

A New World Being Born: Loving in a New Way

Presidential Address – ITMS Ninth General Meeting
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By **Erlinda G. Paguio**

I am happy to welcome all of you to the Ninth General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society. I read Thomas Merton's biography and early writings when I was a teenager in Manila, Philippines. I believe that my decision to remain in the United States after graduate school and my parents' decision not to return to the Philippines after President Ferdinand Marcos imposed martial law in 1972 were all in God's plan for me and my family. In 1974, my parents moved to Louisville after my father accepted a job there. When he died in 1977, I left my job in Chicago and moved to Louisville to become my mother's companion. Being in Louisville has provided me with many opportunities to become involved with many people and activities that are related to Thomas Merton.

I would like to share with you this evening some experiences and reflections on Merton as a peacemaker, a person fully engaged in an outspoken and silent journey toward a deep relationship and unity with God and with his people in this world. On April 28, 2005, Tadatoshi Akiba, the Mayor of Hiroshima, visited Louisville to speak about strengthening the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty so that by the year 2020 all nuclear weapons will have been abolished. The treaty calls for nations without nuclear weapons to pledge not to pursue them and for those that acknowledge having nuclear weapons to pledge to move toward eliminating them. After talking a little about his background, Mayor Akiba inquired if there were some hibakusha in the audience. Two Japanese women stood up in front of where I sat. The hibakusha, the survivors of the bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, believe that as long as there are nuclear weapons, the threat of a nuclear war will always be present and people will have to suffer the way they did. I was very much moved to see them and remembered well Merton's account of a very quiet hibakusha woman, who left a paper crane on the table after Merton read his poem "Paper Cranes"

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to members of the Hibakusha on World Peace Mission Pilgrimage when they visited Gethsemani on May 17, 1964. Merton wrote in his journal: "After they had all gone, it was Mrs. Tayoshi's paper crane that remained silent and eloquent, the most valid statement of the whole afternoon."¹

Mayor Akiba, a former university professor, has inspired a powerful upsurge in anti-nuclear activism. As president of the Mayors for Peace, he has increased by one-third the number of member cities. As of October, 2004, Mayors for Peace has 629 city members in 109 countries and regions including the capitals of all the nuclear-weapon states except Islamabad and Washington. In November 2003, the Mayors for Peace, supported by the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, launched an Emergency Campaign to Ban Nuclear Weapons. This campaign has since received strong endorsements in resolutions passed by the European Parliament, the Conference of U.S. Mayors, International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW), and Abolition 2000. Mayor Akiba is working hard to get Hiroshima-Nagasaki Peace Study courses established in colleges and universities around the world. He believes that the atomic bombings have never received the academic analysis they deserve. Finding a new way to pass on atomic bomb memory is an urgent task because the average age of the A-bomb survivors (hibakusha) is now over 72. I was pleased that Paul Pearson, Director of the Merton Center, read Merton's poem, "Paper Cranes"² and that he gave Mayor Akiba a copy of Merton's *Original Child Bomb*.³ I was also glad that when she was introduced during the meeting, Mary Becker, who is presenting *Original Child Bomb: A Film of Meditations on the Nuclear Age*, expressed her deep gratitude to Mayor Akiba for inspiring her and encouraging her to produce the film, which you will see tomorrow.

Merton's strong anti-nuclear writings in the 1960s are still relevant today. His reflections on surviving a thermonuclear war expressed a need to find some way of saying NO to war-makers. He was convinced that if he must say no, it must be with meaning and some effect and not merely as a feeble gesture. "To say no in a way that unmask[s] falsehood and speaks the truth and articulates the desire of the vast majority of men in the world for peace. All those who are confused and helpless and are driven on to their death by the leaders."⁴ By facing the world with a totally different viewpoint, the contemplative keeps alive in the world the presence of a spiritual and intelligent consciousness which is the root of true peace and unity among men.⁵ Merton emphasized that no Christian could be indifferent to man's fate because God Himself has become man. "Whoever believes that Christ is the Word made flesh believes that every man must in some sense be regarded as Christ. . . . We cannot give an irresponsible and unchristian consent to the demonic use of nuclear power for the destruction of a whole nation, a whole continent, or possibly even the whole human race."⁶

I would like to discuss with you Merton's need to become more informed about the world and engaged in what was going on in it during the 1960s. The questions he raised about his own spirituality and the relationship of his vocation as a monk and a writer in the world provide us with a guide to our own journey during these uncertain times of the 21st century. He assures us that we can build a new world by loving in a new way, by loving as Christ loves. After receiving many Christmas cards in 1957, Merton wrote in his journal that a monk should have something to do with the world he lives in and should love the people in that world: "How much they give us and how little we give them. My responsibility [is] to be in all reality a peacemaker in the world, an apostle, to bring people to truth, to make my whole life a true and effective witness to God's truth."⁷ He asked himself: "What does love mean today? What is its place in the enormous dimensions of the modern world? We have to love in a new way and with a new attitude and I suppose perhaps the first thing to do is

to admit I do not know the meaning of love in any context – ancient or new” (SS 150).

As Merton prepared notes for a novices’ conference, he asked himself whether it was possible in a capitalist economy to live up to the doctrine of St. John’s first epistle, which states: “My little children, let us not love in word nor in tongue, but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:16-18). He felt an obligation to study questions of history, economics, etc. as much as he was able to. He did not think that this obligation was in conflict with his monastic vocation (SS 150). He would remain obedient to his superiors, but he would read whatever he could get permission to read. “I don’t believe that solitude can any longer mean, for me, indifference to or separation from what is happening to the rest of the human race” (SS 181).

In 1960 the reality of apartheid struck Merton strongly. He was appalled when he read about the Sharpeville Massacre in South Africa where at least 180 black Africans were injured and 69 killed when South African police opened fire on approximately 300 demonstrators, who were protesting against the pass laws, at the township of Sharpeville. He wrote in his journal: “I must do all I can at least to learn and understand and try to see things as they are and know what I at least can do about them.” He added, “I am called to pray for the world” (SS 391-92). His interest in the issue of racism may be gleaned from his letter to Daniel Berrigan, a peace activist and one of the founders of the Catholic Peace Fellowship: “When you come down in the fall, the purpose will be for you to give us a talk on South Africa.”⁸ Merton’s letter to Louis Massignon on October 29, 1960 expressed the anguish he felt in trying to become a peacemaker: “First I struggle in my heart with the mystery and the need of peace, peace for the world. As a priest and a monk I must be a man of peace. I tell myself that there must be some truth in that idea. But in fact we are surrounded by and committed to a climate of violence.”⁹ He informed Massignon that he was studying Gandhi’s volumes on non-violence and he thought that he was bound by conscience to do something and wanted to align himself with the Friends of Gandhi, an organization that Massignon founded in the 1930s.

Merton’s exposure to Mahatma Gandhi began in 1931 during Gandhi’s visit to London. Merton argued with the head prefect in his school dormitory at Oakham that Gandhi was perfectly justified in demanding that the British withdraw from India peacefully and go home so the people of India could run their own country. In his “Tribute to Gandhi,” Merton wrote that Gandhi’s belief in serving the truth by non-violence was effective because it began first within himself. Gandhi’s way was “simply to follow [his] conscience without regard for the consequences to himself, in the belief that this was demanded of him by God and that the results would be the work of God.”¹⁰ Gandhi emphasized the importance of the individual person entering politics with a fully awakened and operative spiritual power in himself, the power of satyagraha, “non-violent dedication to truth, a religious and spiritual force, a wisdom born of fasting and prayer” (SD 228). In Merton’s August 30, 1966, letter to Lord Northbourne, author of *Religion in the Modern World*, he noted that he spent at least twelve years of his monastic life trying to devote himself to meditation, contemplation, silence, withdrawal, renunciation, and so on, but saw that this was insufficient, unreal and deceptive. As a solitary, he still devoted most of his time to meditation, contemplation and reading, but he read a great deal more about what was happening and the common problems of the world. As a writer he had to be able to say certain things that needed to be said to the best of his knowledge and according to his conscience and to what seemed to be the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (WF 317-18).

Merton’s search for ways to integrate the Gospel, his life and the world led him to ask these questions: Can the Gospel commitment be considered enough, or must it be translated also into

concrete, contemporary social terms? Is my commitment by religious vows enough, or must it be translated also into concrete, contemporary social terms? In his introduction to *Seeds of Destruction* he wrote: "To have a vow of poverty seems to me illusory if I do not in some way identify myself with the cause of people who are denied their rights and forced, for the most part, to live in abject misery. To have a vow of obedience seems to me to be absurd if it does not imply a deep concern for the most fundamental of all expressions of God's will: the love of His truth and of our neighbor" (*SD* xvi).

Merton was convinced that it was important to discover all the social implications of the Gospel not just by studying them but by living them and uniting himself with those who work in transforming the social order according to the principles of the primacy of the person – justice, liberty, peace, wisdom and love, which are against slavery, materialism, hedonism, pragmatism, control of technology, etc. (*TTW* 9). On May 20, 1961 he wrote this prayer in his journal: "And now Father I beg You to teach me to be a man of peace and to help bring peace to the world. To study here truth and non-violence, and patience and the courage to suffer for truth" (*TTW* 121).

Merton desired to put to practice Christ's words: "whatsoever you do to the least of my brethren you do it to me." His self-questioning was intense: under what conditions can Christians establish by their outlook and their action in the world of today the claim to be true participants in the building of a new humanism? Can our Christian faith suggest appropriate and original answers to our problems today?¹¹ He believed that the light which Christianity can provide must be made evident by the creative activity of Christians themselves as they participate in the solution of contemporary problems. "Christianity can and must contribute something of its own unique and irreplaceable insights into the value of man, not only in his human nature, but in his inalienable dignity as a free person. The course of these insights is, of course, redemptive love" (*L&L* 138).

Merton tells us that in loving we must become engaged in an energetic and sacrificial social action to restore violated rights to the oppressed, to create work for the homeless, so that the hungry may have food to eat and that everyone may earn a decent wage (*L&L* 138). Since the population of the world increases every day, the dimensions of Christian love must be expanded and universalized on the same scale as the human problems to be met. Merton concurs with Vatican II's Constitution on the Church in the Modern World that stated: "Nothing must obscure the obligation of the Christian 'to work with all men in the building of a more human world'" (*L&L* 139). Christianity is a religion of love and a religion of dynamic change.

In the Christian message of salvation, the word "repent" is a summons to a complete change of life both for the individual and the society. "The summons to change, to man's creative self-realization and development in the spirit, as a child of God whom the truth shall make free, is a summons to permanent newness of life" (*L&L* 140). Merton tells us to get away from an abstract idea of God dwelling in a remote heaven where he will one day reward us. We must take this world in our own hands and change it as we change ourselves. We can attain to a real union of love with our neighbors through a realistic collaboration with them in our daily life and work. The love of God enables us to love. God is manifested when we love. Christ became a man that we may learn to love as He has loved. He has become a brother to each of us and he wants us to recognize one another as sons and daughters of God. Merton writes that: "The heart of true Christian humanism, in its full theological dimension, is to be sought in the revealed doctrine of the Incarnation, man's sonship of God in Christ, and the gift of the Holy Spirit as a principle of divine love and love in man" (*L&L* 144-45).

Our relationship to God enables us to discover our true selves in love. Everything that is God's becomes ours in Christ. "To put it more concretely, everything that is God's is our own, provided that we love" (*L&L* 145).

In Merton's conference to the nuns in Alaska, he stressed that the contemplative life is the realization and understanding "of what the mystery of Christ means in my own life and in the life of my community."¹² The Christian responsibility cannot be focused merely on pure intentions, interior charity and good will. "It must also be effective in the context of social action, political life, work, and all the practical choices that affect our relations with others in the family, the city, the nation, and the world" (*L&L* 154).

Merton brings our relationship of love with our fellow men and our reconciliation with one another to a deeper level. When we love one another, our relationship and our unity resemble the relation of love between the Divine Persons within the Blessed Trinity. Christ's prayer for unity, "that they may be one in us as you, Father, are in me, and I in you" (John 17:21), implies a certain likeness between the union of the Divine Persons and the unity of God's children in truth and charity (*L&L* 154).

Merton admitted in 1957 that he did not know the meaning of love in any context. After much reflection and deep prayer, personal trials, encounters with many different people, and experiences of God's tremendous love for him in opening new paths in his life, after loving a woman, "M," and being loved by her, Merton realized in 1966 that "nothing counts except love and that a solitude that is not simply the wide-openness of love and freedom is nothing. Love and solitude are the one ground of true maturity and freedom. . . . True solitude embraces everything, for it is the fullness of love that rejects nothing and no one, is open to All in All."¹³

Merton was a pioneer in interfaith dialogue with other Christian traditions and with Theravada, Tibetan, and Zen Buddhism, Hinduism, Sufism, Judaism, Taoism, Confucianism, Eastern Orthodoxy. In a letter dated June 20, 1959 to Mrs. Leonard, Paul Tillich's secretary, Merton focused on charity as the best formula for Christian unity. He wrote that what we have in common was so much greater and more important than what we do not have in common (*WF* 301). Merton's letter to Abdul Aziz, a practicing Sufi and customs collector in Pakistan, expressed his belief in the same God: "I can certainly join you with my whole heart in confessing the One God (Tawhid) with all my heart and all my soul, for this is the beginning of all faith and the root of our existence. Without this faith we are in deep night and do not know where we are going, and this precisely is the source of all the evils in the world" ([6/02/63] *HGL* 54). When Sister Mary Margaret Funk, OSB, interviewed Brother Patrick Hart, OCSO, Merton's former secretary, she asked him what made Merton so fitting as a dialogue partner with many different traditions. Brother Patrick replied that Merton was always interested in other faiths. In the 1950s, before there was much talk of ecumenism, he would tell the guest master that Baptists, Disciples of Christ, and Episcopalians should be invited to the monastery. People identified with Merton's writing about his own spiritual journey. He felt we have much in common on the experiential level, the level of how we experience God. Because he was steeped in his own tradition, he was able to reach out and explore other traditions, learn from them, and then celebrate the gifts that they brought to his own tradition.¹⁴

I would like to speak briefly about how important Merton's involvement with Muslims and Sufis is today. Since the terrorists' attack of September 11, 2001 in New York and Washington, the war in Iraq, the suicide bombings in the Middle East and elsewhere, there has been a global

demonization of Islam and an intense hatred of U.S. foreign policy. We need to be freed from inherited attitudes and concentrate our efforts on those points that bring us together. The treatment of Muslim prisoners in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo prisons by American military personnel has only increased the animosity against Americans. Fethullah Gullen, a Muslim scholar from Turkey, and one of the most persuasive and influential voices in the Muslim community that has called for dialogue as a step to peace, said that “the present, distorted image of Islam that has resulted from its misuse by both Muslims and non-Muslims for their own goals scares both Muslims and non-Muslims.” He recalled an interview with Professor Sidney Griffith, director of the Institute of Christian Oriental Research in The Catholic University of America and a sincere supporter of Islam–Christian dialogue. Professor Griffith stated that how the West sees Islam is illustrated by one simple fact: in American universities, Islam is not taught as a religion in theological schools but as a political system in the political science or international relations departments. Such a perception also is found among Westernized segments of the Islamic world and non-Muslims in Asia and Africa.¹⁵ On May 17, 2005, I accompanied 13 Muslim scholars from South Asia to the Abbey of Gethsemani. As ITMS president and a staff member of the University of Louisville, I became involved in the Muslims in the United States Program, which aimed at promoting better relations between Muslims and Americans. It is a two-year program funded by the U.S. State Department’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. The program invited Muslim scholars from South Asia for a month-long visit to universities, community organizations, Christian, Jewish and Muslim communities in Louisville and other selected American cities. American scholars in return visited Pakistan, Bangladesh and India to learn more about Muslims and their culture. Initially the second phase of the program would have included Muslim scholars from the Middle East, but the volatility of the situation there has made it difficult to get the necessary clearances. During interfaith meetings in Louisville and other cities, there was a consensus among these Muslims from South Asia that the media has distorted many facets of Islam, and that they should be held accountable for untruths spread against Muslims. *Newsweek*’s inaccurate report on the desecration of the Koran by U.S. interrogators at Guantanamo prison on May 9, 2005 was cited as irresponsible journalism. They said we should be freed from inherited attitudes and misinformation about Islam and Muslims. Doctor Aminul Islam, chairman of the Center for Advanced Studies in the Humanities at Dhaka University in Bangladesh, reminded us that God created all mankind so they may love one another whether great or small. We have to fight the evil of terrorism and the men who kill in the name of God. He emphasized that one of the solutions to our many problems is inner conversion and more dialogue.

Meeting these Muslims scholars last May reminded me of my meeting with Nicole Abadie and her husband Sidi Hadij in 1999 after attending the Symposium on Merton and Sufism at Bellarmine University. I sat beside them during dinner at the Uptown Café in Louisville. Nicole, who spoke English, told me that they had accompanied the Sufi master, Sidi Abdeslam, and Professor Bernard Phillips when they visited Merton at Gethsemani in October 1964. She acted as an interpreter for Sidi Abdeslam, who did not speak English. Sharing her experience of that memorable meeting was indeed a delightful surprise and a happy experience for me. Merton wrote in his journal that the visit of Sidi Abdeslam and his companions had given him a real sense of a strong bond of friendship with them – a sense of God present in them, with them, in friendship. “I can’t begin to put down everything, I was so moved by the visit” (LL 152).

The same thing could be said of the Muslims’ visit to the Abbey of Gethsemani on May 17,

2005. On June 3, 2005, their last day in Louisville, one of the participants, Syed Ali Mohammad Naqvi, rector and secretary general of Madinatul Uloom Aligarh Seminary in India, summed up his own and his fellow scholars' experience of their visit. He said: "When we arrived at Gethsemani, we exchanged many pleasant greetings. We then went to the church where we prayed; we sat together in the dining room, prayed and ate together. After lunch we told each other about ourselves; then we prayed again. We had an intellectual discussion later on. The best part was the interfaith dialogue. At the end of the day when everything was over, the only thing that remained in me was love." Dr. Zeenat Shaukat Ali, who teaches Islamic History at Xavier University in India, said that during their visit to mosques, Christian churches, synagogues and the monastery, seeds of friendship have been sown, which has led her to realize that we are all moving toward the same Light. The dialogue and the prayers we shared with the thirteen Muslims and the eight monks had been a real meeting of the heart and mind. It reminded me of two expressions that appealed to Merton very much: "the heart that knows God" and "a heart alive with love." They express a person's realization of God's innermost knowledge of him, and his own knowledge and love for God. This realization leads to total inner transformation and to unity.

In Merton's essay, *He is Risen*, he advises us that "We must never let our religious ideas, customs, rituals, and conventions become more real to us than the Risen Christ. We must learn, with St. Paul, that all these religious accessories are worthless if they get in the way of our faith in Jesus Christ, or prevent us from loving our brother in Christ."¹⁶ I want to conclude this address by pointing to the Cross as a sign of contradiction and above all also the sign of reconciliation. Merton writes that the Cross reminds us of the contradictions within ourselves and within our society. We can resolve them in unity and love of our Savior. "True unity is the work of love. It is the free union of beings that spontaneously seek to be one in the truth . . . True unity admits the presence of obstacles and of divisions in order to overcome both by humility and sacrifice."¹⁷ Reflecting on the "old man" and the "new man" in 1959, Merton remarked: "For the 'new man' – everything is new. Even the old is transfigured in the Holy Spirit and is always new. . . . The new man is he who can find reality where it cannot be seen by the eyes of the flesh – where it is not yet – where it comes into being the moment he sees it. . . . The new man lives in a world that is always being created, and renewed. He lives in this realm of renewal and of creation. He lives in life" (*SS* 269). Thank you very much.

1. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 105.
2. Thomas Merton, *Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 740; subsequent references will be cited as "CP" parenthetically in the text.
3. Thomas Merton, *Original Child Bomb* (New York: New Directions, 1962); also published in *CP* 291-302.
4. Thomas Merton, *Turning toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 153; subsequent references will be cited as "TTW" parenthetically in the text.
5. See Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 221.
6. Thomas Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, ed. Patricia A. Burton (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004) 10.
7. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life. Journals, vol. 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 149; subsequent references will be cited as "SS" parenthetically in the text.
8. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 83 [8/4/64]; subsequent references will be cited as "HGL" parenthetically in the text.
9. Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994) 279-80; subsequent references will be cited as "WF" parenthetically in the text.

10. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964) 225; subsequent references will be cited as “SD” parenthetically in the text.
11. See Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979) 137; subsequent references will be cited as “L&L” parenthetically in the text.
12. Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton in Alaska: The Alaskan Conferences, Journals, and Letters*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: New Directions, 1989) 80.
13. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 40 [April 14, 1966]; subsequent references will be cited as “LL” parenthetically in the text.
14. Mary Margaret Funk, OSB, “The Legacy of Thomas Merton: An Interview with Br. Patrick Hart, OCSO.” *Monastic Interreligious Dialogue Bulletin* 74 (April 2005) 19.
15. (<http://en.fgulen.com/a.page/tolerance.and.dialogue/fethullah.gulens.speeches.and.interviews.on.interfaith.dialogue/al336.html>).
16. Thomas Merton, *He Is Risen* (Niles, IL: Argus, 1975) 52.
17. Thomas Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani*, ed. Jane Marie Richardson, SL (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1992) 284.