

## Thomas Merton and Catholic Americanism

By David O'Brien

I am a Catholic “Americanist” who hopes to find a positive understanding of Christian responsibility in and for the country in which we live. I learned from the Catholic Worker movement and Dorothy Day the importance of living with integrity as Christians in a country often caught up in making money and war. But Dorothy Day was a very American radical; she directed me toward the radical democratic tradition in which she herself was nurtured. I always hoped that Catholic renewal in the United States would lead us to encounter that populist side of our American heritage. In that spirit I celebrated the decision of the bishops of the United States to dedicate their 1976 celebration of the bicentennial of the American Revolution to the goal of “liberty and justice for all.”

But things changed after 1976. In 1983 the American bishops called upon the American people to consider the moral dimensions of the nuclear arms race. But in the final section of their justifiably praised letter they suggested that their fellow citizens had become so “estranged from Christian values” that Catholics might soon face “persecution and martyrdom.”<sup>1</sup> I found that passage profoundly at odds with the call to join public efforts to make peace. More important, it suggested a moral separation of Catholics from other Americans that seemed dangerously sectarian for the church and unnecessarily divisive for the country. Yet, backed by Vatican moves to strengthen ecclesiastical identity and fueled by anti-abortion militancy, that assessment, with its consequent “counter-cultural” pastoral and political strategy, became normative in American Catholic discourse for the next twenty years.

It was in that context that I renewed a serious reading of Thomas Merton. At the time of his conversion Merton valued the church precisely for its distance from contemporary culture. He found that the church offered a way of life different from and vastly superior to modernity. Uniquely homeless, Merton yearned for a fully Catholic culture and found it at Gethsemani. Everything “in the world outside, was insipid and slightly insane,” he wrote. “There was only one place I knew of where there was any true order.”<sup>2</sup> In the monastery Merton found his home.

His account of that homecoming, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, was a most Catholic book, but it was a very American book as well. American life stories are usually stories about self-discovery and self-making. A century earlier Ralph Waldo Emerson asked Catholic convert Isaac Hecker whether he had been taken by the cathedrals, the stained glass windows and such. Hecker responded, “No, but by what lay behind all that.”<sup>3</sup> What Merton reported was that he too had found not only Catholicism but “what lay behind all that” – God, and through God, himself. It was a very ecumenical book in the fullest sense of that term, and a very democratic one, even though it was written at the most Catholic time of Merton’s life.

Merton moved to the center of the Catholic Church and rejoiced that it placed him, if not outside, at least on the edge of the American modernity he had come to know so well. However, in the twenty years that remained

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to him after *Seven Storey Mountain*, he came to regret the counter-cultural way he told the story. He worried that he had made himself “a sort of stereotype of the world-denying contemplative – the man who spurned New York, spat on Chicago, and tromped on Louisville, heading for the woods with Thoreau in one pocket, John of the Cross in the other, and holding the Bible open at the Apocalypse.”<sup>24</sup> If that was the place of the monk in the modern world, delighting in being outside the centers of modern history, Merton wanted no part of it. “As long as I imagine that the world is something to be ‘escaped’ in a monastery,” he wrote, “I am dedicating my life to an illusion” (*CWA* 145).

Merton could have become the premier spokesman for a modernized, sophisticated sectarian Catholicism. Instead he emerged from his plunge to the depths of the ancient Catholic tradition with an open, compassionate and generous spirit. He fought for years to enjoy solitude in a hermit’s cabin, yet he carried on an enormous correspondence and seemed to read everything. He fled the world for an authoritarian church but on that famous day at the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville came a light that shattered monastic isolation: “I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people.”<sup>25</sup> Wherever else the monk, and therefore the Christian, belonged, he or she belonged out there, with them.

Merton’s best-selling autobiography was a document of the American Catholic subculture, underlining the Catholic sense of separation and superiority. Its American spirit remained to be discovered. In the sixties, without in any sense turning his back on the faith he had made his own, Merton attempted a redefinition of monasticism, and of Catholicism, in the midst of the American people, a redefinition that would open Catholics to the deepest realities of their human experience. Merton’s new catholic sense of Catholicism seemed to enlighten everything and embrace everybody. It contextualized monastic walls, shattered subcultural boundaries, confused once clear categories and encouraged even the most sectarian Christians to listen to the experience and wisdom of others.

Merton rebelled against the ethical minimalism of just war talk and he anguished over the brutal realities of racism. He saw each public problem as a shared human problem, not a secular problem that required a Catholic answer. If one was to address the religious questions of modern man, Merton argued (with his usual use of the masculine for the whole) by merely inviting “him to enter with us into a ghetto in which the spiritual atmosphere seems grimly opposed to everything he experiences as ‘life,’ he will turn away from us in despair.”<sup>26</sup> Instead of proclaiming “the feudal and hierarchical way of life as that which is fully and authentically ‘Christian’” (*SD* 205), Merton thought the monk should dedicate “himself *unconditionally* to a radical quest for truth outside the bounds of social convention and organization” (*SD* 209).

Of course Merton was not alone in experiencing the blurring of edges and the erasure of boundaries in the twenty-year period from 1948 to 1968. The sharp separation of nature and grace, natural and supernatural, become problematic for many serious Catholics. Merton told Dorothy Day that he thought natural law was preoccupied with “the general, the theoretical” instead of “the concrete, the individual, the personal reality of the one confronting us.”<sup>27</sup> On that basis he joined her in seeking “an opening toward peace and love” (*HGL* 458). But he warned against withdrawal to a self-constructed radical edge in order to keep one’s “own life on earth untainted by wickedness.” Merton knew that civil disobedience and noncooperation were sometimes necessary, but to see them “as preferable to the risks and conflicts of public life [was] an admission of defeat, an abdication of responsibility” (*SD* 112).

The continuity in his life was a very American preoccupation with the active, seeking self, a personal, spiritual and intellectual preoccupation that forecast the religious world American Catholics would find when they left their subculture behind and made the modern world their own. Once, Merton regarded other “children of the modern world” as corrupted by pride and self-assertion. Now he feared that they lived at the precipice of meaninglessness. And he knew with all that was in him that there was meaning, to be found first of all not in “Catholicism” as an anti-modern subculture but in the God available in solitude, in the depths of the human heart and at the heart of the world.

Finding God was not easy, in the busy marketplace or in the hermit’s cabin. In the years after Vatican II it was especially difficult, Merton thought, because Christian communities that once could be taken for granted had now to be rebuilt and renewed. “The times are difficult,” Merton wrote in a Christmas letter toward the end of his life. “They call for courage and faith. Faith is in the end a lonely virtue. Lonely especially where a deeply authentic community of love is not an accomplished fact, but a job to be begun over and over . . . [in] all Christian communities.”<sup>8</sup>

Is Merton the voice for a renewed American Catholicism? Certainly he offers some alternative ways of telling the American Catholic story. In 1967 Pope Paul VI asked Merton to draft a letter from contemplatives to people living “in the world.” At first Merton hesitated, telling his superiors that “we [contemplatives] do not speak the language of modern man” and there is danger of “driving him further into despair, simply by convincing him that we belong to an entirely different world” (*HGL* 154). The monk, Merton argued, would have to speak to those outside the monastery as “brothers, as people who are in very much the same difficulties as he is, as people who suffer much of what he suffers, though we are immensely privileged to be exempt from so many, so very many, of his responsibilities and sufferings” (*HGL* 154). Others might go to the people of the world as good Samaritans, but for Merton “myself and my brothers in the world . . . are just two men who have fallen among thieves and we do our best to get each other out of the ditch” (*HGL* 155). However, on reflection Merton decided to write. He admitted that when he entered the monastery he told everyone that he was in flight from the world. But no longer. His conclusion was a stirring statement of his commitment to a public and universal, not private and sectarian faith: “I have learned to rejoice that Jesus is in the world in people who know Him not, that He is at work in them when they think themselves far from Him” (*HGL* 156-57).

Merton reminds those of us who think solidarity requires that we share American responsibilities at the centers of American life that we need our faith and our community of faith if we are to truly be at one with our people. But his story suggests that public squares and monasteries, centers and edges, may not be the starting and ending points of an historical American Catholic journey from immigrant outsiders to Americanized insiders. Instead they may be inner voices speaking from our often divided American Catholic hearts. We hope to be, with God’s grace, the Body of Christ, in church, with fellow Christians, and out of church, with everybody. And that, I suggest, is where Merton thought we are called to be, that is our own promised land, not the end of the American Catholic journey but as so often before a new, perhaps providential, beginning.

1. *The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1983) 86 (§276-77).
2. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 332-33.
3. David O’Brien, *Isaac Hecker: An American Catholic* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994) 63, 75.

4. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) 143; subsequent references will be cited as “CWA” parenthetically in the text.
5. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 140.
6. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964) 198-99; subsequent references will be cited as “SD” parenthetically in the text.
7. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 141; subsequent references will be cited as “HGL” parenthetically in the text.
8. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 107.

## Merton and Young Adults in the Wilderness

By Padraic O’Hare

I reread Robert Ellsberg’s warm and gracious twenty-fifth-anniversary remembrance of Dorothy Day recently and came across these eloquent words about why nineteen-year-old Ellsberg would leave Harvard College and head for St. Joseph House in the 1974 Bowery and stay five years and leave transformed: “I was tired of living for myself alone and longed to give myself to something larger and more meaningful.”<sup>1</sup>

Twenty years later, commenting on William Deresiewicz’s book, *Excellent Sheep*, the author’s critique of elite US schools, David Brooks writes of time spent at these colleges and universities: “Instead of being intervals of freedom they are breeding grounds for advancement. Students are too busy jumping through the next hurdle in the résumé race to figure out what they really want. . . . They have been inculcated with a lust for prestige and fear of doing things that may put their status at risk.”<sup>2</sup>

On the last day of January 2015, Thomas Merton matters to young adults (as does Dorothy of course), if we can render their striving vivid for our young adults. Merton matters if we assist young adults to get inside his yearning, his bumpy search from youth onward for authentic living, for something to give himself to which would be worthy of his sense of the eminence of his own being, a sense that warred in young-adult Merton with his self-loathing. He writes later, but in prose redolent of his own youth: “Either you look at the universe as a very poor creation of which no one can make anything or you look at your own life and your own part in the universe as infinitely rich full of inexhaustible interest opening out into infinite further possibilities.”<sup>3</sup> Merton matters to young adults if we portray him effectively as he deserves to be portrayed: a young man striving to go beyond illusion, self-absorption and the trivial, and to live abundantly, creatively, generously. I’ve taken this on for a good part of the last twenty years, offering the course “Ethical Witnesses: Dorothy



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