

Notes after First Visit and Correspondence 1962-1968

Thomas Merton and Douglas V. Steere

[The following single-spaced notes were typed just after Douglas V. Steere first met Thomas Merton.]

Notes on Conference with Thomas Merton, February 1962

UNION THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

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John Heidbrink, who has been serving the Fellowship of Reconciliation as the secretary for the theological seminaries, had a concern for us to visit Thomas Merton when we were in Kentucky lecturing at the Presbyterian Seminary in Louisville. He felt that Thomas Merton's growing interest in peace was such that someone should see him and find out any possible way that we could serve him and also to thank him for the things that he has written in the interest of a radical position on peace for those who seek to follow the Christian way.

We arranged to come a day early to Louisville and to go out to the Trappist Monastery at Gethsemane [sic] on Monday morning, February 5th, when he asked us to come at nine. We travelled out the new Kentucky turnpike to Lebanon Junction and then got into a little back road called 52 which turned out to be under construction. We wallowed through some open mud and up and down steep rises that

were banked with coal refuse from open pit mines and finally got onto the proper road and to the monastery on the stroke of nine. The real way to go is to take #61 at the Ky. Turnpike exit and then 62 to Boston, Ky., and at Bardstown—the great whiskey manufacturing center—31E south to 247 and then to go in to Trappist, Kentucky on this little 247 spur.

We notified the clerk at the gift shop that we had an appointment and after some time in the shop buying books, we went to the dimly lit chapel and there Thomas Merton met us. He was a man of perhaps fifty wearing a monk's robe with his well worn overall jacket on his arm. He took us past the Church entrance with its GOD ALONE inscription over the door and into a little reception room in the hall off the gift shop, and there we had an hour and a half of excellent visit.

We began with his reference to John Heidbrink's asking him if we should not have an American branch of UNA SANCTA. He said that he was not for this since Americans tended to over-organize good things and that there might be a real slowing up of this ecumenical fellowship if it got too formidably organized. He suggested that it remain as spontaneous and personal as possible and that it would go much further on this basis. He spoke of his own difficulties with the Catholic authorities over the Methodist and Baptist seminaries bringing out their students for a day in order to get some glimpse of medieval church life and his organizing this for them and then how out of it grew some subsequent seminar-like visits. The authorities promptly stopped it when it reached this point. As long as it is a case of Thomas Merton's friends visiting him there is no possible question of it, but beyond this apprehension grows. I told him something of our European experiences with UNA SANCTA and of the spontaneous and unpredictable elements being the most rewarding of all, and spoke of my being visited recently by this Discalced Carmelite who wanted to have some Protestant counselors attached to their Spiritual Life Institutes and these Houses of Leisure and Learning that are springing up. We also talked of the meeting with George Tavard and Damasus Winzen and the Protestant Theological group at the College of Preachers in Washington last November, and of the work of the Taizé brothers at Packard Manse, of the Institutes at Notre Dame, of the work of Robert Brown at Union Theological Seminary and of the fresh temper of openness that is developing. He warned that the worst of all is to get expectations too high that some great move will come at once, and

then to have them dashed. We are still in the forerunner stage and this is going well and should be encouraged without over publicizing it.

I said that many of us were most grateful to him for his writings on peace of late and asked if he would not like to talk some of this side to which he warmly agreed. He said that he had been in some real difficulties with his position on the peace issue because the authorities found this so touchy as far as the church at large was concerned. He feels that the poverty of our Christian position today is revealed by the unwillingness of ordinary men and women to face up to the implications of storing and preparing the delivery-vehicles and of their supine giving over their willingness for the delivery of nuclear bombs to the military. He feels that it shows the erosion of Christian responsibility to have let the present acceptance of this preparation for all-out nuclear war get to the point that it has, without a major demanding of a show-down. I asked him whether he came out at the full Christian pacifist position at this point and if he would go along with Evelyn Underhill's statement issued in a volume of Anglican Essays on the war in about 1940. He did not know the essay and I hope that we can get him a copy of its substance. He said that he had been one who chose non-combatant service in the last war and that he could personally have no part in killing as a Christian, but that he thought the absolute pacifist position at the moment was less the one to demand of all Christians than to go all out for nuclear pacifism and demand a defense of their country by the only means that could defend it, namely by non-violence.

We talked of the Catholic position at the moment and he admitted that it was very clouded on this issue of war, with so reputable a theologian as John Courtney Murray insisting that the old Catholic principle of the "just-war" still held, and that since one could not any longer make the old designation of aggressor stick, that if there were a major injustice committed by the enemy, that he was open to attack. With theologians divided and the bishops unwilling to take positions in advance of their theologians, there was little hope of getting official pronouncements against nuclear war. The Pope's insistence that all loyal Catholics would bear arms in defence of their own countries in 1956 after the Hungarian affair has also helped to damp down those who would plead for a radical peace witness on the part of all Catholics today. I asked him if he could not go to work on this JUST WAR theory which had backing also from a Protestant like Paul Ramsey,

and whether this was not the line of attack at the moment. He assured me that he was not the man for that, that it must be a highly reputable theologian and that the best one would be Professor John Fort [sic] of the Catholic University in Washington, D.C. He had taken a strong position during the last war against obliteration-bombing and had a conscience on these matters, but that he was not optimistic about his undertaking it against the solid storm of public opposition to any undermining of this ancient bulwark of the Catholic war position. He spoke of a forth-coming book by Gordon Zahn of Loyola University in Chicago which was getting at the Catholic record in the Nazi period, and coming somewhat obliquely at the war issue. He asked if Maritain would tackle it and I said that he had shifted his ground from the Gandhian position when France was overrun in the second world war, and had never reopened the earlier chapter to my knowledge.

I spoke of my visits with John Bennett of late who hugs the deterrence doctrine in spite of his horror at the Christian consequences of being willing to deliver what may amount to a destruction of the whole created world. John Bennett insists that nothing will alter the present position unless we have a wholesale revulsion on the part of the people to the insanity and the utter absurdity of the present preparations. This task, he feels that pacifist and non-pacifist alike can participate in and should be about by night and by day. Yet the official church regards discussion of these issues as morbid and tabu in a service of "comforting worship."

Thomas Merton said that he saw little hope from the ordinary methods of waking people up to the present danger. It may have to come by a terrible accident, by something almost apocalyptic. Dorothy Steere spoke of the women's demonstrations and of what Schweitzer had told her in 1957 in Gunsbach that the women who were close to the source of life might finally have to be the ones who called a halt on this threat to wipe out all life. He brightened to this as to almost nothing else on this issue and said that this made real sense to him and that it might well come this way. He spoke of the striking book on *Women and the Salvation of the World* by the Orthodox scholar E[v]dokimo[v] which had been translated from the French. (Try SPCK)

I asked him about the form that a fresh outburst of spirituality of which the monasteries were in some sense the historical landmarks and custodians of past outbursts of spiritual passion might take and inquired what he saw as the need for our day. He admitted that the

present monastic life was largely absorbed in keeping the liturgical engine going and that they were heavily mechanical and not able to meet the need of today. He said that as a symptom there was a longing to go off as solitaries on the part of a number of the most intense younger men and that occasionally they pulled it off. He spoke of one going to Martinique where facilities for hermit existence were present in connection with one of the houses. He said that those in the world who felt the call to contemplation could always withdraw and "take to the woods." "There is still woods." The day of this kind of thing being heroic is past and should be. Let them go if they feel the necessity and perhaps something will come of it for them, and through them.

Laymen have the chance. The monasteries have been largely taken over by clergy and the fresh initiative of laymen is gone. The laymen can hang on to a spar in the shipwreck. They can help rebuild the substrate of silence and purpose in the whole of society which has largely fallen away. These would be people who "are nothing on purpose."

I asked him about the life in the monastery here at Gethsemane and he said it was energetic—the monks being mostly Americans and liking to get things done. There are about 180 monks here and about 1000 in USA and the same number in France with one small house in Germany near Aachen and one in Austria. There are 11 other houses in USA. The penitential side is largely gone today. It never purified the men anyway and today it is a more positive way of life that is encouraged. They support themselves here on their farm—cheese making is a major occupation. They receive many gifts as well. There are 20 of the monks who give themselves entirely to the farm and the rest give perhaps two hours a day to the farm work. He has about 2 1/2 hours a day free to go to his hermitage where he can pray privately and write, but most of the brothers are so caught up in the machine of the monastery that they can do little but to serve it. They go to rest at 7, rise at 2 and have choir duty until 8 or 9 in the morning. They take a light breakfast at 6 or 7, the main meal at noon and a light refec-tion of bread and coffee and fruit at night.

I asked about direction for the spiritual life here at Gethsemane and he said that he and a young Father John of the Cross were each guiding a group of novices, he (TM) the choir novices and J of C the brother novices (who apparently would not go the way of the priesthood). He feels that they have several father confessors who have some

gifts of spiritual guidance in addition to being confessors but that the life here is so severely regulated that there is little room for anything very advanced being done. When the ordinary paths give out and you come to the pathless, then most give up and return to the machine. It was clear that there was no over-romanticising of the existing system as far as being a school of contemplative spirituality was concerned. We talked of the older Zen monasteries that were open once a month for a week and of how many from the wider community came and worshipped with them for that week. He said that they had facilities for this and that Damasus Winzen did this all the time at Mt. Saviour for men visitors taking them in to eat with the regularly professed monks and sharing the services with them.

We talked of Bede Griffiths and his experiment in Peermade in Southern India and he was so eager to hear of it. He deplored that we had gone in so rough shod to these older cultures who often had most precious treasures of spirituality to share with us and we treated them as if all that they had must be ground out before they could become proper Christians. He is deeply sympathetic with what Bede Griffiths is about and asked us to help him get back in touch with him saying that it was so long since he had heard from him although he had written.

We left with some of his articles which he had brought for us and with his begging us to come again and to bring several with us most informally and to stay at the guest house for a day or two for real visits. He also asked for some Quaker literature and I promised him John Woolman's *Journal* and the *Journal* of George Fox. He saw us out to the door of the monastery and sent his blessings with us.

Douglas V. Steere