

Vocations to the Lay Apostolate

Thomas James Merton
Edited by Patrick F. O'Connell

Editor's Note

Shortly before leaving St. Bonaventure College for the Abbey of Gethsemani in December 1941, Thomas Merton gave a miscellaneous collection of his papers to Richard F. Fitzgerald, a seminarian from the Erie, Pennsylvania, diocese who was studying at St. Bonaventure's Christ the King Seminary. In June 1974 these materials were returned by then Msgr. Fitzgerald to St. Bonaventure and now form part of the Friedsam Memorial Library's Merton archives. Included in this "Fitzgerald File" is a ten-page typescript entitled "Vocations to the Lay Apostolate," by-lined "Thomas James Merton" at its conclusion. (Merton frequently used "James," his confirmation name, in signatures in the years following his conversion.)¹ Though the article is undated, internal evidence provides a fairly clear indication of when it was written. The only datable reference is to the fall of France in June 1940, but the extensive discussion of Catherine de Hueck and her Friendship House apostolate strongly suggests that the piece was written after the baroness had visited St. Bonaventure on August 4, 1941, and probably after Merton had spent the latter half of August at Friendship House in Harlem. The most likely time of composition was after he returned to the college from a retreat during the week following Labor Day, 1941, at Our Lady of the Valley Monastery in Rhode Island, where he had gone to try to discern if he should work full time at Friendship House. If Michael Mott is correct in supposing that this was one of "the articles and stuff I had lying around," which Merton says in an October 6, 1941,

1. William H. Shannon, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 97.

letter to Catherine de Hueck that he is going to send to Mary Jerdo at Friendship House,² then it was probably written sometime in September 1941. It must have been finished, at any rate, before Merton once again began considering religious life as an option for himself: though the voice in the essay is public rather than private, the author clearly includes himself as one of those called to the vocation of lay apostle.

The typescript provides some interesting documentation concerning Merton's writing methods at the time. The kinds of corrections he makes suggest that he is composing directly at the typewriter, since he frequently alters his wording as he proceeds. There are about thirty-five instances (not including the occasional typographical errors immediately caught and corrected) when he x-es out words and rewrites on-line directly afterward. Most of these consist of one- or two-word changes and are mainly stylistic: for example, "society" becomes "community"; "come" becomes "penetrate"; "teach" becomes "preach"; "centered" becomes "founded"; "parties" becomes "persons." At times the alteration permits expansion of a thought: where Merton originally wrote ". . . to study books of philosophy or religion," he canceled the last word and then added "speculate about religious questions . . ."; after writing "the prophetic laceration of the lukewarm," he canceled the last two words and continued with "materialistic and lukewarm Catholics . . ."; "could also learn much from them" is canceled and replaced by "would do well to study at least our best philosophers"; the canceled "And there is a better term than good Catholic" is followed by "And a better word for 'good Catholic' is saint, . . ." On occasion, the cancellation is not replaced: contrasting religious and lay vocations, he mentions that those called to priesthood "will have much guidance," and in apparent contrast originally wrote, "We have no other person, generally" and then interlined "mortal" before "person" but canceled all of this and made no further reference to spiritual direction. In one instance, in the opening paragraph, the alteration appears to represent theological reconsideration: ". . . from the moment of his first communion and especially confirmation" is changed to "from the moment of his confirmation, (if not before)," apparently to associate the lay apostolate more specifically (though not exclusively) with the latter sacrament. The evidence of

2. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1984) 194, 598. The nucleus of the essay can be found in a Journal passage from August 21, where Merton writes, "Reading Bloy's 'L'Invendable' it is quite clear to me that what he was doing was a kind of 'Lay Apostolate' (a fancy term I don't like much); he had a definite vocation to write what he wrote—nobody knows, or can measure, the tremendous value of his writing, as apostolate. If he only converted one man, it would justify his whole life. But he converted Maritain and a pile of others, and was crucified for how many?" *St. Bonaventure Journal* (unpublished), p. 182.

these revisions suggests a concern for precision but also a process of rethinking as he is composing.

Another set of revisions consists in interlineations above canceled material; many of these changes are relatively inconsequential, such as "no little" for "a lot"; "apostolate" for "apostles"; "his" for "the"; it is impossible to determine at what stage of composition such changes were made. Other alterations of this type seem to represent more significant revising and may have been added after the initial draft was completed. For example, the statement that "social work is inevitably submitted to the control of local parish priests and their bishop" may have sounded too negative on rereading, and "hastens to submit itself" is interlined above the canceled "is inevitably submitted" (though the context still suggests Merton's lack of strong sympathy for the situation described). A number of these changes are to be found in the paragraphs concerning Leon Bloy, and both the frequency and the types of alteration indicate they may have been made together: in a couple of cases the language is toned down: "attacked" becomes "criticised"; "fought by" becomes "looked at askance by"; in another instance, the generalized "souls" is changed to "sad, Godless men"; "foresees" becomes "hopes for" in reference to increased numbers of devout laypeople, an alteration suggesting less certainty about the outcome; the longest such change occurs in the same sentence: "who will offer up all their prayers and works without exception" is substituted for "devoted to works of prayer and penance all offered up," though in this instance the rationale for the revision is less evident.

The essay also provides some insight into Merton's state of mind in the months previous to his decision to become a Cistercian. His degree of commitment to the Christian life is obviously quite deep: the influence of his pivotal conversation in the spring of 1939 with Robert Lax, to be recounted in a famous passage from *The Seven Storey Mountain*,³ is evident here in his preference for "saint" over "good Catholic" as a description of the dedicated Christian, and in his assurance that "anything we desire, in this realm, we can have, . . ." What the Second Vatican Council would later describe as the universal call to holiness (see especially "The Call of the Whole Church to Holiness," chapter 5 of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church) is already very much a part of Merton's understanding of the Christian life in 1941. When he writes, "To have a 'lay vocation' means to be impelled, by an insatiable desire to see God, to do acts by which are realised the infinite values that God has implanted in our souls, our personalities," not only does the concluding image foreshadow the opening words of *Seeds of Contemplation*,⁴ but the entire

3. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 237-38.

4. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1949) 17.

sentence suggests an intense personal attraction to such vision. But the article also reveals the unsettled state of Merton's mind at the time of writing: "We are still restlessly trying to find out what it is we are called upon to do" is expressed generally, as applying to all those with lay as opposed to priestly vocations, but has the ring of personal experience, as does the conclusion of the same paragraph: "We develop this secret life, because we have to, we need it terribly, we want much more than this. What is there for us?"

He goes on to distinguish between active and contemplative lay vocations, and there is little doubt which is more attractive to him. Though the Friendship House apostolate is praised highly and held up as a model of the active apostolate, there is evident a certain lack of enthusiasm for this life on the writer's part, as when he mentions that the communal aspect of such a life, along with the ecclesiastical control involved, "brings up problems which the contemplative lay apostle need not fear: problems of organisational conflicts, and disappointments that they bring with them, which all add to the trials of this kind of life." Though he hastens to add dutifully that "[e]ach type of lay vocation naturally involves its own difficulties which the zealous servant of God not only expects but even welcomes," the tone here does not suggest someone who is eager to embrace that sort of life. (With hindsight, the reader may note that the problems the author detects with regard to active lay communities are remarkably similar to those he will later encounter in a contemplative monastic community.) Merton seems much more attracted by the example of the lay contemplative, which he finds represented by Jacques Maritain and especially Leon Bloy: the model here is not that of the person who lives an inconspicuous life of prayer in the midst of contemporary secular society, but of one who prophetically confronts by word and example the infidelities of that society and witnesses to a radically different way of life.

Merton's notion of a lay contemplative is clearly one that is compatible with being a writer, in fact virtually presupposes it. The "twofold" function of the lay contemplative vocation is described as "to teach and edify those who have no idea what Christianity is really all about" and to "clarify Christian ideas for Christians themselves who also are always in need of edification and mental stimulation." Though he does subsequently make room for "[h]undreds of other examples" of lay contemplatives who do not write or "teach in big speeches," such as Louis Martin, it is evident that his own leanings are toward a role that is both deeply contemplative and quite public. Thus the essay provides some hint of what direction Thomas Merton's life might have taken had he remained a layperson. But it is not without significance that in the final sentence of the article the Trappists make a brief appearance, an indication that perhaps the author is not completely resigned to life as a layman—though of course he shows no awareness of how much of his con-

ception of the role of the lay contemplative he would bring with him, and fulfill, as a monk who remained very much a writer.

This edition of Merton's hitherto unpublished essay prints only the final version of the typescript; it silently corrects typographical errors, the occasional misspelling, and misspacings, and it regularizes punctuation according to commonly accepted practice. The two substantive changes, "now" for "not" in the sentence beginning "The idea of what a 'lay vocation' can mean . . ." and "to" for "by" in the sentence beginning "Each type of lay vocation . . ." are both required by the sense; in the sentence beginning "The answer will be quite different . . ." the word "we" is added before "possibly." The editor would like to express his gratitude to the staff of the Friedsam Memorial Library of St. Bonaventure University, especially Mrs. Lorraine Welsh, assistant university archivist, for making this article available; to the trustees of the Merton Legacy Trust and their representative, Mrs. Anne H. McCormick, for permission to publish it; and to Grace Davies and Anita Smith, archivists of the Nash Library of Gannon University, for assistance in obtaining information concerning Rev. Richard Fitzgerald.