

# “And God’s Forgiveness”: Frank Kowalski and Merton’s Prayer for Peace

By Thomas Spencer

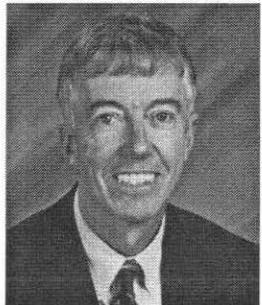
In April, 1962, a Connecticut Congressman named Frank Kowalski wrote Thomas Merton and requested that he write a prayer of peace to be read before the United States Congress. Merton acceded to the Congressman’s request and on April 18, 1962, the prayer was read before the House of Representatives and entered officially into the *Congressional Record*.

Merton’s “Prayer for Peace” remains one of the more significant prayers he wrote. With its references to nuclear weapons, a desperate world in tumult, and a plea for God to “help all races and people travel in friendship” it is as timely and relevant today as it was when written over forty years ago. The prayer is well-known. It has been widely read and quoted, and has been reprinted in various publications,<sup>1</sup> but the circumstances behind the request for the prayer and Kowalski’s motive for asking for it have remained obscure. Merton makes only a passing reference to the request in his journal and his chief biographer Michael Mott does likewise.<sup>2</sup>

A closer examination of the background and circumstances behind the prayer indicates that at the time Kowalski wrote Merton the two men shared common concerns about peace, nuclear weaponry, and increased militarism. The Cold War was at its height and the risk of nuclear confrontation seemed greater than at any previous time, as the Cuban Missile Crisis later that year would attest. Of special importance to Kowalski was the scheduled resumption of atmospheric nuclear testing by the United States and the failure to achieve a world-wide nuclear test ban treaty. Merton had become more active in writing about peace issues by April 1962, and he shared similar views. Kowalski’s letter requesting the prayer could not have been better timed.

Frank Kowalski was born in Bristol, Connecticut in 1907. At the age of eighteen he enlisted in the Army and one year later he received an appointment to the United States Military Academy at West Point. After graduating from West Point he received a number of military assignments during the 1930s while also securing a Master’s in Science from MIT in 1937. His career in the military continued through World War II where he served on General Dwight Eisenhower’s staff, as Director of the Disarmament School in London, and as Deputy Chief of the Information and Education Division at Theater of Operations Headquarters. He received a promotion to Colonel in 1944, and was awarded the Bronze Star for meritorious service during the war.

Following the conclusion of the war, Kowalski remained in the military and in 1948 was appointed Chief of Military Government in Kyoto and Osaka, Japan, and one year later chief of the civil affairs region in Chugoku, Japan. He concluded his service in Japan in 1952, and at that time was chief of staff for the United States Military Advi-



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sory Group, Japanese National Police Reserve. He later authored a book on his experiences that was published in Japan in 1969, under the title *Nihon Saigunbi*, translated "Grace from Heaven." He resigned from the military and in 1958 was elected as an at-large Congressman from Connecticut.<sup>3</sup>

Despite his lengthy military background, Kowalski opposed the spread of nuclear weaponry, and while in Congress he worked tirelessly for arms reduction. His views were shaped in



**Frank Kowalski**

the cause of world peace. In July 1959, he argued against the proposed executive agreements to transfer restricted nuclear information and parts of nuclear weapons systems to other NATO countries. In his remarks he noted his service as military governor in Hiroshima and his first-hand observation of American nuclear tests in the western desert. He deplored the "terrible step" to disperse these horrible weapons around the world and stated that as a former Army officer and member of the Armed Services Committee he was fully aware of the responsibility of national defense, but that he opposed giving these weapons to other countries which might impact the "peace of the world."<sup>5</sup>

Kowalski also sponsored a bill that led to the founding of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency in 1961. In a lengthy address in the House on the occasion of the agency's first anniversary, he spoke of the need "to believe in peace so strongly that we will reassure our friends who may have lost patience to restrain themselves." He added that "working for world peace is the most important thing we can do." He lauded the agency for its work for world peace, nuclear disarmament and a nuclear test ban.<sup>6</sup>

Again in February 1962, Kowalski raised the potential threat of nuclear war when he introduced an appropriations bill for the purchase of United Nations bonds. The bonds were being sold to finance special operations in the Middle East and the Congo. A strong supporter of the UN's peacekeeping initiatives, he viewed the purchase of bonds as a way for Americans to deal

large part by his experience in Japan after World War II. While stationed in Japan he had the opportunity to see first-hand the terrible destruction the bombs had inflicted on the country's population. He developed close relationships with many in the country and his time in Japan convinced him of the need to restrict nuclear armaments. Unlike many in the military, he believed the use of the bomb on a civilian population was a mistake and he was especially critical of the fact that two bombs were dropped on Japan. As he would later confide to Merton, the experience led him to dedicate the remainder of his life to the cause of disarmament.<sup>4</sup>

As a Congressman, Kowalski was outspoken in his desire to stop the spread of nuclear weapons and promote

concretely with the threat of nuclear war. He noted the “menace of a nuclear catastrophe, coupled with a vision of the remoteness of government” often led to hopelessness and outrage among many citizens who want to take a more active role in their defense, short of “burrowing in the ground.”<sup>7</sup>

By the early 1960s, Merton, too, had become more troubled by the proliferation of nuclear weapons. His journal entries note more than a passing concern with the threat of nuclear war and his writings and publications reflected an increased consciousness on issues of war, peace and arms reduction. Merton’s internal struggle and his uneasiness with the Church’s position on nuclear weapons were especially apparent in his writings. In one journal entry he noted that he was obsessed with the “grim condition of the Church, committed in great part to the ‘escape clauses’ that ‘justify’ the brutalities of the secular solution” (*TTW* 187). He was especially disappointed that there was no clear statement from the Vatican on nuclear war. In one particular letter he hoped to include in a published compilation “Cold War Letters,” he stated that “One could certainly wish that the Catholic position on nuclear war was half as strict as the Catholic position on birth control.”<sup>8</sup>

The struggle within over the issues of peace and the atom bomb, and the tension with his censors over such issues, was also evident in his writings. In October, 1961, he wrote in his journal that he was “at a turning point” in his spiritual life. He added that he was perceived as “one of the few Catholic priests in the country who has come out unequivocally for . . . the abolition of war.” This meant “not only against the bomb, against nuclear testing, against Polaris submarines but against all violence.” Realizing the implications of taking such stances he was concerned about the problems of trying to explain and defend his position, given the length of time it took for the community censors to approve for publication what he was writing (*TTW* 172).

The most telling example of Merton’s deep concern for the future of the world in a nuclear age was the publication of the prose-poem entitled *Original Child Bomb*. The piece, first published in October, 1961, records the history of the dropping of the atomic bomb on Japan. Forty-one meditations make up the prose-poem narrative. The last meditation is most telling and offers a pessimistic view of the future. “Since that summer many other bombs have been ‘found.’ What is going to happen?” He continued, “men seem to be fatigued by the whole question.”<sup>9</sup>

The publication of *Original Child Bomb*, delayed by community censors, was misunderstood by many readers. Some misinterpreted it as a glorification for war while in other instances book stores mistakenly placed it in the children’s book section. Intended as a beginning point for a meditation on nuclear war, it failed to achieve the impact Merton hoped for (*TTW* 254; Mott 369-70). One reader who fully grasped the significance of what Merton was trying to say in the meditation was Frank Kowalski. Kowalski read *Original Child Bomb* and it shaped his decision to contact Merton and ask him to write a “Prayer for Peace.” It is not known how the publication was brought to his attention or if he was an avid reader of Merton’s writings, but in his letter to Merton requesting the prayer he notes the impact the poem had on him.

Kowalski’s letter to Merton on April 11, 1962 asked his assistance in bringing before Congress and the American public the “immorality,” the “inhumanity” and “ungodliness” of the proposed resumption of atmospheric nuclear testing. He noted to Merton that the United States was set to resume testing on April 30, or May 1, and he asked if Merton would write a prayer that he might read to Congress on the day tests resumed or just before that date. Kowalski hoped to have

Congress declare the day a day of national prayer. He alluded to *Original Child Bomb* as prompting his request, and that he could think of no one who could write a “more meaningful prayer.”

The sincerity of Kowalski’s request was further demonstrated by suggestions he offered on what he hoped Merton might include in the prayer. He asked if Merton would write a prayer asking for mercy for “what we are doing to present generations and generations unborn.” He further suggested that Merton include words asking for “patience, wisdom, and courage for Congress, the President and our military forces and our adversaries.” He added to this sentence in handwritten blue ink, “and God’s forgiveness” (Kowalski to Merton).

Merton was obviously moved by Kowalski’s letter for his response to the request was immediate. In his letter to Kowalski accompanying his prayer, Merton noted he felt “very close to the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki” and that he prayed for the victims at Mass each day. He offered his wholehearted encouragement to Kowalski’s efforts for peace and disarmament and called such efforts a “sacred duty.”<sup>10</sup>

Kowalski read the prayer to the House of Representatives on April 18, which was Wednesday of Holy Week. In his remarks prior to the official reading he added that “Brother Thomas expresses for me the anguish of man groping to control the monstrous weapons he has devised for the annihilation of civilian populations.” He noted that the world was at a crossroads and the choices were “atomic crucifixion of the human race or a resurrection of faith in God’s presence in man.”

The original “Prayer for Peace” was over 600 words. Merton makes direct references to the nuclear threat, and he incorporates the suggestions Kowalski requested. The prayer asks God to “Help us to be masters of the weapons that threaten to master us,” to use “science for peace and plenty, not for war and destruction,” and to “Show us how to use atomic power to bless our children’s children, not to blight them” (NVA 269).

Merton referred to the scheduled resumption of nuclear testing, as a “day of ominous decision” where America, “Armed with a titanic weapon, and convinced of our own right,” faces an equally “powerful adversary, armed with the same weapon,” and “equally convinced that he is right” (NVA 268-69). The prayer further asks that God grant strength and patience to all who work for peace – “To the Congress, our President, our military forces, and our adversaries” (NVA 269). He adds, “Grant us to see Your face in the lightning of this cosmic storm” (NVA 270).

Although Merton stopped short of using the phrase “God’s forgiveness,” he did allude to the idea that man needed God’s help and the implication of man’s need for forgiveness is apparent. In several lines he asked God to provide compassion and strength for man to overcome his shortcomings. “Save us from our obsessions,” and “Let us never forget that sins against the law of love are punished by loss of faith” (NVA 269). He concluded with a plea to help us “see that our ways are not necessarily your ways” (NVA 269). “In Your will, O God, is our peace” (NVA 270).

Shortly following the inclusion of the prayer in the *Congressional Record* Kowalski wrote Merton a thank you letter, addressing it “Dear Tom” rather than the more formal “Brother Thomas” he used in his first letter. He noted he was “deeply moved” by the prayer and included copies of the pages where it had appeared in the *Congressional Record*. He added he had sent copies of the prayer to peace organizations, individuals, government officials and the news media. He hoped the prayer would achieve a wide distribution and that it would be meaningful to “countless people who are appalled and bewildered by the threatening proposal before us.” He added that

the prayer would continue to give him good counsel in the days ahead. It would help provide him with “profound insights” into the inner contradictions from which our nation suffers.<sup>11</sup>

There is no evidence that Thomas Merton and Frank Kowalski had any further contact or correspondence in the years following the prayer. Kowalski was unsuccessful in securing the 1962 Democratic nomination for the U.S. Senate in Connecticut and he left Congress at the end of the year. In 1963, he was appointed by the U.S. Senate to the Subversive Activities Control Board, a position he held for three years. In 1969, his memoirs, which were particularly critical of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, were published in Japan. Frank Kowalski died in October, 1974 (*Times*).

Merton continued to write further about peace issues in the years following the authorship of the “Prayer for Peace.” The advent of the Vietnam War further spurred his commitment to write about world peace and he became more public in his pronouncements against war and militarism in the years before his death in December 1968.

The “Prayer for Peace” remains today as a testament to two men who shared a common concern for the threat of a nuclear holocaust. Frank Kowalski’s political career was brief, and his name is not one many scholars of political history today would easily recognize. Yet his genuine and consistent commitment to world peace and his sincere and simple request to Merton in April 1962 helped produce a vital and memorable prayer that is as moving and meaningful today as it was when it was written in 1962. Each time the prayer is read or prayed, it continues to echo the spiritual goals and visions for a peaceful world of the two men whose brief collaboration brought it about.

1. The prayer originally appeared in *U.S. Congressional Record*, 87<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, Vol. 108, Part 5 (April 18, 1962) 6937-6938. It is also found in Thomas Merton, *The Nonviolent Alternative*, ed. Gordon Zahn (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980) 268-70 (subsequent references will be cited as “NVA” parenthetically in the text); Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Crossroad, 1995) 327-29; *Across the Rim of Chaos: Thomas Merton’s Prophetic Vision*, ed. Angus Stuart (Stratton-on-the-Fosse, Radstock, UK: Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 2005) xiii-xiv; an edited and abridged version is included in Thomas Merton, *Dialogues with Silence: Prayers and Drawings*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperCollins 2003) 175-76.
2. See Thomas Merton, *Turning toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 216 [April 26, 1962]; subsequent references will be cited as “TTW” parenthetically in the text. See also Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984) 379; subsequent references will be cited as “Mott” parenthetically in the text.
3. See *The New York Times*, October 16, 1974; subsequent references will be cited as “Times” parenthetically in the text.
4. Telephone interview with Barry Kowalski, March 16, 2006; Frank Kowalski to Thomas Merton, April 11, 1962, Kowalski File, Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY; subsequent references will be cited as “Kowalski to Merton” parenthetically in the text.
5. *U.S. Congressional Record*, 86<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, Vol. 105, Part 10 (July 15, 1959) 13490.
6. *U.S. Congressional Record*, 87<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, Vol. 108, Part 16 (October 2, 1962) 21806.
7. *U.S. Congressional Record*, 87<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, Vol. 108, Part 2 (February 6, 1962) 1842.
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) 349 [December 22, 1961 letter to Etta Gullick – Cold War Letter #14].
9. Thomas Merton, *Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 302.
10. *U.S. Congressional Record*, 87<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, Vol. 108, Part 5 (April 18, 1962) 6937; Kowalski included excerpts from Merton’s letter in his remarks introducing the prayer; the letter itself does not seem to be extant.
11. Frank Kowalski to Merton, no date, Kowalski folder, Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University.