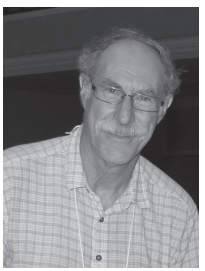
Thomas Merton on "The Wilderness of Compassion"

By **Paul R. Dekar**

Journaling on June 13, 1951, Thomas Merton wrote that he sat on "the threshold of a new existence." He observed, "The one who is going to be most fully formed by the new scholasticate is the Master of the Scholastics. It is as if I were beginning all over again to be a Cistercian . . . . The only essential is . . . God Himself."[1] What prompted Merton's awareness that he was about to become a monk different than the one who had already spent almost a decade at the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani? Biographer Michael Mott suggested that Merton was experiencing a "stability crisis" engendered in part by his struggle with the popularity of *The Seven Storey Mountain*.[2] Biographer William H. Shannon proposed that what was going on in Merton, especially before 1958, the year of his mystical vision in Louisville,[3] was the "ripening intuition" of "a sense of oneness begetting responsibility," rooted in his "maturing prayer life," culminating in the epiphany amidst the people of Louisville that "challenged the concept of a separate 'holy' existence that made him, because he was a monk, different from all of them. He experienced the glorious destiny that comes simply from being a human person and from being united with, not separated from, the rest of the human race."[4]

For Merton the human/divine contrast was altogether crucial. He lived within a world the Holy One had created and has sustained. Unless he understood himself rightly, as a person, Merton could not become a saint. He welcomed his new assignment as Master of Scholastics as an opportunity to shape younger monks and also to "live as a member of a human race" (*ES* 451 [3/3/1951]). Merton may have entered the Abbey of Gethsemani as a "flight from the world,"[5] but a decade later, he had come to understand his monastic vocation positively. Specifically reflecting on his first months as Master of Scholastics, Merton saw this period as a time during which he had looked into the hearts of younger monks, taken on their burdens, stumbled a lot, and discovered that "the kind of work I once feared because I thought it would interfere with 'solitude' is, in fact, the only true path to solitude." He concluded, "Everything that affects you builds you into a hermit, as long as you do not insist on doing the work yourself and building your own kind of hermitage." He asked,

> What is my new desert? The name of it is *compassion*. There is no wilderness so terrible, so beautiful, so arid and so fruitful as the wilderness of compassion. It is the only desert that shall truly flourish like the lily. It shall become a pool, it shall bud forth and blossom and rejoice with joy. It is the desert of compassion that the thirsty land turns into springs of water, that the poor possess all things. There are no bounds to contain the inhabitants of this solitude in which I live



Paul R. Dekar

Paul R. Dekar, Professor Emeritus of Memphis Theological Seminary, is active with the International Thomas Merton Society and Canadian Friends Service Committee. Publications include T*homas Merton: Twentieth-Century Wisdom for Twenty-First-Century Living* (2011) and *Dangerous People: The Fellowship of Reconciliation Building a Nonviolent World of Justice, Peace, and Freedom* (2016).

> alone, as isolated as the Host on the altar, the food of all men, belonging to all and belonging to none, for God is with me, and He sits in the ruins of my heart, preaching His Gospel to the poor. (*ES* 463)

Exploring this passage,[6] we find Merton freed from monasticism as escape several years before his Louisville epiphany. Merton did not come easily to this self-understanding. He characterized his journey through a "wilderness of compassion" as a struggle, a prelude to something he could not have anticipated. Merton may have hoped that love and trust would triumph over fear and hatred, that people could work together to forge a world of peace with justice. He had grown to realize that such dreams do not materialize, at least not for most of us, without a deep spirituality.

As early as his student years at Oakham, Merton supported nonviolent *Satyagraha* (truth-force) that marked Gandhi's efforts to lead India to independence.[7] Merton continued to decry violence and entered the monastery in part as an act of resistance to the Second World War. At the time Merton wrote of his wilderness of compassion, the United States was at war in Korea. Merton felt called to protest such inhumanity. Although ordered, years later, not to write on such issues, he did not cease to brood about war. How could he not? After all, Strategic Air Command planes flew over his valley daily at 3:30 a.m. "loaded with strong medicine. Very strong. Strong enough to burn up all these woods and stretch our hours of fun into eternities."[8]

The wilderness of compassion theme pervaded Merton's prodigious literary output. For example, in *Bread in the Wilderness*, sections of which first appeared in *Orate Fratres* in 1950, Merton explored the liturgical prayer of the monk as "*one of the great pacifying influences in a life that is all devoted to serenity and interior peace*" (*BW* 3). In a chapter entitled "The Shadow of Thy Wings," with a section on "The Silence of the Psalms," Merton focused on descriptions by the Psalmist of times of trouble, suffering, misery, darkness or undertow. Yet Merton concluded that the Psalms "contain within themselves the silence of high mountains and the silence of heaven" when "Christ must still perforce travel among us as a pilgrim disguised in our own tattered garments" (*BW* 129). In *The Wisdom of the Desert*,[10] an expanded version of a book first published in 1959,[11] Merton identified with the early Christian hermits who abandoned the cities of late antiquity to live in solitude in the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, Arabia and Persia. Asking why they did this, Merton summarized in one word, "salvation" (*WD* 3). Yet even as monks fled to the desert to find the Holy during a time of the falling apart of things – characterized by historian Peter Brown as "confusing . . . a minefield with the snares of the devil" – they created a structure that "quite surpassed any of the organizational ventures of the late Roman state."[12]

In his role as Master of Scholastics (1951-1955), and subsequently as novice master (1955-1965), Merton gave conferences on the monastic tradition. We are indebted to Patrick F. O'Connell, who has edited numerous volumes of these conferences, many of which are also available in audio form. A few passages will illustrate Merton's focus on compassion. "The soul united to God in perfect love has no more anger, and hence does not judge sinners but has only compassion for them."[13] Heads of monasteries are "to have St. Paul's zeal and compassion . . . and to realize that in saving the souls of his monks he is saving his own soul."[14] Psalm 50[51] is the fourth of the penitential psalms, "*the psalm par excellence of Christian compunction*. . . . *God's*

pardon is not merely exterior, but it brings with it an interior transformation . . . . [God] looks upon us with fatherly compassion . . . the Spirit of His love takes over and rules our lives. He thus becomes the shepherd of our souls again. Then we taste the joy of His salvation."[15]

In his long-lost essay "In the Wilderness,"[16] originally written as a chapter for *No Man Is an Island*, Merton characterized wilderness, a word synonymous with desert, as a locale of aloneness and physical solitude. Such a place can be either dangerous – one of suffering, darkness, poverty, and frustration – or an earthly paradise. To find oneself in a wilderness where one can be unknown, and allowed to remain alone, can be an opportunity to do more good for the human race than is possible as a prisoner of society. As Merton wrote, there were times when life seemed precarious. No more or less than anyone, monks worried. "There are times when he cannot even think, except to think that he is probably going crazy" (6). Merton found an antidote to his dis-ease with the ways of the world by an interior solitude which can be had without physical isolation. As he entered his second decade in the monastery, Merton's journey inward was deepening. His abbot granted him permission to spend periods of time at a hermitage, an old woodshed that Merton dedicated to St. Anne (see *SS* 29-30 [1/14, 1/28, 2/9/1953]). While this met Merton's need for greater solitude it also, paradoxically, positioned him to play a significant role in and beyond the Church.

On February 21, 1965 Merton advised his friend Jim Forest to free himself from domination by causes, however just, and to live into Christ, trusting God to make something good from situations we cannot necessarily know all about beforehand.[17] He later described this role:

> My own peculiar task in my Church and in my world has been that of the solitary explorer who, instead of jumping on all the latest bandwagons at once, is bound to search the existential depths of faith in its silences, its ambiguities, and in those certainties which lie deeper than the bottom of anxiety. In these depths there are no easy answers, no pat solutions to anything. It is a kind of submarine life in which faith sometimes mysteriously takes on the aspect of doubt . . . . On this level, the division between Believer and Unbeliever ceases to be so crystal clear. It is not that some are all right and others are all wrong: *all* are bound to seek in honest perplexity. Everyone is an Unbeliever more or less! Only when this fact is fully experienced, accepted and lived with, does one become fit to hear the simple message of the Gospel – or of any other religious teaching.[18]

To summarize, years before his Louisville epiphany, Merton had already crossed into a "new existence" (*ES* 460), and invites us to do the same. I first read Merton during the early 1960s as an undergraduate at the Berkeley campus of the University of California. I frequented City Lights bookshop near San Francisco's Chinatown and North Beach neighborhoods, a gathering place for writers identified with the Beat movement, such as Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs.[19] I bought several Merton books on social issues: *Gandhi on Non-Violence*,[20] *Original Child Bomb*[21] and *Faith and Violence* among them. At the time, I was unaware of Merton's writings on contemplation. After graduation from Berkeley, I attended Colgate Rochester Divinity School, where key teachers for me were church historian Winthrop S. Hudson

and William Hamilton, critic of traditional Christian theology and – with other theologians – prominent in the so-called "death of God" movement. They encouraged me to undertake a retreat at Mount Saviour monastery in Pine City, New York. Merton described the abbey and its founder in his survey of various monastic houses as follows: "nourished by the purest sources of monastic tradition, a student of Scripture and the Fathers, Dom Damasus has attempted to return to the primitive simplicity of St Benedict." Merton explained that, until the founding of Mount Saviour, "North America had only known the Benedictines of the great missionary congregations." The need now is for "the particular kind of monastic life" of Mount Saviour.[22]

In my student years, Merton, Hamilton, Anglican Bishop John A. T. Robinson, author of *Honest to God* (1963), and others aroused a storm of controversy. So too, more recently, has Gretta Vosper, pastor of West Hill United Church of Canada in Scarborough, whose removal from pastoral duties was sought last year.[23] For yet another controversial cleric, John Shelby Spong, Vosper represents a world of "new Christian possibilities . . . and . . . . penetrating insights [for] a new generation of spiritually aware and spiritually open people."[24] Prophetic voices, then and again, are shaping renewal in the Church and world. During a speech before a joint session of the United States Congress in 2015, Pope Francis named Thomas Merton, along with Dorothy Day, Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr., as persons who have lived out real fundamental values that will engender creative responses to the myriad tensions and conflicts of the day.[25] Their legacies will offer resources as we move forward with dignity, working for healing of our deepest divisions, and solutions to our pressing crises.[26]

1. Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer. Journals, vol. 2: 1941-1952*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 460; subsequent references will be cited as "*ES*" parenthetically in the text.
2. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984) 273; subsequent references will be cited as "Mott" parenthetically in the text.
3. For this famous epiphany at the corner of Fourth and Walnut on March 18, 1958, see Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life. Journals, vol. 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 181-82 (subsequent references will be cited as "*SS*" parenthetically in the text) and Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 140-42.
4. William H. Shannon, *Thomas Merton's Paradise Journey: Writings on Contemplation* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2000) 249.
5. Thomas Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness* (New York: New Directions, 1953) 11; subsequent references will be cited as "*BW*" parenthetically in the text.
6. For a discussion of this passage see Michael Brennan, "Walking with Thomas Merton," in Gray Henry and Jonathan Montaldo, eds., *We Are Already One: Thomas Merton's Message of Hope* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2014) 321-22.
7. See Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964) 223-24; see also Mott 60; Paul R. Dekar, "Gandhi, Thomas Merton and the 'Uprising' of Youth in the 60s," *The Merton Seasonal* 31 (Winter 2006) 16-23 and Paul R. Dekar, *Thomas Merton: Twentieth-Century Wisdom for Twenty-First-Century Living* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011) 141-50.
8. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 14.
9. For an overview of this book, see Christine M. Bochen, "*Bread in the Wilderness*," in William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O'Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002) 30-32.
10. Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings from the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century* (New York: New Directions, 1960); subsequent references will be cited as "*WD*" parenthetically in the text..

11. Thomas Merton, *What Ought I to Do? Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Lexington, KY: Stamperia del Santuccio, 1959).
12. Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity: AD 150-750* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971) 99; see also his "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971) 80-101.
13. Thomas Merton, *Cassian and the Fathers: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition*, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2005) 113.
14. Thomas Merton, *Pre-Benedictine Monasticism: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* 2, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2006) 118.
15. Thomas Merton, *Monastic Observances: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* 5, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2010) 96-97.
16. Thomas Merton, "In the Wilderness," *The Merton Seasonal* 40.2 (Summer 2015) 3-8.
17. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 294-97.
18. "Apologies to an Unbeliever," in Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence, Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* ((Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 213.
19. For Merton's visit to the bookstore on May 15, 1968 and his time spent with its owner, poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti, see Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey. Journals, vol. 7: 1967-1968*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998) 101-102 and Paul Wilkes, ed., *Merton by Those Who Knew Him Best* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984) 29-31. For a recent account of Merton and the so-called "beat" poets, see the essays in Ron Dart, ed., *Thomas Merton and the Counterculture: A Golden String* (Abbotsford, BC: St. Macrina Press, 2016) (reviewed by Deborah Kehoe, *Merton Seasonal* 41.3 [Fall 2016] 45-47).
20. Thomas Merton, ed., *Gandhi on Non-Violence: Selected Texts from Non-Violence in Peace and War* (New York: New Directions, 1965).
21. Thomas Merton, *Original Child Bomb: Points for Meditation to Be Scratched on the Walls of a Cave* (New York: New Directions, 1961).
22. Thomas Merton, *The Silent Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1957) 91-93.
23. See https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2016/09/11/flock-sticks-with-atheist-united-church-minister.html.
24. John Shelby Spong, Foreword to Gretta Vosper, *With or Without God. Why the Way We Live Is More Important than What We Believe* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2008) xv-xvi.
25. Pope Francis, "Address of the Holy Father to a Joint Session of the United States Congress – September 24, 2015," *The Merton Annual* 28 (2015) 16-23.
26. An earlier version of this essay was presented at the Fifteenth General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society in June 2017 at St. Bonaventure University, Olean, NY.