

## “BLESSED ARE THE MEEK”: THE NONVIOLENCE OF THOMAS MERTON

John Dear, S.J.

---

Twenty-five years ago, on January 14, 1966, Thomas Merton wrote to Hildegard Goss-Mayr of the Fellowship of Reconciliation to announce that he had just written for her an essay on nonviolence, which he called, “Blessed are the Meek: The Christian Roots of Non-violence,” (later published in *The Nonviolent Alternative*, Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1982). His essay, I would suggest, is one of the greatest reflections on nonviolence since Gandhi first coined the term in the early 1900s. Twenty-five years later, almost to the day of his completing the essay, the U.S. began bombing Iraq in a festival of violence and death. Since Merton's death, the worldwide crisis of violence has reached astronomical proportions, Third World poverty and destitution has worsened dramatically with 60,000 people dying each day from starvation while some 60,000 nuclear weapons threaten to destroy the planet, not just once but fifteen times over. We continue to test nuclear weapons every two or three weeks in the Nevada desert, while over thirty-five wars are being waged around the world today—with the U.S. involved in all of them. In our country, millions are homeless and living in poverty, the death penalty goes ahead full steam, the violence of racism and sexism seems to know no end, and the culture itself seems to descend ever farther down the spiral of violence. What would Thomas Merton say to us today about this national and worldwide addiction to violence and death?

I think we can find a clue in his ground-breaking essay, “Blessed are the Meek.”

As one who is greatly interested in the question of Peacemaking and resistance to war and the causes of war, I must confess I have long

been puzzled by the figure of Merton—this meek and nonviolent person. He is filled with so much vitality, vision, life, hope and real spiritual insight into peacemaking and he has a prophetic message for the whole world—and yet, he lives in silence, a monk, a contemplative. What I find so paradoxical and wondrous about Thomas Merton is that at the height of the civil rights movement and the Vietnam war, as he continues to be a prophetic voice for peace and sanity, still he retreated alone into the woods, to the hermitage, to make a statement to the world, inviting us to go deeper, to the roots of our nonviolent spirits as human beings in order to live in peace.

When the U.S. began bombing Iraq on January 16, 1991, I found myself thrown into a flurry of anti-war activity in the San Francisco Bay Area where I live. I joined some 10,000 people on January 17th, to block streets throughout the city, to say NO to the bombings. Several hundred of us people of faith committed to nonviolence joined hands, sang songs, and walked through the streets, trying to calm the crowd, which was seething in anger, furious over the war, and ready to do violence. When the police charged the crowd, and the crowd panicked, we intervened and knelt in silent prayer, and were able, thank God, to calm the crowd.

I was subsequently arrested that day for blocking the entrance to the Federal Building, and the next day, for trespassing at the Presidio, the Army Headquarters for the West Coast. On the days that followed, a crowd of 100,000, and the next week, a crowd of 200,000, marched in the streets, all opposed to the war.

The climax of our active nonviolence came for me on Good Friday, when I found myself on trial for opposing the war, on the day we remember the arrest, trial, torture and execution of the peacemaking Jesus. Though I faced several months in jail, in the end, all charges were dropped against me.

During those days, like many people in the faith-based peace movement around the country, I found my nonviolence and my hope severely tested. These are critical days in human history, a *kairos* moment for the church. The depths of the evil which we as human beings are capable of has been clearly manifested for all to see, and we in the peace movement, as Thich Nhat Hanh, the Buddhist monk has said, can take responsibility for not loving George Bush enough to convince him and others in the government to keep the sanctions on, to pursue the nonviolent alternative in the Persian Gulf.

Like many, I discovered a need to go deeper to the roots of our faith, to the roots of Christian nonviolence, deeper into the well of the spirit of peace. The struggle we all face is to stay centered in the

nonviolent love of God at all times and from that center, to speak out for peace, sit-in against war, march for an end to the U.S. bombing campaigns, and stand with the poor and the oppressed.

During those days, I found myself turning once again to the wisdom of Thomas Merton for strength and consolation.

There he is, at the height of the Vietnam war—alone, praying in solitude, in his hermitage in the Kentucky woods; deliberately silent; speaking out publicly through his writings; cultivating the Spirit of Peace; saving it for future generations; calling us to go to the roots of nonviolence, inviting people to remain pure at heart, at peace within themselves, steadfast in nonviolent love, and adamantly opposed to war and injustice.

What an alternative lifestyle, a counter-cultural sign, a living judgement, a witness for Peace to the nation at war and ever preparing for war! His example challenges all Christian activists and contemplatives, for it calls us to go back to the roots of our faith. This was Merton's great contribution to peacemaking: he pointed out the roots of Christian nonviolence. Merton's peacemaking was existential. His nonviolence, like Gandhi's and Jesus', was his very life. He dwelt in truth, in the spirit of God's love that is peace itself. He breathed the fresh air, watched the birds, looked up at the sky, and in the same breath, condemned our addiction to war and death, and invited us all to dwell in peace, in the reconciliation that already exists with a nuclear bomb, flying directly over his hermitage, and he said, "NO."

In a sentence, Thomas Merton would probably define nonviolence as the unconditional love of God working in us combined with a steadfast commitment to truth that flows from an interior unity already realized in one's self, that recognizes the spiritual reality that all of humanity is already reconciled by God, that we are indeed all already one, all sisters and brothers, and thus that we could never hurt one another, much less kill each other or wage war.

Merton knew that being a person of nonviolence meant taking the risk of publicly opposing war, nuclear weapons and violence in all its forms. His NO to violence was the flipside of his YES to life, to love, and to God. Much like Dr. King, Archbishop Romero and my brother Jesuit, Ignacio Ellacuria, martyred in El Salvador in 1989, Merton's nonviolence centered on a loving, nonstop proclamation of the truth. His simple life was nothing less than a radical protest against the addiction to violence and war. He once wrote: "It is my intention to make my entire life a rejection of and a protest against the crimes and injustices of war and tyranny which threaten to destroy the whole human race and the world."

Merton walked ahead of us, revealing God's call to us to become peacemakers. He showed us a vision of the whole human being—at peace, nonviolent, contemplative, at one with God, nature and all humanity. Merton watered the roots of peacemaking, in the hope that a tree of peace would one day grow and flourish. He proclaimed with his life the good news of peace: "No more war! No nuclear weapons!" he said. "No more injustice! The God of peace is never glorified by human violence. Let us live together as the sisters and brothers that we already are." Life itself is a way of nonviolence for Merton. He searched out an ontology of nonviolence, beginning within his own heart. He studied the threat of nuclear and so-called "conventional" warfare and posed an unlikely but very Christian question: "If we want to end war," Merton asked (like Francis of Assisi), "hadn't we best begin by ending the wars in our own hearts?"

Merton kept pointing to the unity underlying humanity's divisions. "What is important in nonviolence," he wrote, "is the contemplative truth that is not seen. The radical truth of reality is that we are all one."

In a letter to theologian Martin Marty on September 6, 1967, Merton wrote, "Nonviolence is a Christian duty, because it is the only way to keep open really reasonable and creative possibilities in the mess that is to come." He continued: "I think that we white Christians should get busy and find out about using [nonviolence]. . . . We must use it, as it is meant to be used, for truth, and for the good of everybody. To begin with, it must be used to keep open possibilities of authentic human communication when the bullets are flying. . . . [We] may exasperate everyone. But perhaps we may see an opening toward peace and love even when the sulphur and brimstone are at their worst, and others have given up trusting in anything except weapons."

Merton's essay, "Blessed are the Meek: The Christian Roots of Nonviolence," is a pinnacle of his writings, not only on peace, but of his whole thought and life message. I would suggest that the insights of "Blessed are the Meek" are as important today as they were in 1966, if not more important today.

"The chief difference between violence and nonviolence," he says from the start, "is that violence depends entirely on its own calculations. Nonviolence depends entirely on God and God's word." "Christian nonviolence is not built on a presupposed division, but on the basic unity of humanity. It is not out for the conversion of the wicked to the ideas of the good, but for the healing and reconciliation of humanity with humanity," Merton pointed out. Merton's starting point is the Sermon on the Mount, that neglected piece of scripture

which is the essence of Jesus' message. In the Beatitudes, Merton discovers that biology of the spirit which brings forth the reign of God from a mustard seed "Christian nonviolence," he wrote, "is nothing if not first of all a formal profession of faith in the Gospel message that the Reign of God has been established and that the Lord of truth is indeed risen and reigning over his Reign."

Merton identified seven theological insights to nonviolence or what he called, "conditions for relative honesty in the practice of Christian nonviolence," which I think are worth recalling.

First, nonviolence as a way of life and the way of active peacemaking must be aimed above all at the transformation of the whole world. In other words, our mission is to transform the world. But he said, "we must be free from the unjust use of power." This transformation is to be nonviolent, which means it is a participation in the powerlessness of God.

Secondly, since we Christians in the United States live in a powerful, imperial first world nation and are ourselves privileged people, our nonviolence and resistance to evil must be done, not so much for ourselves but for others, that is, for the poor and oppressed. In other words, years before liberation theology of Latin America, Merton encouraged us to take a preferential option for the poor and oppressed, to accompany and act in solidarity, for example, with the people of Nicaragua, Iraq, Ethiopia, El Salvador, or the Philippines, as a condition of our nonviolence. We are to somehow side with them, walk with them, and learn from them what it means to be Christian.

Thirdly, the threat of nuclear war abolishes all privilege. Thus, "nonviolence must not be ambiguously advocated or practiced by unclear and confusing protests that can harden warmakers in their self-righteous blindness." As nonviolent people who speak out against war, Merton said, we avoid self-righteousness. In other words, true peacemakers are rooted in peace; our nonviolence is truly nonviolent, non-judgmental, non-condemnatory, and compassionate. We become patient, gentle revolutionaries.

Fourth, the most insidious temptation to be avoided is the desire for immediate visible results, Merton warned. "The Christian humility of nonviolent action must establish itself in the minds and memories of modern humanity not only as conceivable and possible, but as a desirable alternative to what people now consider the only realistic possibility, namely, war." In other words, we are called to be humble, to be committed to the truth of nonviolence because it is true, and to trust in the God of Truth to bring forth the fruit of truth in peace, even as we seek peace and justice and oppose war with all



our lives. The result of our peacemaking activity is in better hands than ours.

Fifthly, the manner in which the conflict for truth is waged will itself manifest or obscure the truth. To fight for truth by dishonest, violent, or unreasonable means would simply betray the truth we are trying to vindicate. "The absolute refusal of evil or suspect means is a necessary element in the witness of nonviolence," Merton declared. Our task is to disassociate ourselves from evil, untruth and violence in whatever form it takes, whether in our witness to the world or in our own hearts. Merton exemplified this truth-seeking by radiating what Gandhi called *satyagraha* or truth-force. He became himself a loving, compassionate force of truth, and encouraged us to do the same.

Sixth, as nonviolent resisters, we are willing to learn from our adversaries. "If a new truth is made known to us by or through the adversary," Merton asks, "will we accept it? Are we willing to admit that he [or she] is not totally inhumane, wrong, unreasonable, and cruel?" In other words, we are called to love our enemies and to be open to our opponents as our very own sisters and brothers. Nonviolence begins, Merton suggests, by listening to others, and then finding God in every human being. I believe that Thomas Merton would want us to love the people of Iraq, for example, and to listen to the truth in their side of the story.

Seventh, for Merton, Christian hope and Christian humility are inseparable. The quality of our nonviolence is decided largely by the purity of the Christian hope behind it. "Where is our hope?" Merton asks us in a world addicted to violence and death. This is a crucial question for our times. In other words, because we are peacemakers, we cannot afford the luxury of despair. We are a people of hope.

Merton's *Blessed are the Meek* is a call for a greater authenticity in the nonviolence of the Gospels, which we profess as Christians, but which we all find so hard to live, Merton plumbed those depths of Gospel nonviolence and showed us its possibilities in his own life. His essay was well ahead of its time, and continues to raise uncomfortable questions: Are we willing to become a nonviolent people, a people burning with a desire for justice and for peace, that is, for God; a people nonviolent down to the roots of our souls? We need to delve deeper into the nonviolence of Thomas Merton the nonviolence of Jesus, and our own nonviolence to find out.

In that light, several themes in the nonviolence of Thomas Merton can be noted:

First, I think Merton saw Jesus as a peacemaker, as deeply contemplative, in love with God, and therefore, as an active practitioner of nonviolence. Merton followed the peacemaking Jesus. Nonviolence was at the heart of Merton's theology and anthropology. Merton knew that nonviolence begins with the profound assertion that God reigns, that God's reign is a reign of nonviolence, and that the actively nonviolent Jesus is risen alive and calling us to speak out against violence and war and to transform our world into a new creation of peace. To that end, Merton worshipped a nonviolent God, the God of nonviolence, the God of peace.

Secondly, Merton prayed, wrote and labored that we Christians in particular become a nonviolent people. Like Martin Luther King Jr., Merton feared that we as a nation were approaching spiritual death, and so he urged us to start life over again to go back to our roots in Gospel nonviolence. In a sense this is what he did with his own life by retreating to a hermitage, in light of the nuclear age and the Vietnam war, to start all over with himself. Merton's conscious exploration of the roots of nonviolence in his own disarmed heart led to a spiritual explosion in his mind and heart that he shared with the world. He invites us to explore those same roots in our own hearts with the world.

Thirdly, Merton hoped that the church would become a community of nonviolence, a community of peacemakers, a peace church (which Merton, like his friend Daniel Berrigan, would point out is a redundancy). I think our task is to nurture the roots of nonviolence within our own faith-communities and to get on with the mission of practicing nonviolence as Christians and peoples of faith within this culture of violence.

Fourthly, Merton read scripture from the perspective of nonviolence and wanted us to do the same. We must develop peace eyes, he said, the critical perspective that comes from embracing the way of nonviolence, that understands that Jesus was serious about loving our enemies, serious about transforming the fearful systems of violence that lead to war. Like King, Gandhi and Dorothy Day, Merton read everything from the perspective of nonviolence. A helpful way to understand the mature Thomas Merton then is to understand and embrace the way of nonviolence. It is significant that in the 1950s, Merton began a serious reading of Gandhi. I do not think we can understand Merton without understanding Gandhi. Merton knew that Gandhi was a contemplative, that Gandhi, the non-violent revolutionary, the apostle of nonviolence, the Hindu ascetic chosen by God to reveal Christ's way of nonviolence to Western Christians, spent one

day each week in silence for the last twenty years of his life. Like Dr. King and Dorothy Day, Merton tried to apply the insights of Gandhi within his own context to our predicament in the United States to make a contribution from where he stood. Merton would want us too to undertake that work from where we stand.

Fifthly, Merton called us all to get more involved with the Christian peace movement. Though the crisis in the church and the world today is very bleak, still there are signs of hope in the small but growing number of Christians who have taken a stand for peace. Pax Christi, the Fellowship of Reconciliation and Sojourners are but a few examples of the transforming Spirit alive in the churches today. If Merton were alive today, he would surely be involved with these Christian peace movements and would encourage us all to get involved, too.

Sixth, Merton testifies with his life that all spirituality and contemplation must be rooted in active nonviolence. Merton's life was a search into an ontology of nonviolence, and he knew that public opposition to war and injustice was a necessary ingredient in this life experiment with the Gospel. Merton happily risked his reputation as a wise spiritual guru when he came out against the arms race and the Vietnam war. He tells us today that the time has come to devote our faith lives to the making of peace, the proclaiming of Christ's peace. We are called to become ever more conscious of the suffering in the world, the mad race to kill and drop bombs, and the victims of our systemic violence, to do what we can to promote nonviolent social change for justice. With Merton, we can speak out publicly in whatever way we can against these injustices as well as envision a new kind of world, Christ's new world order, freed from violence, poverty, injustice and the bomb.

We can more fully understand Thomas Merton by embracing Christian nonviolence as a way of life, as "Blessed are the Meek" suggests we do. Then in that contemplative, nonviolent struggle, we will discover the spirit of Merton, the spirit of Jesus, the Way of contemplation which is always rooted in active nonviolence.

What then would Thomas Merton say to us about the U.S. war in the Persian Gulf and our world's continued addiction to violence and death, its systemic injustice?

He would say what he always said: "My friends, we are all one, all brothers and sisters, every human being a sacred child of God. Let us love one another and love especially those peoples declared by our government to be our enemies. Take a deep breath, let God disarm your heart, and live in peace. Embrace nonviolence as a way of life, for

behold, Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are the nonviolent. Blessed are You."  
Amen.