

Thomas Merton's Call to Contemplation and Action

By Henri J. M. Nouwen

The following sermon was preached at St. Paul's Church, Columbia University, New York City, on December 10, 1978, on the tenth anniversary of Thomas Merton's death. It is taken from the new collection The Road to Peace: Writings on Peace and Justice, by Henri J. M. Nouwen, edited by John Dear, SJ (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1998).

A reading from the Second Letter of Peter:

This point must not be overlooked, dear friends. In the Lord's eyes, one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years are as a day. The Lord does not delay in keeping his promises—though some consider it “delay.” Rather, he shows you generous patience, since he wants none to perish but all to come to repentance. The day of the Lord will come like a thief, and on that day the heavens will vanish with a roar: the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and all its deeds will be made manifest.

Since everything is to be destroyed in this way, what sort of men and women must you be! How holy in your conduct and devotion, looking for the coming of the day of God and trying to hasten it! Because of it, the heavens will be destroyed in flames and the elements will melt away in a blaze. What we await are new heavens and a new earth where, according to God's promise, the justice of God will reside. So, beloved, while waiting for this, make every effort to be found without stain or defilement, and at peace in God's sight. (2 Peter 3:8–14)

The late **Henri J. M. Nouwen** (1932–1996) was a priest, psychologist, and distinguished spiritual writer who served during the last decade of his life as pastor of the L'Arche Daybreak Community in Toronto. Among his many books are *Pray to Live: Thomas Merton, Contemplative Critic* (1972), *The Genesee Diary: Report from a Trappist Monastery* (1976), and *A Cry for Mercy: Prayers from the Genesee* (1981). Priest and peace activist **John Dear, SJ**, is an ITMS member currently stationed in Derry, Northern Ireland.

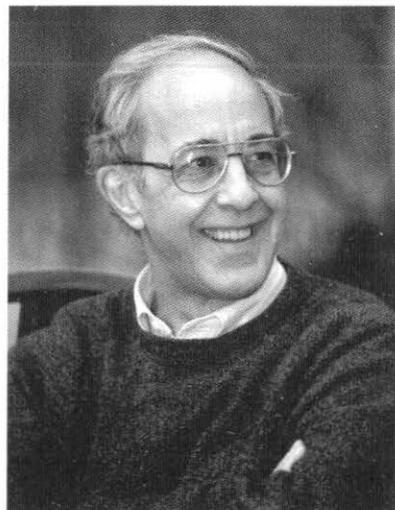


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HENRI J. M. NOUWEN

Peter calls us to look for the coming of the day of God and to try to hasten it. It is a call to look, to keep our eyes open, to be awake, alert, attentive, and always watching. But it is also a call to act, to become engaged, to try hard, to work strenuously without giving up. Thus Peter's call is a call to contemplation and action in the service of the coming of the day of the Lord.

Thomas Merton, whose life and death we celebrate today, made this call his own and tried, through his numerous writings, to show that this call belongs to the core of the life of every Christian.

We are called to be contemplatives, that is *see-ers*, men and women who see the coming of God. The day of the Lord is indeed always coming. It is not a coming that will occur in some distant future, but a coming here and now among us. The Lord's coming is an ongoing event around us, between us, and within us. To become a contemplative, therefore, means to throw off—or better, to peel off—the blindfolds that prevent us from *seeing* his coming in the midst of our own world. Like John the Baptist, Merton constantly points away from himself to the coming One, and invites us to purify our hearts so that we might indeed recognize him as our Lord.

What is it that blinds us? Merton says: our illusions. If there is any word that Merton uses repeatedly and with a certain predilection, it is the word *illusion*. We could call him a specialist in illusions, not because he tried to uphold them but because he sought to unmask them. The many illusions that Merton discusses can best be summarized in these two: the illusion that we can know ourselves and the illusion that we can know God.

The illusion that we can know ourselves puts us on the road to a frantic search for selfhood through self-fulfillment, self-realization, and self-actualization. It is the illusion in which we become so concerned with a self-acquired identity that we constantly worry about how we are doing in comparison with others and preoccupy ourselves with our own unique distinction. It is the illusion that sets us on the road to competition, rivalry, and finally violence. It is the illusion that makes us conquerors who will fight for our place in the world even at the cost of others. This illusion leads some of us to nervous activism fueled by the belief that we are the results of our work. This same illusion leads others to morbid introspection born of the assumption that we are our own deepest feelings and emotions. All of Merton's writings on contemplation attempt to unmask this deep-seated illusion. We are not who we know ourselves to be, but who we are known to be by God. We are not what we can acquire and conquer, but what we have received. We are not the money we earn, the friends we make, or the results we achieve; rather, we are who God made us in God's infinite love. As long as we keep running around, anxiously trying to affirm ourselves to be affirmed by others, we remain blind to the One who has loved us first, dwells in our heart, and is indeed our true self.

The second illusion is that we can know God, that we can say with precision who God is and what God's will is for ourselves and for others. This is the great illusion that sets us on the road to self-righteousness and oppression. It is the illusion that makes whites think they know what is good for blacks, the rich think they know what is good for the poor, and men think they know what is good for women. It is the illusion of control, the illusion that we are masters of our own destiny and can therefore exercise unlimited power and ask for unconditional obedience. It is the illusion that leads to Auschwitz, Hiroshima, and Jonestown.

Thomas Merton invites us to an always deeper awareness of the incomprehensibility of God. He continually unmasks the illusion that we know God and so frees us to see the Lord in always new and surprising ways. All of Merton's prayers, studies, and meditations led him to both a humble recognition of the great abyss between the "allness" of God and the "nothingness" of human beings, and a

grateful awareness that God in God's mercy reaches out over this abyss and embraces us in God's love.

Thus we are called to peel off the blindfolds of our illusions that lead to violence, oppression, hatred, and greed. In so doing, we become contemplatives, people who see the Lord's coming in the midst of everyday life.

But there is more. Peter calls us not only to look for the coming of the day of the Lord, but also to try to hasten it! This is one of the great paradoxes of the Christian life: knowing full well that God is coming in God's time and not in ours, on God's terms and not on ours, Peter nevertheless urges us to work hard with great fervor to hasten the Lord's coming. Here it becomes clear that our action is part of God's coming, that in a mysterious way the realization of the new heaven and the new earth depends on us, that our waiting is not a passive waiting but an active waiting, and that God's promise is not hanging above us in the air, but is deeply embedded in our everyday life.

No one in our time has understood this so well and articulated this so clearly as Thomas Merton. For Merton, contemplation and action can never be separated. The *see-er* acts. Merton has rightly become the guide for those who search for a Christian response to the great pains of our day: hunger, poverty, oppression, exploitation, war, and the threat of nuclear holocaust.

Action is first of all repentance. Peter writes: "The Lord does not delay in keeping promises—though some consider it 'delay.' Rather he shows you generous patience since he wants none to perish but all to come to repentance." And what is repentance? It is to feed the hungry, to visit the sick, to liberate the oppressed. All of Merton's writings on social action make the same point: as long as you act to prove yourself, to justify yourself, or to get rid of your guilt-feelings, you will quickly lose heart and do more harm than good. Merton even goes so far as to say that work for others that does not lead to deeper purity of heart is little more than the imposition of our own compulsions on our surroundings. Why, then, should we act in the civil rights movement? So the whites will be converted by the blacks. Why, then, should we act in the peace movement? So we can discover the source of violence in our own hearts. Why act to alleviate hunger? So we can unmask our own greed. Thus all actions for others can become acts of repentance that bring us to a growing solidarity with our fellow human beings and so establish the basis for all reconciliation. To a friend Merton wrote: "The real hope is not in something we think we can do, but in God, who is making something good out of it in some way we cannot see." Indeed, God is the one who acts, and by our repentance we can hasten God's action. That is why Jesus said: "The time has come to its fullness, the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent" (Mk 1:15).

Action, however, is not only repentance. It is also, and perhaps even more, gratitude. Action is a grateful response that flows from our awareness of God's presence in this world. Jesus' entire ministry was one great act of thanksgiving to his Father. It is to participation in this ministry that we are called. Peter and Paul traveled from place to place with a relentless energy; Teresa of Avila built convents as if she would never get tired; Martin Luther King, Jr., preached, planned, and organized with an unquenchable zeal; and Mother Teresa of Calcutta is fearlessly hastening the coming of the Lord with her care for the poorest of the poor. But none of them tried to solve the problems of the world or sought to gather praise or prizes. Their actions were free of their compulsions, and consequently were spontaneous responses to the experience of God's active presence in their lives. Thus our action can become thanksgiving, and all that we do can become Eucharist.

Here we touch the core of Merton's life and work. It is the Eucharist, the eternal act of thanks given by Christ to his Father, an act of thanksgiving in which we become participants. Merton's life

as a Christian, a monk, and a priest was not his books and articles, his name and fame, but the Lord Jesus Christ who came to make all of life a Eucharist. For in the Eucharist, all is God's action.

When Peter speaks about the coming of the Lord, he does not paint a sweet picture. "The heavens will vanish with a roar, the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and its deeds will be manifest." Merton saw that this fearful reality is in fact taking place. He was a witness to two wars and lived in a period of racial violence, economic oppression, and political assassination. With Peter he asked: "Since everything is to be destroyed in this way, what kind of people must we be?" And to this he answered, "We must be holy in our conduct and devotion, looking in contemplation for the coming of the Lord and trying to hasten it by acts of repentance and gratitude."