

THE TIMELESSNESS OF MERTON

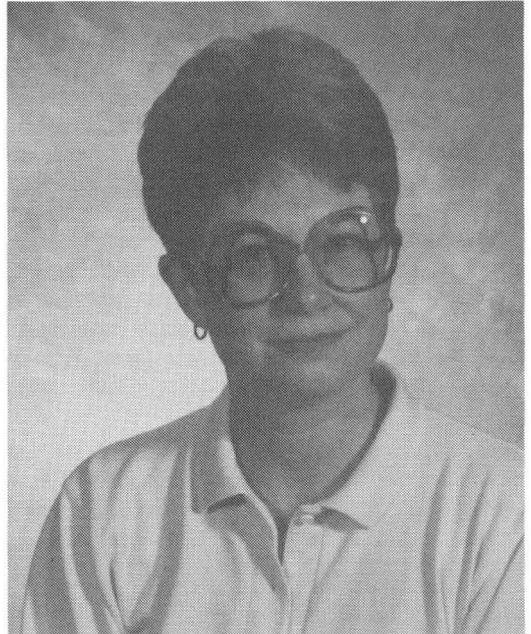
Thoughts on *Desert Storm*

by **Marianna Kane Neal**

I sit alone in the dim stillness of the chapel at Gethsemani searching for a calm that I cannot discover within. The turmoil of war causes me to shake convulsively in a way that no blanket or hot drink could alleviate. In the depths of my soul I feel an emptiness, a sense of despair, that I have brought here with me as I hope desperately to find answers to my many unsettling questions.

Overhead I hear the occasional roar of a plane and fear shoots through my veins. Every sudden noise, even the furnace kicking on, reminds me of the sounds of violence shown continually on television. The tolling of the bell offers me comfort as it calls us to pray for one another and for a world we seem intent on destroying. As the white robed monks enter the chapel, I am reminded of Merton's reflection that they sound like the waves of the sea. In these waves I find a comfort not unlike that I experience sitting beside a lake on a warm summer day. *But* it's not warm, nor is it summer. It is a dark, cold January day and thousands of miles away countries are being bombed and missiles are being launched in a desperate search for peace.

I have often turned to Gethsemani and to Merton searching for answers. The calm of the monastery and Merton's ability to cut to the heart of any issue seem to simplify any situation. Outside the window to my left — not too many yards away — lies Merton. Over twenty years later I still see wisdom in the timelessness of



MARIANNA KANE NEAL

□ **Marianna Kane Neal** lives in Fairborn, Ohio, and is a member of *The International Thomas Merton Society*. She is married, the mother of three sons, and holds degrees in counseling and theology. She writes: "I have avidly read Thomas Merton since I was a teenager. For several years I have been a freelance writer and articles of mine have appeared in several magazines."

his message. I come here to be with him, to reflect on what he has said, and to try to understand myself and my world better.

I have now lived through bombings via television in the safety of my living room and I come here to sort out my feelings. Memories of Vietnam haunt me. Fears buried deep in my subconscious are again manifesting themselves. I realize I cannot deal with the myriad of emotions which are plaguing me and I am frustrated, not only by my own emptiness, but by a sense of helplessness.

“Do not think yourself better because you burn up friends and enemies with long range missiles without ever seeing what you have done” (from Merton’s “Chant to be Used in Procession around a Site with Furnaces”). I have to accept some of the responsibility for this war and the violence with which the media bombards us. I struggle with this realization.

I begin to understand, as Merton says in *Seeds of Contemplation*, that “the root of all war is fear.” Yes, fear is a strange emotion that pervades most of our conscious and unconscious actions. I think this is one of Merton’s most powerful statements. Children lie out of fear of being punished. People cheat on all levels because they are afraid of failure. TV commercials appeal to those who are afraid of not being popular or wealthy. Many turn to drug and alcohol abuse because they are afraid to face reality. Every imaginable crime is either directly or indirectly a result of fear. Merton says in *The Ascent to Truth*: “If we cannot stop judging each other, we run the constant risk of destroying each other.” Judging is merely another form of fear. Judging makes me feel more important as I try to lessen the importance of someone else.

As I listen to the stillness awakening within me I realize that once again being apart from the world and its violence is slowly giving me the answers I need. As Merton says in *The Sign of Jonas*: “You do not see Cistercian life in perspective if you do not look at your abbey from the fields.” This is why I, too, am here. This is why I always return to the monastery and to Merton in my struggles.

“There must be a time when the man of prayer goes to pray as if it were the first time in his life he had ever prayed” (*No Man is an Island*). Sometimes prayer doesn’t SEEM to be enough. Merton has shown me that prayer is the only answer that IS enough. Through writings four decades old a vital truth and force in nature prevails.

To experience peace in our world we must first find inner peace through prayer. To find peace we must, as Merton repeatedly reminds us, pray for those who are afraid so that God’s light and love might show them the truth that they are children of God with nothing to fear. And so I, in my nonviolent search for peace, pray for myself that my fears can be reduced and overcome. I pray for my friends, my country, and our political leaders. But I also pray for the people living in fear in countries being devastated by this war as well as the political leaders whom we mistakenly see as our enemies. They too are children of God who behave as they do because of a fear they do not understand.

Merton’s “Prayer for Peace” expresses what I have discovered. Turning to God in prayer we ask Him: “Teach us to wait and trust. Grant light, grant strength and patience to all who work for peace.” It was true during Merton’s lifetime. It is true today.