

# CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER IS SUBVERSIVE: READING THE GOSPEL — AND MERTON — IN JAIL

by **John Dear**, SJ

---

In Thomas Merton's *Wisdom of the Desert*, we read that a certain brother asked Abbot Moses in Scete for a word of advice. The elder said to him: "Go, sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything." A few centuries later, St. Romauld, father of Camaldolese Benedictine monasticism, told his brother monks: "Sit in your cell in paradise."

The cell I sit in, my "paradise," is a small ugly room with an open toilet and paint peeling off the walls in the Chowan County jail in Edenton, North Carolina. I share this cell with Philip Berrigan, a long time peacemaker and friend of Merton. On 7 December 1993, along with Bruce Friedrich (a Catholic Worker from Washington, D. C.) and Lynn Fredriksson (who is from Baltimore and is not a Christian), we entered the Seymour Johnson Air Force War Base in Goldsboro, North Carolina, and hammered (for less than a minute) on an FISE Strike Eagle nuclear fighter bomber. These FISEs killed tens of thousands of Iraqis fleeing Baghdad at the end of the Gulf War. They are on alert to kill people in war-torn Bosnia-Herzegovina. They are capable of killing millions of people with their nuclear weapons.

We walked on to that war base to experiment with the truth of Gospel nonviolence, to offer a symbol of disarmament as the key to our shared future, and to take seriously God's commands in the scriptures, "Thou shalt not kill!" (Deut. 5:17). "Beat swords into plowshares!" (Isaiah 2:4). "Love your enemies!" (Mt. 5:44). Our modest "plowshares" action (one of over fifty since 1980) emerged from months of prayer, reflection and community building. We are trying to be contemplatives in a violent world, people of faith and nonviolence, disciples of the peacemaking Jesus. We were arrested, jailed, tried, convicted and now await sentencing. We face ten years in prison.

So here we sit in paradise learning anew the wisdom of the desert. On our cell wall, along with pictures of Jesus, Gandhi, Dorothy Day, Oscar Romero, St. Ignatius and St. Francis hangs, a picture of Thomas Merton. Like the cloud of witnesses encouraging me to stay the course and keep the faith, Merton reminds us of the bare essentials of peacemaking — contemplative prayer, solitude, faith, nonviolence, truth, love — being our true selves, sons and daughters of God.

In the "hermitage" of our cell, Phil, Bruce and I spend hours each morning studying the Gospel. Then, we sit in silence. We offer intercessory prayers. We celebrate Eucharist (with Wonder Bread and grape juice). After joining hands for the Lord's Prayer, we exchange the sign of peace. The rest of the day is filled with reading, writing and more silent prayer. We also watch TV and talk with the guards and the other inmates.

---

**John Dear** is a Jesuit priest who works with the homeless in Washington, D.C. He is the author of *Our God is Nonviolent: Witnesses in the Struggle for Peace and Justice* (1991); *Seeds of Non-Violence* (1992); and *The God of Peace: Towards a Theology of Nonviolence* (1994). He was arrested for his part in the "Pax Christi-Spirit of Life Plowshares." His trial was held since he wrote this article and he served his sentence under house arrest at his parents' home near Baltimore. He has completed his sentence.



JOHN DEAR

Many friends have mailed in articles and books by Merton, including *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*. (Since it is hardback, *The Courage for Truth* is major contraband. Nonetheless, a guard let it through. If the jailers grasped its contents, they would quickly return it as too subversive.) Merton's wisdom and contemplative witness helps me not only to endure the oppression of jail, but to transcend it. Merton pushes me to understand this imprisonment as a grace and a doorway to peace.

From his own solitude and prayer, Merton spoke prophetically to the church, denouncing war and injustice, and announcing the good news of faith and nonviolence. I think he would support our witness, knowing that it comes from searching prayer, discussion, lifelong peacemaking, Bible study and nonviolence. Merton saw coming the crisis of violence that is now destroying our world and our souls. He understood our country's sickness, its addiction to violence, and its willingness to destroy the planet to protect its resources. In one of his letters to Dan Berrigan, Merton wrote that the destruction of the planet, like the crucifixion of Christ, will be perfectly legal. "On the day a given general or a chief of state decides to push the button on the human venture, we must understand that his act will lie within the law."

In his writings (a prayers), Merton cries out over and over against the insanity of our country's violence. To Czeslaw Milosz, he laments the sickness of this society, which "is terrible and seems to get worse" (*CT*, p. 72). "For the United States," he writes, "if it is not nuclear war that lies ahead then it is some form of fascist violence" (*CT*, p. 220). "There are certain things that have to be clearly stated," he continues on another occasion. "I had in mind particularly the danger arising from the fact that some of the most belligerent people in this country are Christians, on the one hand fundamental Protestants, and on the other hand, certain Catholics. They both tend to appeal to the bomb to do a 'holy' work of destruction in the name of Christ and Christian truth. This is completely intolerable and the truth has to be stated. I cannot in conscience remain indifferent" *CT*, p. xii).

Merton courageously proclaimed this truth over thirty years ago when few people were criticizing the US nuclear arsenal. Today, the same truth needs to be announced: the US nuclear arsenal is still intolerable. Though the Cold War is over, the Soviet Union has collapsed and communism is dead, the US will still possess 20,000 nuclear warheads after all the peace treaties have been implemented. It has no intention of disarming or distributing a "peace dividend" to the poor. There has been no fundamental "change of hearty" in the North American people. Most US Catholics still justify our possession of nuclear weapons and our willingness to use them — even without a declared enemy. Because we spend our resources on bombs and preparations for war (at over \$500 billion a year now), our cities are falling apart and the younger generation drifts about in despair. Merton saw all this coming because he took a long hard look at reality and said what he saw. He urges us to do the same.

And so we are in jail for denouncing war and war preparations and announcing the nonviolent coming of God's reign — disarmament, justice, and peace. And Merton's words speak clearly to this desert experience as well. "Do not depend on the hope of results." "Concentrate on the truth." Or his famous prayer, "My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going . . ."

To Alceu Amoroso Lima, Merton writes: "The air of the world is foul with lies, hypocrisy, falsity and life is short, death approaches. We must devote ourselves with generosity and integrity to the real values: there is no time for falsity and compromise. But on the other hand, we do not have to be greatly successful or even well known. It is enough for our integrity to be known to God. What we do that is pure in God's sight will avail for the liberty, the enlightenment, and the salvation of God's children everywhere" (*CT*, p. 188). "Our faith can no longer serve merely as a happiness pill," he observes. "It has to be the cross and the resurrection of Christ. And this it will be for all of us who so desire." Here in jail, we sit and try to heed such advice. "Find again within yourself the deep life-giving silence which is genuine truth and the source of truth: for it is a fountain of life and a window into the abyss of eternity and God" (*CT*, p. x1). "In silence and suffering, in the heartbreaking effort to be honest in the midst of dishonesty (most of all our own dishonesty), in all these is victory" (*CT*, p. 57).

From Merton, from the Gospel, from the wisdom of our cell, we hear anew the call to prayer, to dwell in the peace of Christ. We are summoned to speak the truth — that nuclear weapons are sinful; that war is never justified; that God is nonviolent; that peace is possible and seek real justice for all. We are called to a nonviolence of the heart, complemented by a simpler lifestyle, Bible study, Eucharist, community and solidarity with the poor. We are invited to believe in Christ, to trust God. Such basic Christian ingredients for life will propel some of us into conscious, active resistance to the systemic violence of our government. As our roots go deeper into Christian nonviolence (thanks to Merton), we need to enter the public arena like Gandhi, King, Day and Romero and demand real social change.

Contemplative prayer in a world of war and systemic injustice is not an isolated exercise as Merton knew more than anyone. It demands a wide-eyed political awareness of the systemic forces which are killing and oppressing people everywhere and threatening to destroy the planet. If our prayer is loving and true, it will lead us into the messy, complicated and uncomfortable struggle for justice and peace. It may even lead us to nonviolent direct action and jail.