

ANSWERS FOR HERNAN LAVIN CERDA:

On War, Technology and the Intellectual

By **Thomas Merton**

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EDITOR'S NOTE

As far as it is known, Thomas Merton's first direct contact with Latin America was a visit to Cuba in April and May of 1940. He recorded his impressions in a diary originally called "Cuban Journal," a manuscript which he gave to the Baroness Catherine de Hueck (Doherty) shortly before his entrance into the Abbey of Gethsemani on 10 December 1941. It was a farewell gift to the Baroness, with the hope that she might find a publisher and thus receive the royalties for her work at Friendship House in Harlem. The volume was finally published twenty years later, after many difficulties and delays, with a new title, *The Secular Journal of Thomas Merton*. In revising the manuscript for publication in 1959, Merton added a note at the beginning of the section called "Cuba, 1940." It is worth quoting here, as it gives a rather accurate view of the relationship which prevailed at that time between the United States and Latin America:

It is taken for granted that the U. S. is universally benevolent, wise, unselfish and magnanimous in her dealings with Latin American countries. And that the latter tend to be improvident, wasteful, impractical, unwise, lazy and even unreliable. It is a very strange thing to accuse starving workmen of petty thievery when the economic exploitation of the resources of their land by foreigners is one of the things that keeps them starving. One is permitted to wonder if the time has not come for the United States to treat Latin America as an equal, and not as a kind of colony that owes us nothing but respect and gratitude, no matter how we behave towards it." (The Secular Journal of Thomas Merton, pp. 47-48)

During his first years at Gethsemani there was very little Latin American influence in his life, but with the publication of his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, in 1948 and subsequent translations of this best seller into Spanish and Portuguese, Merton became very popular in that part of the world. That he had a great love and admiration for his southern neighbors would be an understatement. When Ernesto Cardenal entered the novitiate at Gethsemani in 1957, he was only one of a number of poets, writers and artists who would become lifelong friends. It is undoubtedly true to say that through these personal contacts with Latin American friends Merton became more and more enthusiastic about Gethsemani's making a foundation in one of these countries whose citizens he had come to know and to love.

The Abbey of Gethsemani did ultimately send a colony of monks to Chile, not exactly as founders since that was already done by St. Joseph's Abbey, Spencer, Massachusetts, but rather to continue an ongoing operation. Coincidentally that occurred about the same time that Merton began corresponding with a Chilean poet and writer, Hernan Lavin Cerda, who was involved in the publication of *Punto Final* in Santiago. The first exchange of letters dealt with having several poems by Merton translated into Spanish for the journal. By this time, Merton was becoming better known as a poet as well as a spiritual writer, and his work was being published in Spanish and Portuguese translations throughout Central and South America, especially in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. For his part, Merton translated many Latin American poets into English, poets such as Rafael Alberti, Ernesto Cardenal, Jorge Carrera Andrade, Alfonso Cortes, Pablo Antonio Cuadra, Carlos Drummond de Andrade, Miguel Hernandez, Nicanor Parra, Fernando Pessoa and Cesar Vallejo. Some of his translations appeared during his lifetime. Others were later published in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*.

In Brazil Sister Emmanuel de Souza e Silva, a Benedictine nun from Petropolis, became his most faithful translator into Portuguese and a cherished friend and correspondent. In his letters to her Merton does not hesitate to declare his great love for Latin America, and especially Brazil and its fine poets. In his last letter to her, dated 18 March 1968, Merton even suggests the possibility of a visit to Brazil: "It is possible under the new Abbot [Flavian Burns] I may be able to visit Brazil — if I can do so very quietly, without publicity, and without having to appear in public for talks, etc. Not this year, however. It might be done if I am sent to our foundation in Chile for some work, temporarily . . ." (*The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters*; edited by William H. Shannon, p. 201)

In July of 1967, Hernan Lavin Cerda wrote again to Merton with a list of questions. Merton's responses appeared in Spanish in the 15 September 1967 issue of *Punto Final*. In his last letter to Lavin Cerda, Merton acknowledges having received the copy of *Punto Final* in which the interview was published and, he adds, "with good results."

We are publishing the "Answers" here for the first time in English just as Merton actually wrote them in August of 1967. They are strangely relevant to our contemporary scene today, over twenty years after they were written. They reflect, once again, Merton's views of modern warfare and the problems resulting from a highly technological society, especially as they are experienced by the intellectual, the poet and the artist of the twentieth century.
