only loosely connected. Merton had now transformed it into a ten-page chapter that contained only fragments from the earlier version.

One of the many additions was a comment on the cold-war mentality — the tendency of

---

<sup>9</sup> *Conjectures of A Guilty Bystander* (CGB), 140-42.

Americans to see only the best and purest motives in ourselves and to ascribe the very worst motives to our adversaries. Merton asked:

*What is the use of postmarking our mail with exhortations to 'pray for peace' and then spending billions of dollars on atomic submarines, thermonuclear weapons, and ballistic missiles? This, I would think, would certainly be what the New Testament calls 'mocking God' — and mocking Him far more effectively than atheists do.... Consider the utterly fabulous amount of money, planning, energy, anxiety and care which go into the production of weapons which almost immediately become obsolete and have to be scrapped. Contrast all this with the pitiful little gesture 'pray for peace' piously canceling our stamps!... It does not even seem to enter our minds that there might be some incongruity in praying to the God of peace, the God who told us to love one another as He had loved us, Who warned us that they who took the sword would perish by it, and at the same time planning to annihilate not thousands but millions of civilians and soldiers, men, women and children without discrimination.... It may make sense for a sick man to pray for health and then take medicine, but I fail to see any sense at all in his praying for health and then drinking poison.*

In a preface to the chapter written for *The Catholic Worker*, Merton made a call for action:

*The duty of the Christian in this crisis is to strive with all his power and intelligence, with his faith, his hope in Christ, and love for God and man, to do the one task which God has imposed upon us in the world today. That task is to work for the total abolition of war.*

*What are we to do? The duty of the Christian in this crisis is to strive with all his power and intelligence, with his faith, his hope in Christ, and love for God and man, to do the one task which God has imposed upon us in the world today. That task is to work for the total abolition of war. There can be no question that unless war is abolished the world will remain constantly in a state of madness and desperation in which, because of the immense destructive power of modern weapons, the danger of catastrophe will be imminent and probable at every moment everywhere. Unless we set ourselves immediately to this task, both as individuals and in our political and religious groups, we tend by our very passivity and fatalism to cooperate with the destructive forces that are leading inexorably to war. It is a problem of terrifying complexity and magnitude, for which the Church itself is not fully able to see clear and decisive solutions. Yet she must lead the way on the road to the nonviolent settlement of difficulties and toward the gradual abolition of war as the way of settling international or civil disputes. Christians must become active in every possible way, mobilizing all their resources for the fight against war. First of all there is much to be studied, much to be learned. Peace is to be preached, nonviolence is to be explained as a practical method, and not left to be mocked as an outlet for crackpots who want to make a show of themselves. Prayer and sacrifice must be used as the most effective spiritual weapons in the war against war, and like all weapons, they must be used with deliberate aim: not just with a vague aspiration for peace and security, but against violence and war. This implies that we are also willing to sacrifice and restrain our own instinct for violence and aggressiveness in our relations with other people. We may never succeed in this campaign, but whether we succeed or not, the duty is evident. It is the great Christian task of our time. Everything else is secondary, for the survival of the human race itself depends upon it. We must at least face this responsibility and*

*do something about it. And the first job of all is to understand the psychological forces at work in ourselves and in society.*

In this hard struggle, Merton saw the Church as being called to play a prominent part promoting nonviolent alternatives to conflict, leading the way “on the road to the nonviolent settlement of difficulties and toward the gradual abolition of war as the way of settling international or civil disputes. Christians must become active in every possible way, mobilizing all their resources for the fight against war.”

Not a great many people in the American Catholic Church in those days were ready to say “amen” to such ideas. In fact even now, half a century later, Merton’s words remain strong stuff, but in the climate of the time, when to display an interest in peacemaking or social justice could easily result in one being labeled a “Communist sympathizer” if not an outright “Red,” Merton was really putting his neck on the chopping block. That such thoughts should come from the most widely read Catholic author of his generation was more than startling.

We placed “The Root of War” essay on page one of the October issue alongside a drawing of Saint Francis of Assisi. The Catholic Worker version of this chapter, comments Msgr. William Shannon in his anthology of Merton’s social essays, *Passion for Peace*, “marked the initial and definitive entry of Thomas Merton into the struggle against war.”

Shortly afterward publication of “The Root of War is Fear,” Merton wrote in his journal:

*I am perhaps at a turning point in my spiritual life: perhaps slowly coming to a point of maturation and the resolution of doubts — and the forgetting of fears. Walking in to a known and definite battle. May God protect me in it. The Catholic Worker sent out a press release about my article, which may have many reactions — or may have none. At any rate it appears that I am one of the few Catholic priests in the country who has come out unequivocally for a completely intransigent fight for the abolition of war, for the use of nonviolent means to settle international conflicts. Hence by implication not only against the bomb, against nuclear testing, against Polaris [nuclear-armed] submarines but against all violence. This I will inevitably have to explain in due course. Nonviolent action, not mere passivity. How I am going to explain myself and defend a definite position in a timely manner when it takes at least two months to get even a short article through the censors of the Order is a question I cannot attempt to answer....*

*At least I feel clean for having stated what is certainly the true Christian position. Not that self-defense is not legitimate, but there are wider perspectives than that and we have to see them. It is not possible to solve our problems on the basis of “every man for himself” and saving your own skin by killing the first person who threatens it....*

\* \* \*

“Target Equals City,” an essay written in February 1962 for publication in *The Catholic Worker*, was refused approval by his order’s censors, the first of Merton’s war-related writings to suffer that fate. In it he argued that a major ethical border had been crossed during the Second World

War. On the Allies' side, it was a war that had begun with "a just cause if ever there was one." There was no doubt that Hitler was the aggressor in Europe and that Japan was in Asia. But by the war's end in 1945, not only Germany but the Allies had moved from bombing military targets to targeting whole cities. Anyone who took Church teaching on war seriously were forced to consider the question "whether the old [just war] doctrine [still] had any meaning."

*The obliteration bombing of cities on both sides, culminating in the total destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by one plane with one bomb for each, had completely changed the nature of war. Traditional standards no longer applied because ... there was no longer any distinction made between civilian and combatant.... [In fact] the slaughter of civilians was explicitly intended as a means of "breaking enemy morale" and thus breaking the "will to resist." This was pure terrorism, and the traditional doctrine of war excluded such immoral methods.... These methods were practiced by the enemy [at the war's start, but by the time] the war ended they were bequeathed to the western nations.<sup>10</sup>*

Merton recalled how, early in the war, Britain had declared that it would not imitate Germany's savage blitz-bombing tactics but instead would limit its bombing raids to military objectives. But in 1942 Britain abandoned its early restraint and began to target whole cities. "There are no lengths in violence to which we will not go," Churchill declared. To quiet troubled consciences, the argument was put forward that city destruction, in the long run, "will save lives and end the war sooner." In one notorious case, a thousand British and US bombers dropped so many bombs on the German city of Dresden that a firestorm was created that gutted the heart of the city. An estimated 25,000 people were killed, including many refugees and also many Allied prisoners of war.<sup>11</sup> Far more perished in the saturation bombing of Tokyo — the Tokyo Fire Department estimated 97,000 killed and 125,000 wounded.

Merton noted that while one can understand how those who suffered the Blitz would accept similar combat strategies against their enemy, no one could any longer claim that the standards of the just war doctrine, requiring not only a just cause but just methods that shelter non-combatant lives, were being respected.

*The development of nuclear weapons and rockets for their delivery to distant targets, many of which were cities, meant that city destruction had become an integral element of future war planning. While the policy is called deterrence, the effectiveness of deterrence depends on the demonstrated readiness to commit the gravest war crime ever contemplated.*

Merton finished the essay with three sentences:

*There is only one winner in war. The winner is not justice, not liberty, not Christian truth. The winner is war itself.*

---

<sup>10</sup> The essay was published only after Merton's death. PFP, 27-36.

<sup>11</sup> One of the survivors was an American captive, Kurt Vonnegut. He later wrote of his near-death experience in Dresden in his sardonic novel *Slaughterhouse Five*.

\* \* \*

In his banned book, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, Merton went on to make the case for Christian disobedience when obedience would be sinful:

*Now let us suppose that the political leaders of the world, supported by the mass media in their various countries, and carried on by a tidal wave of greater and greater war preparations, see themselves swept inexorably into a war of cataclysmic proportions. Let us suppose that it becomes morally certain that these leaders are helpless to arrest the blind force of the process that has irresponsibly been set in motion. What then? Are the masses of the world, including you and me, to resign [ourselves] to our fate and march to global suicide without resistance, simply bowing our heads and obeying our leaders as showing us the "will of God"? I think it should be evident to everyone that this can no longer, in the present situation, be accepted unequivocally as Christian obedience and civic duty.<sup>12</sup>*

\* \* \*

In both *Peace in the Post-Christian Era* and *Cold War Letters*, Merton cited declarations of recent popes condemning war and the targeting of cities. Even before Hiroshima, in 1944 Pius XII had declared that "the theory of war as an apt and proportionate means of solving international conflicts is now out of date." What was most notable about such statements for Merton was how little interest American Catholic bishops took in making papal teaching on war widely known. In contrast, Catholic opposition to abortion and birth control, the topic of countless sermons and pastoral letters, was known to even the most non-attentive occasional Mass attendee. In a letter to Oxford scholar Etta Gullick, Merton commented wryly:

*One would certainly wish that the Catholic position on nuclear war was held as strictly as the Catholic position on birth control. It seems a little strange that we are so wildly exercised about the "murder" (and the word is of course correct) of an unborn infant by abortion, or even the prevention of conception, which is hardly murder, and yet accept without a qualm the extermination of millions of helpless and innocent adults, some of whom may be Christians and even our friends rather than our enemies. I submit that we ought to fulfill the one without omitting the other.<sup>13</sup>*

\* \* \*

Alert to major lapses in moral leadership in recent times, Merton repeatedly referred to the failure of the Catholic Church in Germany to declare that Hitler's expansionist wars blatantly failed to meet the criteria of the just war doctrine. On the contrary, German and Austrian Catholics were solemnly called upon by their bishops to take part in these wars, while the rare conscientious objectors, such as Franz Jägerstätter, were counseled to take the military oath and went to their executions unsupported by their Church.

---

<sup>12</sup> Chapter "The Christian Choice" (PPCE, 155-6).

<sup>13</sup> CWL, 38.

“Jägerstätter is to me a moving symbol of a lonely isolated Christian who was faithful to his conscience, in the supremely difficult question of the most real and the highest kind of obedience,”<sup>14</sup> Merton commented in a letter to Gordon Zahn, author of *German Catholics and Hitler's Wars* and of a biography of Jägerstätter, *In Solitary Witness*.

As happened in Germany, said Merton in another letter, American Christianity has become a “Christianity of passive conformity, in which, under the name of obedience, we are often brought into subjection to the most worldly influences and powers.”<sup>15</sup>

\* \* \*

Genuine nonviolence for Merton had to be more than a negative state of demonstrating without violence. Protest may be superficially nonviolent and yet communicate contempt for one's adversaries and bring out the worst in them. In a letter to me Merton wrote about this problem:

*One of the most problematical questions about nonviolence is the inevitable involvement of hidden aggressions and provocations. I think this is especially true when there are a fair proportion of non-religious elements, or religious elements that are not spiritually developed. It is an enormously subtle question, but we have to consider the fact that in its provocative aspect, nonviolence may tend to harden the opposition and confirm people in their righteous blindness. It may even in some cases separate men out and drive them in the other direction, away from us and away from peace. This of course may be (as it was with the prophets) part of God's plan. A clear separation of antagonists. And perhaps now we have to see that this may be all we can do: simply clarify the issue.*

*Anyway we can always direct our action towards opening people's eyes to the truth, and if they are blinded, we must try to be sure we did nothing specifically to blind them. Yet there is that danger: the danger one observes subtly in tight groups like families and monastic communities, where the martyr for the right sometimes thrives on making his persecutors terribly and visibly wrong. He can drive them in desperation to be wrong, to seek refuge in the wrong, to seek refuge in violence.*

*The violent man is, by our standards, weak and sick. Though to us at times he is powerful and menacing in an extreme degree. In our acceptance of vulnerability, however, we play on his guilt. There is no finer torment. This is one of the enormous problems of the time, and the place. It is the overwhelming problem of America: all this guilt and nothing to do about it except finally to explode and blow it all out in hatreds, race hatreds, political hatreds, war hatreds. We, the righteous, are dangerous people in such a situation. (Of course we are not righteous, we are conscious of our guilt above all, we are sinners: but nevertheless we are bound to take courses of action that are professionally righteous and we have committed ourselves to that course.)*

---

<sup>14</sup> CWL, 50.

<sup>15</sup> CWL, 64.

*This is not for you so much as for myself. We have got to be aware of the awful sharpness of truth when it is used as a weapon, and since it can be the deadliest weapon, we must take care that we don't kill more than falsehood with it. In fact, we must be careful how we "use" truth, for we are ideally the instruments of truth and not the other way round.*<sup>16</sup>

Along similar lines, another letter to me included in *Cold War Letters* stressed the importance of compassion toward those who are outraged by acts of protest:

*Of course the tragedy is that the vast majority of people do not understand the meaning of this kind of witness. In their pitiful blind craving for undisturbed security they feel that agitation for peace is somehow threatening to them. They do not feel at all threatened by the bomb, for some reason, but they feel terribly threatened by some little girl student carrying a placard, or by some poor workingman striking in protest. Somehow they feel that it is after all possible for people to change their mind and revise their whole attitude towards a setup that has its enormous disadvantages but—at least it is "what we are used to, and please God don't ask us to get used to something else." Unfortunately the bomb is going to impose a terrible adjustment on those who may be left around to adjust. And it is with this that people want to defend themselves. **We have to have deep patient compassion for the fears of men, for the fears and irrational mania of those who hate us or condemn us.***<sup>17</sup>

Among the factors that blind us to the divine image in the other, especially the enemy, and turn society toward violence is, in Merton's view, our entrapment in the "magic" of technology. In a letter to author Claire Boothe Luce, Merton stressed the problem of out-of-control technology:

*Our sudden, unbalanced top-heavy rush into technological mastery has left us without the spiritual means to face our problems. Or rather, we have thrown the spiritual means away. Even the religious people have not been aware of the situation, not become aware until perhaps too late. And here we all stand as prisoners of our own scientific virtuosity, ruled by immense power that we ought to be ruling and cannot. Our weapons dictate what we are to do. They force us into awful corners. They give us our living, they sustain our economy, they bolster up our politicians, they sell our mass media, in short we live by them. But if they continue to rule us we will also most surely die by them. For they have now made it plain that they are the friends of the "preemptive strike." They are most advantageous to those who use them first. And consequently nobody wants to be too late in using them second. Hence the weapons keep us in a state of fury and desperation, with our fingers poised over the button and our eyes glued to the radar screen.*<sup>18</sup>

The word "pacifism" figured in a number of the *Cold War Letters*. In the sense that Merton had personally renounced killing anyone, Merton was certainly a pacifist. Yet in a number of letters, as well as in *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, he denied the pacifist label, insofar as it suggested he had renounced the Church's just war doctrine or condemned those who were not conscientious objectors. Though he personally would not take part in any war, he could imagine wars of

---

<sup>16</sup> CWL, 69-70.

<sup>17</sup> CWL, 58-9.

<sup>18</sup> CWL, 43.

self-defense against invaders that might meet the criteria of a just war. But if the conditions of a just war were taken seriously, no war could be considered just insofar as it targeted noncombatants or used weapons of mass destruction. As he put it to a correspondent in Kansas:

*Though not a total pacifist in theory myself, I certainly believe that every Christian should try to practice nonviolence rather than violence and that some should bind themselves to follow only the way of peace as an example to the others. I myself as a monk do not believe it would be licit for me ever to kill another human being even in self-defense and I would certainly never attempt to do so. There are much greater and truer ways than this. Killing achieves nothing. Finally, though as I said in theory I would still admit some persons might licitly wage war to defend themselves (for instance the Hungarians [resisting Soviet troops] in 1956), yet I think that nuclear war is out of the question, it is beyond all doubt murder and sin....*

In fact, Merton added, even small wars of self-defense were problematic:

*Since in practice any war is likely to lead to nuclear war, I believe in practice that war must be absolutely banned and abolished today as a method of settling international disputes.<sup>19</sup>*

Merton never felt at home in arguments that sought to establish the ethical limits of violence, arguments — such as killing a neighbor in defense of one’s fallout shelter — that impressed him for the absence of actual Christian content. He preferred the Gospel, in which everything is centered on love of God and neighbor, with “neighbor” meaning whoever is standing in front of you, friend or foe. One of the collection’s most memorable texts, part of a letter to Dorothy Day, was a reflection on love:

*Persons are known not by the intellect alone, not by principles alone, but only by love. It is when we love the other, the enemy, that we obtain from God the key to an understanding of who he is, and who we are. It is only this realization that can open to us the real nature of our duty, and of right action. To shut out the person and to refuse to consider him as a person, as an other self, we resort to the impersonal “law” and “nature.” That is to say we block off the reality of the other, we cut the intercommunication of our nature and his nature, and we consider only our own nature with its rights, its claims, its demands. And we justify the evil we do to our brother because he is no longer a brother; he is merely an adversary, an accused.*

*To restore communication, to see our oneness of nature with him, and to respect his personal rights and his integrity, his worthiness of love, we have to see ourselves as similarly accused along with him, condemned to death along with him, sinking into the abyss with him, and needing, with him, the ineffable gift of grace and mercy to be saved. Then instead of pushing him down, trying to climb out by using his head as a stepping stone for ourselves, we help ourselves to rise by helping him to rise. When we extend our hand to the enemy who is sinking in the abyss, God reaches out for both of us, for it is He first of all who extends our hand to the enemy. It is He who “saves himself” in the enemy who makes use of us to recover the lost goat which is His*

---

<sup>19</sup> CWL, 14-15.

*image in our enemy.*<sup>20</sup>

\* \* \*

*Domine ut videam.* Lord, that I might see. These three words, from Jerome's Latin translation of Mark's Gospel, are the appeal that Bartimaeus made to Jesus to open his blind eyes. This urgent prayer was used by Merton the first day of a small retreat of peacemakers in November 1964. Peacemaking begins with seeing, seeing what is really going on around us, seeing ourselves in relation to the world we are part of, seeing our lives in the light of the kingdom of God, seeing those who suffer, and seeing the image of God not only in friends but in enemies. What we see and what we fail to see defines who we are and how we live our lives. The day-by-day challenge is to be aware of the divine presence in the other, struggling not to be blinded by fear.

Then there was another Latin phrase that Merton used: *Quo warranto?* (By what right?) In the context of the retreat this became, "By what right do we protest?" It wasn't a question I had ever before considered. I was born into a family in which protest was a normal activity — protest against injustice, protest against war, protest against racism, protest against cruelty. While not by nature a person drawn to protest, as a young adult I found myself seeing protest as an unfortunate necessity. I could not watch preparations for war and fail to raise an opposing voice or refuse to participate in actions of protest and resistance. To protest was an unpleasant duty, period.

In raising the "by what right" question, Merton forced us to consider that protest, if it is to have any hope of constructive impact on others, has to be undertaken not only with great care but with a genuine sympathy and compassion for those who don't understand or who object to one's protest, who feel threatened and angered by it, who even regard the protester as a traitor. After all, what protest at its best aims at is not just to make a dissenting noise but to help others think freshly about our social order and the direction we are going. The protester needs to remember that no one is converted by anger, self-righteousness, contempt or hatred. One has to use the hammer of protest carefully. Protest can backfire, harden people in their opposition, bring out the worst in the other. Sometimes this may be necessary — consider the confrontations that occurred in Selma just a few months earlier in which police and others brutally attacked nonviolent demonstrators simply wanting to exercise their constitutional right to vote. If it is to be transformative, protest needs to be animated by love, not love in the sentimental sense but in the sober biblical sense of the word. Hence Christ's insistence on love of enemies. "Until we love our enemies," Merton said, "we're not yet Christians."

"The grace to protest," Merton wrote in his notes for the retreat, "is a special gift of God requiring fidelity and purity of heart." Far from seeing an opponent merely as an obstacle, one wishes for him or her "a better situation in which oppression no longer exists."<sup>21</sup> Ideally, protest aims at change which benefits everyone.

\* \* \*

---

<sup>20</sup> CWL, 30-31.

<sup>21</sup> Oyer, 240.

The final major document produced by the Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, contained this solemn by the Council:

*Every act of war directed to the indiscriminate destruction of whole cities or vast areas with their inhabitants is a crime against God and humanity, which merits firm and unequivocal condemnation.*<sup>22</sup>

Of similar significance was the Council's emphasis on conscience:

*In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to his heart more specifically: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of man. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths. In a wonderful manner conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbor. In fidelity to conscience, Christians are joined with the rest of men in the search for truth, and for the genuine solution of the numerous problems which arise in the lives of individuals and from social relationships. Hence, the more right conscience holds sway, the more persons and groups turn aside from blind choice and strive to be guided by objective norms of morality. Conscience frequently errs from individual ignorance without losing its dignity. The same cannot be said for a man who cares little for truth and goodness, or for conscience which by degrees grows practically sightless as a result of habitual sin. (section 16)*

It follows that conscientious objection to participation in war ought to be universally respected:

*It seems right that laws make humane provision for the case of those who for reasons of conscience refuse to bear arms, provided, however, that they agree to serve the human community in some other way. (79)*

The express recognition of conscientious objection marked a major turning point in Church teaching. For centuries, Catholics in every country had been told to obey their rulers and submit to conscription, assuring them that, were they made party to a sin by their obedience, the guilt would lie with the rulers rather than with their obedient subjects.

Those who obey commands which condemn the innocent and defenseless to death were described as "criminal":

*The council wishes, above all, to recall the permanent binding force of universal natural law and its all-embracing principles. Man's conscience itself gives ever more emphatic voice to these principles. Therefore, actions which deliberately conflict with these same principles, as well as*

---

<sup>22</sup> Section 80. The Second Vatican Council also condemned abortion: "Life must be safeguarded with extreme care from conception; abortion and infanticide are abominable crimes." [*Gaudium et spes*, 51]

*orders commanding such actions are criminal, and blind obedience cannot excuse those who yield to them. The most infamous among these are actions designed for the methodical extermination of an entire people, nation or ethnic minority. Such actions must be vehemently condemned as horrendous crimes. The courage of those who fearlessly and openly resist those who issue such commands merits supreme commendation. (79)*

Those who renounce violence altogether, seeking to build a more just and compassionate society by nonviolent means, were applauded:

*We cannot fail to praise those who renounce the use of violence in vindication of their rights and who resort to methods of defense which are otherwise available to weaker parties too, provided this can be done without injury to the rights and duties of others or to the community itself. (78)*

With the publication first of *Pacem in Terris* and then *Gaudium et Spes*, the Catholic Church crossed a border. It had condemned nuclear war and indeed any sort of war in which non-combatants were targeted. At the same time it could no longer be presumed that obedience to national leaders would be the automatic response of faithful Catholics. It was no wonder that during the Vietnam War so many young American Catholics refused to take part.

\* \* \*

Re Merton and the issue of property destruction:

.... Dan Berrigan was himself much less certain than his brother Phil of what should come next and whether destruction of property was appropriate. In a letter dated October 6, 1967, two weeks after the blood-pouring action in Baltimore, Dan had written Merton "in strict confidence" that "good people are talking more and more violence" while dismissing Martin Luther King's nonviolence as naïve. "There is rage and discontent in the air," Dan noted, "which in many cases seems to be the seeding into us of the sins of the war makers themselves, and the loss of our own choices by the imposition of theirs."

Phil too, Dan told Merton, was thinking of strategies of violence, though against property, not people: "The news is that Phil and a group who have been outstanding and courageous on civil disobedience in Baltimore are now seeking bigger action. They are going in for violence against military or government property.... There is sure to be a huge howl from the two-headed [state and church] establishment, legal and religious [if an act of property destruction occurs].... But will such an action communicate at all??? ... We seem to be nearing the point where racism and war-making are pushing us in the direction of a more dangerous revaluation of the *violence-to-persons-through-inviolate-property* equation. Also the possibility of vindicating the truth of nonviolence toward persons by working violence on idolatrous things, thus removing, at least by way of prophecy, all the garbage which expensively keeps persons from being human toward persons. [The war in Vietnam is] inevitably pushing good people into very dangerous waters. Phil and the others are seeking light from me ... [but] there is not a great deal of light I can shed." Dan begged Merton for what wisdom he could offer. "We need you as always and turn

to you in hard times as the one most likely to shed light — a noble vocation indeed.”<sup>23</sup>

In his response Merton posed a range of reservations and hard questions. To what extent, he asked, “is the new revolutionism ... simply irresponsible, capricious, idiotic, pointless, haphazard and inviting disaster? To what extent do these people realize they are so disoriented that at the moment all they can think of is systematic unreason and disaster — acceptable insofar as precipitated by themselves?... The obsession with being ‘with it’ whatever ‘it’ may turn out to be. It seems to me that the indifference with which the radicals and some liberals are now nonviolent, now flower power, now burn-baby[-burn], all sweetness on Tuesday and all hell-fire on Wednesday, reflects sheer mindlessness and hopelessness....”<sup>24</sup>

Might it not be better, Merton asked, for the Catholic Peace Fellowship and the “Catholic left” to be “less naïve, try to go it more on our own, have a more or less firm and consistent position? [Would not] our best contribution to the whole mess [be] a kind of relative clarity and consistency and firmness that stays with a clearly recognizable Christian and Gospel position? Have we ever even begun to explore what real nonviolence is about? Is this just the testing that is essential before we even get sorted out enough to begin? Are we now ready for a novitiate? In my opinion the answer is to close ranks with people [committed to nonviolence] like [Martin Luther] King.... To become recognizable as committed to very clear limits on the violence thing? At least to take up enough of a basic position to be able to go on from there to decide whether yes or no we can be violent ‘against property.’ That is outside the Gandhian [path] right away. My opinion would be some of us ought to stay with Gandhi’s end of it until we have at least gone deep into it and seen what was there (as King has)....”

“We have to be able to define our limits,” Merton continued. “I don’t say violence against property is off-limits. [But it] certainly seems to me that killing people is. But if it comes to burning buildings, then people are going to be in danger and whoever is involved is going to be partly responsible for people getting destroyed even on his own side in a way that the nonviolent resister would not be responsible....”

Merton also questioned the group dynamics involved: “Politically are we just getting involved in a fake revolution of badly mixed-up, disaster-inviting people who are willing to do anything absurd and irrational simply to mess things up, and to mess them up especially for the well-meaning ‘idealists’ who want to run along proving that they are such real good hip people.”

Might there be a pathology involved, Merton asked, in a turn toward violence even if limited to property? “Psychologically how nuts is the whole damn business? In my opinion the job of the Christian is to try to give an example of sanity, independence, human integrity, good sense, as well as Christian love and wisdom, against all establishments and all mass movements and all current fashions which are merely mindless and hysterical. But of course are they? And do we get hung up in merely futile moral posturing? Well, somewhere we have to choose. The most popular

---

<sup>23</sup> Unpublished letter dated October 6, 1967, in the archives of the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky.

<sup>24</sup> Letter from Merton to Dan dated October 10, 1967; HGL, 98.

and exciting thing at the moment is not necessarily the best choice.”

Merton ended the letter by noting he was hampered in not knowing exactly what Phil was planning: “I don’t say any of this comes anywhere near applying to the situation Phil speaks of. I have no real idea whether that is sane or nutty: I am just talking in terms of the whole situation judged by the smell of the smog that reaches me down here.”

Dan felt, he told me later, “torn down the middle by the two people I most admired — Phil pulling in one direction, Merton the other.”<sup>25</sup>

\* \* \*

The Unspeakable. What is this? Surely, an eschatological image. It is the void that we encounter, you and I, underlying the announced programs, the good intentions, the unexampled and universal aspirations for the best of all possible worlds. It is the void that contradicts everything that is spoken even before the words are said; the void that gets into the language of public and official declarations at the very moment when they are pronounced, and makes them ring dead with the hollowness of the abyss. It is the void out of which Eichmann drew the punctilious exactitude of his obedience. . . . It is the emptiness of “the end.” Not necessarily the end of the world, but a theological point of no return, a climax of absolute finality in refusal, in equivocation, in disorder, in absurdity, which can be broken open again to truth only by miracle, by the coming of God. . . . Christian hope begins where every other hope stands frozen stiff before the face of the Unspeakable.

— Thomas Merton, from the introduction to *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New Directions, 1965)

\* \* \*

---

<sup>25</sup> from *At Play in the Lions' Den: a biography and memoir of Daniel Berrigan* by Jim Forest, to be published by Orbis in November 2017