

## With Love in the Lord: The Correspondence of Thomas Merton and Rosemary Radford Ruether

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### **Abstract**

Between August 1966 and February 1968, Thomas Merton, the seasoned contemplative monk and writer, and Rosemary Radford Ruether, a theologian beginning her career, exchanged a total of 40 letters. An analysis of these letters forms the basis for this article. The introductory exchange of letters between the correspondents included discussions of a variety of topics, from Christian humanism and the theology of Bonhoeffer, to contemporary crises in the institutional Catholic Church. In a January 1967 letter Merton asked for Ruether's help as a theologian he could trust with his concerns about the church and scripture. And yet, the topic that occupied them in their remaining correspondence was monastic vocation. Ruether profoundly distrusted monasticism because she believed that it was not an eschatological witness to the church, that monastic life should not be a permanent celibate commitment but a temporary one, and that contemplation without action was irresponsible. For Ruether the true locus of the Christian life was working for peace and justice in the city. Merton responded to Ruether's objections by honestly confronting her arguments based on his scholarly knowledge of monasticism and his lived experience as a monk. Only after his death did Ruether acknowledge that Merton had reconnected monasticism with its apocalyptic root.

**Keywords** monastic vocation, church, city-country dichotomy, charism and institution, powers and principalities

### **Introduction**

Thomas Merton was a well-recognized inveterate writer of articles, essays, poems, journals, and letters. Like his other writing many of his letters were finely crafted prose in which he often shared many of his personal thoughts about his life and the times in which he lived. It is my conjecture that, in part, he used letter writing to express immedi-

ate thoughts and feelings in ways that he could not do with his fellow monks in the semi-silent environment of the monastic community. In turn he also counted on his correspondents to receive news that was otherwise unattainable inside the monastic cloister and to obtain feedback about what he had written to them. Thus, it can be said that the letters stimulated and clarified his on-going monastic formation, particularly in relation to contemporary issues such as peace and social justice and his dynamic relationship with the world. Such is certainly true of his correspondence with Rosemary Radford Ruether.

Merton's correspondence with Rosemary Radford Ruether began on 18 August 1966 and lasted until 18 February 1968. They exchanged a total of 40 letters, 19 from Ruether to Merton individually and one form letter, and 18 from Merton specifically to Ruether, with two form letters included in his correspondence to her. This exchange of letters is the focus for this article.<sup>1</sup> In order to put the correspondence in context I will begin with a presentation of Rosemary Radford Ruether's background and follow it with Merton's life at the time of the correspondence. I will then proceed with a chronological analysis of the letters with emphasis on various topics in the correspondence including Catholicism in the late-1960s, the meaning of monastic life, and the particular challenges Merton faced concerning his place in the church and his monastic vocation. In each case I will chart the dynamic elements in their changing relationship.

### Biographical Notes

#### Rosemary Radford Ruether

Rosemary Radford's father was an 'Anglican, Republican, a Virginia gentleman'.<sup>2</sup> Her mother came from an English, Austrian Catholic background with roots in colonial America and whose family had pioneered California and Mexico. Her father, after being away during the Second World War and afterward Greece died suddenly in 1948. Rosemary, then 12, returned with her mother and sisters to La Jolla,

1. For the complete correspondence between Thomas Merton and Rosemary Radford Ruether, see *At Home in the World: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Rosemary Radford Ruether* (ed. Mary Tardiff, Afterword by Christine M. Bochen; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995). Merton's letters can also be found in *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns* (compiled and edited by William Shannon; New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985), pp. 497-516.

2. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Disputed Questions: On Being a Christian* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), p. 18.

California where she was surrounded by loving women who had a major influence on her later feminist thought and on feelings about herself as a woman in American society and the church.<sup>3</sup>

In 1954 she entered Scripps College in Claremont, California, an experience that she described as the beginning of a

dramatic intellectual awakening. One might almost speak of them as years of conversion, from being an object to being a subject of education, years of being galvanized into a process of continual, self-motivated search from enlarged understanding, not as a means of 'winning' something from others, but as a way of developing and locating myself, my own consciousness.<sup>4</sup>

At Scripps, under the tutelage of classics scholars Robert Palmer and Philip Merlan, a Platonist scholar, she studied a humanities curriculum consisting of history, philosophy, literature, art, music, religion, and social thought of various historical periods. At the same time her Christian faith was questioned by her non-Christian professors; being so challenged she discovered the existential nature of religion.<sup>5</sup> There, despite the challenges to her faith, she experienced not only an intellectual awakening but an on-going religious conversion as well. At Claremont Graduate School, complemented by her studies in the humanities, she studied scripture and patristics, and wrote her PhD thesis on the theology of Gregory of Naziansus, a fourth-century bishop of Constantinople.

At the beginning of her correspondence with Thomas Merton, Rosemary Radford Ruether was starting her professional career as a theologian, a professor of historical theology at Howard University, and a writer. She was also a wife and the mother of three children. With her family she lived in the inner city of Washington, DC, and was concerned with problems of social justice and racism, and with the challenges of building an authentic church community in a world of individualism.

She was also struggling with the questions of whether it was possible to be a Roman Catholic and a person of integrity. These for her were questions of truth that arose particularly in her study of biblical exegeses and her dialogue with the theologies of Luther, Calvin, the

3. Ruether, 'The Question of Feminism', in her *Disputed Questions: On Being a Christian*, pp. 112-13.

4. Ruether, 'The Question of Christian Credibility', in her *Disputed Questions: On Being a Christian*, p. 17.

5. Ruether, *Disputed Questions: On Being a Christian*, p. 28.

Anabaptists, Bultmann, Barth, Gabriel Vahanian, Alfred Loisy, and others.

In a 1989 publication, 'The Question of Feminism', she wrote of her theological methodology:

I would regard my own mode of thinking as dialectical. I see negation, not as an attack on someone else's person or community, but as a self-criticism of the distortions of one's own being and community. Criticism of these distortions opens up the way for a positive reconstruction of the healing and liberating word of the tradition and capacities of human life. This is the healing and liberating word that I have heard emerge from the Christian tradition, once freed of distorted consciousness. This is the healing and liberating word I would hope to communicate to others. But this healing and hope is available only through the cross of negation. This cross of negation means both theoretical struggle against false ideologies of oppression and practical struggle against its social consequences. Only through this struggle does one hear a healing word and glimpse an alternative future.<sup>6</sup>

The use of this dialectical methodology against false ideologies and dualisms will be reflected in some of the letters of Ruether to Merton, particularly those regarding the vocation of monasticism.

At the time of their correspondence, Ruether considered herself neither a Merton scholar nor fan. She had read some of his pre-Vatican II works, but expressed little to no acquaintance with his later writings.<sup>7</sup>

### **Thomas Merton**

At the time of their correspondence, Merton had been in the monastic community for almost 25 years and a full-time hermit for almost a year. In the 1960s he had written extensively about peace and social justice issues and continued to refine his thought about contemplation and the monastic life. In March of 1966 Merton, hospitalized for surgery on his back, began a short but intense relationship with the student nurse who took care of him. At the beginning of his correspondence to Ruether in August 1966 the relationship with the nurse had ended except for an infrequent call or letter, although Merton continued to struggle with the meaning and value of the relationship in his life. As such he was just coming out of a crisis of major proportions in which he again affirmed his commitment to the monastic vocation, although he was uncertain about how that commitment would be lived out.

6. Ruether, 'The Question of Feminism', pp. 141-42.

7. Ruether, in her introduction to *At Home in the World*, p. xiii.

## The Correspondence

### The Beginnings

Justus Lawler, an editor at Herder & Herder Publishing Company, passed on affirming remarks made to him in a letter from Thomas Merton about an article that Rosemary Ruether had published.<sup>8</sup> Justus Lawler sent the letter to Rosemary Ruether who wrote to Merton on 12 August 1966.<sup>9</sup> In this letter she offered to send Merton a personal carbon copy of the manuscript for her forthcoming book.<sup>10</sup> Merton replied to Ruether on 18 August warning her not to send her personal carbon of the manuscript as it could most likely get lost. He also said that he was pressured with other matters and would not have time to read the manuscript. He did send her an article he had recently completed for a Brazilian newspaper<sup>11</sup> and asked her to send him 'anything that you think would be good for me to read [for] I depend to a great extent on the light and love of my friends who keep me informed, notified, alerted, etc.'<sup>12</sup>

The next few letters were of the 'getting to know you' type. The salutations are still rather formal, Ruether referred to Merton as 'Dear Father Merton' or 'Dear Thomas Merton'; Merton used the more informal greeting of 'Dear Rosemary'. In these letters a number of issues were touched upon, although none in depth. Ruether responded to Merton's 'Christian Humanism' article about Renaissance Popes and Galileo and speculated what would have happened if the drama had unfolded 100 years earlier. Questions of theodicy were mentioned and Ruether recommended Bonhoeffer and his understanding of the relationship between narcissism and identity.<sup>13</sup> She then revealed that 'My own thought is increasingly informed by Bonhoeffer, and indeed the Lutheran form of theologizing generally strikes me as a more

8. Rosemary Ruether, 'Vahanian: The Worldly Church and the Churchy World', *Continuum* 4 (1966), pp. 50-62.

9. In a letter from Rosemary Ruether to Thomas Merton, 18 August 1966 (*At Home in the World*, pp. 3-4).

10. Rosemary Ruether, *The Church against Itself* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1967).

11. Thomas Merton, 'Christian Humanism', in his *Love and Living* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979).

12. In a letter from Thomas Merton to Rosemary Ruether, 18 August 1966 (*At Home in the World*, p. 4).

13. Rosemary Ruether, 'A Query to Daniel Sullivan: Bonhoeffer on Sexuality', *Continuum* 4 (August 1966), pp. 457-160.

mature Christianity than either the old triumphalism or the new optimism and naturalism of Catholicism'.<sup>14</sup> In fact, she continued:

The only accurate description of man, it seems to me, is the one Bonhoeffer developed: 'Man in the Middle' alienated from his beginning, glimpsing his end only in faith and hope, i.e., *theologia crucis*. It is against this stance which seems to me to define a position over against both old Catholic triumphalism and new Catholic liberalism, i.e., anti-liberal Christian radicalism.<sup>15</sup>

Ruether had also expressed her worry about a pressing issue regarding her friend Father William DuBay. The Cardinal Archbishop of Los Angeles had refused the request of diocesan priests and religious to be involved in the movement for Civil Rights. In response Fr DuBay had requested that the pope (Paul VI) remove the cardinal from his position. Rosemary Ruether urged him not to fight over the issue, fearing that he wanted to be 'the sacrificial lamb, hurling himself against the evil institution, testing its assumptions and the false justice of the courts'. 'Unfortunately', she continued, 'I don't see him in some calm center of spirituality which can stand above the storm'.<sup>16</sup>

Merton responded also by stating a liking for Bonhoeffer and informing her that he had responded to some of Bonhoeffer's thought in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, which he then sent her.<sup>17</sup> In a response he also affirmed Ruether's stance about sexuality:

The point you make about accepting the man-woman relation as a true acceptance of createdness is very necessary. That this is a relationship of limit and not of fusion. I think though there is also an ecstatic element in the Augustinian tradition on love that can be emphasized too. Ecstasy is not fusion but the perfection of giving, *caritas*. Fusion, narcissism are on the level of cupiditas. You bring this out well. There is a lot there and I am all for you. I think as you do that this naïve optimistic naturalism only trivializes sex and adds to the speed with which it becomes impossible for people to cope with.

14. In a letter from Rosemary Ruether to Thomas Merton, late-August/early-September 1966 (*At Home in the World*, p. 6).

15. In a letter from Rosemary Ruether to Thomas Merton, late-August/early-September 1966 (*At Home in the World*, p. 7). The reader should note that Ruether is not using inclusive language at this time.

16. In a letter from Rosemary Ruether to Thomas Merton, late-August/early-September 1966 (*At Home in the World*, p. 7). See also Rosemary Ruether, 'Crisis in Los Angeles', *Continuum* 2 (Winter 1965), pp. 652-62.

17. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: New Directions, Image Books, 1968).

He also responded to her worry about Fr William DuBay, as Ruether had requested. In his correspondence with DuBay, Merton had come to the impression '...that he is not going to listen to advice that does not go along the lines that he has decided to take, and these are heading on a collision course that at the best will result in his being a victim for everyone. Will it do any good?' Merton concluded that because of DuBay's lack of communication the case would not be resolved easily.<sup>18</sup>

Rosemary Ruether continued the correspondence with a letter on 10 October 1966 addressed to 'Dear Father Merton'. In this letter she stated 'I think your perspective is much like mine, although with a little more touch of melancholia where I tend to be angry, also with the agonizing I have done over modern exegesis which makes it so difficult to make the kind of statements about "what the church teaches" which still come easily to you'.<sup>19</sup> Following, in a discussion about teaching a church history course at George Washington University, she concluded:

I feel such a terrible build up of wrath over the church; it really makes me shudder to go near the inner Catholic world, so I hang out on the fringes, usually celebrate with Protestants, etc. I can't do the transformation bit—there is no presto change here, no changing of wrath into love—I love the church, but that doesn't do anything to alter the dimensions of this wrath, but rather intensifies it to the limit.<sup>20</sup>

Here is seen the first hint of a difference of thought regarding the church that will unfold in future correspondence.

Next, Merton corresponded to Ruether through a form letter sent also to many other correspondents. This letter is important for two reasons. First, in a discussion of Father Charles Davis, who left the Church in England over the issue of the abuse of authority, Merton responded that:

The present institutional structure of the church is certainly too antiquated, too baroque, and is often in practice unjust, inhuman, arbitrary, and even absurd in its functioning. It sometimes imposes useless and intolerable burdens on the human person and demands outrageous

18. In a letter from Thomas Merton to Rosemary Ruether, 21 September 1966 (*At Home in the World*, pp. 8-9). See also Merton's correspondence with Fr William DuBay in *The Hidden Ground of Love*, pp. 167-70.

19. In a letter to Thomas Merton from Rosemary Ruether, 10 October 1966 (*At Home in the World*, p. 8).

20. In a letter to Thomas Merton from Rosemary Ruether, 10 October 1966 (*At Home in the World*, p. 11).

sacrifices, often with no better result than to maintain a rigid system in its rigidity and to keep the same abuses established, one might think, until kingdom come. I certainly respect Fr. Davis's anguish—who of us does not sometimes share it? But I cannot follow him in his conclusion that the institutional Church has not reached the point where it can hardly be anything other than dishonest, tyrannical, mendacious, and inhuman. He feels he has a moral obligation to leave the Church, and he offers this theological justification for his decision.<sup>21</sup>

Merton continued with a discussion of Pascal who recognized and analyzed his own inner demon of combativeness. The point, he concluded, was the importance of finding when it was no longer necessary to prove that one is right, but instead 'simply to live, to surrender to God and love'.<sup>22</sup>

Like Ruether, Merton found himself often at odds with the church. On the other hand Merton, while admitting the negatives of the institutional church, believed that the absurdities encountered in the church were balanced by the grace, love, and infinite mercy of Christ in his Church.<sup>23</sup> This approach was also apparent in an earlier distinction that he made between the Church as institution and the Church as the Body of Christ. Although Merton did not bring this distinction to light in his letters to Ruether, I believe that a more detailed understanding of Merton's view of the church will be helpful in this analysis.

The Vatican II shift from an emphasis on the church as a hierarchical society and institution, to the church as the Mystical Body of Christ and the People of God, was welcomed by Merton. This change of emphasis, however, did not deter Merton's appreciation for the fact that all institutions, even the church, were subject to problems and challenges. It was important, he believed, that these not be glossed over or ignored but be faced, not from a position of superiority or pride, but with an honesty and humility that one's response did not necessarily represent an ability to solve or even to understand the complex nature of some problems. In fact, he continued, such an encounter and response can have a role to play in the purification of one's faith, obedience, and love for the church. This response places Christians in a position whereby they are challenged to acknowledge not only the

21. In a form letter from Thomas Merton, 22 January 1967 (*At Home in the World*, p. 12).

22. In a form letter from Thomas Merton, 22 January 1967 (*At Home in the World*, p. 13).

23. In a form letter from Thomas Merton, 22 January 1967 (*At Home in the World*, p. 14).



deficiencies in the institutional church and in other persons, but also in themselves. This is the challenge and sacrifice demanded of adult Christians even when their efforts might appear to be wasted.<sup>24</sup> After all, Merton recognized that he too had exhibited some of the behaviors of those in positions of authority in the church. 'Am I not arrogant too? Am I not unreasonable, unfair, demanding, suspicious, and often quite arbitrary in my dealings with others?' And, he continued,

The point is not just 'who is right?' but 'judge not' and 'forgive one another' and 'bear one another's burden.' This by no means implies passive obsequiousness and blind obedience, but a willingness to listen, to be patient, and to keep working to help the Church change and renew herself from within. This is our task. Therefore, by God's grace I remain a Catholic, a monk and a hermit. I have made commitments which are unconditional and cannot be taken back. I do not regard this position as especially courageous: it is just the ordinary stuff of life, the acceptance of limits which we must all accept in one way or another: the acceptance of a sphere in which one is called to love, trust, and pray — and meet those whom one is destined to meet.<sup>25</sup>

Again Merton emphasized the important significance of facing reality by turning inward to the presence of God as the source and head of the Mystical Body. Although he encouraged Christians to be attentive to the exterior guidance of the church, he also directed them to a life of interiority in relationship with God, through Christ, in the loving grace of the Holy Spirit. He counseled, '...life cannot be reduced to mere exterior conformity to patterns and norms of a given social group, no matter how Christian may be its intentions. Each Christian must work out his own situation as a member of Christ, and work it out in union with others.' Such a cooperative effort, he believed, was essential if the whole society was to be redeemed by love.<sup>26</sup>

### **A Turning Point in the Relationship**

It is in the letter of 29 January 1967 that a more personal tone in the communication between Merton and Ruether began to be expressed. As Merton stated he had been thinking of this letter for a time in light of the discussion published on women intellectuals and the Church in

24. Thomas Merton, *Life and Holiness* (New York: Herder & Herder 1962), pp. 48-49.

25. In a form letter from Thomas Merton, 22 January 1967 (*At Home in the World*, p. 14).

26. Thomas Merton, 'Christianity and Totalitarianism', in *Disputed Questions* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1960; Noonday Press, 1973), pp. 140-41.

*Commonweal*.<sup>27</sup> From the tone and content of the article Merton moved to a deeper level of trust with Rosemary Ruether as he stated:

The whole question is terribly important [the woman intellectual in the Church], but I don't know where to begin on that so I'll keep quiet. Yet in a way the letter has oblique reference to the question because it happens that you, a woman, are for some reason a theologian I trust. Almost the only one. And I do think I need the help of a theologian. Do you think you could help me once in a while? I do not intend to be very demanding on your time, but I would like to feel that I can resort to you for suggestions and advice. Not so much for my work, as just to help me think. I have no great project in mind. I just need help in two areas where I have been avoiding a confrontation: the Bible and the Church.<sup>28</sup>

Merton identified that his problem was not with leaving the Church or a challenge from authority, but with other Catholics. As he bluntly stated it, 'I am simply browned off with and of Catholics'. And, in his sometimes hyperbolic way of presenting his opinion he included, 'All Catholics, from Ottaviani to DuBay, all down the damn line. There are few Catholics I can understand with equanimity when I forget they are Catholics and remember that they are just my friends...' These and similar comments were followed by a number of questions posed to Ruether: '...where is the Church, and where am I in the Church?... Is the Church a community of people who love each other or a big dog fight where you do your religious business, seeking, meanwhile, your friends somewhere else?'<sup>29</sup> As to the question of the Bible, Merton asked Ruether to recommend sources so that he could expand his knowledge of biblical scholarship.

Ruether also responded to Merton's letter in a more personal tone:

I was profoundly moved by your last letter. I have had a feeling in reading your words previously that you were holding back: that though you were treating profound ideas, you were doing it with the surface of your

27. The article to which Merton referred was 'The Woman Intellectual and the Church', *Commonweal* 85 (27 January 1967), pp. 446-58. This article was a symposium taped at the *Commonweal* offices and included Nancy Rambusch, Mary Daly, Rosemary Ruether and Sr Mary Aloysius, SSJ. Merton did demonstrate a knowledge of feminist thought in conferences he gave to women religious in December 1967 and May 1968 published in *The Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani* (ed. Jane Marie Richardson; New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1992).

28. In a letter from Thomas Merton to Rosemary Ruether, 29 January 1967 (*At Home in the World*, p. 16).

29. In a letter to Thomas Merton from Rosemary Ruether, 29 January 1967 (*At Home in the World*, pp. 18-19).

being. In this letter I felt some swirl of deeper waters that I sensed were being held back, but I didn't expect to see them surface. I thought that the 'Catholic' structure would keep them under.<sup>30</sup>

In brief, Ruether attended to Merton's questions about the Church with a distinction of her own that was at odds with traditional Catholic doctrine concerning ecclesiology. The institutional structure of the Church, she believed, was founded not by Christ, but by history, and the true church was the presence of the reality of God's ever-present salvation of his good creation that happens within the historical structure of the Church. Then, on a penetratingly personal level, she also challenged Merton with a probing question about whether he wanted to be a Christian—a 'creational, incarnate flesh and blood man', or the alternative—'an abstraction, zen mystic?'<sup>31</sup>

As to the biblical question, Ruether stated that the difficulties of biblical scholarship resulted from a misunderstanding of the Incarnation and recommended a book for him to read.

The crux of the letter was, however, a profound challenge from Rosemary Ruether to Merton regarding his monastic vocation. Ruether's objections to monasticism were threefold. Her first objection was based on her evaluation that the monastic life was no longer an eschatological witness to the church. That eschatological view, she believed, had shifted from the monastic desert and countryside to the city where the real demons were to be fought and defeated in the inner recesses of the ghetto. Her second objection was based on an evaluation that monasticism had erred in defining itself as a celibate way of life that demanded a lifetime commitment. Monasticism, she believed, should be a commitment for only a portion of one's life to be used as resource for those who needed a short-term place of respite. A third objection involved Ruether's distrust of contemplation without action that she defined as a failure to meet one's civil responsibilities.<sup>32</sup> Using a Platonic image she wrote, 'One needs to return to the cave to help those

30. In a letter from Thomas Merton to Rosemary Ruether, 29 January 1967 (*At Home in the World*, pp. 19-20).

31. In a letter from Thomas Merton to Rosemary Ruether, 29 January 1967 (*At Home in the World*, p. 20)

32. In *Disputed Questions: On Being A Christian*, p. 40, Ruether identified Robert Palmer, her teacher at Scripps College, as critical of Christianity as deserters of civic responsibility. In a journal entry Merton stated, 'In her letter Rosemary challenges my solitude, but not understanding it, I think. She is very Barthian—which is why I trust her. There is a fundamental Christian honesty about her theology...' See Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love* (ed. Christine Bochen; Journals, VI, 1966-67; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p. 195.

imprisoned therein, else one's contemplation remains sterile; indeed I wonder if one can even contemplate out of relation of touch, sight, smell, verbal feel of one another. The face of God is revealed in the face of our brother.' So disposed, she suggested to Merton, 'I think you will have to find some new way of having Word and church happening *for you*. Perhaps you have gone as far as you can in the hermitage direction; you are running out of fat from previous community contact, and need renewal in a period of service.'<sup>33</sup>

Merton's response to Ruether's conclusions about monasticism and to the directness of her questions elicited his thanks for a good letter and a clarification about his vocation. In his answer he informed her about the problems he had experienced with institutional monasticism and its leadership and provided her with his own experience of his monastic hermit life on the margin of the institution.

I am in a position where I am practically laicized and de-institutionalized and living like all the other old bats who live alone in the hills in this part of the country, and I feel like a human being again. My hermit life is expressly a *lay* life. I never wear the habit except when at the monastery, and I try to be as much on my own as I can and like the people around in the country. Also, I try as best I can to keep up valid and living contacts with my friends who are in the thick of things, and everyone knows where my real 'community' is. I honestly believe that this is the right place for me (woods, not Gethsemani) in so far as it is the right battleground... In staying here I am not just being here for myself but for my friends, my Church, and all those I am one with.

He then shared his fears that life in the city for him would be less honest in which it would be more difficult to be faithful and dependent on God and he would be more open to the possibility of role-playing and his own ability to talk.

Merton closed the letter with a postscript with words of appreciation for their conversation and the perception that in different ways they were working for the same things. He expressed the hope that their exchange could be fruitful for monastic renewal. He also shared his perception that the current problem of his monastic vocation was based on the fact that because of his commitment to monastic solitude he was forbidden by the Abbot from attending any conferences.<sup>34</sup>

Rosemary Ruether must have been worried about Merton's response to her interpretation of the monastic life in general and her challenge

33. In a letter from Rosemary Ruether to Thomas Merton, February 1967 (*At Home in the World*, p. 20).

34. In a letter from Thomas Merton to Rosemary Ruether, 14 February 1967 (*At Home in the World*, pp. 21-25).

to his monastic vocation in particular. She opened her next letter to him, dated Mid-February 1967, with relief about his 'sane' response and a series of admissions that had influenced the manner and content of her correspondence with him. First, she explained,

I tend to write missives without realizing it and then afterwards really worry if the poor guy has been trampled to death. I didn't know if there was some big thing that you were hiding from yourself and that maybe I had kicked it open in some way that would just undercut and not save, but I should have had more faith in your self-knowledge.

Then, she admitted her fear of the woods and contemplation and her tendency to 'get all caught up in a rising ecstasy of communing with God and then discover I have been communing with nothing but myself. This drives me back to the absolute necessity for prophetic community which can really strip us open and be the place of revelation...' A third admission involved her lack of trust for academic theology that is not grounded in human experience.<sup>35</sup>

There was another factor that most likely influenced Ruether's interpretation of monasticism. In the letter of February 1967, when she told Merton that he should be having trouble with his monastic vocation, she had revealed that she was a Third Order Benedictine.<sup>36</sup> But in the Introduction of *At Home in the World*, she stated her personal experience of monasticism in more negative terms:

I had had a brief and superficial interest in monastic life through my relation with the Benedictine priory of St. Andrew's in Valyermo, California, in the early 1960's. At the time when these letters [to Merton] were written I had become disillusioned with what such monastic community could offer me as a laywoman, especially because of the rather brutal treatment of Father Vincent Martin, O.S.B. who had been the director of oblates at Valyermo.<sup>37</sup>

### **The Trust is Tested**

Ruether began her next letter to Thomas Merton, dated early March 1967, with comments about his paper on monastic renewal that he had sent previously. 'What can I say', she wrote, 'about your paper on monastic renewal?? Let us just admit at the outset that I am radically out of sympathy with the monastic project, not merely in its fallen

35. In a letter from Thomas Merton to Rosemary Ruether, mid-February 1967 (*At Home in the World*, p. 25).

36. In a letter from Rosemary Ruether to Thomas Merton, February 1967 (*At Home in the World*, p. 20).

37. Ruether, in her Introduction to *At Home in the World*, pp. xiii-xiv.

state, but also in its original and most intrinsic self-understanding.'

She explained her divergence with monasticism in terms of the meaning of salvation that she defined as a defeat of the world and a coming of the kingdom of God. Monasticism, she claimed, has always misunderstood the gospel because salvation, as she wrote, 'is precisely salvation *of* and not *from* the world', whereas monasticism 'is rooted in a view of the gospel that makes salvation a salvation *from* the world and not salvation *of* the world'. She continued her argument with a further distinction between the world and creation. 'The point is that creation is very good, and God intended it to be our home and our *only* home. "The world" is not creation, but the sphere of the powers and principalities.' This, however was distorted by monasticism that confuses creation with world. 'All monasticism rests on a mistaken confusion of creation with this world, and so they [monks] suppose by withdrawing in some symbolic fashion from creation that they are leaving the world. But creation is precisely not the world but its antitheses, and so what they do is essentially the opposite of salvation.'

Moving from general statements about monasticism, Ruether then changed her theoretical argument to a personal one when she asked Merton, 'Isn't it evident to you that everything you were saying about the bureaucracy and dehumanization of the monastic institution is precisely the very essence of "this world," the purest expression of the powers and the principalities? You have not withdrawn from this world into heaven, you have withdrawn from creation into hell!' <sup>38</sup>

Authentic monastic renewal for Ruether meant a radical change of envisioning and living the monastic life. In order for Christians to fight the powers and principalities of this world, particularly in the city, and to renew God's good creation, monasticism would provide places of temporary withdrawal for solitude and contemplation in order for Christians to return to real action grounded in the historical realm. Thus monasticism would be not an end in itself, but a ministry for the whole church.

Perhaps surprisingly, Merton responded positively to Ruether's scholarly interpretation of the monastic tradition, although he did not agree with all of it. 'Glad you set forth the toughest arguments against monasticism, as they are the ones that have to be faced today.' And yet he proceeded to add, '...in your absolutist version I don't recognize monasticism in a form that any monk in his right mind today

38. In a letter from Rosemary Ruether to Thomas Merton, early-March 1967 (*At Home in the World*, pp. 28-29).

would accept. Historically that view has existed however. Is it the original one? I rather doubt it.' At the same time they both agreed about the need to be freed from the pride of the powers and principalities that dominate human persons individually and collectively, and the necessity of clarifying notions of the 'world' that enslave rather than liberate.<sup>39</sup>

It was Rosemary Ruether who reacted strongly to Merton's letter of 4 March 1966. 'I couldn't read all of your letter, but a certain state of shock came through to me from it. I hope that what seems a polemic will be seen through by you, and you will, in an unthreatened way, see the systematic exposition that lies behind it, a position which coheres with everything else I have written and which presumably you have liked.' This systematic exposition was based on what Ruether named the logic of an asceticism in which one is saved from the world through a diminishment of all that is created. This movement and alienation from creation and history is expressed by the principle of eschatological alienation. The solution for monasticism, according to Ruether, was an integration of a prophetic iconoclastic dimension into monasticism and taking of a new place in a new church, the eschatological community over against the world. Thus could the church and monasticism be a force to recreate the world in history and play their proper roles freed from barriers of institutionalism.<sup>40</sup>

Merton responded with dismay and replied to Ruether's negative evaluation of monasticism in two major ways. The first was to distinguish from what he called her abstract and arbitrary understanding of monasticism from the existential, concrete experience of monasticism that he lived. He expressed that difference with an illustration of his life in the hermitage as being close to creation, as living in the rhythms of the 'sun, moon and seasons', in his conservation efforts in the forest, and in the transformative and restorative power of authentic asceticism. Thus, he wrote, 'In a word, to my mind, the monk is one of those who not only saves the world in a theological sense, but saves it literally, protecting it against the destructiveness of the rampaging city of greed, war, etc.' 'And', he explained, 'this loving care for natural creatures, becomes, in some sense, a warrant of his theological mission and ministry of a man of contemplation'. Thus he tied together

39. In a letter from Thomas Merton to Rosemary Ruether, 4 March 1967 (*At Home in the World* p. 31). This was an abbreviated handwritten letter; due to surgery Merton was unable to type.

40. In a letter from Rosemary Ruether to Thomas Merton, 4 March 1967 (*At Home in the World*, pp. 31-33). For a full exposition of Ruether's ecclesiology see *The Church against Itself*.

the paradise tradition or the recreation of right relations with all of creation with his contemplative vocation and ministry.<sup>41</sup>

Merton's second point in addressing Ruether's view of monasticism as anti-creation, involved a presentation about two topics: an evaluation of traditional texts, and the importance of addressing questions of the literary form of the texts. Merton believed that although there were texts that tended to be very negative and Gnostic regarding creation, these were balanced by other texts such as the classic, *The Life of Anthony*, in which Athanasius presented the goodness of all creation.<sup>42</sup>

Merton also cautioned Ruether to consider the literary genre of the traditional texts in which extreme statements and ideas of one story were balanced by other stories that pushed an opposite view to its extreme. This, he noted, would 'show that you are much too sweeping when you say that monasticism is simply a repudiation of the world in the sense of God's good creation. On the contrary, it is a repudiation—more often—of the world in the sense of a decadent, imperial society that is basically idolatrous.' And, although monks themselves got involved in that society, there were other monks that strove to reform that involvement, for example the lay hermit preachers of the eleventh century.<sup>43</sup>

Merton then turned to an area about how he believed that monasticism had indeed 'lost its soul'. This deformation of monasticism, he wrote, was found particularly in a commitment to an 'iron-bound institutionalism built on a perverse doctrine of authority-humility-obedience'. In this pattern the monk was prevented from having any contact outside the monastic enclosure. In addition, if caught in 'a Jansenistic repudiation of all pleasure', there, Merton exclaimed, 'you do get a real monastic hell: I don't deny it at all, I have lived in one. But again, the answer is to start out with saving the poor blighters that are caught in such a mess and to save the beautiful life that has been turned into a hell for them when it should be what it was first intended to be.'<sup>44</sup>

41. In a letter from Thomas Merton to Rosemary Ruether, 9 March 1967 (*At Home in the World*, pp. 33-34).

42. In a letter from Thomas Merton to Rosemary Ruether, 9 March 1967 (*At Home in the World*, p. 36). See also Athanasius, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980).

43. In a letter from Thomas Merton to Rosemary Ruether, 9 March 1967 (*At Home in the World*, p. 37).

44. In a letter from Thomas Merton to Rosemary Ruether, 9 March 1967 (*At Home in the World*, pp. 37-38).



Again Ruether disagreed with Merton's evaluation of the balance of the monastic sources. She continued to maintain that whatever authentic eschatological commitment to re-creation was present in the monastic tradition, it was smothered by the Gnostic position of creational eschatological alienation. Even the Cappadocians, she maintained, were hostile to the *politike arête* [political virtue] a tendency that she interestingly also claimed for Merton. One must ask if at this point she knew about any of his substantial peace and social justice writings.

The conversation now turned to the topic of the rejection of the powers and principalities, associated not with God's good creation or with historical activity and civilization. These, in fact, are precisely the arena of redemption. Thus, for Ruether, the mixing of the Paradise tradition with 'agrarian romanticism' in the monastic tradition failed to comprehend the seriousness of the powers and principalities in the world, and the obligation to fight them where they are the most ferocious, in the city. She concluded with a summary of her position:

...I think a theology of opposition to the principalities and powers and a bringing of paradise out of the wilderness is a theology on which we can both adhere, but I think we do disagree on what this means—first of all, the principalities and powers are not somebody or something else but we ourselves; it is we ourselves, that we must struggle against, and secondly, we do not bring paradise out of the wilderness by taking off to the hills, but by struggling with the principalities and powers where they really are, and it is only in this way that paradise is brought out of the wilderness, the real and not the figurative wilderness.<sup>45</sup>

Merton's response to Ruether took on a personal tone. He proclaimed a lack of personal hostility to *political arête*, and referred to his participation in the political life as it made sense from within the monastery. Next, he contended that her city-country dichotomy no longer made sense in the modern world and defended his reforestation project as meaningful. Lastly he made an observation about her from the tone and content of her communications, '...I wonder if you realize that you (at least from your letters) are a very academic, cerebral, abstract type. You talk about God's good creation, the goodness of the body, and all that, but I wonder if you have any realization at all of the fact that by working on the land a person is deeply and sensually involved with matter.' He also attempted to put the traditional anti-creation thought of some early monks in context, first with

45. In a letter from Rosemary Ruether to Thomas Merton, 19 March 1967 (*At Home in the World*, pp. 40-41).

a note of his personal experience and secondly with an observation from the tradition.

First, he declared, '...I would say that my life of the cultivation and expansion of the senses, and sensual awareness of things and people, and sensual response, are probably a whole lot more important than they are in yours'. 'That is why', he proceeded,

I don't take very seriously your academic dismissal of my statements on the grounds of something some fool monk said in the fifth century when, in any case, everyone was saying the same things because their senses were so strong and their passions so powerful that one could be afraid of them. It is easier to talk about the body and all that when one is insulated from technology by the direct impact of nature.

He also responded to Ruether's city-country dualism. 'In actual fact', he asked her, 'is there anything you can do in the city, more effectively than I can do in the country, to stop the war in Vietnam? Except perhaps march with a sign in front of the White House (which is something I too ought to be allowed to do). But in reality are we not reduced to pretty much the same gestures, with pretty much the same hope of achieving anything?' In any case, he concluded, 'My negative ideas about political life today are trying precisely to say that political action is too often rendered futile by the massive corruption and dishonesty and fakery which neutralize it everywhere'.<sup>46</sup>

Merton continued this letter with a reiteration of two positions—he stressed political responsibility in history where the powers and principalities are confronted and he called for the need to confront the danger of a false spirituality punctuated by a 'false and demonic parody of creation and incarnation and redemption, a demonic parody of the Kingdom', that is associated with a naïve optimism about technology.

He continued an awareness that although the demons of the country were perhaps small-time—a surprisingly deferential statement—when compared with the demons of the city, it was the duty of the monk to confront them wherever he was. Then in a personal statement concerning a change of his existential situation he admitted, 'I am personally aware that if I merely threw in the sponge down here and went out to engage in something ostensibly more effective, it would be a real betrayal, not of abstract obligations, but of the Kingdom in which the monastic life, however marginal, retains its importance'.<sup>47</sup>

46. In a letter from Thomas Merton to Rosemary Ruether, 19 March 1967 (*At Home in the World*, pp. 42-44).

47. In a letter from Thomas Merton to Rosemary Ruether, 19 March 1967 (*At Home in the World*, pp. 44-45).

At the end of the letter he concluded with a postscript because he feared that despite his intention he had been 'a little insolent'. He reinforced his concerns and named them as human and universal. He characterized his hermit life as one meant that he was

being nothing but man, or nothing but a mere man reduced to his simple condition as man, that is to say as a non-monk even, a non-layman, a non-categorized man: not as an ideal status or a condition of 'striving for 'spiritual perfection,' but a reduction to the bare condition of man as a starting point where everything has to begin: incomplete and insufficient in the sense of being outside social cadres. But then, entering into these in a free and tentative way, in an exploratory way, to establish new and simple relationships.<sup>48</sup>

Ruether's reply to Merton's latest response in which he attempted to clarify his position regarding monasticism led to an accusation that he was being 'bloody defensive and on edge'. She also accused him of not appreciating the balance that she had tried to establish and of not understanding that she was striving to overcome false dualisms and ideologies. In general she believed that he was missing the point that she had been trying to make. She then challenged him: '...but if you come off your high horse a minute and listen to me, it should be simple common sense that the city is the important place to be hooked into for recreating the world, because it is where the center of power is and, thus, where the center of "powers" is to be encountered and grappled'. Therefore, she contended, the country was less in touch with the powers to be encountered in the city, was sometimes arrested in a nostalgic return to the past, and was living in a false simplicity and security pretending that technology did not exist.<sup>49</sup>

Ruether reassured Merton that she was not 'attacking him'; and that he should not 'get excited', and wrote of her impression that he was in a personal crisis which, if not dealt with, would be harmful to his development. The answer, she offered, was that he should get to another place and make some new contacts, that, in short, he needed a change.<sup>50</sup>

Again, Merton responded with gratitude and graciousness to Rosemary Ruether's profound challenges. He reinforced the fact that he trusted her and again asked that she be his confessor. He admitted

48. In a letter from Thomas Merton to Rosemary Ruether, 19 March 1967 (*At Home in the World*, p. 46).

49. In a letter from Rosemary Ruether to Thomas Merton, c. 21 March 1967 (*At Home in the World*, p. 47).

50. In a letter from Rosemary Ruether to Thomas Merton, c. 21 March 1967 (*At Home in the World*, p. 48).

that he was indeed in crisis and explained the nature of what he called 'my insults' and my 'misinterpretation'.

First: I recognized in you someone I could really, I thought, talk to at last. Second: I felt that you were putting me, as a monk, in a category of people to whom you refused to talk. Image: she is saying she won't recognize me as a human being until I leave the monastery. Problem: unrecognized assumption of my own that I have to get out of here. Below that: recognition that life here is to some extent (not entirely) a lie and that I can no longer just say the community lies and I don't. With that: sense of being totally unable to do anything about it that is not bottom ...I think this should clear things up a bit. I am not mad at you for being an 'intellectual woman,' but in only for seeming to reject me. I don't take sweetly to rejection, I tell you. I need and value your friendship, and I will also, on my part, be more or less grown up about it and try to give you what I can in my turn, once I know what you want. And now I think I do. (Before, I got the impression that you didn't want anything from me except that I shut up and admit you were right about something or other).<sup>51</sup>

### **The Tension Between Charism and Institution**

In a follow-up letter of early April 1967, Ruether acknowledged the tension in of working out a viable relationship between commitment to an institution, however deadly, and the need for life-giving charismatic community. In fact Merton had addressed such a tension in institutional life and the need for a charismatic community, not in this correspondence, but in other writings that I will now explore.

When a person responds to a call from God to break with secular society in order to become a monk, Merton noted, he does not automatically shed worldly ideologies often exemplified by the world or the church. Freedom from these ideologies is an indication of mature human personhood and a gift of the dynamic process of conversion. Paradoxically, however, the monk may find that the return to God, and the emergence of the true self in purity of heart, may be thwarted by ideologies present in the monastery. This paradox is worked out in the tension between the monastic charism and certain monastic structures and monastic institutionalism

The charism of the monastic vocation was characterized by Merton with words such as desire, thirst, celebration, creativity, immersion, spontaneity and freedom, as well as anguish, suffering and detachment, poverty and emptiness. The monk responds to a call of the Holy

51. In a letter of Rosemary Ruether to Thomas Merton, early-April 1967 (*At Home in the World*, pp. 51-52).

Spirit to give up one kind of freedom in the world, with its securities, comforts and diversions, and its structures and institutions, for another kind of freedom marginal to these structures and institutions. This new freedom is for the sake of a return to the Father. The way, of course, is not without its perils. The monk faces unknown hazards in which he must learn to give up a dependency on all that is not God. It is for the sake of this liberation that the monk leaves the world and when this liberation is received as gift, returns to the world to proclaim its reality.

The gift of a call to the monastic vocation and response to its charism is made within the monastic institution and its structures. The structures and the institution are meant to serve the charism and the gift of liberation so that the monk may be free to be receptive to the transforming and unitive relationship with God, through Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. As Merton wrote:

The purpose of monastic detachment—which demands genuine sacrifice—is simply to leave the monk unencumbered, free to move, in possession of his spiritual senses and of his right mind, capable of living a charismatic life of freedom of spirit. To love, one must be free, and while the apostolic life implies one mode of freedom in the world, the monastic life has its own freedom which is that of the wilderness. The two are not mutually exclusive. They are complementary and, on the highest level, they turn out to be one and the same: union with God in the mystery of total love, in the oneness of His Spirit.<sup>52</sup>

Despite the charism to monastic life there was often tension with the establishment and maintenance of an institutional life that failed to provide the disorienting and barren challenge to the desert or wilderness of solitude. With this mind-set, a monk was defined as good in so far as he obeyed the rules and purified his intentions that ended up in playing a monastic role. In the last analysis, Merton judged, such mediocre role-playing was contrary to openness to the love of the Holy Spirit and represented a lack of acceptance in participating in the paschal mystery present in the duties and responsibilities of ordinary living.<sup>53</sup>

Another of the temptations of the monastic life is the attempt to justify it in terms of some measurable result or positive contribution to the church, the world, and to monasticism, rather than to accept the

52. Thomas Merton, 'Problems and Prospects', in his *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday/Image Books, 1973), p. 44.

53. Thomas Merton, 'Does the Monk Have a Specific Task in the World?', in his *Contemplation in a World of Action*, pp. 242-43.

life as its own justification. In this aberration of consciousness the monastic institution becomes defined as a 'factory of prayer' or the emphasis is placed on its usefulness through the industries it supports. Again, as Merton explained to Ruether, this illusory notion of the vow obedience supports a monastic institutionalism in which

one is committed for life to a massively organized, rigidly formalistic institutional existence. Here everything is decided for him beforehand. Everything is provided by rule and system. Initiative is not only discouraged, it becomes useless. Questions cease to have any point, for you already know the answers by heart in advance. But the trouble is that they are not answers, since they imply a firm decision to ignore your questions. Obedience then no longer consists in dedicating one's will and love to the service of God, but almost the renunciation of all human rights, needs and feelings in order to conform to the rigid demands of an institution. The institution is identified with God, and becomes an end in itself.<sup>54</sup>

The problem, if the charism becomes distorted and channeled by institutionalism, is that the monastic life and relationships become artificial and the monk is less able to respond to the prompting of the Holy Spirit. It also becomes more difficult to question the institutionalism and to stress the need to return to a charismatic foundation. Indeed, the monk is also less likely to witness to the presence of God in the world or have an alternative spiritual perspective to offer to others.

Merton lived in the tension between charism and institution as a monk and a hermit. Ruether lived with this tension by worshipping and serving at an ecumenical Episcopal faith community; Merton chose to remain in the monastic community, and integral to it, even as a hermit. He chose to live on the margins of the monastic institution, while striving to remain committed to his monastic vows in a life-giving way, and to remain faithful to his friends and readers outside the cloister. He wrote to Ruether on 9 April 1967. 'I don't think I am rationalizing or evading when I say I think I owe it to you to pursue my own way and stand on my own in this sort of marginal and lost position I have. I am sometimes terribly hit by its meaning which is something I just cannot explain, because it is something you are not supposed to explain and must get along without explaining.'<sup>55</sup>

After Merton's admission of his 'insolence' the correspondence with Rosemary Ruether gradually became less intense and the time between letters lengthened. They shared their activities and hopes for the future,

54. Merton, *Problems and Prospects*, pp. 34-35.

55. In a letter from Thomas Merton to Rosemary Ruether, 9 April 1967 (*At Home in the World*, p. 62).

although plans for a formal dialogue and a visit from Ruether and her family never materialized. Ruether helped Merton with the details of an exhibition of his drawings in Washington, DC, and he persuaded Abbot James Fox to contribute money to a family that she was assisting. Their last letters were exchanged in January to February, 1968.

### Assessment of the Correspondence

From the perspective of more than 30 years it is impossible to predict how Thomas Merton would assess his correspondence with Rosemary Ruether. However, we do have evidence of her evaluation of their exchange.

One of the points that Ruether made quite strongly about monasticism, both in its conception and its unfolding, was the error of confusing the world of powers and principalities and God's good creation and subsequently of equating salvation in terms of salvation from the world instead of salvation of the world. Again she went so far as to say to Merton that, 'You have not withdrawn from this world into heaven, you have withdrawn from creation into hell!'<sup>56</sup> Yet in an article in 1973 Ruether had revised her view. 'In the monastic spirituality of Thomas Merton, traditional Christian rejection of "this world" took on new and concrete meaning, not as a struggle against flesh and blood, but as a struggle against the powers and principalities of the great empires, with America as their most recent representative. Here monastic spirituality was reconnected with its apocalyptic root.'<sup>57</sup> One can only speculate whether this revision also influenced Ruether's understanding of the city-country dichotomy. If indeed, the powers and principalities of the world are to be found first of all by looking inward, as stated both by Ruether and by Merton, would not one's geographical location, whether in country or city, be much less critical for the struggle?<sup>58</sup> In this way a false dualism of city over country is also avoided and they become interdependent and unified.

Thomas Merton looked to Rosemary Ruether as a theologian and a confessor as she looked to him as she wrote 'as a genuine Catholic intellectual peer, one who would treat me as a peer, and with whom I

56. In a letter from Rosemary Ruether to Thomas Merton, early-March 1967 (*At Home in the World*, p. 29).

57. Rosemary Ruether, 'Monks and Marxists: A Look at the Catholic Left', *Christianity and Crisis* 74 (30 April 1973), pp. 75-79.

58. In a letter from Rosemary Ruether to Thomas Merton, mid-March 1967 (*At Home in the World*, p. 41). See also Thomas Merton, 'Contemplation in a World of Action', in his *Contemplation in a World of Action*, pp. 172-79.

could be ruthlessly honest about my own questions of intellectual and existential integrity'.<sup>59</sup> Others had failed in this test. How did Merton measure up to Ruether's sometimes ruthless questioning?

First of all, it seems, that despite the intense nature of the correspondence that the correspondents were at different places in their lives and had different questions and concerns. Merton was coming out of a relational crisis and was questioning his faithfulness to solitude, his relationship to his abbot, his theological problems about the church, Catholics and the Bible, and working out questions about monastic renewal. At the same time he was committed to his monastic vocation and to the Catholic Church. Ruether was interested in questions of truth about the Catholic Church particularly in areas of ecclesiology and eschatology. Both as a historical theologian and a woman she envisioned a new way of being church, which challenged traditional doctrine. She worshipped and found her church home outside of the Roman Catholic Church. At the same time she was boldly out of sympathy with monasticism. On the surface it seems that these two persons would have little to talk about.

Second, it has to be asked how a world-famous middle-age male monk and writer would relate to a young female theologian in the late-1960s before the dawn of the American feminist movement? Ruether had found others to be condescending and even dismissive of her questions. Yet, as she related:

...Merton from the beginning addressed me as an equal. This did not surprise me at the time, since I saw myself as an equal, but it is more impressive in retrospect. Occasionally he assumed the stance of subordinate, asking me to be his teacher or even confessor. But never did he take the paternalistic stance as the father addressing the child, which is more typical of the cleric, especially in relation to women. Mostly, in these letters, we dialogue and even scrap with each other as intellectual siblings.<sup>60</sup>

Merton not only treated Rosemary Ruether as an intellectual peer but he also trusted her. This almost unearned trust, fairly early in their correspondence, continued even in an atmosphere of aggressive questions and challenges about the theoretical basis of monasticism as well as the existential circumstances of his life and vocation. Although at times he became defensive and strove to justify his vocation, he was also brutally honest about his life and about the difficulties he had experienced as a monk. Never did he try to idealize or dismiss the

59. Ruether, in her Introduction to *At Home in the World*, p. 41.

60. Ruether, in her Introduction to *At Home in the World*, pp. xv-xvi.



dysfunction in his own life in the monastery or the church. In fact his correspondence with Ruether led him to re-examine the basic motivation of his own conversion. In this re-examination he found it important to distinguish between what had been God's action in his life from his own attraction to 'a sacral and traditional and stable culture'. 'This' he stated, 'is especially important for my vocation. Now that the stability of these structures is really shaken—and I have done my own part in shaking them—I have to live really by God's word and by a "true" Christian community (where?) and not cheat by relying on past cultural props which keep me comfortable'.<sup>61</sup>

The true value of the correspondence between Thomas Merton and Rosemary Ruether cannot be measured by the number of letters they exchanged, by the intensity of the exchange, or even by their areas of disagreement. It may be that the value cannot be measured at all. Perhaps all that can be said is that it led each of them to reconsider their own positions about the Church, the monastery and the world, and 'to live by God's word', values in and of themselves.

61. Merton, *Learning to Love*, p. 198.