

# THOMAS MERTON'S FIRST ARTICLE ON WAR & PEACE

—by **William H. Shannon**

Thomas Merton began writing on the subject of war-peace in the fall of 1961. Apart from his "Auschwitz poem" ("Chant to be Used in Procession Around a Site with Furnaces") which was published in the August 1961 issue of the *Catholic Worker*, his first article on war-peace was entitled "The Root of War." It too was published in the *Catholic Worker - in October, 1961*. Actually the article was a chapter from a book of Merton's that had recently been approved by the censors: *New Seeds of Contemplation* and was published in 1962 by New Directions. *New Seeds* is an extensive re-write of an earlier book that had been published in 1949, *Seeds of Contemplation*. The original work also had a chapter entitled "The Root of War." This chapter is considerably expanded in *New Seeds*.

What is perhaps not widely realized is that the *Catholic Worker* version in turn expands the chapter in *New Seeds*. Three long paragraphs (that had not been censored!) were prefixed to the chapter when it appeared in the October issue of the *Catholic Worker*.

In 1962 the *Catholic Worker* version of "The Root of War", together with another article of Merton's ("Red or Dead: the Anatomy of a Cliche") was published in pamphlet form by the Fellowship of Reconciliation at Nyack, New York. The price of the pamphlet was fifteen cents! Curiously, the section that Merton had added at the beginning of the *Catholic Worker* version of "The Root of War" became the concluding paragraphs of the version in the Fellowship pamphlet.

Since the Fellowship pamphlet is out of print and back issues of the magazine are difficult to locate, the text of Merton's (uncensored) additions to chapter 16 of *New Seeds* is here reproduced. If the reader has *New Seeds* at hand, he or she may choose to read these paragraphs at the beginning or at the end. Merton utilized both possibilities.

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The present war crisis is something we have made entirely for and by ourselves. There is in reality not the slightest logical reason for war, and yet the whole world is plunging headlong into frightful destruction, and doing so *with the purpose of avoiding war and preserving peace!* This is a true war-madness, an illness of the mind and the spirit that is spreading with a furious and subtle contagion all over the world. Of all the countries that are sick, America is perhaps the most grievously afflicted. On all sides we have people building bomb shelters where, in case of nuclear war, they will simply bake slowly instead of burning up quickly or being blown out of existence in a flash. And they are prepared to sit in these shelters with machine guns with which to prevent their neighbor from entering. This is a nation that claims to be fighting for religious truth along with freedom and other values of the spirit. Truly we have entered the "post-Christian era" with a vengeance. Whether we are destroyed or whether we survive, the future is awful to contemplate.

What is the place of the Christian in all this? Is he simply to fold his hands and resign himself to the worst, accepting it as the inescapable will of God and preparing himself to enter heaven with a sigh of relief? Should he open up the Apocalypse and run out into the street to give everyone his idea of what is happening? Or worse still, should he take a hard-headed and "practical" attitude about it and join in the madness of the warmakers, calculating how by a "first strike," the glorious Christian West can eliminate atheistic communism for all time and usher in the millenium? . . . I am no prophet and no seer but it seems to me that this last position may very well be the most diabolical of illusions, the great and not even subtle temptation of a Christianity that has grown rich and comfortable, and is satisfied with its riches.

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, hope in Christ, and love for God and humanity, 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 probably 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 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 herself is not fully able to see clear and decisive solutions. Yet she must lead the way on the road towards nonviolent settlement of difficulties and towards 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. Prayers 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 against 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.