

Let Peace Be Your Aim: Thomas Merton, Peacemaking and *The Rule of St. Benedict*

By **Judith Valente**

I once spent a Memorial Day weekend reading *Thomas Merton on Peace*,¹ a collection of Merton's essays on peace and non-violence from the fifties and sixties edited by Gordon Zahn. The issues that perplexed Merton back then continue to plague our world today. America remains embroiled in conflicts around the world. Meanwhile, the demonic genie unleashed by the first atom bomb explosion in 1945 still hangs over the human race. As of 2018, there were 14,465 nuclear warheads in the world,² enough to kill every man, woman and child on earth.

Merton recognized more than a half-century ago that the world was moving toward globalization and increasing deadly threats. Here he is in 1961 warning against blindly following leaders who would drive us into war: "The fact that they are powerful does not mean that they are sane, and the fact that they speak with intense conviction does not mean that they speak the truth."³ Merton believed Christians must offer this global society a saner, more compassionate path – a way to life, not to mutual destruction.

"A purely individualistic inner life, unconcerned for the suffering of others, is unreal. Therefore my meditation on love and peace must be realistically and intimately related to the fury of war, bloodshed, burning, destruction, killing that takes place on the other side of the earth," he wrote in 1966 in the preface to the Vietnamese edition of *No Man Is an Island*; "everyone is involved in the lives and in the joys and sorrows of everyone else."⁴ The two world wars in his lifetime and the Vietnam War at the end of his life helped hone Merton's ideas on the roots of war – and its antidotes. But his thoughts on peace and non-violence are also the by-product of a text he encountered in his earliest days in the monastery: *The Rule of St. Benedict*. Merton considered this sixth-century text the heart of monastic spirituality. It was the focus of his series of conferences presented to the novices at the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1957-1959 and again in 1960-1962.⁵ Because of its emphasis on community, consensus-building and relationship-repair, the *Rule* offered Merton an early seed-bed in which to cultivate his ideas on peace.

St. Benedict sought first to nurture an inner peace within the monastery's individual members – through silence and prayer. It was a peace based on following the will of God – something Merton would allude to in a prayer he composed: "Grant us to seek peace where it is truly found! In your will, O God, is our peace!"⁶ It was Benedict's hope (and later Merton's) that striving for inner peace would then extend outward into a shared peace within the monastic community, and by extension, the rest of the world.

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Merton's conferences to novices begin with the person of St. Benedict. He draws largely from the pages of St. Gregory the Great's *Life of Benedict*, which traces the saint's life from his flight from the chaos of the late Roman Empire to a cave in the hills of Subiaco, to his final days at Monte Cassino (see *RSB* 16-38). Quoting a Benedictine scholar, Merton writes: "In this soul . . . where the tender and the strong, the simple and the grave, the love of work and of prayer are so excellently united, there reigned a profound peace, the peace of a man who knows that he is united to God and feels himself strong and mild through the inner power that he has from on high."⁷ The passage continues: "The peace that St. Benedict loved was certainly that which results from removal from the noises of the world. He loved the quiet of the narrow and deep valley of Subiaco . . . the peace of Monte Cassino. But there is another peace . . . it depends only on God and the soul. . . . It results from truth, from true goods, from justice, from all that which we have done and are – in ourselves and before God. This interior peace, gift of the Holy Ghost, ruled sovereignly in the soul of St. Benedict" (*RSB* 36-37).

Interestingly, there are few direct references to peacemaking in the *Rule* itself. Those that are there tend to be quotations from Scripture. Still, taken in its entirety, the *Rule* is a primer on peacemaking, and Merton treats it as such. "*Is there anyone here who yearns for life and desires to see good days?*"⁸ Benedict asks at the beginning of the *Rule*. "If you hear this and your answer is, 'I do,' God then directs these words to you: 'If you desire true and eternal life, *keep your tongue free from vicious talk and your lips from all deceit; turn away from evil and do good; let peace be your quest and aim* (Ps 33[34]:14-15)" (*Rule* 161). Benedict believed peace begins in the enclosure of the heart. "Your way of acting should be different from the world's way," he says in his chapter 4, on "The Tools for Good Works"; "the love of Christ must come before all else. You are not to act in anger or nurse a grudge. Rid your heart of all deceit. Never give a hollow greeting of peace" (*Rule* 183).

To the novices in his care, Merton repeatedly stresses that inner peace comes from submission to the will of God and from mutual obedience to members of one's monastic community. It's a somewhat ironic stance. From reading his personal journals, we know Merton was racked by inner turmoil. He's spars with his abbot.⁹ He restlessly searches for a hermitage site for himself beyond Gethesmani, in the American West and later in Alaska. He's conflicted for the better part of a year over whether to remain a monk, or leave to marry the woman with whom he's fallen in love.¹⁰ At times, Merton seems to exhibit the very characteristics St. Benedict says the peaceful person must root out. "Excitable, anxious, extreme, obstinate, jealous or oversuspicious he must not be," Benedict says. Such a person "is never at rest" (*Rule* 283 [c. 64]). *Excitable, Anxious, Obstinate* – one could argue Merton was at times all three. It explains perhaps why he stresses the importance of inner peacefulness to the abbey's novices. It is a quality Merton knew he himself had to strive for.

In both Benedict and Merton, community plays an important role in the pursuit of peace. Benedict believed a peaceful heart is shaped, strengthened and perfected within the crucible of community. He devotes fourteen chapters in the *Rule* to relationship-repair, our relationships both with others and with ourselves. The first order of business, he says, is to acknowledge our faults – not as enemies, but simply as realities. In chapter 46, "Faults Committed in Other Matters," Benedict writes, "If someone commits a fault while at any work – while working in the kitchen, in the storeroom, in serving, in the bakery, in the garden, in any craft or anywhere else" that person

“must at once come before the abbot and community and of his own accord admit his fault and make satisfaction” (*Rule* 247).

We know from his journals that Merton struggled in his relationships within the monastery. To say that Dom James Fox often rubbed him the wrong way would be an understatement. His confreres frequently frustrated him. He rebuffed the occasional efforts by some to elect him abbot. In an open letter to the community called, “My Campaign Platform for Non-Abbot and Permanent Keeper of Present Doghouse,” Merton said he did not intend to “spend the rest of my life arguing about complete trivialities with one hundred and twenty slightly confused and anxiety-ridden monks.”¹¹ And yet, Merton could exhibit remarkable patience with as well as affection for his fellow monks. In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, he writes of encountering a group of novices about to go to work in the fields “in their patched coveralls, with their white woolen hoods.” He is moved at the sight of them and the thought that “we get so much in our own way and try to carry so much useless baggage in the spiritual life. And how difficult it is to help them without unconsciously adding much more useless baggage to the load they already carry, instead of relieving them of it (which is what I try to do).”¹²

This attitude stems at least in part from the *Rule*. Benedict exhibits remarkable patience with community members who seek to leave or who demonstrate their flaws in broad cinemascopes. There is no “one strike and you’re out” policy in the *Rule*. What disturbs Benedict the most isn’t the odd transgression, but repeated patterns of bad behavior. He condemns most loudly those acts that disrupt the peacefulness of the community and disrespect the other members – things such as repeatedly arriving late for prayer or work; complaining; being argumentative; gossiping. Even so, the emphasis isn’t on punishment, but what Benedict calls “making amends” (see *Rule* 245 [c. 43]). In chapter 27, “Concern for the Excommunicated,” he writes, “The abbot must exercise the utmost care and concern for wayward brothers, because *it is not the healthy who need a physician, but the sick* (Matt 9:12)” (*Rule* 223). Repeatedly, Benedict likens the abbot to a physician who is to apply “the ointment of encouragement” (*Rule* 225 [c. 28]). Monastic leaders should realize they have “undertaken care of the sick, not tyranny over the healthy” (*Rule* 225 [c. 27]). Only after all other options are exhausted does Benedict recommend excommunication, “lest one diseased sheep,” he explains, “infect the whole flock” (*Rule* 225 [c. 28]). Still, he says, the abbot or prioress should use prudence and avoid extremes in confronting a community member: “otherwise,” he writes, “by rubbing too hard to remove the rust, he may break the vessel” (*Rule* 283 [c. 64]). The kinds of peacemaking practices Benedict espoused in the sixth century are being used in our own time. Increasingly today, the criminal system is opting for “restorative justice.”¹³ I believe it is a practice Merton would endorse if he were alive today. Rather than solely punish people, restorative justice seeks to repair the harm done, especially in non-violent and juvenile cases. It focuses less on blame than on obtaining an admission of responsibility, and an effort to make amends.

Finally, much of the impetus for peacemaking found in the Benedictine *Rule* comes from a much-misunderstood concept: humility. Merton called Benedict’s chapter 7, on humility, “the *supernatural* heart of the *Rule*” (*RSB* 160). We might call humility the heart of Merton’s views on peace and non-violence. Benedict’s writing on humility “should be *known* most thoroughly by every novice” (*RSB* 153), Merton writes. It should be frequently meditated upon, he says, because its teaching contains “*the solution of many of our most difficult problems*” (*RSB* 153). Benedict

aligns peacemaking with Jesus' words in the gospel of Luke: "*Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted*" (Rule 191 [c. 7]). (What war has not begun as a result of some leader or some country exalting itself above another?) Benedict likens the pursuit of humility to climbing a ladder by way of twelve steps, or "degrees." Each one serves as a rung leading toward the summit of an interior journey.

The first step of humility (see *RSB* 173-81) is to recognize that "fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov. 1:7) (*RSB* 174). Many prefer to translate this phrase from the Psalms as *reverence* of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. The first degree of humility reminds us we are to shun sin, and keep "*a constant consciousness of the last things*" (*RSB* 174), as Merton puts it, in which we will have to give an account for our actions in life. About this first step, Merton writes, God "*sees with love . . . The thought that Love sees me is a deterrent from sin. Shall I hurt Him Who loves me infinitely?*" (*RSB* 177).

The second degree (see *RSB* 182-83) is similar: that we consider not our own will and desires, but the will of God. "God's will is that *which is most common*," Merton writes; "it embraces not only our own private good but at the same time the good of others, the good of the universe, and the glory of God" (*RSB* 178). It "puts us on our guard against *judging all things in terms of our own comfort and convenience* – our own private good" (*RSB* 182).

The third step (see *RSB* 183-85) involves obedience to a superior – to one who represents Christ, particularly in the monastic community. Here too the motive is love, rather than fear. The result, Merton says, is an emptying of the "*worldly self*" in "imitation of Christ" (*RSB* 185).

The fourth step (see *RSB* 186-89) is to endure difficult, unfavorable and even unjust conditions with a spirit of patience. In essence, the fourth step calls for a non-violent approach to redressing the world's injustices: "if he is strong and mature a man can grow in trial and humiliation and emerge with greater dignity as a result" (*RSB* 186-87), Merton writes. This is the epitome of Gandhi's embrace of non-violent protest to overthrow British rule in India, and Martin Luther King's adoption of non-violence principles in the American civil rights movement.

The fifth step of humility (see *RSB* 190-93) is to confess one's faults as a means of amending them. But then one has to go farther. One has to be willing to submit to guidance from a trusted spiritual advisor.

The sixth degree (see *RSB* 194-201) is to be content with what is simple, even poor. This step speaks particularly to our modern culture of materialism and acquisition.

The seventh degree (see *RSB* 201-205) is usually where we in the modern era begin to part ways with Benedict's path toward humility. The seventh step asks us to not only admit our mistakes, but to be convinced we are inferior to everyone else. It's an idea that clangs dissonantly in the modern ear. Even Merton writes, "This appears to us today as a scandalous statement. We are so unused to such things" (*RSB* 201). Still, Merton calls the sixth and seventh degrees the stuff that makes a person a saint.

We must understand it not as a morbid comparison of oneself with everyone else, always ending up with oneself at the bottom of the pile. . . . Hence in this degree one does not morbidly reproach himself as inferior, but he gladly recognizes a superiority in the other, and rejoices in this superiority with perfect selflessness, not groveling before it, but accepting it with joy and praise. (*RSB* 202)

Then Merton adds: “*The humble man does not regard himself as the last in a collection of criminals but the last in a community of saints*” (RSB 203).

The eighth, ninth, tenth, eleventh and twelfth degrees of humility (see RSB 205-14) concern the exterior habits and demeanor of the humble person – things such as walking with one’s eyes downcast, not engaging in cynical or sarcastic laughter, not complaining. Merton says, however, that these behaviors have little or no meaning unless they are founded on an interior humility.

Merton concludes his exploration of the Benedictine *Rule* by noting that all steps on the ladder to humility lead to charity (see RSB 214). They lead to “a spirit of peace” (RSB 213) as well – interior peace and peaceful relations among people. It is the reason why *The Rule of St. Benedict* remains a timeless source of wisdom for those of us living today who seek to make peace *our quest and our aim*.

1. *Thomas Merton on Peace*, ed. Gordon C. Zahn (New York: McCall, 1971); issued in slightly revised form as Thomas Merton, *The Nonviolent Alternative*, ed. Gordon C. Zahn (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980).
2. Data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), available at: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/06/the-state-of-the-world-s-nuclear-arsenal-in-3-charts>.
3. “A Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra concerning Giants,” in Thomas Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 1963) 71-72; and Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 373-74.
4. Thomas Merton, “*Honorable Reader*”: *Reflections on My Work*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 124.
5. Thomas Merton, *The Rule of Saint Benedict: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* 4, ed. Patrick F. O’Connell (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2009); subsequent references will be cited as “RSB” parenthetically in the text. The *Rule* is also an important topic in other sets of novitiate conferences: see Thomas Merton, *Monastic Observances: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* 5, ed. Patrick F. O’Connell (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2010) and Thomas Merton, *The Life of the Vows: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* 6, ed. Patrick F. O’Connell (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2012).
6. Thomas Merton, *A Thomas Merton Reader*, ed. Thomas P. McDonnell, rev. ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Image, 1974) 284; see Thomas T. Spencer, ““And God’s Forgiveness”: Frank Kowalski and Merton’s Prayer for Peace,” *The Merton Seasonal* 31.4 (Winter 2006) 9-13; and James G. R. Cronin, “A Nation under Judgment: Thomas Merton, Frank Kowalski and the Congressional Peace Prayer,” *The Merton Annual* 28 (2015) 30-39.
7. Idesbald Ryelandt, OSB, *St. Benedict the Man*, trans. Patrick Shaughnessy, OSB (St. Meinrad, IN: Grail, 1950) 51, quoted in RSB 36.
8. *RB 1980: the Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English with Notes*, ed. Timothy Fry, OSB et al (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1981) 161 (quoting Ps. 33[34]:13); subsequent references will be cited as “*Rule*” parenthetically in the text.
9. See Roger Lipsey, *Make Peace Before the Sun Goes Down: The Long Encounter of Thomas Merton and His Abbot, James Fox* (Boston: Shambhala, 2015).
10. See Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997).
11. Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: Letters on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990) 356.
12. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 45-46.
13. See for example the website for the Centre for Justice and Reconciliation; available at: <http://restorativejustice.org/restorative-justice/about-restorative-justice/#sthash.09PIXH1h.t0vNgbxf.dpbs>.