

## “This Yes to God”: The Gospel Wisdom of Thomas Merton

By **William Apel**

“At the center of Merton’s thought was the search for God – the careful search for God’s will in the events of his life. . . . He yearned constantly for conscious union with God. . . . Well acquainted with all the great mystics of the Christian tradition, he became increasingly well informed about the spiritual masters of other traditions, never ceasing to integrate their original insights into his own thoroughly Christian identity.”<sup>1</sup>

Mary Luke Tobin, SL

“There is something left in the depths of our being which is this yes to God. . . . If we reflect and think, we sense that the whole meaning of our life consists in this yes to God.”<sup>2</sup>

Thomas Merton

During a retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani, Thomas Merton told a gathering of women monastics that “the whole meaning” of their lives consisted “in this yes to God.” “This yes to God” had not come easily for Merton. In retrospect, we know it took Merton half a lifetime to arrive at this greatest of all affirmations. Even then, as a monk of Gethsemani, he continued to wrestle with the meaning of his “yes to God.” He closely identified with the biblical Jonah and his struggles with God, but Merton was also much like Jacob whose other name became Israel – “one who struggles with God and prevails.” In fact, most of the wisdom Merton derived from the biblical narrative has to do with his “yes to God.” Within all his God-wrestling, he did find peace. As he was to share with his retreatants, this peace came to him in the person of the living Christ – the risen One, the One he experienced in “the depths” of his own being (*SC* 268, 274). For Merton, this yes to God was indeed centered in his own existential experience of the living Christ. This Christ was for him neither an abstract concept nor a church relic of the past. Rather, his Christ represented a new Reality which touched every aspect of his life.

The focus of this present discussion is the living Christ that Thomas Merton shared with the women monastics he hosted at Gethsemani. During the retreat, it soon became clear that the heart of all Biblical wisdom for Merton was the living Christ, the One who is both Love and the Beloved. Fortunately, Merton’s conferences with the nuns were taped and the recordings were transcribed and published in 1992 as *The Springs of Contemplation*.<sup>3</sup> After an overview of the retreats, we will consider Merton’s gospel message as found in the retreat talks and then explore Merton’s living Christ who is the eternal Source of his “yes to God.”

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**William Apel**

### 1. *The Retreats*

In the fall of 1967, Merton contacted his friend and neighbor Sister Mary Luke Tobin, asking for her help and inviting her participation in a project he was about to propose. In his letter to her he wrote: “I’d like to invite you to a little gathering of contemplative sisters (prioresses, really), which I am planning for early December. They need my help. You are invited to attend the conferences, and maybe you can assist in transportation and in welcoming them” (SC vii). Sister Mary Luke responded she “was delighted to help.” In retrospect, she has written that Merton – more than most – saw an acute need in the post-Vatican II Church to help women monastics to think through the many challenges and changes faced within their contemplative orders (SC vii). Mary Luke Tobin had great faith in Merton’s ability as a teacher and spiritual guide. She has noted, “Merton knew that, as a widely recognized leader in prayer and contemplative life, he had our confidence” (SC viii). The first retreat in December of 1967 did not disappoint, and its success led to a second retreat in May of 1968. It is in the final chapter of *The Springs of Contemplation* that Merton’s gospel of the living Christ is so fully expressed. The sessions themselves were much to Merton’s liking. They had no official sanction; they were open-ended; they moved freely from one topic to another; and they were informal, sometimes meeting outdoors among Gethsemani’s trees and by its lakes (see SC viii). Without question, Merton was in his glory! And it showed.

### 2. *Merton’s Gospel*

Elements of Merton’s gospel message can be found throughout his writings.<sup>4</sup> However, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, published in 1966, not long before his retreats with monastic women, provides one of Merton’s best reflections on God’s “good news.” He alerts his readers to the Gospel’s challenge: “The Gospel [the good news of God’s love in Jesus Christ] is handed down from generation to generation *but it must reach each one of us brand new, or not at all.*” For Merton, the gospel needs to be heard again and again. Its power to unsettle and disturb cannot be lost nor can its prophetic challenge and vision. Merton cautioned: “If there is no risk in revelation [the gospel itself], if there is no fear in it, if there is no challenge in it, if it is not a word which creates whole new worlds, and new beings, if it does not call into existence a new creature, our new self, then religion is dead and God is dead.”<sup>5</sup> Merton later told his retreatants that their “yes to God” had no currency without the gospel reality of a new life in Christ. This gospel changes everything. Nothing continues as it has been. All things are made new in the living Christ (see SC 269).

An example of how all things are transformed in Christ finds expression in the reading of the Bible itself. Long before his retreats with women monastics, Merton had discovered that scripture reads differently in his new life in Christ. According to Merton: “By the reading of Scripture I am so renewed that all nature seems renewed around me and with me. The sky seems to be a pure, a cooler blue, the trees a deeper green, light is sharper on the outlines of the forest and the hills and the whole world is charged with the glory of God and I feel fire and music in the earth under my feet” (SJ 215-16). In their “yes to God,” Merton and the women monastics also must have felt “fire and music” in the earth under their feet. Their “yes to God” was nothing more or nothing less than their “yes” to the living Christ within them and among them.

### 3. *The Living Christ*

Christ is alive – right here and now. That is Merton’s gospel message in a nutshell! The two most significant works on Merton’s Christ, George Kilcourse’s *Ace of Freedoms*<sup>6</sup> and Christopher

Pramuk's *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton*,<sup>7</sup> make a similar point. For both scholars, Merton's Christ is very much a living reality in addition to being the Christ of the creeds of the Church. Whether it be Kilcourse's kenotic Christology or Pramuk's hiddenness of Christ in Sophia, Merton's Christ is affirmed as the heart of his gospel message. Whatever the Church has to offer for our times, Merton believed it must begin with the living Christ once again. In accord with the Protestant theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Merton also asked himself and others: "Who is Christ for us today?"<sup>8</sup> He told his retreatants, we cannot "go ahead with confidence" until we are prepared to embrace the Resurrected Christ who lives in the depths of our being" (SC 273-74).

In Merton's presentation to his women monastic retreatants entitled "Contemplative Reality and the Living Christ," he spoke of Christ in terms of a realized eschatology. In other words, he presented Christ as one who is fully alive in the present reality of his followers. Merton reminded his retreatants that the "reality of our vocation [a new life in Christ] is not when you get back home and I get back to the hermitage. It's now or never" (SC 259). According to Merton, we meet Christ now – in our deepest selves, in the divine office and the Eucharist, among friends and in the stranger. It's either this or we do not meet Christ at all. Gathered with his retreatants, Merton declared, "This is exegesis. Sitting here, we are an exegesis of the Gospel" (SC 264). This, for Merton, was the starting point in renewal; namely, entering once more into gospel truth and reality of God's love in Christ. The rest will follow, but first comes Christ. Merton put it this way to his contemplative sisters: "By being here and by being aware of this truth, we are contributing to the next step. We're not just sitting back and watching. We are making the reality of religious life [monastic life and life in Christ]. . . . Not by doing anything. . . . we're not going to pass a single law . . . . We're not going to do anything except just decide where we stand and become more clear about it" (SC 264). This bears repeating; according to Merton, "We're not going to do anything except just decide where we stand." And for Merton, the only solid ground on which to stand is the living, risen Christ. He insisted that the Christ of Resurrection lives within us and among us. He is the rock upon which we stand.

Within the Methodist church of my childhood, we often sang, "On Christ the solid rock I stand, / All other ground is sinking sand, / All other ground is sinking sand." A simple truth – Merton put it this way to his retreatants: "The only affirmation that makes sense to commit yourself to is the affirmation of the risen Christ" (SC 268). Merton reminded his retreatants, "we are witnesses to life in the Resurrection" (SC 268). All else is secondary. The Resurrection life was the new gospel reality. It set, in Merton's mind, the spiritual and moral context for the future Church. It was this "life in the Resurrection," rather than any new programs or ecclesiastical structures, that would lead to renewal. In terms of the Resurrection, "You either take it or leave it," Merton confessed (SC 269). But it cannot be ignored. Christ lives; God's love abides; hope prevails.

Here is "this yes to God" to which Merton and the gathered women monastics dedicated their lives. Here is the heart of Merton's gospel. It is nothing new, but it is to be renewed in each new generation. It is ever old and ever new. It is the gospel of the living Christ. It is Merton's "yes to God." It is one of his greatest legacies to the present generation – a generation that is also struggling to find its own "yes to God."

1. Mary Luke Tobin, *Hope Is an Open Door* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1981) 262.
2. Thomas Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani*, ed. Jane Marie Richardson, SL (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1992) 72; subsequent references will be cited as “SC” parenthetically in the text.
3. The recordings of these two retreats have now been made available commercially: *Solitude and Togetherness* (Introduction by Fr. Anthony Ciorra + 11 Lectures: 11 CDs); *The Prophet’s Freedom* (Introduction by Fr. Anthony Ciorra + 8 Lectures: 8 CDs) (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2012).
4. Some of the most helpful books by Merton on the gospel message are *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953) (subsequent references will be cited as “SJ” parenthetically in the text); *Bread in the Wilderness* (New York: New Directions, 1953); *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1961); *Opening the Bible* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1970). See the entries on these volumes in William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O’Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002) 431-33, 30-32, 322-23, 341-42; somewhat surprisingly, the *Encyclopedia* does not include an entry for the term “Gospel” as a separate heading.
5. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 111-12.
6. George A. Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton’s Christ* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993).
7. Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009).
8. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was read by Merton and commented on in *Conjectures* (see 53-54, 59, 61-64, 109-11, 149-51, 176-77, 182-83, 230-31, 288-90, 292-93). Bonhoeffer’s famous quotation is from his *Letters and Papers from Prison*.
9. These verses of an old revival hymn from nineteenth-century America were sung in many Protestant churches – especially by youth in Sunday school – and sometimes sung in worship services as well.