

Merton's Turn To The World, and Ours

Review of
Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years
The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume IV, 1960-1963

Edited by Victor A. Kramer

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Reviewed by **John Dear, S. J.**

Last fall, I received a beautiful gift from the Abbey of Gethsemani. I spent ten days on a silent retreat at Merton's secluded hermitage. I had just completed my assignment as director of a community center for the poor in inner-city Richmond, Virginia, and was preparing to teach one semester of theology classes at Fordham University in the Bronx before moving to Belfast for one year as part of a Jesuit "tertianship" program, a year of prayer and renewal before final vows in the Society of Jesus. I was, in other words, in a time of transition.

I arrived in Gethsemani, excited but exhausted. After visiting with my friend Brother Patrick, I walked up to the hermitage on a cold, November morning. The solitude, silence, and serenity of Merton's cabin and the surrounding woods filled me with the peace of Christ. By the end of my stay, I felt transformed, like I had been to the mountaintop and looked over and seen the promised land.

Like many others, I have read Merton's works carefully, seeking encouragement for my own spiritual journey. As I read the latest installment of the projected seven volumes of Merton journals, I understood for the first time why the hermitage was so precious to Merton. I can well imagine the spiritual renewal and inner consolation he felt in this new environment. From his first afternoon there, Merton felt God's abiding peace. On December 10, 1960, he wrote:

Totally new perspectives on solitude. Afternoons at St. Mary of Carmel. It is true, places and situations are not supposed to matter. This one makes a tremendous difference. Real silence. Real solitude. Peace. Getting acclimated to the surroundings. The valley in front. The tall, separated pines to the west, the heavy, close-set denser pine wood to the north east, the sweep of pasture and the line of bare oaks on the east, various clumps of pine and poplar between east and south, bright sky through bare trunks of ash, elm and oak to the southwest, where a shoulder of hill hides the abbey. And a great dance of sky overhead. And a fire murmuring in the fireplace. Room smells faintly of pine smoke. Silent.

It is important to remember just how profound an impact the hermitage made on Merton at the dawn of the 1960s. It was not only a sacred space; it opened within him a new sacred space to see the world with peace

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eyes. After the decade of inner turmoil confessed in the third journal volume, Merton's life changed. Now, he has a new home, a new mission, and a room with a view to the world.

Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years (Edited by Victor Kramer) records Merton's journey from May 25, 1960 to July 30, 1963, when he was in his late forties, working on the new hermitage, writing about war, following the civil rights movement, denouncing nuclear weapons, teaching his novices, and aching to become a full-time hermit. Much of it offers the raw material for his later collection, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*.

The journal begins with hopes for the hermitage, as well as reflections for Lanza del Vasto (the French disciple of Gandhian nonviolence) and news of Boris Pasternak's death. He reads Hannah Arendt; admires Latin American poets; studies Chuang Tzu, Buddhism and Gandhi; hosts a variety of friends; and fears the prospect of nuclear war between the US and the Soviets. He notes the impact of correspondents such as Milosz, Heschel, and Jacques Maritain. He worries about Cuba, Birmingham, the arms race and his ongoing difficulties with Gethsemani. He marvels at the shining example of Pope John and Martin Luther King, Jr.

But throughout the years, Merton, like so many others, turned his attentive focus on the world and was appalled at what he saw. He dedicated himself to the work of peace, disarmament and civil rights, and paid dearly for his prophetic call with the suppression of his writings, including a provocatively titled manuscript, "Peace in a Post-Christian Era." The insights in his journal brim with wisdom, truer than ever, over thirty-five years later.

"If only our foreign politics made sense! But we have nobody in it who knows what he is doing," he writes on June 20, 1960. "What is worst in the world is the apathy, the helplessness, the despair of people, especially of the intellectuals. Others continue to fill the air with the noise of deceptive hopes — thus intensifying our despair." (July 12, 1960)

While I was at the hermitage, sitting at Merton's desk looking through the windows out across the field to the distant hills and sky, I felt like a watchman, expecting the arrival of Christ any minute. In this peaceful setting, I recalled Christ's final command in the synoptic gospels, to "keep watch." "Watch and pray," Jesus tells Simon Peter (Mark 14:38). "Of that day or hour, no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, not the Son, but only the Father. Be watchful! Be alert! You do not know when the time will come . . . Watch therefore . . . What I say to you, I say to all: Watch!" (Mark 13:32-37) Similarly, we read in Luke, "Those in Judea must flee to the mountains. Let those within the city escape from it, and let those in the countryside not enter the center . . . There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on earth nations will be in dismay, perplexed by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will die of fright in anticipation of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Humanity coming in a cloud with power and great glory. But when these signs begin to happen, stand erect and raise your heads because your redemption is at hand." (Luke 21: 21-28)

Merton lived this call to keep watch. He kept a contemplative vigil on the world. He studied the destructive path of war, racism and nuclear weapons, and wrote about what he saw. His vision stretched far ahead of the church and most of the public. Like Dorothy Day, he issued a strong condemnation of nuclear violence and he held his head high, living an eschatological nonviolence that continues to witness to the church and the world. On November 25, 1961, he wrote:

Tomorrow is the last Sunday after Pentecost. "Let the one who is in Judea flee to the hills." Always the same deep awe and compunction at this Gospel. It has been with me every year since my conversion, and its repetition has not robbed it of significance or turned it into a dead, routine affair. On the contrary, I see more and more how central this is in my life. Yesterday afternoon at the hermitage, surely a

decisive clarity came. That I must definitely commit myself to opposition to, and non-cooperation with, nuclear war. That this includes refusing to vote for those who favor the policy of deterrence, and going forward in trying to make this kind of position and its obligation increasingly clear. Not that I did not mean this before — but never so wholly and so definitely.

As the Order clamped down on his anti-war stance and refused permission to publish some of his peace writings, he observed, “I am in effect a political prisoner at Gethsemani.” On November 22, 1960, he wrote, “Sense of obscure struggle to find a genuinely true and honest position in this world and its belligerent affairs. I wish I knew where to stand. I think I stand with a Ghandi more than with anyone else. But how to transpose his principles to suit my own situation? . . . A growing obscure conviction that this country, having been weighed in the balance and found wanting, faces a dreadful judgment.”

His prayer for the world and for himself deepened, especially when he prayed from his hermitage outpost: “Here you ask me to be nothing else than your friend . . . If I have any choice to make, it is to live and even die here . . . 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 nonviolence, and patience and the courage to suffer for truth.” On July 4, 1961, he reflected on the culture’s shift away from religious faith:

We must adjust our attitude. We are living in a world that used to be Christian — and Hindu, Moslem, Buddhist. In the west we are in the post-Christian age — and all over the world it will soon be the same. The religions will be for the minority. The world as a whole is going to be not pagan but irreligious. Hence we are already living, and will live more and more, in a world that we cannot look upon precisely as “ours” in any external and obvious sense. Certainly we shall “inherit the earth,” but not to build an earthly kingdom in it, I am bold to think! Nor to have a genuinely Christian society in it, nor to have, in any manifest way, an accepted place in it. We will be lucky to submit at all. We will certainly survive, but as genuine aliens and exiles. And perhaps this is as it should be. Yet we should not for all that become inert and inactive. But our activity must take into account this new dimension of a humility that has at last come to check our illusion of a politically successful Christendom. This sounds like defeatism and I am ready to revise and qualify it. But I confess it looks to me like the sober truth. It does not make one any less a Christian. On the contrary, it confirms me in my dependence on the Gospel message and in my dedication to Christ!

The sense of impending judgment lingers throughout this journal. On August 16, 1961, he comments: “Inexorably life moves on towards crisis and mystery. Everyone must struggle to adjust himself to this, to face the situation for ‘now is the judgment of the world.’”

“I am perhaps at a turning point in my spiritual life,” he concludes on October 23, 1961, after publishing his powerful statement against war and calling for active nonviolence in *The Catholic Worker*. “At least I feel clean for having stated what is certainly the true Christian position . . . I am happy that I have turned a corner, perhaps the last corner in my life.” One week later, he writes again, “Convinced again that I must set everything aside to work for the abolition of war. Primarily of course by prayer. I remain a contemplative, but as for writing, contacts, letters, that kind of effort: here it seems to me everything should yield first place to the struggle against war.” Near Christmas, he writes:

About peace . . . What obsesses me most is the grim condition of the Church, committed in great part to the ‘escape clauses’ that ‘justify’ the brutalities of the secular solution, and which enable the moral theologian to hand over the ordinary

Christian, bound hard and fast, to the power of the militarist. In the early days of Christianity, to be a soldier was *abnormal*, to refuse war was *normal*. Today, when war is beyond all reason, is utterly murderous and suicidal, we are told that the Christian who fails to participate is not a good Christian, he is evading his duty, rejecting the *Cross!!!!* This is to me one of the most abominable and terrifying of signs. And one of the most convincingly awful indications that the end is near. In a word — that it may indeed be vitally necessary for us to be better Christians than our theologians, and *that our very salvation may depend on this!*

After a visit with a young priest from Oklahoma who joined civil rights sit-ins, he declares, “Every priest should have been and should be active in that!! Every priest should be active in the peace movement. [But] the majority in the country are interested more in the extermination of Russia.”

On August 21, 1962, he glowed about meeting Dan Berrigan, “an altogether convincing and warm intelligence, with a perfect zeal, compassion and understanding. This, certainly, is the spirit of the Church. This is a hope I can believe in, at least in its validity and its spirit.” The next day, Merton pledged again to pursue the work of peace:

Today I realize with urgency the absolute seriousness of my need to study and practice nonviolence. Hitherto I have “liked” nonviolence as an idea. I have “approved” it, looked with benignity upon it, praised it even earnestly. But I have not practiced it fully. My thoughts and words retaliate. I condemn and resist adversaries when I think I am unjustly treated. I revile them, even treat them with open (but polite) contempt to their face. It is necessary to realize that I am a monk consecrated to God and this restricting non-retaliation merely to physical non-retaliation is not enough — on the contrary it is in some sense a greater evil. At the same time the energy wasted in contempt, criticism and resentment is thus diverted from its true function, *insistence on truth* . . . I need to set myself to the study of nonviolence with thoroughness. The complete, integral practice of it in community life. Eventually teaching it to others by word and example. Short of this, the monastic life will remain a mockery in my life. It will extend to civil disobedience where necessary. Certainly to non-cooperation in evil, even in monastic policies. But polite, charitable, restrained. I need grace to see how to do this. I normally tend to express non-agreement in an insecure, therefore forced manner.

Throughout these urgent pages, Merton applies his biblical analysis to the times. On April 30, 1963, he comments on Gordon Zahn’s talk to the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions in Santa Barbara. “Why religious groups are not potential centers of *dissent* when secular society challenges their basic ethical principles, or have they really abandoned these? What is religion, for the most part, in this country? A “source of peace,” a refuge from conflict? So — an Eichman factory, maybe! Certainly we preach the Cross, but not the cross of resistance; only the cross of submission. And never mind to what. Submission to power — any power that adjusts itself to the Church.

On July 22, 1963, he writes:

How true it is that the great obligation of the Christian, *especially now* is to prove himself a disciple of Christ by *hating no one*, that is to say by condemning no one, rejecting no one. And how true that the impatience that fumes at others and damns them (especially whole classes, races, nations) is a sign of the weakness that is still unliberated, still not tracked by the Blood of Christ, and still a stranger to the Cross.

The last lines of this anxious journal confess his ongoing anguish and despair, and his conviction that such turmoil is necessary to the life of faith in an insane, violent world. "Only answer is acceptance of the Cross" he concludes.

After reading his journal, I feel not only gratitude for his extraordinary perseverance, but new energy to turn again toward the world with the heart of a contemplative and the mind of a truth-seeker. Merton's journal encourages us to face our world with the same contemplative intensity and prophetic truth he lived. Merton challenges me to deepen my own convictions, my own interaction with the world, and my own nonviolent transformation so that I too can be a witness of Christ's hope and peace in a culture of despair and deadly weapons.

Indeed, the challenges before us in 1997 remain the same challenges that Merton faced when he turned toward the world: war, nuclear weapons, poverty, racism, violence, despair, technology run amok, crisis within the church, and infidelity to the God of peace. Merton invites us to enter the contemplative life with all our hearts, and to undergo the conversion he underwent, that same turning toward the world, so that we too may speak God's word of truth and peace. He would not want us to idolize him or create a cult around him, but to live our own authentic Christian lives filled with honesty, courage and hope. He would want us to look at our world and speak God's word: to renounce war and nuclear weapons; to abolish the death penalty and abortion; to resist racism, sexism, consumerism, materialism, and destruction of the earth; to redirect the billions we spend each year on militarism and on weapons of destruction toward human needs; to provide affordable housing, decent healthcare and employment opportunities for all; and most of all, to seek the nonviolent Christ, the God of peace, with all our broken hearts.

The work of peace goes on as urgently needed now as when Merton turned again toward the world. On Ash Wednesday, February 12, 1997, six peace activists, including Philip Berrigan and Fr. Steve Kelly, S.J., calling themselves "the Prince of Peace Plowshares," boarded the U.S.S. Sullivan, a nuclear-capable destroyer at the Bath Iron Works, in Maine. After hammering on the Pilot House, the Bridge, the Helicopter pad, and the Missile Hatch Covers, the six unfurled a banner which read, "They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks." "We see these ships as blasphemy against God; as the byproduct of fear and hatred; as robbery from the poor; and as technology bent toward pride and lawlessness," they read from their statement. "In the spirit of Lent, we come to B.I.W., to symbolically disarm and convert an Aegis destroyer in repentance and atonement." They called for adherence to the vision of Isaiah and the Judeo-Christian peace tradition: "We can obey God and learn nonviolence. We can love our enemies. We can offer the poor dignity and equality. We can abolish war. We can nurture and heal the planet. We can convert nuclear swords into plowshares." Armed officers forcibly threw them to the deck. They sit in the Portland County Jail awaiting trial this Spring. Like Merton, they keep watch and pursue God's urgent word of peace.

Merton's life, like his journal, offers the hope that though we may not make a difference, though we may not see any positive changes on the cultural horizon, we can be faithful to God. His off-handed comment about Henry David Thoreau (written on August 8, 1962) sums up Merton's own wilderness journey: "Thoreau's idleness was an incomparable gift and its fruits were blessings that America has unfortunately never learned to appreciate. Yet he made his gift, even though it was not asked for. And he went his way. If he had followed the advice of his neighbors in Concord, America would have been much poorer."

Merton too offered "an incomparable gift" which continues to bear fruit. Though the country has not embraced his vision of nonviolence and justice, his message remains the same: turn from your old ways; God's reign of peace is at hand.