

## Introduction: From Graduate School to Gethsemani – A Pilgrimage of Prophecy and Prayer

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St. Bonaventure's represents one of the happiest periods in my life. It was a transition stage. God had something else planned for me, but it was a necessary stage.<sup>1</sup>

Thomas Merton

To see a World in a Grain of Sand  
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
And Eternity in an hour.<sup>2</sup>

William Blake

The stanza above from Blake's "Auguries of Innocence" alludes to epiphanies revealing the vastness of life in the smallest of parts. These familiar lines came to my mind when thinking about that rather small sliver of time between Thomas Merton's baptism in 1938 and his becoming a monk in 1941. Just as the whole image of a hologram can be reconstructed from its fragments, so too can the whole of Merton's story be glimpsed through this frame. As a graduate student at Columbia writing on Blake he was also honing his own poetic skill, dabbling in philosophy, mysticism, Zen Buddhism and a variety of other topics that would continue to shape his entire life. After completing his master's degree and before entering the monastery, Merton spent time in the foothills of the Allegheny Mountains teaching at Saint Bonaventure College; he sojourned in Cuba and volunteered in Harlem. That time, from graduate school to Gethsemani, proved to be a microcosm reflecting all of his perpetual desires and concerns. His instruction of undergraduate Bonnies would later be mirrored by his novitiate conferences. His foray with Friendship House in Harlem foreshadows the fiery prophet of the nineteen sixties railing against racism and a variety of structural injustices. Still in those feverish final months leading up to his becoming a Trappist, aching for eventual ordination, he was simultaneously considering an array of alternative options should

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1. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 298.

2. William Blake, *Complete Writings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957) 431.

monastic and priestly life prove out of reach. Fundamentally, it was a time of awakening to and absorbing the awesome mystery of God, the consolation of Divine Mercy.

In June of 2017 the Fifteenth General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society (ITMS) was held on the campus of St. Bonaventure University on the edge of Olean, New York. The conference title, “Overshadowed by Mercy,” pointed in the direction of Merton’s own brilliant meditations such as we find in the closing passage of *The Sign of Jonas*<sup>3</sup> or the eleventh chapter of *No Man Is an Island*.<sup>4</sup> But the title also reflected the recently celebrated Jubilee of Mercy (2016), and finally its location pointed to that pivotal time and place in Merton’s own journey. These orienting points converge in the present volume of *The Merton Annual* in powerful and surprising ways. While not all the contributions to this present volume stem directly from the 2017 ITMS conference, its location or its title, each can be introduced in reference to that pivotal period in Merton’s early life and under the topics named in the conference’s subtitle – *pilgrimage, prophecy and prayer*.<sup>5</sup>

### Pilgrimage

The geographical pilgrimage is the symbolic acting out of an inner journey.<sup>6</sup>

Thomas Merton

From Montauban to the monastery, from Prades to Polonnaruwa, Merton was a man without a home in this world, a pilgrim whose journey took him to many points of the globe. Two cities in the state of New York, vastly different, mark important points of Merton’s early pilgrimage: New York and Olean. Two of the features in this volume bring us back to this period and to these places. First, there is a collection of letters from Thomas Merton to Pat Hickman published here for the first time. **Paul M. Pearson**, Director and Archivist of the Thomas Merton Center, has compiled, edited and introduced a group of “Letters to Pat,” which first came to light in 1997, that Thomas Merton had written to his “Chicago

3. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953) 362.

4. Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955) 206-16.

5. The 2017 ITMS General Meeting’s official title was “Overshadowed by Mercy: Pilgrimage, Prayer, Prophecy.” I’ve switched the order of the topics in the subtitle here for the purpose of organizing this Introduction. I am, however, arranging the Introduction topically and not sequentially, so the order in which articles are treated here does not correspond to the order in which they appear in this volume.

6. Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967) 92.

girl” in June of 1938. Merton had begun dating Pat Hickman not long after he returned to New York following his stint at Cambridge, and these youthful and delightful letters, written while Merton was up in Olean summing with Robert Lax, provide us, as Pearson writes, “with a precious insight into the life and loves of the Merton of 1938.”

However, as Pat Hickman recalls, her young admirer was such a master of compartmentalization that even as his girlfriend she knew little about “Mert’s” life at Columbia, his college friends and what was going on with his inner journey. **Mary Frances Coady** provides a window into that richer world with her article “‘A Fire That Burns’: Thomas Merton, Catherine de Hueck Doherty and the Story of *The Secular Journal*.” Coady’s piece brings the reader back to Merton’s search for a vocation, whether it be in religious life or through Catholic action in the secular sphere. Coady’s tightly told narrative illustrates the Martha and Mary tension between Catherine and the young Tom in ways that endear them both and delight with good humor. Coady’s story covers their early relationship centered around Friendship House in Harlem, a lay apostolate founded by Catherine, then leaps to a period many years later when Catherine, hoping to raise money for a new apostolate, wants to publish a manuscript Merton had given years before. In our present age, when privacy seems to be a thing of the past, it is touchingly quaint to be reminded of how cautious and concerned not only the monks but also some of Merton’s friends were over the possible scandals that might unfold should his “*Secular Journal*” come to light.

Certainly Merton’s work with Catherine and Friendship House exposed him to the harsh and ugly side of urban squalor, but Harlem’s rich culture of music and literature fed his soul profoundly. Merton loved jazz, a genre of music with roots in the Mississippi delta yet firmly associated with Harlem’s Cotton Club in the 1930s and 1940s. Merton was a passable jazz pianist himself and tried to emulate Duke Ellington’s “stride” style with his own choppy playing.<sup>7</sup> Ellington, Django Reinhardt and Count Basie were among Merton’s early favorites, but his love of jazz continued until his death and grew to include musicians like Jackie McLean and John Coltrane. **Robert Whalen**’s “Thomas Merton and John Coltrane: Jazz and the Mercy beyond Being” examines how both the monk and the great saxophonist “arrived at a Zen-like understanding of God in part because of their love of Jazz” – a love that for each stretched back to Ellington’s Harlem and the Cotton Club. Using Merton’s affinity for

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7. In his introduction to Merton’s letters to Pat Hickman published in this volume, Paul Pearson mentions Hickman’s recollection of Merton’s piano-playing as the “choppiest” she’d ever heard.

Coltrane's music as a starting point, Whalen's piece illuminates the mercy and gratitude at the heart of both men's religious experience and shows that the leap from jazz to zen is no leap at all.<sup>8</sup>

Another Harlem connection is highlighted in **Christopher Fici's** "Larger, Freer, and More Loving: Confronting and Healing the Infection of Whiteness with Thomas Merton and James Baldwin." Baldwin, a son of Harlem, helped to give Merton a view of race relations in America from the standpoint of the oppressed. Baldwin's best known work, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*,<sup>9</sup> partly conveyed his own experience of growing up in Harlem in the '30s and was published in 1953, but his tract, *The Fire Next Time*, published ten years later, was especially revelatory for Merton.<sup>10</sup> Fici's piece explores the shared vision of Baldwin and Merton regarding the sin of racism and the specter of an ideology of white supremacy that continues to bedevil the United States today. While some respond to the Black Lives Matter movement with the "all lives matter" mantra, and the American President interprets the gesture of NFL players kneeling for the Star Spangled Banner in terms of disrespecting the flag, the prophetic message of Baldwin and Merton cries out for appropriation. Fici remains hopeful that, should we be able to embrace this message, a larger, freer and more loving world awaits us.

### Prophecy

The vocation of the monk in the modern world . . . is not survival but prophecy.<sup>11</sup>

Thomas Merton

Fici's piece is one of many in this volume that connect Merton's prophetic voice and moral vision to our times, and while Fici paired the monk with Baldwin, **M. Shawn Copeland** couples him with Martin Luther King. One of the highlights of the 2017 ITMS conference was the plenary talk given by Dr. Copeland which she has developed for publication in this

8. In his article Whalen reports that when James Harford was asked how Merton had made the leap from jazz to zen, Harford replied: "From jazz to Zen? No leap" (see James Harford, *Merton & Friends: A Joint Biography of Thomas Merton, Robert Lax, and Edward Rice* [New York: Crossroad, 2006] 237).

9. James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (New York: Knopf, 1953).

10. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dial Press, 1963). The book contains two "letters": "My Dungeon Shook – Letter to my Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of Emancipation" (originally published in *The Progressive*) and "Down at the Cross – Letter from a Region of My Mind" (originally published in *The New Yorker*).

11. Thomas Merton and Jean Leclercq, *Survival or Prophecy? The Letters of Thomas Merton and Jean Leclercq*, ed. Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002) 175.

volume. Copeland's authoritative command of the Christian theological tradition and her attentiveness to currently relevant issues regarding race in America position her as a prophet along with the protagonists she considers in "The Watchman and the Witnesses: Thomas Merton, Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Exercise of the Prophetic." This substantive and insightful essay situates the monk and the preacher in line with the biblical prophets of Israel and presents them as announcers who *still* set before us a choice and a challenge to awake from the nightmare of racial oppression and injustice and realize the dream of genuine communion.

Racism of course is not the only target of Merton's prophetic pen. Another target concerns the ubiquity and utility of modern technology. Merton entered Gethsemani in 1941, the Manhattan Project was initiated in 1942, and the world was obsessed with technological progress. As Merton observed first the creation and then the deployment of nuclear weapons he was horrified. He was equally horrified over a spreading assumption that what was technologically possible must become actual. One of the people that profoundly shaped Merton's thinking about technology and its effects on culture was the French intellectual Jacques Ellul. In "Thomas Merton and the 'Pessimism' of Jacques Ellul," **Gordon Oyer** deftly explores Merton's assimilation and critique of Ellul's insights. A few years ago, in his award-winning study of the Gethsemani Peacemakers retreat, Oyer had briefly discussed Ellul's influence on Merton's thinking.<sup>12</sup> Here, however, he explores Ellul's influence on Merton in comprehensive fashion, considering everything Merton had read from Ellul and evaluating Merton's increasing ambivalence toward it. Oyer's efforts result in a piece that significantly contributes to our understanding of Merton's broader critique of technology, a topic of growing interest today.<sup>13</sup>

Hearing the call of the prophet is one thing, and responding to it is another. Upon hearing, do we become moralistic denuncers who walk out on the world and wag fingers in its face? Or are we too called to change – to navigate a path toward the good – a path that may require getting dirty? The young Merton had to discern between Harlem and Gethsemani and between conscientious objection or military service.

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12. Gordon Oyer, *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest: Merton, Berrigan, Yoder, and Muste at the Gethsemani Abbey Peacemakers Retreat* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014); see especially 53-65, 153-66.

13. See especially Paul Dekar's chapter "Thomas Merton, Guide to the Right Use of Technology" in his book *Thomas Merton: Twentieth-Century Wisdom for Twenty-First-Century Living* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011) 85-114. See also Robert Inchausti's fine work *Subversive Orthodoxy: Outlaws, Revolutionaries, and Other Christians in Disguise* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005); Inchausti looks at Merton in his third chapter and Ellul in his fourth.

Later in life he struggled with how to resist the Vietnam War. **David Golemboski** explores Merton's struggle in his timely piece "A Mysterious Unaccountable Mixture of Good and Evil: Thomas Merton on Cooperation and Complicity." In this challenging essay Golemboski looks carefully at Merton's social critique of the Vietnam War and of the peace movement, highlighting Merton's concern that while organized resistance to war often emerges from good and noble intentions, that fact does not automatically immunize a movement against the possibility of insidious corruption. We are always vulnerable. Golemboski does not settle whether Merton overreacted when he temporarily distanced himself from the Catholic Peace Fellowship, or was too critical of the Catonsville Nine. Rather, he is interested in Merton's wise counsel not to get seduced by the temptation that arises when we take a side – namely the temptation to believe in our own moral purity and to demonize our adversaries. Merton's guarding against un-self-critical moral certainty provides a model for those who, resisting complacency, try to cooperate with grace in the construction of the concrete good.

Another quite different piece that highlights Merton's prophetic role is **Benedetto Calati's** "Thomas Merton: Gift of God for the Monks of Our Time." Calati's tribute to Merton, composed in 1978 in commemoration of the tenth anniversary of Merton's death and made available here in English for the first time, recounts how Calati had disapproved of what he took to be the early Merton's romanticized view of monasticism, but then came to admire Merton as a prophetic voice, a brother "especially illuminated by the Spirit." In his engaging introduction to this piece, **Donald Grayston** provides the fascinating back-story which illustrates in greater detail just how the Camaldolese Calati had moved "From Critique to Encomium": the "Encomium" in the title of Grayston's introduction refers to this tribute, while the "Critique" references an earlier article by Calati<sup>14</sup> that had unsettled and continued to irritate the American monk. In *Day of a Stranger* Merton interprets Calati's criticism as an *accusation* that he is living more like Henry David Thoreau than like St. John the Baptist.<sup>15</sup> Both Calati and Merton, however, understood the prophetic mission of the monk and it was Merton's later writings on social justice

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14. See Calati's article in C. Vagaggini, J. Leclercq, B. Calati et al., *Problemi e Orientamenti di Spiritualità Monastica, Biblica e Liturgica* (Rome: Edizioni Paoline, 1961). Calati's contribution to this collection contains a critique of Merton's view of monasticism, in which Calati implies that Merton's romantic view of monastic life reflects American Transcendentalism more than traditional Catholic forms of monasticism.

15. See Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1981) 31, 33.

issues and non-violent resistance that in the end won over the critical Calati. Calati's commemorative tribute, gracious and laudatory, focuses more on the later Merton whom Calati admired as a prophetic monk for modern times. As we approach the fiftieth anniversary of Merton's death, it is a gift to be able to read a tribute written by a fellow monk on the occasion of the tenth – one that reminds us of Merton's enduring relevance.

### Prayer

Sophia is the mercy of God in us. She is the tenderness with which the infinitely mysterious power of pardon turns the darkness of our sins into the light of grace.<sup>16</sup>

Thomas Merton

Merton sojourned as a pilgrim who donned the prophet's mantle because he was a person of prayer. Prayer led him and fed him. But what led him to prayer and what fed him in prayer was Divine Mercy. The next set of articles to be introduced engages this theme directly but in a variety of different ways.

**Daniel Horan's** portrayal of Merton supports the patristic maxim "a theologian is one who prays and one who prays is a theologian." In his piece "*Kyrie Eleison: Mercy at the Heart of Thomas Merton's Theology of Revelation*," Horan begins by discussing the general field of foundational theology and its subfield, the theology of revelation, illustrating its importance since the Second Vatican Council issued its Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*). From there Horan skillfully presents Merton's own theology of revelation as an exposition and explication of God's infinite Mercy. In this thoughtful and lucid essay, Horan conveys a command of the subfield and shows Merton to be a serious theologian, even a visionary, who "presciently anticipates the work of modern theologians and religious leaders like Walter Kasper and Pope Francis."

Merton's theology of revelation emerged from the depth of his prayer life. In "Divine Mercy in Thomas Merton and St. John of the Cross: Encountering the Dark Nights in the Human Soul," **Cristóbal Serrán-Pagán y Fuentes** considers Merton's tutelage under St. John of the Cross, his guide through the darkness of apophatic prayer. Through the darkening of desire which is detachment, and the darkening of the intellect which is discernment, we can be brought to encounter the Divine Mercy.<sup>17</sup> Serrán-

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16. Thomas Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 1963) 67; subsequent references will be cited as "*ESF*" parenthetically in the text.

17. See William Shannon's summary of what Merton learned from St. John of the

Pagán provides a thorough account of the great Spanish mystic's influence, indeed enormous, on the American monk – and presents Merton as an exceptionally reliable interpreter of “Sanjuanist teaching” for us today.

**Ryan L. Scruggs** examines the influence of another Doctor of the Church, the theologian Anselm of Canterbury, in his article “The ‘One Merciful Event’: Thomas Merton on Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo*.” This challenging piece explores what may seem a paradox, the near-pacifist’s profound admiration for Anselm’s satisfaction theory of atonement – a soteriology often ridiculed for allegedly propping up an image of a violent God. Scruggs conveys how Merton refutes simplistic appraisals of Anselm’s soteriology as rationalistic, juridical and bloodthirsty while illuminating a contrasting view of Anselm’s theory as a celebration of reconciliation and great mercy. Scruggs, drawing from a wide array of sources in the Merton corpus, convincingly demonstrates that Merton looks to Anselm not for a singular and definitive *ratio* for the Incarnation, but as a key to appreciating the crucifixion.<sup>18</sup> Scruggs establishes that what Merton discovers in Anselm’s treatise is not a god who needs reparation and so exacts the punitive payment of a penalty, but a God who, in the Person of the Son, responds to human violence and cruelty with mercy, forgiveness and total self-donation, thereby creating the conditions for reconciliation, making room for mercy in a fallen and redeemed world.

But the Cross of Christ requires the consent of his Mother who, as Merton wrote, “sends the infinitely Rich and Powerful One forth as poor and helpless, in His mission of inexpressible mercy, to die for us on the Cross.”<sup>19</sup> It was 1940 when Merton visited the shrines of La Soledad (Our Lady of Solitude) and Our Lady of Cobre on his Cuban pilgrimage. Following these visits, he began to develop a devotion to the Blessed Mother that would deepen throughout his life.<sup>20</sup> **June-Ann Greeley** explores Merton’s reflections on Mary not in exhaustive fashion, but precisely in terms of Merton’s appreciation of Mary as a mediator of God’s mercy.

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Cross regarding darkness and detachment in William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O’Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002) 12; subsequent references will be cited as “*Encyclopedia*” parenthetically in the text.

18. To show Merton’s responses to those common criticisms, Scruggs draws significantly from Louis [Thomas] Merton, “Reflections on Some Recent Studies of St. Anselm,” *Monastic Studies* 3 (1965) 221-34. But as he builds the constructive reading of Anselm, Scruggs utilizes much more material, demonstrating a comprehensive knowledge of Anselm’s influence on Merton.

19. “Hagia Sophia” (*ESF* 68).

20. See Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 229-30, 281-83; see also Patrick F. O’Connell, “Mary” (*Encyclopedia* 285-87).



In her rich portrait “The Mercy of God: Mary as a Mercy for Humanity and as the Mediatrix of Salvation,” Greeley draws from a representative variety of sources to flesh out this dimension of Merton’s Mariology, which accords with the Cistercian veneration of Mary as “the royal way” – the surest path to her Son with whom she stands at the center of salvation history.

At the same time that Merton was teaching at St. Bonaventure, Paul Evdokimov was working away on his doctorate in Aix-en-Provence. Evdokimov’s theological studies in St. Petersburg had been interrupted by the Bolshevik Revolution, years before, but having relocated to France he was able to resume them.<sup>21</sup> Evdokimov would become part of that important group of Russian émigré writers that Merton enthusiastically discovered in the decade of the 1950s. In his learned essay “God’s Mercy and Foolish Love: Thomas Merton and Paul Evdokimov,” **Michael Plekon** probes the story of Evdokimov’s influence on Merton and elucidates profound affinities between the two. The way Plekon presents both Evdokimov and Merton offers an entry for us into sharing their shocking and joyful discovery of the foolishness of God’s Mercy.

Once again, the last feature article in this volume is a bibliographic review of Merton-related literature and other media productions published in the prior year. **Deborah Pope Kehoe** rises to the challenge of reviewing a quite robust bibliography by having us think about perspectives. In “Five Ways of Looking at a Monk: A Bibliographic Review of 2016,” Kehoe cleverly frames Merton “within the walls,” “in touch with the times,” as a man “for the ages,” “with a widening embrace” and as a “unifier” to illuminate the ways twenty-first-century readers, critics and scholars are framing Merton. The ways he gets framed may differ widely but Kehoe reminds us that his hope-filled message proclaiming “the inexhaustibly creative power of divine love” is constant.

### Conclusion

Kehoe’s reminder of the constancy of Merton’s message is essential. It is the convincing way that Merton points toward the fullness of life and love that keeps so many people reading him today. Robert Lax once said that he often met readers of Merton who felt that Merton was speaking from inside of them. He went on to say that Merton “was so much inside himself that he was inside of everyone.”<sup>22</sup> It is good that so many people, so many of us, find ourselves by reading Merton – not to indulge in so-

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21. See [https://orthodoxwiki.org/Paul\\_Evdokimov](https://orthodoxwiki.org/Paul_Evdokimov).

22. Paul Wilkes, ed., *Merton by Those Who Knew Him Best* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984) 71.

lipsistic admiration, but in order to hope that we, along with Merton, can surrender ourselves to the Divine Mercy, the Great Compassion. Should we be tempted to despair – and temptations abound – we need only recall Merton’s troubled times, especially between 1938 and 1941. Surely the good news of God’s foolish Mercy seemed no less crazy to a young kid imprisoned in Harlem, or to a girl in a Jewish ghetto in Poland or to a conscripted soldier abandoned on the beach at Dunkirk. It was, however, precisely in those dark times, times of segregation, genocide and war, that Merton did discover the Divine Mercy, did fall head over heels in unrestricted love, did embark on the abundant life. It happened in those dark times and it happens mercifully in our own.