

Conscientious Objection to a War-Driven World

Review of

The Root of War Is Fear: Thomas Merton's Advice to Peacemakers

By Jim Forest

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Reviewed by **Rose Marie Berger**

In Rome last spring a landmark gathering on Catholic nonviolence and just peace, cohosted by the Vatican justice and peace office and Pax Christi International, a global Catholic peace movement, convened bishops, theologians, laypersons, sisters, priests – most living in situations of extreme conflict and most from the majority world. The Vatican and Pax Christi International wanted to hear the experiences of people who have lived with violence, lived through war, and still found successful ways to remain nonviolent or have observed effective nonviolent practices. Those who arrived in Rome were from Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Palestine, Colombia, Mexico, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Uganda, as well as the United States and Western Europe.

This April conference on nonviolence and just peace concluded with an appeal to the Catholic Church to re-commit to the centrality of Gospel nonviolence. It included a six-point plan: 1) continue developing Catholic social teaching on nonviolence – in particular, Pope Francis was called upon to share with the world an encyclical on nonviolence and just peace; 2) integrate Gospel nonviolence explicitly into the life, including the sacramental life, and work of the Church through dioceses, parishes, agencies, schools, universities, seminaries, religious orders, voluntary associations and others; 3) promote nonviolent practices and strategies (e.g., nonviolent resistance, restorative justice, trauma-healing, unarmed civilian protection, conflict transformation and peacebuilding strategies); 4) initiate a global conversation on nonviolence within the Church, with people of other faiths and with the larger world, to respond to the monumental crises of our time with the vision and strategies of nonviolence and just peace; 5) no longer use or teach “just war theory” and continue advocating for the abolition of war and nuclear weapons; 6) lift up the prophetic voice of the Church to challenge unjust world powers and to support and defend those nonviolent activists whose work for peace and justice put their lives at risk. These requests have not fallen on deaf ears. Following the Rome conference, Pope Francis announced the theme for the fiftieth anniversary of the World Day of Peace: “Nonviolence.” These events are part of an evolving conversation among Catholics on issues of nonviolence and peace that has not been discussed at this level since the Second Vatican Council. This conversation has deep roots – particularly in the context of American Catholicism. Jim Forest’s *The Root of War Is Fear: Thomas Merton’s Advice to Peacemakers* provides an appropriate and crucial context for understanding the significance of what’s happening now.

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Merton entered Jim Forest's life in December 1959 (see 19) when Forest was on two-weeks leave from the Navy and came across a copy of Merton's autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, in a New York City bus terminal. By early fall 1960 Forest had also read Dorothy Day's autobiography, *The Long Loneliness* (see 20), and decided to visit the Catholic Worker in Manhattan. In conversation with Day, he discovered that she and Merton exchanged letters (see 21). Through those conversations Forest made a decision to take part in a protest (though not in uniform) against the CIA-sponsored invasion of the Bay of Pigs in Cuba. Not long afterward, he "filed an application for early discharge from the Navy as a conscientious objector" (23-24), a request swiftly granted. Within a few months Forest had joined Day and became an editor of *The Catholic Worker* newspaper. This position put him in direct correspondence with Merton, who had submitted his first article to the *CW* in September 1961. In this piece, entitled "The Root of War is Fear," Merton wrote, "The present war crisis is something we have made entirely for and by ourselves. There is in reality not the slightest logical reason for war, and yet the whole world is plunging headlong into frightful destruction, and doing so with the purpose of avoiding war and preserving peace! This is true war-madness" (28).

With the skill of a people's historian Forest tracks the evolution of Merton's thought on war and peace from his early application for conscientious objector status at the outset of World War II through the powerful anti-war writings of the 1960s – from the virulent anti-Communism and nuclear brinkmanship of the Cold War (see 35) through the atrocity of the war in Vietnam (see 187). Of particular interest for today is the background Forest includes on the American Catholic peace movement, the formation of the Catholic Peace Fellowship and of the U.S. branch of Pax Christi. Merton writes in a letter to psychoanalyst Erich Fromm in December 1961, "The Catholics in the peace movement we are now starting are not the most influential in the country by any means There are a few priests, no bishops" (97). There was a neat division of labor. Pax Christi would publish a journal and hold annual conferences. CPF would reach out to ordinary Catholics to teach about the option for Catholics to be conscientious objectors to war, particularly targeting Catholic high schools and young adults "who would become the cannon fodder of war if the U.S. military involvement in Vietnam intensified" (106).

By the opening of the Second Vatican Council in 1962, Merton's voice was already well known and influential. In 1958, he had initiated conversation with Pope John XXIII that included discussion of social issues (some of which may have influenced the pope's breakthrough encyclical *Pacem in Terris*) (see 91-92). But Merton's war and peace writing had been censored by the Cistercian abbot general and one Trappist monastery was reportedly visited by a "military intelligence officer" inquiring about Merton (50). Censorship did not stop Merton from writing his extensive letters to friends nor from mimeographing essays for limited distribution. One recipient was John Wright, Bishop of Pittsburgh, who shared copies of Merton's manuscript of *Peace in the Post-Christian Era* at the Vatican Council with fellow-bishops and the theologians assisting them (see 141). Another Merton contact at the Council was James Douglass, who worked as a theological advisor on questions of war and peace for several American, British and Swedish bishops. Bishop John Taylor of Stockholm submitted language to the Council documents that referenced Merton by name: "Thomas Merton, one of the most profound mystical theologians of our times, has written that total nuclear war would be a sin of mankind equal only to the crucifixion of Christ" (144). Merton also sent three packets of his peace writings to Hildegard Goss-Mayr (secretary of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation) who delivered them to Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani, one of the key figures responsible for laying the groundwork for the council (see 142), a stalwart curial conservative who was nevertheless a committed opponent of modern warfare.

Both John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris* and *Gaudium et Spes*, the Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, "pose the question whether just war criteria need to be thoroughly reconsidered," according to Catholic ethicist Lisa Sowle Cahill (see https://nonviolencejustpeacedotnet.files.wordpress.com/2016/05/official_cst_on_gospel_nonviolence.pdf). John XXIII says explicitly that it is "contrary to reason to hold that war is now a suitable way to restore rights which have been violated" (*Pacem in Terris*, n. 127; cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, nn. 79-80). While *Gaudium et Spes* still accepts the legitimacy of defensive wars and John XXIII does not definitively exclude them, with Merton they agree that modern war and preparation for war is a root cause of global injustice, and emphasize that gospel-inspired and nonviolent peace is the proper path for engendering lasting trust among nations.

With Merton's embrace of monasticism, he – like every Catholic priest – chose a life that was a sign of contradiction to war and a war-driven world (see 12). He affirmed that "an essential part of the 'good news' is that nonviolent and reasonable measures are stronger than weapons. Indeed, by spiritual arms, the early Church conquered the entire Roman world" (72). Merton questioned the use of the word "pacifist" in relation to gospel nonviolence. "This is really an important semantic problem which touches on theology and requires a little thought," he wrote to Eileen Egan, close friend of Dorothy Day and senior staff member of Catholic Relief Services. "If by pacifist we mean 'peacemaker,' then a Catholic is obliged to be one." However, if the word was to be used, then "we must make clear that it is to be understood . . . not just as individual and subjective revulsion of war, but a Catholic protest, based on the mind of the church, against the use of war as a way of settling international disputes" (99).

Additionally, Merton appealed to the American Catholic bishops, according to Forest, "to make an unambiguous statement advocating the renunciation of violence in favor of negotiation and other nonviolent means of conflict settlement. Methods of warfare that result in the indiscriminate killing of both combatants and noncombatants must be unreservedly condemned" (145). But, Merton warned, "Wherever there is a high moral ideal there is an attendant risk of pharisaism, and nonviolence is no exception. . . . Christian nonviolence . . . is not built on presupposed division, but on the basic unity of man. It is not out for the conversion of the wicked to the ideas of the good, but for the healing and reconciliation of man with himself, man the person and man the human family" (173).

Merton's theology of Christian nonviolence is inextricably rooted in the life and teaching of the Catholic Church. Vatican II channeled the Church's witness for peace into diplomacy and economic development. The Rome conference in April indicates that we now have an opportunity to marry the profundity of the Church's teaching on gospel peace with at least one hundred years of strategies and practices of nonviolent resistance. Recent academic research, in fact, has confirmed that nonviolent resistance strategies are twice as effective as violent ones. In Pope Francis' letter addressing the conference in Rome in April he wrote, "Humanity needs to refurbish all the best available tools to help the men and women of today to fulfil their aspirations for justice and peace. Accordingly, your thoughts on revitalizing the tools of nonviolence, and of active nonviolence in particular, will be a needed and positive contribution" (<http://www.iustitiaetpax.va/content/giustiziaepace/en/archivio/news/2016/pope-francis--message-to-the-the-nonviolence-and-just-peace-conf.html>). When Pope Francis refers to nonviolence, he is not referring to passive-ism. Terrence Rynne, founder of the Center for Peacebuilding at Marquette University in Wisconsin, put it this way: "The topic at issue here is proactive, positive, nonviolent strategic peacemaking – an emerging body of data, theology, and praxis that goes well beyond the false choices of justifying war or refusing to confront it" (<https://sojo.net/magazine/july-2016/toward-new-theology-peace>). This is a new approach. A third way is emerging.

Pope Francis has described our times as “World War Three – but in installments” (<https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/eco-catholic/popes-eco-quotes-inalienable-right>). Deadly conflict is increasing around the world, most significantly in the last five years (see <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/01/03/10-conflicts-to-watch-in-2016>). Vatican II’s predictions about “total war” are the stark reality of daily news. The Church stands at a watershed. Will it reject the necessity of armed force? Will it counsel the state strongly and clearly against the use of violence? Will it promote active effective alternatives to armed force? Will it confront the evil so clearly at work in the world with the sword of peace alone? At the bright edge of this transformative time, there is a clear need for alternatives to war. Across the world, effective alternatives are emerging. People are doing serious work to advance these alternatives, to mainstream them, and to scale them up. “Currently 12 international, nongovernmental organizations and many more local groups provide unarmed civilian protection in 17 areas of violent conflict,” according to Mel Duncan, founding director of Nonviolent Peaceforce (<https://nonviolencejustpeacedotnet.files.wordpress.com/2016/05/duncan-mel-u-s.pdf>). In one year, Nonviolent Peaceforce trained more than 14,000 people in conflict-affected communities in unarmed civilian protection (http://www.nonviolentpeaceforce.org/images/AnnualReports/8NP_Progress_Report_E-Version.compressed.pdf). Pope Francis set his agenda when he took the name of the saint from Assisi: a Church of the poor for the poor; a love of creation; and a passionate commitment to nonviolent peacemaking. Pope Francis is redirecting Church finances and leadership to the poor. Through *Laudato Si’*, we see him leading on a Christian response to climate change. Now we see intimations of the third agenda: gospel nonviolence.

What Jim Forest offers here – in addition to some previously unpublished Merton material (see 213-15) – is some of the critical background necessary for all who want to engage fully in this next phase of the life of the Church. We stand on the shoulders of giants, such as Merton, Day, the Berrigan brothers, Hildegard Goss-Mayr, Jim Douglass and Jim Forest himself.

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