

## Reasons for Rejoicing: Thomas Merton and *Jubilee* Magazine

By Mary Anne Rivera with Mary J. Margosian

One who was completely unfamiliar with the life and writings of Thomas Merton need only thumb through *Jubilee* magazine, published between 1953 and 1967, to encounter the full range of interests of the prolific Trappist monk. Throughout its entire run, Merton contributed regularly to the Catholic monthly founded and edited by his Columbia friend and godfather, Edward Rice, with more than two dozen articles that reflected the breadth of his vision and his interdisciplinary approach to education and life.<sup>1</sup> From Bernard of Clairvaux to Gandhi, St. John Climacus to Boris Pasternak, Herakleitos of Ephesus to Julian of Norwich, from the Athanasian Creed to the Shakers to the nuclear threat, his *Jubilee* articles reached from East to West, past to present, prose to poetry, devotion to prophecy, familiar to obscure. In “Notes on Sacred and Profane Art” (4.7 [November 1956] 25-32), or his essay “Flannery O’Connor – A Prose Elegy”<sup>2</sup> (12.7 [November 1964] 49-53), one sees Merton’s diverse interests which span the humanities. His brotherhood with humankind can be seen in such articles as “Let the Poor Man Speak!” (8.6 [October 1960] 18-21), which considers how our treatment of the poor is the realization of our treatment of God and conveys the message that our attempts to ignore and forget the poor are linked to our attempts to ignore and forget God. Merton helped the readers of *Jubilee* to put a human face on the Vietnam conflict when he shared his relationship with a Buddhist monk and peacemaker in “Nhat Hanh Is My Brother”<sup>3</sup> (14.4 [August 1966] 11). He conveyed his enthusiasm for the poetry of his friend Jacques Maritain’s wife in “Raissa Maritain’s Poems”<sup>4</sup> (10.12 [April 1963] 24-26), and his commitment to the cause of civil rights in “The Negro Revolt”<sup>5</sup> (11.5 [September 1963] 39-43). Readers journeyed with Merton to “Mount Athos”<sup>6</sup> (7.4 [August 1959] 8-16) and to the Far East in “The Jesuits in China”<sup>7</sup> (10.5 [September 1962] 35-38). They got an advance look at his verse play *The Tower of Babel*<sup>8</sup> (3.6 [October 1955] 21-35) and at “The General Dance,” the final chapter of *New Seeds of Contemplation*<sup>9</sup>

(9.8 [December 1961] 8-11). They could read articles that would later be included in books, like “Classic Chinese Thought”<sup>10</sup> (8.9 [January 1961] 26-32) and “Religion and the Bomb”<sup>11</sup> (10.1 [May 1962] 7-13),



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and others, like “St. Peter Damian and the Medieval Monk” (8.4 [August 1960] 39-44) and “The Death of a Holy Terror: The Strange Story of Frère Pascal” (15.2 [June 1967] 35-38), that would appear nowhere else.<sup>12</sup> To trace the succession of these commentaries is to watch as the Trappist monk shapes and informs his views – sharing them with the Catholic public in a remarkable magazine over the course of two historically unique decades.

This partnership between Thomas Merton and the readership of *Jubilee* was born of a genuine Catholic revival in the post-war Church. Pope Pius XII had called upon the Catholic press, “the valiant heralds of truth,” to establish a truly Christian culture.<sup>13</sup> *Jubilee* was a response to the pope’s clarion call to action, a vibrant journal that was evolving just as Merton was. Since their student days at Columbia University in the late 1930s, Edward Rice, Thomas Merton and their friend Robert Lax speculated about starting “a really good” Catholic magazine.<sup>14</sup> In 1936, the newly arrived Rice had met upperclassmen Lax and Merton while all were working on the campus humor magazine, *Jester*, and had quickly joined the group of campus bohemians that surrounded them. Robert Giroux, a classmate of Lax and Merton, described this troika as “the three musketeers . . . good pals, highly sophisticated, with good senses of humor and very artistic.”<sup>15</sup> Lax, Rice, and Merton bonded both emotionally as friends and spiritually as brothers. They made the fourth floor of John Jay Hall, home of *Jester*, the place where everybody wanted to be. It was this same “up-for-anything” spirit, a playful attitude formed at Columbia, that more than a decade later would breathe life into *Jubilee*. These three men, who were on unique yet interwoven spiritual paths, eventually decided to start a Catholic magazine, with Rice taking the lead. While the early thoughts of this journal continued throughout the 1940s, the actual gestation process of *Jubilee* extended from 1950 until the first issue was released in May of 1953.

*Jubilee* presented a new vision of the Catholic Church “in all her beauty: her intellectual eminence, her hard work, her charity [and] her spirit of true peace” (1.1 [May 1953] 1). The scope of *Jubilee*’s message was “virtually inexhaustible.”<sup>16</sup> Rice, Merton and Lax were well aware of the fact that materialism and atheistic propaganda had gained the loyalty of millions of Catholics by exploiting their religious indifference, ignorance, and complacency. They saw the need for Christians to reorient themselves in a changing world and addressed this religious need of the day by communicating the living truths of Catholicism to a world that did not know her. The shared goal of Rice, Lax and Merton was to produce a popular Catholic magazine that would act as a forum for addressing issues confronting the contemporary Church together with a practical discussion of issues that Catholics dealt with in their daily lives.

*Jubilee*’s message highlighted Christian ideology and sociology in order to show how the Truth of Christ was borne out by the ordinary people of His Church: housewife, worker, teacher, mystic, farmer, businessman, monk, priest, brother and sister – the living, working, praying, thinking Church. Its photographic essays, which made the magazine virtually unique in the Catholic publishing world of the time, were designed to show the breath of the Lord God to the farthest confines of His world. As the work of both lay and religious Catholics, *Jubilee* served as witness to the Church’s existence and “documented the struggles of people (far from all of them Catholic) to live the Word given us so long ago” (Rice 7). *Jubilee* was a public proclamation of “*Jubilate Deo, omnis terra*” (“Shout with joy to God, all the earth”) (Ps. 65:1). For Rice, its founder, the magazine proclaimed the “cheerfulness and joy” (Rice 4) of everyday life and was a concrete expression of believers’

experience of God in a tumultuous and unsettled world. *Jubilee's* editors and writers repeatedly reminded its readers that Christian spirituality was constantly being acted out in the daily lives of its people in towns, cities, nations and continents. The format of *Jubilee* reflected Rice's desire to make sense out of Christendom, to answer his fundamental question, "What does it mean to be a Catholic in the twentieth century?" Rice's use of photography, a feature that distinguished *Jubilee* from its competitors, made it possible for Catholics to visualize, experience, and capture the true Christian spirit manifested in a diversity of images, faces and cultures. Its use of modern journalistic techniques enabled *Jubilee* to span almost twenty centuries to underline for its readers the true importance of an event like the Ascension, and to bring into focus events of the day which would decisively affect its readers' lives as Catholics and as Americans. It was dramatically innovative in its graphic design as part of its efforts to initiate a revival of Catholic life. As an organ for dialogue between the Church and the world, *Jubilee* addressed religious and social questions aesthetically. The magazine followed the rhythm of the liturgical year; featured articles and excerpts written and illustrated by professionals in the arts and the sciences to ultimately reveal the truth about the Church and her people. In this way, *Jubilee* was able to familiarize its readers with these issues and in doing so to educate, prepare, and enable them to intelligently participate as the Church in the world.

Rice's editorial plan was designed to revitalize the Church and her people primarily through three "apostolates": liturgy, theological education, and social action.<sup>17</sup> *Jubilee* began with an understanding of the liturgy as the primary apostolate whose purpose was "to bring man, civilization, and culture back to Christ."<sup>18</sup> Rice and his colleagues reminded the Christian community that it was called to participate actively in the corporate worship of its body and to continue the work and mission of Christ on earth. It is through the liturgy, the solemn and public worship of the Church, her official prayers and blessings, the sacraments, and above all the Mass, that the Mystical Body that is Christ himself lives and acts for the glory of God and for the salvation of all. In one of his earlier contributions, entitled "The Second Coming," an excerpt in the April 1956 issue (3.12) from *The Living Bread*,<sup>19</sup> his reflections on the Eucharist published that same year, Merton provided strong support for this focus on the renewing power of the liturgy. He emphasized the Eucharist as a source of hope and an empowerment to work for the unity of humanity. "Our life in Christ," he wrote, "calls for a fully eucharistic apostolate – a far-seeing and energetic action, based on prayer and interior union with God, which is able to transcend the limitations of class and nation and culture and continue to build a new world upon the ruins of what is always falling into decay." The article concludes, "In working to unite all men in charity, we are as it were preparing the Host, made up of many grains, to be finally consecrated and transformed in the glory of Christ at the end of time" (9).

The second apostolate, the educational, had a two-fold intent: information and formation. Inspired by the Church's need to confront contemporary irreligion and to intellectually embrace its own cultural heritage, *Jubilee* communicated the broadest range of Christian culture in both time and space. *Jubilee* offered its readers a new vision of the living, working, praying, thinking Church whose scope was world-wide and whose activity was intended to encompass every worthwhile field of human thought, work and play. With his cosmopolitan background and his truly catholic range of interests, Merton was uniquely well-placed to contribute to this aspect of *Jubilee's* mission. In

the early years of the magazine, he was called upon particularly to open up the riches of his own monastic tradition. His first appearance in *Jubilee*, in its fourth issue (1.4 [August 1953] 32-37), was an article on his great Cistercian forbear, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux,<sup>20</sup> who according to Merton was “one of the towering figures in the whole history of Christianity” (33). Merton provided *Jubilee* readers with a vivid portrait of the twelfth-century abbot,

who was plunged deeply into the mystery of the Cross, which was the mystery of God’s will for his world and ours; who had left the world to become a monk, was thrown back into the world to be an apostle, a worker of miracles, a peacemaker and a warmaker, the reformer of abbeys, the monitor of popes, a prophet sent to alarm kings. The saint who wrote the letters . . . became the passionate embodiment of the truths in which he believed. . . . Bernard, the contemplative, was a great man of action because he was a great contemplative. And because he was a contemplative he never ceased fearing to be a mere man of action . . . and threw himself fiercely into the most difficult problems of the age. (33)

Merton’s fascination with the Eastern Church (which he shared with Ed Rice) is evident in a subsequent article on “Mount Athos” (7.4) which included discussion of the “great and highly significant mystical revival on the Holy Mountain, the hesychast movement,” which Merton notes “has always been regarded with extreme caution, if not outright suspicion, by Western writers,” but which he defends as “an authentically Christian and deeply simple way of prayer” (15), thus anticipating the growing interest in and use of the Jesus prayer in the West in subsequent decades. His articles in the following year on “The Ladder of Divine Ascent”<sup>21</sup> of St. John Climacus (7.10 [February 1960] 37-40), and “St. Peter Damian and the Medieval Monk” (8.4) brought to the attention of *Jubilee* readers a pair of monastic figures, one Eastern and one Western, who exercised enormous influence not only on monasticism itself but on their respective cultures, without overlooking the “caustic observations and . . . sensational style” (38) of the one and the “violent and dominating aggressiveness” (44) of the other. It is interesting that in his final monastic portrait, “Death of a Holy Terror: The Strange Story of Frère Pascal” (15.2), Merton focused on a restless French Trappist with a background in the avant-garde of bohemian Paris, who exemplified the crisis of institutionalism and of authority which rocked the entire Church, and who ended his life in an African leper colony, one of many in the order in the 1960s who found “that the Cistercian Order was not going where they themselves believed they had to go” (37).

Of course, Merton’s contributions to *Jubilee*’s educational apostolate were not restricted to monastic topics. The magazine’s strong aesthetic dimension was reflected in his “Notes on Profane and Sacred Art.” He pointed out analogies between the wisdom of Herakleitos and that of his favorite passage on “divine Wisdom” as “a ‘child playing in the world’” from Proverbs 8 in “Herakleitos the Obscure”<sup>22</sup> (8.5 [September 1960] 26), which also included his poetic versions of some of the Greek philosopher’s provocative and enigmatic statements (30-31). He introduced *Jubilee* readers to new English versions of significant Taoist and Confucian texts in “Classic Chinese Thought,” and to his beloved fourteenth-century mystical authors in “The English Mystics”<sup>23</sup> (9.5 [September 1961] 36-40). Even his morality play, *The Tower of Babel*, with its poetic explorations of sin, pride, selfishness, and being out of right relationship with God, was a significant contribution

to the educational apostolate of the magazine. In a way, Merton's series of contributions to *Jubilee* paralleled the program of study that he was providing for his novices at Gethsemani during his tenure as their master (1955-1965), a period that corresponded closely to the years of *Jubilee's* always precarious existence. For the readers of *Jubilee*, Merton was their novice master. His interests and message were grounded in the ancient rule of faith: *lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi* – the law of worship determines the law of belief which determines the law of life. Through solid theological grounding in the central Christian beliefs in the Incarnation, the Redemption, and the Church as Mystical Body of Christ, People of God, and Communion of Saints, *Jubilee* readers were invited to discover the contemplative depths of their tradition and challenged to make the Christian vision a dynamic reality in the contemporary world, to commit themselves to the social action that was Rice's third apostolate for his journal.

*Jubilee* drew upon Catholic social teaching to provide the framework for its treatment of the social apostolate and to address issues of social justice as found on the local, national, and international levels. In this area as well, Merton's contributions to the *Jubilee* vision were crucial. In his article, "A Testament to Peace" (9.11 [March 1962] 22-25), he highlighted the heroic witness of Fr. Franz Metzger in resisting the injustices of the Third Reich, a topic he returned to a year later with "A Martyr to the Nazis"<sup>24</sup> (10.11 [March 1963] 32-35), excerpted from his introduction to the prison journals of Fr. Alfred Delp, in which Merton finds a prophetic critique of the Church's failure to live the principles it professed in the face of the evils of National Socialism, made "with all the authority of a confessor of the faith who knows that he must not waste words. . . . [t]he words of one who has been obedient unto death" (35). Merton's focus on issues of war and peace moves from past to present and future in his article "Religion and the Bomb" (10.1) in which Merton calls the temptation to use nuclear weapons "the most crucial moral and religious problem in twenty centuries of history" (9) and concludes: "If we spontaneously approve of nuclear terrorism, if we become apologists for the uninhibited use of naked power, we are thinking like Communists, we are behaving like Nazis, and we are well on the way to becoming either one or the other. In that event we had better face the fact that we are destroying our own Christian heritage" (13). As *Jubilee* was an important venue for Merton's developing views on war and peace, so it also provided him with an opportunity to voice his support of the civil rights movement and its defense of the human dignity of every person in "The Negro Revolt," his review article on William Melvin Kelley's novel *A Different Drummer*. He shared with *Jubilee* readers his admiration for practitioners of nonviolence, and at the same time his respect for the authentic values and practices of the great South Asian religious traditions, in "Gandhi and the One-Eyed Giant"<sup>25</sup> (12.9 [January 1965] 12-17), with its evocation of a "wisdom which transcends and unites, wisdom which dwells in body and soul together and which, more by means of myth, of rite, of contemplation, than by scientific experiment, opens the door to a life in which the individual is not lost in the cosmos and in society but found in them" (13), and the brief but moving "Nhat Hanh Is My Brother," in which Merton professes his solidarity with the Vietnamese Buddhist monk and war resister.

Merton's contributions to *Jubilee* exemplified the magazine's consistent message that a deep interior life and an engaged awareness and practice of social responsibility were not mutually exclusive alternatives but correlative and complementary dimensions of an integrated Christian life. *Jubilee's* living theological tradition, its process of education for a truly Christian culture, and its



holistic principles of spiritual coordination and unity made it a beacon of progressive Catholicism, but a Catholicism deeply rooted in tradition, in the years leading up to and during the Second Vatican Council, whose key documents *Sacrosanctum Concilium (The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy)*, *Lumen Gentium (The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church)*, and *Gaudium et Spes (The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World)* incorporated so much of what Rice and his colleagues, including Thomas Merton, had been advocating for the American Church and the Church Universal. While Merton contributed to dozens of different journals over the course of the three decades of his writing career, it can be confidently suggested that with none of them was his relationship so intimate and his vision so compatible as with the “Magazine of the Church and Her People” that could trace its origins to the friendships that had first been nurtured on the fourth floor of Columbia’s John Jay Hall and in the ramshackle cottage owned by Bob Lax’s brother-in-law in the hills above Olean, New York. The bonds forged there provided reasons for rejoicing, for jubilation, not only for Rice and Lax and Merton but for all who were touched in one way or another by the fruits of their life-long friendship, including *Jubilee* magazine.

1. A complete list of Merton’s contributions to *Jubilee* is found in the Appendix to this article.
2. Reprinted in Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 37-42.
3. Reprinted in Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 106-108.
4. Reprinted in Thomas Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 1963) 104-106.
5. Reprinted as “The Legend of Tucker Caliban” in Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964) 72-90.
6. Reprinted in Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960) 68-82.
7. Reprinted in Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967) 81-90.
8. Reprinted in Thomas Merton, *The Strange Islands* (New York: New Directions, 1957) 43-78.
9. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 290-97.
10. Reprinted in *Mystics and Zen Masters* 45-65.
11. Reprinted in Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Crossroad, 1995) 65-79.
12. “The Death of a Holy Terror” was reprinted later in *The Merton Seasonal* 24.1 (Spring 1999) 8-11 as part of an issue focused on *Jubilee*.
13. Pope Pius XII, *Valiant Heralds of Truth: Pius XII and the Arts of Communication* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1958) 195.
14. For a detailed presentation of the friendship of Rice, Lax and Merton, see James Harford, *Merton & Friends: A Joint Biography of Thomas Merton, Robert Lax, and Edward Rice* (New York: Crossroad, 2006).
15. Quoted in Mary Cummings, “Edward Rice ’40 Traveling on Unbeaten Paths: Breaking Rules and Taking Risks as a Writer, Publisher, Artist and Photojournalist,” *Columbia College Today* 27.4 (May 2001) 4.
16. Edward Rice “Starting a Magazine: A Guide for the Courageous – The Short Happy Life of *Jubilee*,” *The Merton Seasonal* 24.1 (Spring 1999) 6; subsequent references will be cited as “Rice” parenthetically in the text.
17. For an extended discussion of these apostolates in *Jubilee*, see Mary Anne Rivera, “*Jubilee* Magazine and the Development of a Vatican II Ecclesiology” [doctoral] (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University, 2004); see also Mary Anne Rivera, “*Jubilee*: A Magazine of the Church and Her People: Toward a Vatican II Ecclesiology,” *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 10.4 (Fall 2007) 77-103.
18. Paul B. Marx, OSB, *Virgil Michel and the Liturgical Movement* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1957) 67.
19. Thomas Merton, *The Living Bread* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1956) 151-57.
20. Reprinted as the Foreword to *St. Bernard of Clairvaux, As Seen through His Selected Letters*, tr. Bruno Scott James (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1953) v-viii.

21. Reprinted as “The Spirituality of Sinai” in *Disputed Questions* 83-93.
22. Reprinted in Thomas Merton, *The Behavior of Titans* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 75-84.
23. Reprinted in *Mystics and Zen Masters* 128-53.
24. Reprinted as “The Prison Meditations of Father Delp” in *Faith and Violence* 47-68.
25. Reprinted from Thomas Merton, ed., *Gandhi on Non-Violence: Selected Texts from Non-Violence in Peace and War* (New York: New Directions, 1965) 1-20.

## Appendix

### Thomas Merton’s Contributions to *Jubilee Magazine*

1.4 [August 1953] 32-37	St. Bernard of Clairvaux
1.10 [February 1954] 25	The Sign of Jonas [excerpt]
2.1 [May 1954] 44-47	The Athanasian Creed
3.6 [October 1955] 21-35	The Tower of Babel
3.12 [April 1956] 6-9	The Second Coming [excerpt from <i>The Living Bread</i> ]
4.7 [November 1956] 25-32	Notes on Profane and Sacred Art
6.4 [August 1958] 24-27	The Vision of Peace [excerpt from <i>Monastic Peace</i> ]
6.10 [February 1959] 16-20	Secular Journals of Thomas Merton [excerpt]
7.3 [July 1959] 16-31	Boris Pasternak and the People with Watch Chains
7.4 [August 1959] 8-16	Mount Athos
7.10 [February 1960] 37-40	The Ladder of Divine Ascent
8.4 [August 1960] 39-44	St. Peter Damian and the Medieval Monk
8.5 [September 1960] 24-31	Herakleitos the Obscure
8.6 [October 1960] 18-21	Let the Poor Man Speak!
8.9 [January 1961] 26-32	Classic Chinese Thought
9.5 [September 1961] 36-40	The English Mystics
9.8 [December 1961] 8-11	The General Dance
9.11 [March 1962] 22-25	Testament to Peace [Fr. Metzger]
10.1 [May 1962] 7-13	Religion and the Bomb
10.5 [September 1962] 35-38	The Jesuits in China
10.11 [March 1963] 32-35	A Martyr to the Nazis [Fr. Delp]
10.12 [April 1963] 24-26	Raissa Maritain’s Poems
10.12 [April 1963] 27	The Moslems’ Angel of Death (Algeria 1961) [poem]
11.5 [September 1963] 39-43	The Negro Revolt
11.9 [January 1964] 36-41	The Shakers
12.7 [November 1964] 49-53	Flannery O’Connor – A Prose Elegy
12.9 [January 1965] 12-17	Gandhi and the One-Eyed Giant
14.4 [August 1966] 11	Nhat Hanh is My Brother
15.2 [June 1967] 35-38	Death of a Holy Terror: The Strange Story of Frère Pascal

### Articles on Thomas Merton in *Jubilee Magazine*

4.11 [March 1957] 2-3	“The Tower of Babel” on TV
13.11 [March 1966] 28-33	Thomas Merton Today