Thomas Merton, Monk and Prophet of Peace: The Opening Address at the 2005 International Thomas Merton Society General Meeting

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My Brothers and Sisters,

If I have been invited to address you as we open this meeting it is due chiefly to the fact that I knew Thomas Merton the way a brother comes to know a brother by living the same way of life, sharing similar moral and spiritual values together in the same community. I have no other qualifying credentials or competence that might entitle me to speak to you on Peace and Non-violence in a world where, on the political level, the issues involved have become more intricate and so requiring a more ample information and insight than did the period of the cold war when Merton wrote. Accordingly, I offer these words as the limited contribution of one man's personal experience and reflections. They have been formed in good part under the influence of Merton's teaching and colored by memories of our shared experiences in the monastery during the last eighteen years of his life. Hopefully, they might usefully serve as a background for the subsequent discussions of a more technical nature.

I

Thomas Merton was a prophetic voice for his times. He spoke of God and of the spiritual life to large numbers of people with a fresh voice. In the words of Samuel Johnson, "he employed wit on the side of virtue and religion." At one point in the course of his writings on peace, he mentioned that he made no claim to be a prophet. Later, as he accepted the Pax Medal, he modestly commented that if he said beforehand what Pope John XXIII taught in his groundbreaking Encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, "that still does not make me terribly original, because these same things were said long ago by Popes and ... Fathers of the Church."[1]

However, from my first contact with Merton's writings, I viewed him as a prophetic voice for our times. In fact, I believe that Merton himself, already before he entered the monastery, was convinced he had a special gift to speak in God's name to his age. That is what accounts for his beginning to write an autobiography already at the age of twenty four, shortly after his conversion. This conviction led him to break with a tradition of centuries and to overcome the initial resistance of his superiors, by publishing a journal, *The Sign of Jonas*, about his day-to-day experiences and reflections as a Trappist monk not long after publication of his life story.

He continues to speak to us today in circumstances that, in many respects, are marked by the issues he identified half a century ago as crucial for the future of our world. His life and writings that have brought us together here in the cause of Christian faith and world peace are a living indication of his role as one who speaks in the name of the God of peace and justice. His concern for these issues was a fruit of the faith that grew out of his monastic life and contemplative prayer. Rightly to understand his approach to the issues of peace and non-violence, it is essential to advert to the fact that his chief, daily efforts were expended in what the monastic tradition calls "the work of the heart," that is, the prolonged struggle with the passions and contemplative assimilation of the truths of faith. Through this interior labor he became, as Gordan Zahn notes, a man "ahead of his time" because he was "in tune with his time."[2]

Merton viewed his times in the light of history. This perspective permitted him to observe with keen penetration that "somewhere in the last fifty years we have crossed a mysterious limit set by Providence and have entered a new era.... There has been a violent disruption of society and a radical overthrow of that modern world which goes back to Charlemagne."[3] Based on his contemplative experience he viewed the issues of war and violence in the broadest of contexts, as a crisis of the spirit as he stated in 1962:

> The present world crisis is not merely a political and economic conflict. It goes deeper than ideologies. It is a crisis of man's spirit. It is a great religious and moral upheaval of the human race, and we do not really know half the causes of this upheaval. We cannot pretend to have a full understanding of what

> is going on in ourselves and in our society.... The moral evil in the world is due to man's alienation from the deepest truth, from the springs of spiritual life within himself.[4]

Anyone who reads some of the many books and articles written about Merton the man and his thought, will soon realize that he was uncommonly sensitive to the social forces at work in his world and so was able to interpret its condition and spiritual needs with an exactitude of insight. It will also be apparent that he was a many-sided personality, richly complex, not always obviously consistent in his opinions. That he himself was aware of this is attested to by the repeated revisions of his views and self-evaluations recorded in the twenty manuscript volumes of his diaries. The wide variety of people who met him in person as well as those who knew him only from his printed works, formed quite contrasting conceptions of him and of his significance. He was at once more simple and constant in his deepest purpose and more subtle in his dealings and relations than most persons realized. Merton was convinced that seeming inconsistency inevitably results from growth and the process of transformation that is the Christian and fully human life. He held quite deliberately the persuasion that in the trajectory of life lived in a persevering search for the true self as created by God, there is inevitable change, but under the surface there is a higher consistency at work.

Those of us who lived with him, especially we who were formed as monks in large part by his teaching and counseling, knew Fr. Louis (Merton's name in the monastery) as warm-hearted, wise, fervent for monastic life, concerned for us as persons, personally accessible and, in a word, dedicated to our formation and the good of the community. In his classes with us, it became apparent that he possessed an exceptional energy of intelligence together with an acuteness of insight and sensibility that spontaneously came to expression so that the genuine affection he inspired was tempered by his restraint of respect.

Fr. Louis, it seems to me, was quite aware of his gifts and being sensitive to the vulnerability of his students, made it a point to cultivate simplicity in his manner, giving free scope to his marked sense of humor. He showed no reluctance, however, rather unceremoniously to correct any of us who needed to be reminded of some failure or called to account for inappropriate behavior. As spiritual director Fr. Louis possessed an extraordinary fund of

empathy, rendered more sensitive and purified by his contemplative experience of God that was a source of ready understanding and deeply felt concern when one of us was undergoing a difficult trial of one kind or another.

Such then was our view as young monks of our Father Master. Nor did we have occasion as time went on to alter in any radical way this early impression. Our respect and affection, masked for the most part as is the rather casual manner of American men, persisted undiminished to the end, even as those of us who worked more closely with him became aware of his human weaknesses. Later I discovered that this fraternal affection was not always evident to Fr. Louis himself; at times of stress, especially after he moved into the hermitage, he too readily felt emotionally distanced. He misinterpreted as lack of concern the surface disengagement that resulted from the solitude he chose and which he had asked us to accept. The need for signs of the warmth of human appreciation and understanding remained in continuing tension with the equal attraction for solitude; this conflict persisted to the very end of his life and accounts for much of the seeming inconsistency in his life and writings. The various expressions of the resulting inner struggle have sometimes been misunderstood and wrongly interpreted by some biographers.

His affective sensitivity contributed greatly to his remarkable capacity to enter with feeling into the inner experience of others. This power of empathy in large measure accounts for a quality of his writings, of his teaching and counseling that enabled him effectively to communicate his views to a wide variety of persons. Many who read him feel he knew them and their struggles personally. That he was aware of the personal tonality this quality of empathy imparted to his writings appears in the preface he wrote to the Japanese translation of *The Seven Storey Mountain*:

> Therefore, most honorable reader, it is not as an author that I would speak to you, not as a story-teller, not as a philosopher, not as a friend only: I seek to speak to you, in some way, as your own self. Who can tell what this may mean? I myself do not know. But if you listen, things will be said that are perhaps not written in this book. And this will be due not to me, but to One who lives and speaks in both![5]

In other words, Merton's writings are a continuation of his contemplative communion with God, conveying something of the life of the Spirit to those who, as he states, truly listen to the One who communicates with the reader as he does with the author.

II

If I have dwelt here on this personal character of Merton's work, it is because his writing on Peace, Social Justice and finally Non-violence remain vital and speak with pertinence to us today not only due to his insights and shrewd analyses, but no less because they are rooted in this personalizing and contemplative region of his soul. It was because Fr. Louis's sense of identity as a sinner, flawed, marginal, errant man, was as someone who was sought and found by the God of mercy. With the pathos of heartfelt experience he identifies himself with Jonas, the prophet of God's mercy.

The Voice of God is heard in Paradise:

> "What was vile has become precious. What is now precious was never vile. I have always known the vile as precious: for what is vile I know not at all. ... I have always overshadowed Jonas with my mercy.... Have you had sight of Me, Jonas My child? Mercy within mercy within mercy. I have forgiven the universe without end, because I have never known sin.... What was fragile has become powerful. I loved what was most frail...."[6]

It was awareness of receiving the mercy of God when he had strayed far that made him sensitive to the plight of the marginal and the weak who are the chief victims of violence and injustice. This profound sense of identity with the vulnerable stands at the root of his decision to involve himself in social issues that to many seemed outside the province of a cloistered monk. I submit that the contrary is true and is a major portion of his message to us. Monastic life and Christian life as such wherever it is lived, is a life of ongoing conversion. As we come to know something of the power, the holiness, the beauty and the loving goodness of God, revealed in Jesus our Savior, we become more aware of our need for mercy, and experience deeper empathy for others who have the same need. It is this profound sense of God's holiness and loving mercy that, more than any other single factor, explains Thomas Merton's work for Justice, Peace and Non-violence.

Note: This is the text of the opening address of the International Thomas Merton Society, San Diego, California given on June 9, 2005. I leave it in the original form.

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *The Nonviolent Alternative,* revised edition of *Thomas Merton on Peace,* ed., Gordon C. Zahn (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980), pp. 257-58.

2. *Nonviolent Alternative,* p. x.

3. Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays,* ed., William H. Shannon (New York: Crossroad, 1995), p. 134.

4. Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace,* p. 83.

5. Thomas Merton, *"Honorable Reader": Reflections on My Work* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), p. 67.

6. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1953), p. 362.