

A WITNESS TO TRUTH

Review of
 Witness to Freedom:
The Letters of Thomas Merton in Times of Crisis
 Selected and edited by William H. Shannon
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Reviewed by **Patrick F. Guyton**

The publication of *Witness to Freedom*, edited by William H. Shannon, is a noteworthy event, not only because it helps us complete our picture of Thomas Merton as a correspondent, but also because it is the latest selection of his letters to be published in this series. Shannon edited the first collection of letters, *The Hidden Ground of Love (HGL)*, and is also the General Editor of The Merton Letters.

The letters in *Witness to Freedom* will be welcomed like old friends to those who are familiar with the previous volumes of letters. Most of the issues covered in those volumes are revisited in this collection. The letters are generally shorter, involve many correspondents, and provide “snapshots” of Merton thinking on a variety of topics close to his heart.

The collection is divided into four parts: art and freedom; war and freedom; Merton’s life and written works; and Merton’s thoughts about some aspects of religion and religious dialogue. Some of the letters are written by Merton in great humility, others in great pain. Among the most poignant are those written during a vocation crisis in the late 1950s, letters written to and about his Abbot, Dom James Fox, who subverted Merton’s efforts to transfer to another order.

As Shannon points out in the introduction, this collection is about Merton’s struggle for freedom as his concept of freedom underwent radical change during the three stages of his life: (1) an early stage when he saw restraints only as preventing him from doing what he wanted to do; (2) looking outwardly for freedom in rules of the monastery when he entered Gethsemani; and (3) his realization that freedom is an inner reality which is guided more from within than from without.

The first section deals with art and freedom and is made up entirely of letters to Victor Hammer. In a letter from 1959 we hear Merton posit the idea that the wisdom of God, Hagia Sophia, is “not only a Father but a Mother” that is a kind of darkness, and the key to this wisdom is mercy and love. This darkness of wisdom “becomes to us an inexpressible light. We pass through the center of our own nothingness into the light of God.”

The second section is concerned with issues of war and freedom. Most of the letters in this section are from Merton’s *Cold War Letters* of the early 1960s. Shannon believes that this collection of letters which Merton wrote, collated, and then circulated was not simply an afterthought but was rather a series of letters he planned in order to get out his own thinking about war and peace after he had been silenced by superiors in his order. Merton’s voice in these letters is a strong, clear one for sincerity and truth in pursuit of a sane policy

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during a period when such moderate voices were being drowned out by extreme voices from the far left and the far right.

In a letter, probably written to Archbishop Thomas Roberts, he writes: “The most scandalous thing of all, and this has been stated very explicitly by some few sane people who are still pointing to the danger [of nuclear war], is that the Church and her clergy have been almost completely silent.” While in a letter possibly written to Frank J. Sheed, he states: “It is true that there is a lot of loose talk and debate. A witless pacifism is no answer. There is no question of just giving up. We have to seek to find the sane middle path, to protect our faith and freedom while at the same time keeping peace.”

In a 1968 letter to Barbara Hubbard, Merton again advocates a balanced approach to the future: “I detect two broad kinds of ethical consciousness developing (over and above the sclerotic fixation on norms that are given by the past): (1) a millennial consciousness, and (2) an ecological consciousness.” He explains that the millennial consciousness views all that has happened up to now as at best provisional and preparatory for the real thing that is about to happen, i.e., the new creation, the Second Coming. This view states that in order for the millennium to happen there are things that people must do to destroy and repudiate the past, such as conversion or revolution, and when these things are done, the big event will happen. He attributes this type of millennial thinking to Marxism, the Black Power movement, Cargo Cults, and Third World revolutionary movements. Opposed to this view, he continues, is ecological consciousness which says, “Look out! In preparing this great event you run the risk of forgetting something. We are not alone in this thing. We belong to a community of living beings and we owe our fellow members in this community the respect and honor due to them. If we are to enter into a new era, well and good, but let’s bring the rest of the living along with us.”

Included in this section is Merton’s “Open Letter to the American Hierarchy,” written in September of 1965, which is an outstanding summation of his views on war and peace. A succinct compilation of these views is found in a 1968 letter to Mary Lanahan: “I am not a ‘pure’ pacifist. I can certainly see that the use of force may be necessary to maintain a certain international order. I do not say that evil must be passively accepted. It must be resisted. But I believe that with the advent of the atomic bomb war has taken on a new shape which makes it at the same time stupid and pointless.”

The third section of the book deals with Merton’s life and works. It contains the longest series of letters in the book, about sixty letters to Naomi Burton Stone, Merton’s friend and literary agent, spanning over twenty years. The letters are truly outstanding in the breadth of issues and ideas covered. In some ways, the personal and intimate way in which Merton wrote to Stone are similar to the wrenching and painful letters he wrote to Rosemary Radford Ruether (*HGL*). As a young monk, writing in January 1947 to Naomi Burton, Merton stated that the one idea that he hopes people get from reading *The Seven Storey Mountain* is his identity with “disinterested charity and true freedom, because that is important.” These letters to Naomi Burton Stone will be must reading for Merton scholars and for those who wish to hear him speak from the heart about many different events throughout his entire time in the monastery.

In 1963 M. R. Chandler of *The San Francisco Examiner* wrote and asked Merton to reply to a questionnaire about book reading. His response is most interesting as it contains his philosophy of reading: “The real joy of reading is not in the reading itself but in the thinking which it stimulates and which may go beyond what is said in the book.” In the rest of the letter he answered questions about the last books he read, the books he was presently reading, the books he wanted to read, the books that influenced him the most as well as books people should read.

In this section is a series of over twenty letters to Sister Anita [Ann] Wasserman, OCD, spanning the years from 1952 to 1967. It is interesting to see the shift in Merton’s spiritual direction from an early emphasis on traditional spiritual practice in 1952 to this statement in a September 1964 letter: “One thing is sure. I am really aware that solitude is most important in my own life and I know that this is not just a subjective

opinion.” One insight from the letters to Sister Anita and other members of her family is Merton’s longing for a family. It is apparent in these letters to the Wassermans that Merton wishes they were, in fact, his family or at least that he indeed had a family.

The letters in a series from June 1959 through September 1960 that deal with Merton’s “Vocation Crisis” are the most painful in the book to read. In these letters Merton writes to several bishops in different places stating his desire to live the life of a hermit and asking for their help. He reveals that his spiritual director at Gethsemani has urged him, for his own spiritual growth, to leave Gethsemani and find a more secluded place to live a life of solitude. Over the year and a half the letters weave a sad tale of Merton’s Abbot, Dom James Fox, using extraordinary means to thwart Merton’s attempts to leave Gethsemani. Fox’s efforts to stop his departure become so obsessive that they border on great evil and reveal a superior who is more like a manipulative manager of a branch bank than a father of a Christian community of men. At the end of the crisis, under the vow of obedience, Merton accepts his superior’s orders to remain at Gethsemani. However, as late as 1965, he corresponded with Ernesto Cardenal asking him to stand by to make an appeal to the Pope for permission to leave.

Also in section three is a small collection of letters Shannon has called “Reflections on Life’s Meaning” that contains an insightful letter to Robert Menchin written in January of 1966. Menchin had written to Merton asking for advice to people who wished to make career changes. In his response, Merton provides us with a summary of his own spiritual journey and thinking at the time:

“Consequently there has been a great deal of change in me, during the course of my monastic life. I would say that my interests have deepened and broadened as time went on. I have become more and more interested in all different forms of religious and monastic experiences, and it has been my privilege to engage in dialogue with men living according to Hinduism, Zen, Hasidic Judaism, Sufism, and so on. I have also become more deeply concerned with basic issues in the world situation. For me the monastery has not been a mere refuge: it has meant facing responsibility on the deepest level, and it has meant giving an account of myself to others, and being open to them in their problems.”

The final section deals with Merton’s religious thought and his dialogue with others about religion. The letters to experts in other religious traditions will be found interesting, but one of my favorites is an August 1966 letter to Lord Northbourne in which Merton explains his guarded pessimism about the future of the world and society: “For my part I am frankly dubious. I foresee a rather pitiful bastardized culture, vulgarized, uniform, and full of elements of parody and caricature, and perhaps frightening new developments of its own which may be in a certain way ‘interesting’ and even exciting. And terrible.” How prophetic these words seem now almost thirty years later.

Lay people wrote Merton during his life asking his opinion about every conceivable subject. One such person, named only as Rita, wrote asking his opinion of the revised liturgy in the Roman Catholic Church after the Second Vatican Council. In his November 1965 response to her, he advocates that the Latin liturgy should be allowed to be retained at least in monasteries. “I was even more attracted to it in the monastery and I grew up in it as a monk, so that now when I see even the monks discarding Gregorian and Latin I realize that it is a great loss, for monks at least ought to be able to keep alive this ancient tradition so valid in itself.”

Witness to Freedom is certainly a book that every person interested in Merton will want to read. Shannon reveals to us a Merton who was not only a “witness to freedom,” but also a witness to truth through his own struggles in life. This collection shows that he paid a high price at times and his scars at the end were many. Today his voice continues to be a witness to the truth for people everywhere, of all faiths, who search for that which is real, lasting and freeing — that which leads us ultimately to God.