

## “An Absolute Duty to Rebel”: Thomas Merton, Religious Women and the Challenges of Vatican II

By **Bonnie Thurston**

What do you remember or know of the years from 1958 to 1965? In 1959 the Soviet Union’s Lunik I landed on the moon, and Hawaii became our fiftieth state. For Americans the years included post-war cultural optimism and economic growth as well as the trials of Nazi war criminals (notably Adolf Eichmann in 1960) and the “Cuban Missile Crisis” of October 1962. Fidel Castro came to power in 1958, and 1961 saw the Bay of Pigs fiasco. These years included America’s increasing involvement in Vietnam. In 1962 US pilots flew missions over the North. The Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964 led to further escalation and by December 1965 there were 175,000 US soldiers in heavy combat. These were the years of the Civil Rights Movement in America. In 1963 the Birmingham Protests led to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” and the bombing of a church that killed four black children at Sunday School. The 1963 March on Washington with King’s “I Have a Dream” speech was followed in 1965 by a march of 4,000 people from Selma to Montgomery and by the Watts riots. Many of us of a certain age remember vividly November 22, 1963, when President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. These were not only turbulent times for the world and for the country but for the Roman Catholic Church. Lawrence Cunningham once described the 1960s as a time when America was having “a collective nervous breakdown”: the pot of the Western world was being well and duly stirred! This is part of the back-drop of the Second Vatican Council.

In October, 1958 Pope Pius XII died, and Angelo Roncalli was elected his successor, taking the name John XXIII. On January 25, 1959 he announced his decision to convoke an ecumenical council. According to Kevin Seasoltz, OSB, John XXIII “defined the immediate task of the council as renewing the life of the Church and bringing up to date its teaching, discipline, and organization. He saw the unity of all Christians as the ultimate goal of the council.”<sup>1</sup> More than three years later, on October 11, 1962, the first session of that Council, the twenty-first ecumenical council of the Western Church, took place. In his opening address John XXIII said, “The major interest of the Ecumenical Council is this: that the sacred heritage of Christian truth be safeguarded and expounded with greater efficacy. . . . What is needed at the present time is a new enthusiasm, a new joy and serenity of mind in the unreserved acceptance by all of the entire Christian faith” (quoted in Seasoltz 14).

From the Council’s beginning, the Curia was nervous. At the first session, bishops refused to accept heads of commissions that they had proposed. The very theologians that had been looked on with suspicion or even silenced by



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the Vatican bureaucracy (for example, Yves Congar, OP, Henri de Lubac, SJ and Karl Rahner, SJ) served as key theological experts in the formation of the Council's sixteen documents: four major constitutions and twelve decrees or declarations. While most of the documents were approved by large majorities, a vocal minority was "deeply disturbed by the developments in the council" (Seasoltz 13). Thus recent resistance to the Council isn't a new phenomenon.

The Council met in four sessions: October-December, 1962, September-December, 1963, September-November, 1964 and September-December, 1965. About 2,500 bishops attended the sessions at which only Roman Catholic (and Eastern Rite) bishops and heads of male religious orders could vote. Orthodox and Protestant churches sent 80 observers. By the final session of the Council, 52 Catholic laypersons, 29 men and 23 women, took part as "auditors."<sup>2</sup> In her 1987 interview with Dewey Weiss Kramer, Sr. Mary Luke Tobin, SL, one of those women "auditors" (accurate since they weren't allowed to speak in the general sessions), reports of the initial group of women that "Seven were nuns and eight were lay women; there were fifteen altogether."<sup>3</sup> Sr. Mary Luke notes that Bernard Haring, a prominent moral theologian, "set up an arrangement by which some of the fifteen women . . . would be on 'commissions.' . . . So by putting us on the commissions and assigning some of us to these commissions we had the right to talk. . . . These commissions prepared the documents. And really in a way it was a very influential thing because we helped finalize those documents" (Kramer 54). Sr. Mary Luke funneled direct information about the Council to her friend Thomas Merton.

To provide context for Merton's encouragement of women religious during and after the Council, a brief review of what Merton was up to between 1959 and 1965, an outline of his attitudes toward the Council, and a note on documents in which he had special interest is helpful. Merton's life from 1959 to 1965 reflected something of the turbulence of those times. He sought and was denied permission to join the Benedictine Monastery in Cuernavaca, Mexico. He was allowed to spend longer periods of the time at the "hermitage" built in 1960 as a retreat center. He began important, sustained correspondences: in 1959 he began to write to D. T. Suzuki which blossomed into a major interest in Buddhist-Christian dialogue;<sup>4</sup> his correspondence with Abraham Heschel led to Merton's influence on the Council's declaration on the Jews (*HGL* 430-36), and that with Abdul Aziz to Merton's becoming a most articulate voice in Islamic-Christian dialogue (*HGL* 43-67). Merton wrote eloquently against war, especially atomic war, and was silenced on the subject by his Abbot General in January, 1962. Nevertheless he continued to influence the peace movement through circulating Xeroxed material and through his letters ("Cold War Letters"<sup>5</sup>) to prominent leaders, some of whom he gathered at Gethsemani for a meeting in November, 1964.<sup>6</sup> His voluminous correspondence reflects deep concern for Civil Rights and "the Race Question." During the period his health was not robust. He had trouble with his back and stomach and painful dermatitis on his hands, yet wrote more than a dozen of his most important books. In January, 1965, the year the Council ended, Merton turned 50 and he was allowed to move permanently to the hermitage in August of that year.

Merton's changing attitude toward the Council would make a fascinating study. (He *is*, after all, the man who wrote, quoting Rilke: "I am the impression that will change"<sup>7</sup>) According to a 2000 interview with Sr. Jane Marie Richardson, SL (who accompanied Sr. Luke Tobin to Rome), "Merton was so hopeful, so enthusiastic, about the Council and very eager to stay in close touch regarding information and developments. I think he saw its potential more than most of us did."<sup>8</sup> As the bishops were preparing to return to Rome for the final session of the Council, Merton wrote an open letter to

the American Hierarchy which was published in the September, 1965 issue of *Worldview*. Echoing the ideas of John XXIII, Merton described the task of the Council as “proclaiming the Gospel of love and hope to modern man in a language that he will understand, without any alteration or distortion of the essential Gospel perspectives.”<sup>9</sup> We may take this as the principle by which he evaluated Vatican II.

Merton’s attitude before the Council opened was characteristically skeptical. He had just been silenced by his Order on a subject of enormous significance about which he cared deeply. He wrote to Justus George Lawler in March, 1962,

I am so afraid that the concept of “renewal” will turn out to be nothing more than a tightening of the screws on the poor rank-and-file religious, clergy, and layman who have been hog-tied for so long. This Council is going to have to be a proof that we are not just a monolithic organization, because that is how such organizations renew themselves: by tightening their grip on the rank and file and reasserting the perpetual rightness of the managers. If that happens . . . it will be one of the most horrible scandals that ever took place. It will be a disaster. (*WF* 46-47)

His letters indicate a softening attitude after the Council opened. Writing to Etta Gullick on October 29, 1962 he said, “I thought the opening of the Council was tremendous” (*HGL* 355). In a 1963 letter to Ernesto Cardenal he writes, “The Council seems to have been going well. The general impression is that the second session is ‘not exciting’ but I would certainly say that the decision on the collegiality of bishops is one of the most important things done by the Church in the last five hundred years. It can have a tremendous meaning. Also, if lay deacons (even married) are allowed, this can be of tremendous significance.”<sup>10</sup>

In January, 1963 Merton quips to Jean and Hildegard Goss-Mayr that “an awakening must be something other than a dogged return to conventionally accepted and authoritative curial positions” (*HGL* 331). At the close of the second session Merton’s evaluation is positive, but guarded. He wrote to Fr. Kilian McDonnell on December 20, 1963:

The Council has really been something great, and it has fulfilled the promises of Pope John’s reign. It has really effected a deep change in the Church and even in the world. Perhaps not as deep a change as everyone would like, or as some claim it to have made. But it has been most significant, a real beginning of renewal already. There is much more to be done, but one can be thankful for such a hopeful beginning. Time will have more to say about it, because the effects of such a renewal cannot be sudden. I have great hopes for the next years, and . . . the prospect is a lot brighter than it was a year ago, and before the opening of the Council.<sup>11</sup>

Writing about the third session’s work on non-Christian religions, specifically its attitude toward the Jews, on November 28, 1964 Merton confesses to Rabbi Zalman Schachter, “I am left in a state of doubt and confusion by the Third Session” (*HGL* 540). When this session closed, Merton expressed mixed emotions to Sr. Thérèse Lentfoehr: “The end of the Council session was not exactly encouraging.”<sup>12</sup> In February, 1965 Merton reminds Ernesto Cardenal that “all that is new is not necessarily an improvement. However, I do think that a great deal that is going on is most salutary and what the Council has done so far is excellent” (*CT* 149). Writing at Easter, 1965 to Lord Northbourne Merton says, “I am very disturbed by both those who are termed conservative and some who are called liberal in the Council . . . I am afraid that on both sides too superficial a view

of ‘the world’ is being taken . . . . I don’t think that the implications of the technological revolution have even begun to be grasped by either side” (*WF* 313).

Merton understood the gravity of the issues with which Vatican II grappled: liturgical reform, the role of the bishops in the Church, peace and the reform of the Curia. According to William Shannon (of blessed memory), the most important issues of the Council for Merton concerned war, peace, deterrence and non-violence (Shannon 504-505); I would add the Church’s attitude toward non-Christian religions. During the Council Merton wrote to Cardinal Bea about the latter issue (*HGL* 433-34) and an open letter to the American bishops about the former (*WF* 88-92). In December, 1963, he gave a series of conferences at Gethsemani on the Council’s first document, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (December 4, 1963) and wrote two articles on it which are incorporated as the first and last chapters of his 1965 book *Seasons of Celebration*.<sup>13</sup> Between the third and fourth sessions of the Council, in January and February, 1965, he gave conferences on monastic renewal.<sup>14</sup> His correspondence during the Council consistently encourages prayer for genuine renewal – see for example, his letter to Sr. M. Emmanuel on November 2, 1962: “let us keep praying for the Council” (*HGL* 189).

Through it all runs Merton’s deep existential concern for what the changes might mean for monastic life and apostolic religious orders. In his introduction to Merton’s conferences on the vows, Patrick F. O’Connell says: “Responding to the call of the Second Vatican Council for religious orders to recover the charisms of their founders, Merton repeatedly calls for a genuine renewal and recovery of an authentic monastic spirit rather than merely a reform of structures and observances.”<sup>15</sup> It was to genuine renewal that Merton urged communities of religious women, to which we now turn our attention.

What follows is not about Merton and women, a subject broadly, and frequently badly, discussed elsewhere,<sup>16</sup> but is a sketch of some ways Merton encouraged women religious to interpret and implement the challenges of Vatican II, particularly the “Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of Religious Life,” promulgated October 28, 1965. Perhaps fittingly, it begins with the Latin phrase *Perfectae Caritatis*, “perfect charity” or “complete love.”<sup>17</sup> According to that document, “The appropriate renewal of religious life involves two simultaneous processes: (1) a continuous return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original inspiration behind a given community and (2) an adjustment of the community to the changed conditions of the times” (Abbott 468). It continues: “even the most desirable changes made on behalf of contemporary needs will fail of their purpose unless a renewal of spirit gives life to them. Indeed such an interior renewal must always be accorded the leading role” (Abbott 469). These principles are evident when Merton’s discusses the Council with women religious.

Merton encouraged the women to make their own decisions about proposed changes. In the 1987 interview Sr. Mary Luke Tobin, perhaps Merton’s closest woman friend, remarked that he thought religious women “needed to take their lives in hand. They were too much controlled and dominated by male superiors . . . who wouldn’t let them move. He was frustrated by that” (Kramer 48). Merton actively supported the renewal process in the Loretto Community in the 1960s, and recorded a talk for their special General Chapter in 1967.<sup>18</sup> Evidence of his “encouragement toward liberation” is found in Merton’s letters of encouragement to women religious, the conferences he led at Gethsemani in December, 1967 and May, 1968 for superiors of contemplative women’s

communities (which Sr. Mary Luke and the Sisters of Loretto facilitated), and the talks he gave to sisters and others in September, 1968 en route to Asia.

Excerpts from four letters between 1964 and 1965 (allowing time for the Council's ideas to have circulated) exemplify the tenor of Merton's encouragement to embrace the full possibilities newly opened for women religious by Vatican II. Writing to "a Religious" December 30, 1964 (after the third session of the Council) Merton commented on the frustration caused in religious life by over-organization and systematization. He continued, "we should all be praying for a genuine renewal and opening up of new perspectives. Certainly in most Orders the Superiors are beginning to work on it" (*WF* 194). Reading between the lines, we see Merton had been in touch with various superiors and knew of work being done. He reminds the sister that her task "is to seek, with purity of intention, to give yourself as completely as possible to God . . . be patient, be open with your Superiors and . . . hope for the best" (*WF* 194). The entry suggests that, in light of the institutional and organizational changes that the Council signaled, the basic work of renewal remained individual and spiritual. For the Christian, external renewal and/or organizational change begins and grows or withers in the heart of each individual.

Writing the same month to Mother Angela Collins (Prioress of the Louisville Carmel who later founded a Carmel in Savannah, GA) Merton addresses external, community matters, especially formation, in which he had particular interest both because of its crucial importance and because of his work as Master of Scholastics and of Novices at Gethsemani. The exchange anticipates section 18 of the decree on renewal of religious life which addresses the training and education of religious and which opens: "The suitable renewal of religious communities depends very largely on the training of their members" (Abbott 478). Although Merton understands that "The idea of letting nuns get out to study . . . might meet with difficulties," he says, "it is very important to bring the Carmelites up to date and into touch with realities" (*SC* 256). He suggests bringing in speakers and developing their own house of studies. He pulls no punches about formation: "the way the nuns are formed keeps them childish and deprives them of a mature perspective, and thus they are unable to take advantage of the measures that would help mature them and deepen them." He calls this "a vicious circle" (*SC* 256) and suggests that "the nuns who have some sense and some good forward-looking ideas should be allowed to communicate with 'experts' and knowledgeable people" (*SC* 257). He believes the "first problem is one of communication" (*SC* 257) and that there should be interchange of ideas within the community.

Writing to a member of the Cleveland Carmel March 21, 1965 (before the last session of the Council), Merton addresses the particular problems of renewal in contemplative orders. They need "greater flexibility and maturity" while "not sacrificing their truly contemplative ideal" (*WF* 191); "routine active work and odd jobs" should not "oppress and overwhelm the freedom they need to be alone with God. . . . Anything that threatens their freedom and disengagement from routine obligations in the active life must be fought and fought hard" (*WF* 191). The real problem as Merton sees it "is getting ourselves free from silly routines with our own cloistered life," things that are done "without anyone really knowing why" (*WF* 191). Interestingly in light of his own struggles, Merton thinks "sweeping reforms are not a matter of immediate and urgent necessity. We can take our time" (*WF* 191). Merton's remarks adhere to the Decree's insistence on "the original inspiration behind a given community" (Abbott 468). The Decree devoted section 7 to contemplative communities. After praising their contribution to the Church it closes, "Nevertheless, their manner of living should be

revised according to the aforementioned principles . . . though their withdrawal from the world and the practices of their contemplative life should be maintained at their holiest” (Abbott 471).

On July 11, 1965 Merton writes to Sr. M. Emmanuel de Souza e Silva, a Brazilian nun with whom he had been in correspondence since 1955 (largely about literature and the translation of his work into Portuguese). The letter serves as a summary of his thought about renewal as the Council drew to a close. He speaks of his Order’s General Chapter: “The confusion of motives and ideas is still too great and the monks for the most part are not stable enough or mature enough . . . to assimilate what is going on and make good use of it. Basically, they do not really know what they want, but they are sincere in their seeking. I think it will come out all right” (*HGL* 194). He continues,

The religious life is not going to get any easier or less confused and we are going to go through more of a crisis than we have yet seen. But in the end, this will bring us . . . to a more radical obedience of faith. After all what matters is not simply to be a monk or a nun but to be a Christian and a perfect disciple, open in heart and mind to God’s word. . . . [W]e will absolutely not see any real peace and perfection in religious life in the next ten or fifteen years. That need not prevent us from being happier than we ever were. (*HGL* 195)

These four letters written during Vatican II indicate that Merton immediately engaged women religious who were at the vanguard of implementing the Council’s reforms. The Decree on Renewal of Religious Life was promulgated in October, 1965, and the Council closed that December. But Merton’s encouragement of women religious did not end – if anything it intensified, as his continued correspondence, his engagement with Loretto, the conferences at Gethsemani for contemplative superiors and his last talks to religious attest.

The advent of the Gethsemani retreats for contemplative superiors is interesting. George Bernard Flahiff became Archbishop of Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada in 1961 (cardinal in 1969). After participating in the Council he was a member of the Sacred Congregation for Religious. In that capacity Merton wrote to him on May 15, 1966 about “one of the contemplative Superiors of women who is . . . trying to form an association to discuss the problems of contemplative women” (*HGL* 250). She wrote to Merton to inquire whether “I would be willing to give a short retreat to a group of these Superiors some time in the future after one of their meetings” (*HGL* 250). Because Merton thinks his immediate superiors would oppose the invitation, he sought the opinion (or permission?) of “higher Superiors” (*HGL* 250), an unusual step in the monastic world.

What eventuated were two retreats at Gethsemani for superiors of women’s contemplative communities. In the fall of 1967, Merton enlisted the help of Sr. Mary Luke Tobin and Loretto. So naturally the meetings happened! The first retreat took place in December, 1967, the second in May, 1968. The sessions were recorded, transcribed and edited by Sr. Jane Marie Richardson, SL and published in 1992 as *The Springs of Contemplation*.<sup>19</sup> Merton’s journal entries of December 7 and 9, 1967 and May 28 and June 4, 1968 reflect his very positive responses to the meetings.<sup>20</sup> He called the first “the best retreat I ever made in my life” (*OSM* 21). Fortunately, the editors of *The Merton Annual* conducted interviews with Loretto Srs. Mary Luke and Jane Marie that provide information about the logistics and contents of the meetings which ostensibly focused on the role of contemplative communities in the Church in light of the renewal called for by Vatican II.

In the introduction of *The Springs of Contemplation*, Sr. Mary Luke noted, “In that time of incredibly swift changes in our world and in the post-Vatican II Church, Merton saw the need of assisting contemplatives who were often cut off by inflexible regulations” (*SpC* vii-viii). She adds: “Merton believed in the faith reality lived by contemplative women. He realized that their vocations demanded a new maturity within a patriarchal system” (*SpC* ix). Luke records that Merton sent questions to participants before the meetings. For her the most telling one was: “What would you do if organized religious life were to disappear?” She notes, “The relevance of exploring such a question illustrates Merton’s talent for cutting through non-essentials, and engaging the mind and heart directly. Merton did not pretend to have answers; he knew that was not his task” (*SpC* x). Merton served as mentor, not magician. He raised pertinent questions and introduced relevant topics, but left the (highly capable) women to devise their own answers and come to their own conclusions.

I highlight two points of interest from the extraordinarily rich material of these retreats: first, the prophetic role of contemplatives, and, second, Merton’s critique of the “feminine mystique.” It is clear from these conferences that Merton thought that when, following the recommendations of Vatican II, contemplatives are true to their founding charisms, they are not only counter-cultural, but prophetic. He explained, “We become prophetic when we live in such a way that our life is an experience of the infallible fidelity of God” (*SpC* 73). “The prophetic struggle with the world is the struggle of the Cross against worldly power.” Merton reminded the prioresses that “the Church is, in fact, a worldly power” (*SpC* 81). Merton foresaw the radical implications in the Decree on Religious Life and in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*), which had such far-reaching implications. Fifty years on, we know that attempts either to live out those documents or to marginalize them have led to many of our current impasses.

In the May, 1968 retreat, Merton devoted a talk to the “feminine mystique,” the “idealization of supposed special feminine qualities which are . . . tied in with a cloistered, contemplative mystique” (*SpC* 161). Against this he suggested, “I think you have an absolute duty to rebel, for the good of the Church itself” (*SpC* 162). Merton warned the prioresses of the dangers of an alliance between an idealized view of women and of religious life because it leads to an idolatry that denies women’s freedom and autonomy. Within the monastic family, Merton encouraged the women to liberate themselves, as Mary Luke Tobin said, to “Stand on your own two feet.” “Proceed to live your life as you think you must.” Sr. Luke described “Merton’s proclamation of authentic autonomy, the overcoming of alienation” (*SpC* x-xi).

Merton’s summary of the first meeting in a letter to Carmelite Sr. Anita Wasserman on December 10, 1967 applies to both: “A fine thing happened this week. Fifteen cloistered superiors . . . were here for a meeting, a kind of retreat and conference on renewal problems. . . . [W]e had a very fruitful time. . . . I got the feeling that there are really solid hopes for our communities getting somewhere . . . I think we can have a first rate contemplative life within the structures we know, but that serious changes need to be made” (*WF* 193).

Merton’s meetings with the contemplative superiors address many of the points raised in the Decree on renewal in religious life: chastity (section 12), obedience (section 14), religious habits [that is “outfits”!] (section 17), training and formation (section 18). Because *The Springs of Contemplation* retains the informality of conversation, it has never quite received the attention it deserves as a source for Merton’s thought. Be that as it may, it stands as evidence of the seriousness with which

religious women and Thomas Merton took the decrees of Vatican II, a seriousness evident as well in other conferences Merton gave to religious women.

For example, in 1967 Merton recorded a series of talks for the Carmelite sisters in Savannah that address many of these same issues.<sup>21</sup> They recur in the talks he gave to women religious in Alaska in 1968. That retreat for nuns was at the request of the bishop of Anchorage (see *OSM* 153). Merton was in Alaska from September 18 to October 2.<sup>22</sup> September 18 to 21 he gave a workshop for sisters at the Monastery of the Precious Blood in Eagle River, north of Anchorage. September 29 he preached a day of recollection for diocesan sisters at Providence Hospital in Anchorage. The talks reflect Merton's wide reading and rely heavily on Pauline theology and the desert tradition of the fourth century in addressing the general subject of prayer and the contemplative life.<sup>23</sup> While the concerns of Vatican II were not the explicit subject of the eight conferences Merton gave religious women in Alaska, several relevant issues appeared. The first conference, entitled "This Is God's Work," addressed the "renewal of the contemplative life" which Merton said was "first of all a kind of simplification" (*TMA* 72). God's call to contemplatives is "simply to be people who are content to live close to Him and to renew the kind of life in which that closeness is felt and experienced" (*TMA* 73). No program for this is suggested, but a principle is given. He answered questions about "changes in the Divine Office" (*TMA* 89-90), and in "Community, Politics, and Contemplation" alluded to the prophetic character of the life. He spoke about monastic education (*TMA* 76, 126-27), personhood and autonomy. In references to Buddhism, Judaism and Islam (the latter two especially in "The Life that Unifies"), one hears echoes of the 1965 Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions.

After participating in a conference at the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions in Santa Barbara, CA,<sup>24</sup> Merton returned on October 8 to Our Lady of the Redwoods Trappistine monastery which he had previously visited in May, 1968. A three-day conference on monastic renewal was arranged there by the Abbess, Myriam Dardenne, apparently at the request of M. Benedicta of the Immaculate Heart of Mary sisters of Monroe, MI. That both male and female monastics attended is an example of experimental implementation of Vatican II's ideas. Br. David Steindl-Rast, OSB attended this meeting and recorded it for an article published in *Monastic Studies*; his essay was subsequently included in Br. Patrick Hart's 1974 collection *Thomas Merton, Monk: A Monastic Tribute*.<sup>25</sup> Br. David indicates that monastic prayer and formation were focal points of the talks and discussions. Merton noted, for example, that institutions (like monasteries) could help people find themselves in prayer. But, he said, "The institution must serve the development of the individual person. . . . What we need are person-centered communities, not institution-centered ones" (Steindl-Rast 85); he noted, "the supreme reward in a religious community should be that a man or a woman be set free for what they most desire" (Steindl-Rast 87). From Redwoods, Merton returned to San Francisco and then went on to Asia and his great *transitus*. It is worth noting that the hospitality for most of the American part of his last journey was provided by women religious: Poor Clares in Chicago, Precious Blood Sisters in Alaska and women Cistercians in California.

So where does this leave us with regard to Merton, women religious and the challenges of Vatican II? I give first voice to two women religious who worked closely with Merton. In 1987 Sr. Mary Luke Tobin recalled Merton's talks to Loretto novices and the conferences for the contemplative prioresses. She noted their importance: "Because here is a man twenty years ago who was . . . at the



beginning of the women's movement. . . . He stressed the full human being and sought to indicate how to draw out of human persons the autonomy that is rightfully theirs . . . . Karl Rahner says our autonomy grows in direct proportion to our approach to the mystery of God. I think Merton understood that and brought people along that path" (Kramer 51).

Sr. Jane Marie Richardson noted that Sr. Luke "credits [Merton] with encouraging . . . religious women to develop their vocation as a 'new maturity within a patriarchal system'" (Kilcourse 138). She continues, "Merton's whole approach allayed a lot of fears of reactions from Rome, freed us to see things in fresh ways, to try different things, to make some changes according to the document, to trust in the Spirit that was among us, to be willing to risk the old-time securities, to take hold of our lives as intelligent and capable women" (Kilcourse 139). "He was . . . affirming even of the very idea of trying to make the constitutions of a community much more positive and uplifting . . . much more expressive of a woman's experience and point of view" (Kilcourse 129).

Not surprisingly, Merton's own evaluation of the Council and of renewal evolved. Early on he was optimistic but cautious. Writing to E. I. Watkin on January 11, 1963, he said:

The problem is much deeper than many people seem to imagine, though the possibilities of renewal . . . are great. Still, I think the approach is not radical enough. Or at least, we do not know as yet how radical it is . . . the first session did not really get down to the roots. Liturgy is all very well, but it is not the root problem. Nor is the schema on revelation. The great problem is the fact that the Church is utterly embedded in a social matrix that is radically unfriendly to genuine spiritual growth because it tends to stifle justice and charity as well as genuine inner life. (*HGL* 581)

Writing in 1965 to the American bishops about the very subject on which he had been silenced, Merton echoed John XXIII that the task of the Council was to proclaim the Gospel of love in language moderns could understand. The principle of action, Merton insisted, is that "The Christian is called . . . to a decision for Christ, not to a decision for this or that kind of society. He is called to obey the Gospel of love, for all . . . and not simply to devote himself to the interests of a nation, a party, a class, or a culture" (*WF* 88) – or, dare we add, a particular order in the Church.

Merton made this explicit in the 1967 recording for the Loretto sisters: "it is more important to have one convent with five people in it who are alive than to have a whole country of convents in which people are half dead, or live a kind of living death."<sup>26</sup> "One of the things that gets us under this pressure," Merton continued, "is the excessive concern about our institutional survival. This should not concern us that much" (Merton, "Comments" 27-28). What was crucial was "to keep the future completely open so that you will be able to liberate yourself and one another in an open community with the help of the Holy Spirit and with the help of your love for one another" (Merton, "Comments" 24). For Merton, living the charism was more important than circling up the wagons to preserve the institution. The renewal of religious life was a specific example of one of his basic themes: the freedom (or the liberation) of the person in Christ.

He realized this was not easy or without attendant dangers. Writing August 9, 1963 to Mother M. L. Schroen, RSCJ, who was at her order's Generalate in Rome, he said, "Everything is connected in the mystery of the Church and it is good, as well as frightening, to find oneself part of the same movement that produced the Council . . . . One cannot do anything for the Church . . . without

inexplicable sufferings, some of which come from the Church herself, not necessarily in that which is most perfect in her. This is especially true of the Religious Life, and of the needed reform in it” (SC 180). Merton’s words sound eerily contemporary.

Merton understood the profound implications of Vatican II for religious women. Whether they were apostolic or contemplative (although he clearly has a special affinity with and concern for contemplative communities like the Carmelites), he took their communities’ struggles absolutely seriously and encouraged them to undertake renewal while preserving what was essential to their individual charisms. This was central to the Decree and to Merton, who wrote to Sr. Thérèse Lentfoehr September 17, 1964: “Mostly desires of change are not always too enlightened. I am by no means a conservative, but I think that some of our Abbots . . . are a bit blind to real values that are primitive and still as good as new. They just want to be ‘modern’ and may end up by being nothing.”<sup>27</sup>

Writing in the journal *Spirituality*, Breda O’Brien says that perhaps the greatest legacy of the Council is “the unequivocal locating of the church in the world, not apart from the world, not in opposition to the world, but in the world.”<sup>28</sup> Each of us probably has a personal view of the “greatest legacy.” For what it’s worth, mine is Vatican II’s insistence that the Church is not primarily an institution but a people. This has profound consequences, especially for religious life in its institutional manifestations. The insight implies that the focus of renewal should not be maintenance of the institution, but formation in Christ of individuals, to set them free to celebrate Liturgy and to serve the world.

I give the last word to Merton. On February 20, 1964 he wrote to Bishop John J. Wright:

when we look at the enormity of the task before us, our mind is simply staggered by it. The Lord has willed us to live in perhaps the most difficult of all periods in . . . history, and it is painful to us above all because the Catholic conscience has apparently been so slow to wake up to its responsibilities. . . . Yet I feel . . . that we are really completely in God’s hands and that, with all our incapacity, we can serve Him well by staying . . . and responding to what our times ask of us, insofar as we can. If only He will give us the grace of lucidity and strength in all the diabolical confusion of the world – a confusion in which we share. How deeply we are involved in what we condemn. (*HGL* 609-10)<sup>29</sup>

1. Kevin Seasoltz, OSB, “Vatican Council II: Turning Point or Turning Back?” *Abbey Banner* [St. John’s Abbey] (Winter 2012) 12; subsequent references will be cited as “Seasoltz” parenthetically in the text.
2. For basic information see Mary Peter McGinty, CSJ, “Vatican II at 50 Years: What Is Was, Is, and Can Be,” *Imagine One* 4/2 (Fall/Winter, 2012) 14-18; John W. O’Malley, “Misdirections,” *America* (4 Feb. 2013) 25-27; *The National Catholic Reporter* October 11, 2012 issue devoted to the Second Vatican Council; Seasoltz; William Shannon, “Vatican Council, The Second,” in William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O’Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002) 503-508 (subsequent references will be cited as “Shannon” parenthetically in the text); *Spirituality* 18.105 (Nov.-Dec. 2012).
3. Dewey Weiss Kramer, “Growing into Responsibility: An Interview with Mary Luke Tobin, SL,” *The Merton Annual* 2 (1989) 54; subsequent references will be cited as “Kramer” parenthetically in the text. In fact there were seventeen women auditors in 1964 (two of the laywomen were war widows, the others heads of various lay organizations – evidently Sr. Luke was not including the former in her number), increased to 23 for the fourth and final session in 1965 (which explains the discrepancy in numbers cited in the text): see the article on women auditors on the Pontifical Council on the Laity website: <http://www.laici.va/content/laici/en/sezioni/donna/notizie/le-uditrici-al-concilio-vaticano-ii.html>.

4. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 560-71; subsequent references will be cited as “HGL” parenthetically in the text.
5. Thomas Merton, *Cold War Letters*, ed. Christine M. Bochen and William H. Shannon (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006).
6. See Gordon Oyer, *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest: Merton, Berrigan, Yoder, and Muste at the Gethsemani Abbey Peacemaker Retreat* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014).
7. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953) 248.
8. George A. Kilcourse, Jr., “Life through the Lens of Inner and Outer Freedom: An Interview with Jane Marie Richardson, SL,” *The Merton Annual* 13 (2000) 128; subsequent references will be cited as “Kilcourse” 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) 88; subsequent references will be cited as “WF” parenthetically in the text.
10. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993) 142; subsequent references will be cited as “CT” parenthetically in the text.
11. Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: Letters on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990) 189; subsequent references will be cited as “SC” parenthetically in the text.
12. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 250.
13. Thomas Merton, *Seasons of Celebration* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1965) 1-27, 236-48.
14. These 1963 and 1965 conferences are available on CD: Thomas Merton, *Vatican II: The Sacred Liturgy and Religious Life* (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2012).
15. Thomas Merton, *The Life of the Vows: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* 6, ed. Patrick F. O’Connell, Monastic Wisdom [MW], vol. 30 (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2012) lvi.
16. Those interested in balanced material on this subject might begin with the two issues of *The Merton Seasonal* devoted to Merton and women: 15.1 (Winter 1990) and 17.1 (Winter 1992) as well as *The Merton Annual* 14 (2001), which has numerous important articles on the subject from a variety of perspectives. Also of interest is the 1998 video *Women Who Knew Merton*, moderated by Christine M. Bochen.
17. Walter M. Abbott, SJ, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild Press, 1966) 466; subsequent references will be cited as “Abbott” parenthetically in the text.
18. A note on this recording and a transcript of it appear in *The Merton Annual* 14 (2001) 12-32; for more on Merton and Loretto see Bonnie Thurston, ed., *Hidden in the Same Mystery: Thomas Merton and Loretto* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2010).
19. Thomas Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani*, ed. Jane Marie Richardson, SL (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1992); subsequent references will be cited as “SpC” parenthetically in the text. For introductions to the work see Patrick F. O’Connell, “*Springs of Contemplation*” (*Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* 451-52) and Bonnie Bowman Thurston, “‘The Best Retreat I Ever Made’: Merton and the Contemplative Prioresses,” *The Merton Annual* 14 (2001) 81-95. Recordings of the two retreats are now available commercially: *Solitude and Togetherness* (Introduction by Fr. Anthony Ciorra + 11 Lectures: 11 CDs); *The Prophet’s Freedom* (Introduction by Fr. Anthony Ciorra + 8 Lectures: 8 CDs) (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2012); for a comparison of the edited text and the original recordings see Patrick F. O’Connell’s review in *The Merton Annual* 26 (2013) 230-32.
20. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey. Journals, vol. 7: 1967-1968*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998) 20-22, 123-25; subsequent references will be cited as “OSM” parenthetically in the text.
21. Now available as *Living Contemplatively: Address to the Carmelite Sisters of Savannah* (1967) (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2013).
22. For more on Merton in Alaska see Christine M. Bochen, “*Alaskan Journal of Thomas Merton*” (*Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* 1-3); Bonnie Thurston, “Islam in Alaska: Sufi Material in *Thomas Merton in Alaska*,” *The Merton Seasonal* 29.4 (Winter 2004) 3-8; and Bonnie Thurston, “I Spoke Most of Prayer”: Thomas Merton on the West Coast,” *The Merton Seasonal* 35.3 (Fall 2010) 10-19.
23. The tapes of the first seven conferences were sent to Gethsemani, transcribed by Br. Patrick Hart and edited by Naomi Burton Stone: see Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton in Alaska: The Alaskan Conferences, Journals, and Letters*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: New Directions, 1989) 69 (subsequent references will be cited as “TMA” parenthetically in the text). In late 1970 and into 1971 in *Sisters Today* “there appeared each month for seven months a transcription

of one of Merton's Alaska conferences" (Elizabeth M. O'Hara, RSM, "Merton and Alaska," presentation given June 5, 2003 at the Eighth General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society – typescript [2] she generously shared with me).

24. See Thomas Merton, *Preview of the Asian Journey*, ed. Walter H. Capps (New York: Crossroad, 1989).
25. David Steindl-Rast, OSB, "Man of Prayer," in Patrick Hart, ed., *Thomas Merton/Monk: A Monastic Tribute* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1974) 79-89; subsequent references will be cited as "Steindl-Rast" parenthetically in the text.
26. Thomas Merton, "Comments about the Religious Life Today," *The Merton Annual* 14 (2001) 14; subsequent references will be cited as "Merton, 'Comments'" parenthetically in the text.
27. Quoted in Robert Nugent, SDS, *Thomas Merton and Thérèse Lentfoehr: The Story of a Friendship* (New York: St Pauls Editions, 2012) 127-28.
28. Breda O'Brien, "Vatican II and the Media," *Spirituality* 18.105 (2012) 333.
29. An earlier version of this material was presented on October 16, 2013 at Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY.