

FOUNDATIONS FOR RENEWAL:

An Analysis of the Shared Reflections of Thomas Merton and Ernesto Cardenal

by **D. R. Letson**

I was ordained a priest to come and establish the community here* [at Solentiname]. It was Thomas Merton who gave me the idea. He had been a monk for twenty years and had written a great deal about that life but had become unhappy with monastic life He knew it was a medieval, anachronistic lifestyle. Ridiculous. So he wanted to found a different kind of contemplative community outside the U. S. Merton was an enemy of the U. S., of Yankee Civilization and everything it represented. He hated the bourgeois mentality most monks had.¹

Words of Ernesto Cardenal: poet, minister of culture in Sandinista Nicaragua, and a man whom Thomas Merton, Cardenal's one-time novice master, praised as "one of the rare vocations we have had here [at Gethsemani] who certainly and manifestly combined the gifts of a contemplative with those of an artist."²

Indeed, Thomas Merton and Ernesto Cardenal shared much in common. Both were religious converts of sorts who responded to a call to a religious vocation as mature men of the world. Both had their writings censored (one by an ecclesial, the other by a governmental authority). Both were significantly influenced by a Cuban experience (Merton by the warmth of 1940 pre-revolution Havana, Cardenal by the community-

1. Margaret Randall, *Christians in the Nicaraguan Revolution* (Vancouver: New Star, 1983), p. 41.

2. Thomas Merton, "Ernesto Cardenal," in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*; ed. Brother Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1981), p. 323.

* This paper was delivered on 27 May 1989 in the session, "Merton and Human Dignity," at the First General Meeting of *The International Thomas Merton Society* in Louisville, Kentucky.

mindedness of 1970 post-revolution Cuba).³ Both were inspired by a theology of love. Both had developed a deep admiration for the spiritual and communal traditions of the Latin American Native Indian. Both genuinely admired Gandhi and his philosophy of nonviolence. Both were poets — Columbia University-trained poets who ultimately shared an Augustinian-Bonaventurian affection for nature and a liberationist thirst for social justice. So strong was the Merton-Cardenal association that Dom James Fox is said to have frowned upon it as being an “ami intime.” The abbot was clearly intent on putting an end to an epistolary friendship which was becoming too hot to handle.⁴

As Ernesto Cardenal’s spiritual director during the Nicaraguan’s two-year apprenticeship with the Gethsemani Trappists (1957-1959), Thomas Merton displayed a keen interest in Cardenal’s knowledge of Nicaraguan poets, of the Somoza dynasty, of Nicaraguan geography, and of matters Latin American in general. Indeed, Cardenal’s spiritual director was destined to change the course of his novice’s life irreversibly, his life as contemplative and his life as artist. Through Merton’s guidance, for example, Cardenal quickly grasped the inherent fusion of contemplation and poetry, of the active and contemplative life which Merton himself had long struggled to reconcile. According to Cardenal, Merton “saw no conflict in the contemplative life and a life of action.”⁵ Indeed, Cardenal notes of his mentor that “Merton transformed me completely during the two years I was a novice under him” Merton had convinced Cardenal that he (Cardenal) needed to renounce nothing, that there was no contradiction in being simultaneously a poet, a contemplative, and a political activist (Wilkes, pp. 36-37). Like the Desert Fathers and like St. Bernard whom Merton had so admired, Thomas Merton and Ernesto Cardenal dreamed of new foundations, new forms of religious expression — foundations embodied in part at least at Solentiname.

Solentiname would become a contemplative foundation with the potential to transform the lives of those it touched, a community which

3. Merton discusses his Cuban experience in *The Seven Storey Mountain* and *The Secular Journal*, but perhaps more to the present point Ernesto Cardenal compares their reactions in his *In Cuba*; trans. by Donald D. Walsh (New York: New Directions, 1974), pp. 8-9.

4. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), p. 340.

5. See Paul Wilkes, *Merton, By Those Who Knew Him Best* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), p. 36. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Wilkes*. It is a theme Merton developed often. See, for example, “Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal,” in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*: “In actual fact, true contemplation is inseparable from life and from the dynamism of life” (p. 339). See also his “Marxism and Monastic Perspectives” in *The Avian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1973).

would provide the contemplative pause for the nurturing of research and the inspiration of writing, research and writing which would, in turn, promote new social foundations blossoming from the teachings of Vatican II and rooted in the gospel of love.⁶ The spirit of St. Benedict would be reshaped once more, this time to serve the needs of a nuclear world stalked by the shadows of Gog and Magog. Solentiname is the physical manifestation of Merton's 1963 observation on Cardenal, the contemplative and the poet, that

the poet remains conscious of his relation to the world he has left and thinks a great deal about it, with the result that one recognizes how the purifying isolation of the monastery encourages a profound renewal and change of perspective in which "the world" is not forgotten but seen in a clearer and less delusive light. (*LE*, pp. 323-324)

As Cardenal observes from the tentative security of his 1977 exile in Costa Rica, the menace of Solentiname then reduced to rubble by Somoza's National Guard, "Contemplation means union with God Contemplation also brought us to the revolution."⁷

When Ernesto Cardenal's uncertain health forced him from Gethsemani in 1959, Merton encouraged him in his quest for priesthood — "the church was still very clerical, so it would be important to be a priest in the kind of community we had in mind" — and Merton also encouraged him in the pursuit of their common vision (*Randall*, p. 43). As for Cardenal's departure from Gethsemani, Cardenal asserts that Merton saw it as a good thing: "If you leave before making your vows then you won't have a problem [of dispensation] I do being a monk from the Trappist order." As for Merton, he would follow as soon as permission permitted: "We are planning to leave anyway, now you can leave early" (*Randall*, p. 42). And so Cardenal recalled for Michael Higgins and me how Merton petitioned Rome for permission to establish his Latin American foundation, but John XXIII, while approving of the idea itself, insisted that the Trappists were not the order to realize the vision, a different order with a different charism was

6. In his "Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal," *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, Merton has much to say about poetry which echoes Cardenal's convictions perfectly. Contemplation, Merton explains, "brings us into the closest contact with the one subject that is truly worthy of a Christian poet: the great Mystery of God, revealing His mercy to us in Christ" (p. 343). Merton also says of the Christian poet that "All good Christian poets are then contemplatives in the sense that they see God everywhere in His creation and in His mysteries, and behold the created world as filled with the signs of God" (p. 345). Like Merton, Cardenal frequently uses his poetry to analyze the function of the poet. Like Merton, he concludes that the roles of the contemplative and of the poet will merge necessarily. The ideas noted above are evident in the themes of the liberation theologian which become more and more a part of Cardenal's poetry. They are especially explicit in his *Psalms*, and they are reflected on in his *Love*.

7. Ernesto Cardenal, *The Gospel in Solentiname*; vol. 1; trans. by Donald D. Walsh (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1976), p. 267. Hereafter referred to in the text as *GIS*.

required.⁸ Merton agreed, and petitioned to leave the Trappists, a dispensation he was so confident of receiving that a Merton-Cardenal rendezvous was determined for Mexico. One day before the Mexican meeting, Merton informed Cardenal that Dom James had lobbied Rome successfully — Merton was bound by obedience both to silence and to his cloister (*Conversation*, pp. 35-36). Merton, however, remained forever restless, eager to develop new forms of contemplative life. He continued to yearn for Solentiname. New plans were made, and Cardenal had prepared a cottage for his would-be companion in Solentiname where he was to stay for several weeks following his return from Asia and on route to Chile where he was to investigate the potential for establishing a Latin American Trappist foundation. It was another meeting destined to remain unfulfilled.

Inspired by Thomas Merton's vision, however, Ernesto Cardenal pursued the dream. He was ordained a priest in Managua on the Feast of the Assumption of Our Lady in 1965. On February 13, 1966, he founded his religious community, Our Lady of Solentiname.⁹ And from Cardenal's leaving Gethsemani until Merton's departure for Asia, the two corresponded regularly. At first they discussed matters related to poetry and to the publication of poetry, but the topics soon included Latin American issues, social corruption, the politics of Gethsemani, and the development of Solentiname.

The evolution of Merton's thinking with respect to Solentiname makes for interesting reading. At the outset, Merton clearly shares the spark of excitement he has fanned in Cardenal, and surely intends to leave Gethsemani to join his former pupil; but by 1968 he has begun to waver, to waver seriously, so that the enthusiasm Cardenal clearly exhibited in his 1984 conversation with Michael Higgins and me concerning Merton's joining him in Nicaragua seems no longer to have been a mutually-shared one by the time Merton left for his Asian pilgrimage. Merton's 17 August 1959 letter to Cardenal is only the first of a series of what were to become a virtual "Dear Ernesto" genre.¹⁰ In this instance he could not join Cardenal in Mexico where he was studying at Cuernavaca — problems at Gethsemani:

8. Michael W. Higgins and Douglas R. Letson, "A Conversation with Ernesto Cardenal," *Gamut* 6 (1984), pp. 30-43. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Conversation*.

9. February 13 is the date recalled by members of the Solentiname community (*Randall*, p. 48). Robert Pring-Mill records February 16 in his thorough introduction to Cardenal's *Marilyn Monroe and Other Poems* (London: Search Press, 1975), p. 18.

10. All references to the Merton-Cardenal correspondence are to material researched at the Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine College, Louisville, Kentucky. The letters file includes the Robert Pring-Mill records of the Merton-Cardenal correspondence prepared by Pring-Mill in Managua and deposited at the Merton Center.

“We have no right to escape into happiness that most of the world cannot share. This is a very grim and terrible country, and in it we must suffer sorrow and responsibility with the rest of the world.”

Still, on 8 October 1959, Merton is planning to enter Mexico on “a regular visa . . . as a permanent resident.” Undaunted by occasional setbacks, Merton and Cardenal have proceeded with their plans to establish a new foundation and have chosen as their site Corn Island, the subsequent CIA jumping-off point for the abortive Bay of Pigs fiasco. Corn Island was an isolated territory in the Atlantic, northeast of Bluefields, Nicaragua. Then, on 24 October 1959, Merton wrote to Cardenal to break the news. According to Merton, Dom James had apparently intervened and had scuttled their plans by warning the bishop of Bluefields “to steer clear of anyone who wanted to leave Gethsemani. The bishop really sounded frightened.” The advice: turn our eyes to Ometepe, a large island in the westerly region of Lake Nicaragua, and not far distant from the Solentiname archipelago. To reinforce the present thesis, Merton points out that Pablo Antonio Cuadra agrees with him that the new foundation must “be rooted in the Indian and Latin cultural complex in a very definite way.”

24 November 1959: awaiting an indult, but no news of it. Father Abbot has gone to Rome and “is evidently opposing everything with all his power.” In the meantime, “Gethsemani is *terrible* . . .” 17 December 1959: the response from Rome is negative; I “can only accept and obey.” Merton suspects that psychiatrist Gregory Zilboorg is at the root of the problem since he has advised the abbot “of my desire of solitude that I just wanted to get out from under obedience and that if I were allowed a little liberty I would probably run away with a woman.” Nonetheless, Merton has not lost his consistently-expressed enthusiasm for Cardenal or their project, consoling Ernesto that “I know we will always be united in prayer, and I assure you of all my affection and of the joy I have in our association.”

Over the next two years, Merton mentions Corn Island and Ometepe on several occasions, but centers more on poetry, peace, his headaches, and Latin America. The issue of their jointly-sponsored undertaking is renewed in earnest, however, when Cardenal is ordained a priest on 15 August 1965 and immediately sets about to realize their plan for a newly-formed religious foundation in Nicaragua. Fate and finances present the archipelago of Solentiname in Lake Nicaragua and (providentially, in Cardenal’s mind) a partially completed church on one of the thirty-eight islands. It is an opportunity which Cardenal explains to Merton in a letter from Managua dated 28 December 1965.

Merton replies to Cardenal's news on 8 January 1966, suggesting that Cardenal proceed with the foundation, that he "should do everything that is required, leaving all the rest to Divine Providence." As for his joining Cardenal in Nicaragua, Merton suggests flexibility about the timing of the petition to Rome, adding that "at present my feeling is that it should be put off until 1967." Anyway, it would be best if Cardenal, himself, got "off to a good start before I came, and meanwhile we could freely correspond about the problems and difficulties that presented themselves." For his part, Merton could foresee a major problem: "I am a North American. I know that I am not a typical North American But I do not want to be in any sense a kind of occult cultural ambassador for this society, and I cannot help being so in some involuntary sense." One year hence, in 1967, Merton explained, he would petition Rome for a six-month permission, "after which I could get the regular permission from Rome according to the usual routine."

So, as promised, by 14 October 1966, Merton is writing to give advice to Cardenal, encouraging him to accept the bishop's invitation that he become pastor to the people of Solentiname, to establish a small community with no bureaucracy, and to attract "a beautiful community of the poor around the monastery." For his part, as a sign of foundational renewal and of identification with his people, Cardenal abandoned the trappings of the traditional monastic setting, resurrecting for the communal habit the *cotona*, the traditional shirt of Nicaragua's peasants (*Randall*, p. 67). And the foundation flourished, raising Christian consciousness, becoming a center of Nicaraguan native art, the haunt of poets and professional artists, and, ultimately, a center for Sandinista revolutionaries, radicalized, as Cardenal explains, by the Gospel (*GIS*, p. 268).

3 July 1966: Gethsemani is taking control of a monastery in Chile. Now that the Trappists are in Latin America, Merton suggests, perhaps he and Cardenal will finally meet in Solentiname. But, Merton adds to temper the optimism, "Dom James believes my place is here." Warning signs of second thoughts. Then, on 15 March 1968, Merton writes to Cardenal celebrating Father Flavian Burns' elevation to the position of abbot of Gethsemani, and noting that, as a result, he may be able to join Ernesto in a few weeks. Still, Merton interjects another sign of waning interest: "It seems wrong to escape the immense rottenness, the evil, the judgment, that are inevitable here." Then Merton adds by way of further caution: "If I were to leave here, I would want to disappear completely and go where I was not known at all, and cease to have any kind of public existence

whatever." At the same time, he continues to encourage Cardenal, rejoicing that the foundation includes a married couple: it's "just tremendous. I think the whole future of monasticism depends on some broadening of perspective like this."

Finally, on 15 March 1968, Merton sees the real possibility of travel, and even of joining Cardenal in Solentiname. His enthusiasm has diminished considerably, however, and Merton begins to backtrack in the face of a long-held anticipation about to be realized. He explains to Cardenal:

I would be ashamed to be in a Latin American country and to be known as a North American. But in any case, apart from all these ideas one way or the other, it is necessary to see whether or not God really wants me there. In so many ways this seems to be the place for me, here. But I want to come to Solentiname and see what it is like, see if it seems to be where God wants me, though I rather doubt it. For one thing, I believe I would be a kind of tourist attraction, and would have to be seeing people all the time. It is bad enough here.

Peculiar ideas, these, about the comings and goings on an all-but-deserted island in the lower reaches of Lake Nicaragua, and this during the height of Somoza repression. Merton grasps for a *deus ex machina*. He is consistent, nonetheless, in his repeated expressions of admiration for the Latin American Native, in his revulsion towards North American society, and in his care to temper Cardenal's expectations concerning his own arrival while simultaneously exulting over developments in Solentiname.

Then, on 21 July 1968, Merton informs Cardenal that he is leaving for Japan, thence to Thailand, with various visits in the Far East. If, however, his travel plans do not unfold as expected, "I may get to Nicaragua for a few weeks with you." On the other hand, Merton adds — taking with the left hand what he gives with the right — Dom Flavian is thinking of starting a hermitage in California, "or somewhere hidden." Dom Flavian's proposition sounds attractive to Merton, forgetting altogether that three months earlier he had cautioned Cardenal that Gethsemani now "seems to be the place for me." Characteristically, however, Merton leaves a ray of hope: the pursuing of the California concept will rest on Father Flavian's suggested location "remaining really hidden." So, Merton concludes, "I hope to see you either in June 1969 or the following year." "Or the following year": Merton has now maneuvered a two year delay! Clearly, Merton has shoes hot to travel, but decidedly cool to travel to Nicaragua. A tragic final chapter, this, to what seemed destined to be so fortunate a tale.

Nevertheless, the association of Thomas Merton and Ernesto Cardenal was surely a providential one since they complemented one another's needs and interests so remarkably. In addition, the foundation which they

planned did not reside merely in physical structures. Solentiname, for example, provided Cardenal with the time and the resources to study the religion and society of the Native Peoples of North America, as well as to teach his people the message of Christ's love. Projects close to Merton's heart since in these people he saw the potential for revitalized social foundations and a living example of Christ's love for his people.

Thomas Merton's and Ernesto Cardenal's shared enthusiasm for the Native life-style echoes throughout their correspondence between 1962 and 1965. On 12 July 1962, for example, Merton assures Cardenal that:

It is first of all important to listen to the silence of the Indian and to admit to hearing all that has been said for five hundred years. The salvation of our lives depends on it. The thing you wrote about the San Blas Indians was marvelous. There is no doubt that you have a providential task in this work of understanding and of love, a profound work of spiritual reconciliation and atonement.

The essential redemptive and healing work which Merton feels is to be done with the Natives of Latin America begins with hearing because, he contends, the "confusion, hatred, violence, misinformation, blindness of whole populations comes from having no one to listen to them. Hence they speak with knives, as the Negroes are now doing"

Later that same year, Merton writes once more in praise of Cardenal's poetry of the Latin American Indian, noting in his letter of 17 November 1962: "I have not forgotten about the Indians and all that they mean to us both . . . : [T]he Indians . . . the poorest and humblest people . . . may remain to pray God to pardon and revive the human race." The Indians whom Cardenal is researching during his seminary studies in Colombia Merton contrasts with the "great criminals with enormous power [who are] . . . in a death struggle with each other" and who populate the rest of the world. On 25 February 1963, Merton once more celebrates the Latin American Indian, noting that it is the challenge of the greatest missionaries to "enter into the thought of primitive peoples and to love that thought and spirit as Christians, thus bringing the spirituality of these people into the light of Christ where, indeed, it was from the start without anyone realizing the fact." 10 March 1964, Merton writes to congratulate Cardenal on an interview with Yabilinguina, and to write in lavish praise of the Latin American poetic tradition:

[T]his movement of poets and artists toward a new spiritual consciousness is certainly the most hopeful thing that I have seen in the world lately We simply cannot look to the established forms and structures at the moment for any kind of constructive and living activity. It is all dead, ossified, corrupt, stinking But Miguel [Grinberg] and the poets have

shown genuine integrity and love which are the same longing for life and truth is manifesting itself everywhere at the same time and independently.¹¹

North America, Merton concludes, must learn to hear “the voices of the Andes and the Amazon.” It is a letter flowing with praise for the Native and grating with condemnation for the non-Native. Then, on 24 April 1965, Merton warns that Cardenal should expect clerical criticism for his work with the Indians. It is a caution, Merton assures him, spoken from painful experience. The warning is, in fact, a tactful follow-up to Merton’s 2 March 1965 correspondence with Pablo Antonio Cuadra in which he outlined his concern that Ernesto’s ordination was in jeopardy — Ernesto is to “stop publishing anything about the Indians at once.” Rome has been informed. On 10 May Merton consoles Cardenal once more. He too has been censored. It is friendly advice intermixed with the bitter disclosure that he feels confined to the uttering of officially sanctioned catechetical statements or to the mouthing of vacuous expressions of social pleasantries. Nonetheless, Ernesto is ordained on 15 August 1965 and proceeds both with the religious foundation as planned, and with the study of Latin America’s Native People as a foundation for a renewed social order.

Of course, Merton discussed his interest in Latin America, its people and its poets, with correspondents other than Cardenal. Stefan Baciu, for example, clearly documents this interest when he quotes, among other things, Merton’s statement that “Latin American poets really seem to me to be alive, to have something honest to say, to be sincerely concerned with life and with humanity. There is some genuine hope left in them . . .”¹² The sentiments reflect those contained in his February 1964 “Message to Poets” in Mexico City as well as in Merton’s 10 March 1964 letter to Cardenal. Ernesto Cardenal’s name appears naturally in the short list of authors provided to Stefan Baciu by Thomas Merton to verify the accuracy of his observations about poets of life and humanity (*Baciu*, p. 21), as it does in Merton’s undated “Prologo.”¹³ Similarly, Robert E. Daggy’s introduction to *Day of a Stranger*, a brief book written by Merton in response to a request from Latin America, also sketches Merton’s affection for Latin America and

11. One month earlier Merton had written his “Message to Poets” who were meeting in Mexico City and had presented them with a similar message. In that letter he exhorted his poetic colleagues: “Let us obey life, and the Spirit of Life that calls us to be poets, and we shall harvest many new fruits for which the world hungers — fruits of hope that have never been seen before” (*LE*, p. 373).

12. Stefan Baciu, “Latin America and Spain in the Poetic World of Thomas Merton,” *The Merton Annual* 2; ed. Daggy, Hart, Kramer & Kramer (New York: AMS Press, 1989), p. 17. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Baciu*.

13. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), p. 744. Hereafter referred to in the text as *CP*.

his disaffection for the culture of the United States.¹⁴ But it is Thomas Merton himself, especially in his "Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra concerning Giants," who best expresses his philosophy of life, death, and Latin America. In Merton's eyes the Latin American races reject the apocalyptic forces of Gog and Magog. Instead they take "a totally different outlook on life, a spiritual outlook which is not abstract but concrete, not pragmatic but hieratic, intuitive and affective rather than rational and aggressive" (CP, p. 380). In our inability to see in these simple people a superior rather than an inferior race, we and those who came before us have failed to "encounter Christ already potentially present in the Indians" (CP, p. 381).

It was Cardenal's concurrence with Merton's thesis which spurred him to research the sources of Latin America's Native civilization while at Cuernavaca, Mexico, and La Ceja, Colombia, which caused him to amass a library of half a million books in Solentiname from which he could contemplate the history of the Incas and the Aztecs. And it was Cardenal's personal meditation coupled with his scholar's admiration for the Native way of life which produced numerous poems about the Native People of Latin America, most of which are collected in his *Homage to the American Indian*. In it, Cardenal sings of individuals and tribes who live essentially egalitarian lives without money, without conflict (conflict being the direct result of acquisition), without walls. He sings of people living communally, reflecting a oneness with nature and with each other. He sings of "Lost Cities," of civilizations destroyed by white man's greed for power and possession.

and because there was no money
 there was neither prostitution nor plunder
 the doors of the houses stayed open
 there was no Administrative graft nor embezzlement

.....

No Indian was ever sold
 and there was *chicha* for everybody¹⁵

Because Cardenal is a Latin American poet, a poet of hope and life, his poems may well describe the destructive forces of Gog and Magog, but they will also almost invariably embody lessons of hope, of resurrection, and will often conclude with a resurrection motif:

14. Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger*; ed. Robert E. Daggy (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1981), pp. 12ff.

15. Ernesto Cardenal, *Homage to the American Indian*; trans. by Monique & Carlos Altschul (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), p. 36. Hereafter referred to in the text as *HAI*.

but in the glass case of the Museum
 the Mummy still squeezes her pouch of grain
 in her dry hand. (HAI, p. 43)

And so in the last words of "The Ghost Dance," Cardenal embraces his theme and his mentor:

and the old chief smiled sadly (and understood me)
 (fall 1965, my trip to the usa to see
 Merton and the indians). (HAI, p. 111)

In a similar way, whether knowingly or unknowingly, Natalia Sequeira, a member of the Solentiname community, echoes the resurrection motif which permeates Cardenal's poems, poems like "Death of Thomas Merton," and she anticipates the resurrection celebrations of those who fell in the Sandinista uprisings eternalized in many of Cardenal's *Flights of Victory* poems, and others.¹⁶ Speaking to Margaret Randall, Sequeira comments: "One time, someone mentioned Che Guevara. And I said: 'Che died, but he didn't die. He remains alive because there are others who follow him'."¹⁷ There is here a spirit of hope, of resurrection, a hope which inspires Cardenal to rejoice in his "Death of Thomas Merton": "At last you've reached Solentiname (it wasn't *practical*)" (*Marilyn Monroe*, p. 133). And, indeed, Thomas Merton had reached even to Solentiname.

But if the contemplative and poetic lives of Merton and Cardenal had been in some ways sketched in the stars, one might legitimately wonder whether their paths would have parted when it came to questions of Marxism and to questions of revolution. Such issues deserve more time and space than such an article can provide, as indeed do those introduced above, but we can here at least be suggestive, though hardly definitive.

Although his earlier inclinations were to call himself a socialist, with the maturing of liberation theology Cardenal began openly to declare himself a Marxist. It was no easy transition for Cardenal who had been a social activist in the 1950s, but whose "conversion" to Roman Catholicism had put him at arm's length from social revolution — Marxist theory implies revolution. In fact, Cardenal's reply to Carlos Fonseca's invitation that Cardenal join the FSLN consisted in the gift of a biography of Gandhi

16. Ernesto Cardenal, *Flights of Victory*; trans. by Marc Zimmerman (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985).

17. Randall, p. 69. For a similar resurrection motif in *Flights of Victory*, see, for example, "Flight over the Homeland without Stopover," "Landing with Epitaph," "Vision of a Face," "To Donald and Elvis," "Elvis," "A Very Screwed Up Trip," "In the Tomb of the Guerilla Fighter," "Vision from the Blue Window." It is worth noting that in his *In Cuba* Cardenal recalls that Haydee Santamaria, Director of the House of the Americas, had assured him that "If Fidel was alive, her brother, her fiance, and all the others had not died, they would live in Fidel, who was going to make the revolution" (p. 28).

(*Randall*, pp. 80-81). But his 1970 experiences in Cuba had had a profound impact on Cardenal and had convinced him of the possibility of a fusing of Christianity with Marxism. He returned from Cuba singing its praises in tones remarkably similar to his celebration of the Latin American Native. Contrasting Havana with capitalist cities he had seen, Cardenal marvels: "Here I see the immense joy of a metropolis without poor people, without misery. And the joy of everyone being equal" (*In Cuba*, p. 6). It is a city where people are given according to their needs and in which people provide according to their ability. On the relationship between capital and acquisition, he records the reflections of a Cuban companion: "There's a curious change in mentality produced in a people when you take away commercial advertising. They no longer desire to make unnecessary purchases. They no longer want to get ahead of others by buying more things or owning the best things" (*In Cuba*, p. 10). In Cuba, he says, there is plenty of money, but little to buy. As a result, there is no greed, no materialistically-based discontent, no struggle for power, no swelling of Gog and Magog. As for food rationing, the whole undertaking reminds him of his monastic asceticism. He remarks to Margaret Randall: "This system that delights you because you're a communist delights me because I find it evangelic. I also am fond of scarcity: I am a monk. I hope you will never have too much abundance. These rations are like what they eat in Solentiname" (*Randall*, p. 14). And so, Cardenal concludes: "In Cuba the new name for charity is Revolution" (*Randall*, p. 15).

Merton, of course, had provided early reflections on Marxism in his "Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra concerning Giants," but he develops his idea in detail in his Bangkok presentation "Marxism and Monastic Perspectives," recorded in *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*. In this talk he argues that, like the Marxist, the monk is by definition someone who "takes a critical attitude toward the world and its structures" (*AJ*, p. 329). Both look to the world as open to change, but "[t]he difference between the monk and the Marxist is fundamental insofar as the Marxist view of change is oriented to the change of substructures, economic substructures, and the monk is seeking to change man's consciousness." The distinction, of course, is at the heart of liberation theology, a theology embraced by Cardenal and responsible for his activity in Nicaragua. The monk, Merton adds, is one who "knows the secret of liberation and can somehow or other communicate this to others" (*AJ*, p. 333). Liberation involves a transformation of people, a recognition of the need to live the life of love: "The whole purpose of the monastic life is to teach men to live by love" (*AJ*, p. 333). At

the same time, the monk is to seek liberation from the world while simultaneously liberating the world — such a liberation involves the transformation of habit and the recognition of the Christ Who dwells in all beings. Many of these ideas Merton repeats in the preface to Cardenal's book entitled *Love*, ideals he suggests are vivified in the Solentiname community, a community "located precisely at a place where it is most needed — in Central America, where there are no contemplative religious orders."¹⁸ The opening words of *Love*, "All things love one another," teach the presence of the Word in creation, as do the young Solentiname boy's assurances to his mother: "Mother, some young people will have to die, like Christ, to end the injustice that we have in Nicaragua" (*Randall*, p. 86). Cardenal's poetic reflections dedicated to Bishop Pedro Casaldaliga make a similar point:

One arrested in the bakery.
Another one waiting for a bus to go to work.
A long-haired boy falls in a Sao Paulo street.
There is reurrection of the flesh.

In that same poem, Cardenal suggests that:

For Communists there is no God, only justice,
For Christians, there is no God without justice.¹⁹

It is a dangerous message, this fusion of contemplation and action, of love and revolution, a message which created rumors about CIA involvement in Merton's death, and which earned Cardenal an honorable mention in the CIA document *Psychological Operations in Guerilla Warfare*²⁰

It is true that the Sandinista-supported attack on San Carlos, Nicaragua, was launched from Solentiname with the support of Ernesto Cardenal, a disciple of love and admirer of Gandhi. Nonetheless, Cardenal insists that "Merton would have supported the Sandinista revolution" and adds that Merton had "told us that Gandhi had said that his method of nonviolence would not have worked in Hitler's Germany" (*Wilkes*, p. 391). It is true that Merton did praise the Danes for their nonviolent resistance to Hitler, that he did write in praise of Gandhi, and that he did reject Augustinian and medieval notions of just war, especially as they applied to a nuclear age. But it is also true that Merton did not rule out the possibility of a just war. In his

18. Ernesto Cardenal, *Love*; trans. by Dinah Livingstone (New York: Crossroad, 1981), p. 18.

19. Ernesto Cardenal, "Epistle to Monsignor Casaldaliga," *Zero Hour and Other Documentary Poems*; trans. by Paul W. Borgeson, Jr., Jonathan Cohen, Robert Pring-Mill, & Donald D. Walsh (New York: New Directions, 1980), pp. 88, 89.

20. Taycan. Translated by CRS Language Services. As presented to the United Nations Security Council by Nicaraguan Ambassador to the United Nations, Javier Chamorro Mora, 22 October 1984.

essay "Faith and Violence," in fact, Merton argued that "[t]he theology of love must seek to deal realistically with the evil and injustice in the world, and not merely to compromise with them A theology of love may also conceivably turn out to be a theology of revolution."²¹ Merton's preference was clearly for a nonviolent victory as the ideal solution to conflict since only in such a victory will one have altered the minds and hearts of one's enemies, thereby sowing the seeds for lasting peace. It is not without justification, therefore, that Cardenal insists that Merton would have supported the initiatives of the Sandinistas. It is worth observing, too, that in his open letter to the people of Nicaragua, Gaspar Garcia Laviana, missionary priest of the Sacred Heart who died in battle against Somoza's National guard, insisted that: "*This is a just war, one which the holy gospels see as good and which my conscience as a Christian says is good, because it represents the struggle against a state of affairs that is hateful to the Lord our God*" (Randall, p. 27).

One can only speculate about how Merton may have reacted to the Solentiname community's affiliations with the FSLN, since Merton did in fact not reach Latin America, Nicaragua, or Solentiname. Still, Merton's influence on Cardenal is so apparent in much of what Cardenal has done, in the philosophical positions he has taken, in the poetry he has written that Cardenal is surely correct when he observes in his "Death of Thomas Merton": "At last you've reached Solentiname."

21. Thomas Merton, *The Nonviolent Alternative*; ed. by Gordon C. Zahn (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980), pp. 189-190.