

**Thomas Merton: Witness to Peace**  
LF 677/877: January 5-8 Intensive  
Lexington Theological Seminary  
Dr. Christopher Pramuk / Regis University

*The more I am able to affirm others, to say “yes” to them in myself, by discovering them in myself and myself in them, the more real I am. I am fully real if my own heart says yes to everyone.*

~ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*

*“It was Merton who first introduced me to the real meaning of the word ‘Christian.’”*

~ His Holiness the Dalai Lama

The Roman Catholic Trappist monk and spiritual writer Thomas Merton (1915-1968) is widely celebrated as one of the most important religious figures of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This seminar offers an intensive engagement with Merton’s autobiographical and spiritual writings as well as his prophetic social essays on war and peace, race relations, interfaith dialogue, and communion with God through the natural world. It is hoped that students will not just “study” Merton critically but will be invited to engage his writings personally and holistically, “through the eyes of the heart,” and further to consider the enduring pastoral implications of Merton’s witness to Christian faith and critical social engagement in our times.

## Learning Objectives

### *Intellectual*

1. To understand the historical and social context of Merton’s life and writings, from his youth and decision to become a Catholic and a Trappist monk in 1941, to his death in 1968. What were the forces at play in the world and in the Roman Catholic Church both before and after Vatican II that shaped Merton’s spiritual and theological worldview?
2. To engage Merton’s autobiographical and spiritual writings, as well as select essays on war, nuclear proliferation, race relations, and interfaith dialogue, and to explore the implications of his thought for our lives today. Why are so many people, and very different kinds of people, still drawn to Merton?

### *Spiritual*

3. To cultivate sacred reading/prayer practices such as *lectio divina* as a way of embodying a deeper sense of divine presence and compassion in our everyday lives, work, and relationships. What can Merton teach us about “finding God in all things,” even in a world riven by suffering and violence?

### *Practical*

4. To provide each student the opportunity to become especially conversant in one aspect of Merton’s thought and to articulate its relevance in the context of their own spirituality, pastoral ministry, and vocation. What do you find most compelling in Merton’s writings, and why?

## Spiritual Writer, Public Intellectual, and Witness to Peace

As a Trappist monk, mystic, poet, and spiritual writer, Merton was and remains one of the most influential Catholic public intellectuals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His writings engage the classical Christian and Catholic tradition, even while expanding the boundaries of the tradition in daring ways, as in his remembrance of the sacred feminine and mystical-poetical translation of the Wisdom-Sophia theology of the Christian East. Merton's prophetic essays on racism, war, nuclear proliferation, poverty, and economic injustice address contemporary ethical and social justice issues that pertain to the service of the common good. His outreach to practitioners of non-Christian religious traditions well before the Catholic Church endorsed such outreach at Vatican II has made him an internationally celebrated witness to peacemaking and the transformational potential of interfaith dialogue.

By focusing in their final project on a particular theme in Merton's writings, students will apply the critical reading skills encouraged in the course to a particular aspect of their life or pastoral ministry, as well as their capacity for contemplative engagement with the mystical and prophetic traditions through their *lectio divina* journals. The tools of critical inquiry and contemplative imagination modeled by Merton himself and practiced together in the classroom environment will build on the intellectual, spiritual and practical foundations endemic to a Lexington Theological Seminary education and holistic formation for ministry.

### Primary Texts (required selections detailed in course calendar below)

1. Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master [TMSM]*, ed. Lawrence Cunningham (Paulist, 1992)
2. Thomas Merton, *A Book of Hours*, ed. Kathleen Deignan (Sorin Books, 2007)
3. Select essays (PDFs provided) in T. Merton, *Passion for Peace: Reflections on War and Nonviolence*

### D Min Students: Additional Required

1. Gregory Hillis, *Man of Dialogue: Thomas Merton's Catholic Vision* (Liturgical, 2021)

### Secondary Resources and Video (provided via Canvas)

1. Christine Bochen, "Awakening the Heart," in *Thomas Merton: Essential Writings*
2. "Merton: A Film Biography," dir. Paul Wilkes (PBS, 1986)
3. "Soul Searching: The Journey of Thomas Merton," dir. Morgan Atkinson (Duckworks, 2006)
4. "Tuesdays with Merton" YouTube Channel – select lectures plus Q/A with leading Merton scholars

### Additional Resources

Merton Collection at Bellarmine University: [www.merton.org](http://www.merton.org)

- Searchable database of manuscripts, drawings, photographs, audio recordings, etc.
- International Thomas Merton Society (ITMS) - Facebook page and membership information at [merton.org](http://merton.org)
- *The Merton Annual* (biannual academic journal) and *The Merton Seasonal* (quarterly newsletter with articles and updates on retreats, publications, other ITMS happenings)

By Christopher Pramuk:

- *At Play in Creation: Merton's Awakening to the Feminine Divine* (Liturgical, 2015)
- *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Michael Glazier/Liturgical, 2009)

## Classroom Atmosphere: Curiosity, Openness, Generosity

*We are going to have to create a new language of prayer. And this new language of prayer has to come out of something which transcends all our traditions, and comes out of the immediacy of love. . . the love that unites us in spite of real differences.*

~ Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*

In keeping with Merton's witness to mutual understanding across all kinds of differences, I hope that together we can cultivate an open and inclusive environment in the classroom that values the contributions of all participants. As your professor, or better, your guide and co-learner in our study of Merton, I am committed to the belief that our various identities and experiences—including but not limited to age, gender, race/ethnicity, class, disability, sexual orientation, religion and other forms of human difference—reflect our shared source and destiny in the mystery of God, and contribute uniquely to the vitality of the learning community. I hope to maintain an atmosphere of generosity, with respect and reverence for the diverse faith traditions we all bring to the table; I promise careful preparation of each session of this course, and every effort to make this class interesting, challenging, and enjoyable. Any questions or concerns you have before, during, or after the in-person portion of the course, please don't hesitate to reach out to me directly, via my Regis University email: cpramuk@regis.edu.

**Requirements:** Each student is expected to:

1. Prepare readings carefully, attend all in-person sessions, and participate actively in seminar discussions. **Keep a regular Journal** for *lectio divina* ("sacred reading" or meditative note-taking), recording thoughts, insights, and images from the readings and other resources wherever they strike you.
2. Submit **three Journal entries** in response to primary texts in Merton before the course (by Jan 1); and **three additional entries** after the course (no later than Feb 9). Each entry no more than 400-500 words each. Guidelines for *lectio divina* and journaling are provided below.

**D Min students:** submit **four Journal entries** (400-500 words) before the course (by Jan 1); and **four more entries** after the course (by Feb 9); **at least two of these eight entries** should be in response to your reading of *A Book of Hours* (Deignan) or *Man of Dialogue* (Hillis).

3. Complete a **Final Project: Presentation with PowerPoint (due Feb 9/ guidelines below)** focusing on a theme in Merton in dialogue with your own spiritual journey and/or pastoral ministry.
4. **D Min students: "Pastoral Book Review"** on Deignan or Hillis (due **Feb 16/** guidelines below)

## Grade summary

[20%] Pre-course journals (3) / D Min students (4) – due Jan 1

[20%] Attendance+ active seminar participation

[20%] Post-course journals (3) – D Min students (4) – due Feb 9

[40%] Final project: Presentation with PP (due Feb 9)

+ D Min students: Final project [30%] due Feb 9 + Pastoral Book Review [10%] due Feb 16

## Grading scale

	B+ = 89-87	C+ = 79-77	D+ = 69-67	F = 59 and below
A = 100-93	B = 86-83	C = 76-73	D = 66-63	
A- = 92-90	B- = 82-80	C- = 72-70	D- = 62-60	

**“Seeing with the Eyes of the Heart”  
A Contemplative Approach to Reading & Journaling**

To look wholly means that my whole person reacts. Not only my mind, but my eyes and ears, smelling and touching and tasting. . . Contemplation is not study, not cold examination, not a computer. To contemplate is to be in love.

~ Walter Burghart, SJ

Thomas Merton kept extensive journals, making notes on books he was reading, biblical passages, his experiences of God in prayer, liturgy, in the natural world and in the dance of human relationships. You are asked to do something similar by keeping a *lectio divina* (sacred reading) journal while engaging with the primary and secondary materials in this course. Meditative reading and journaling invites you, in the first place, to *slow down* and to place yourself as much as possible in an environment conducive to quiet reflection. You might think of contemplative practices of reading and journaling as your act of periodic resistance to the “rat race,” your protest against the non-stop activity of contemporary life. Your journal entries are not meant to be formal or “academic” in the sense of analyzing the readings so much as forums to allow the readings to open up reflection on your experience in a deep, holistic way.

The following is a simple method for getting “inside” the life-world of another or the particular “text” at hand *in a holistic way*. The following method can be adapted to your reflection on Merton’s writings for this course.

**Linger, savor, and attend.** Read the text in a quiet environment. Allow yourself to *linger* over a single image, phrase, sentence, or idea. Let it stop you, penetrate your heart, rest in it, enjoy it, allow it to provoke. Simply notice. Pay attention to any feelings, images, thoughts, memories that arise. After savoring or ruminating (lit: chewing) on the text, allow yourself to reflect more deeply at multiple levels:

- What is going on here? What is the author saying? = world “within” the text
- What is the social/historical context to which the author is writing and responding? = world “behind” the text
- What is the author saying *to me*? What arises in me as I read? = world “in front of” the text
- Is God stirring something in me through the text?  
What do I wish to say to God in response? = world of mystery/prayer
- What difference might this encounter make in my life?  
How can these insights “become real”? = world of freedom/relationships

Use your journal to record images, thoughts, emotions, etc., that arise as you engage Merton’s writings. When a quote, insight, or idea especially strikes you, write it down at the top of your journal entry for the day. Savor it for a while, then simply begin writing. The important thing is not to edit or censor yourself as you listen, think, pray, or write, but to let your *lectio* journal be a sacred space and time for honest “conversation” with the material, with yourself, perhaps even with God, as the process awakens things in you spontaneously.

**Pre-course/post-course journal submissions:** each entry (no more than 400-500 words each) should be a response to a particular passage, quote, image, or theme in Merton’s writings that catches your attention. Submit 3 entries by January 1; an additional 3 entries by February 9. Each entry should include your name, entry date, and a clear reference to or citation from a particular passage (source, page#). *Multiple entries can be gathered into a single document before submission.* **D Min students:** submit four Journal entries (400-500 words) before the course (by Jan 1); and four more entries after the course (by Feb 9); any two of these eight journals should be from your reading of *A Book of Hours* (Deignan) or *Man of Dialogue* (Hillis).

## **Final Project: Presentation with PowerPoint** (12-15 minutes) – by Friday Feb. 9, midnight (your time zone)

This course is built from a conviction that Thomas Merton is a “classic” figure of the Christian tradition from whom we still have much to learn. Do you agree? Why/why not? What themes or contributions do you find most compelling in Merton’s life and writings? What aspect of Merton’s witness most speaks to our world today, and/or provides guidance for the spiritual life? Are there elements of his thought that are worthy of critique, counterpoint, disagreement? The purpose of the presentation is to provide a forum to synthesize elements of Merton’s witness that you find most compelling into a format that can be readily shared with others in your professional life or ministry. While you will record the presentation asynchronously for course evaluation, **your imagined audience is not the professor but a “real world” audience:** your congregation or ministry site, a study or prayer group, etc.

### **Resources**

a. Primary readings of your choice *plus* at least 2 other secondary sources from the class. *D Min students:* at least one of your secondary sources must be the Gregory Hillis book; b. Internet/archival resources: Any visual, artistic, or unusual textual material you might uncover that can be incorporated into your presentation is encouraged.

### **Structure** [12-15 min. max]

#### **World within the Text**

Part 1 [7-8 min.] Identify your theme of interest and explore Merton’s contribution. What key question, issue, or challenge do you want to address and how does Merton respond to it and offer guidance in a constructive way? Select 2-3 passages *from primary texts* to present and unpack with your audience to illuminate Merton’s response.

#### **World behind the Text**

Part 2 [3-4 min.] Provide historical and biographical context *drawing here from secondary texts*. In a concise manner, highlight personal and historical events which shaped Merton’s life and his response to the issue or theme at hand. What early or later circumstances in Merton’s life journey or historical events are especially relevant here?

#### **World in front of the Text**

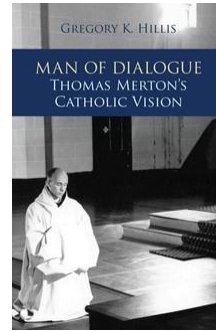
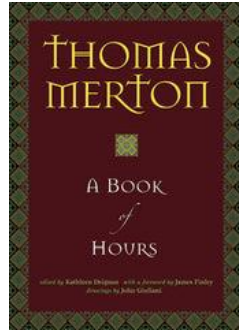
Part 3 [2-3 min.] Reflect on present and future personal or social, spiritual or theological implications. So what? Why is Merton’s witness significant, and for whom? Young people? Catholics or Christians alone? All?

### **Checklist**

1. Identify your theme or topic of focus and identify *primary and secondary* readings you wish to engage. (Optional: If helpful to you, you may schedule a brief phone call or zoom meeting with Dr. Pramuk to review or narrow down those sources that might be most useful to you.)
2. Complete additional (e.g., Internet/archival) research to find visual images of interest, and outline the basic content and form of your presentation. Note that PowerPoint is especially good for images, audio, short passages to highlight key theological themes, objections, or critical questions. Please be judicious in your use of PowerPoint – e.g., do NOT simply paste a lot of text to the slide and read it back to your audience.
3. *Record your presentation so that it can be uploaded to Canvas electronically (asynchronously).* Remember: you are presenting for a “real world” audience – your congregation or ministry site or a study group you are leading. *How to record?* a/ with access to a zoom account, you can record yourself giving the talk and showing the slides via the “share screen” function; b/ with a laptop projector (in a classroom or checked out from a library), deliver your presentation as if you were in front of your audience, and have a friend record your presentation on an I-phone. Save the recording to a linkable file and **upload to Canvas by Feb. 9.**

## Pastoral Book Review (for D Min students only)

800-1000 words – due Friday Feb 16, midnight (your time zone)



*A Book of Hours* is described as “a manual of mysticism, a set of teaching for engaged contemplatives,” a “collection of koans, mantras, and prayers” that are framed in such a way as to encourage the practice of *lectio divina*, “making the ancient new, and the timeless timely.” *Man of Dialogue* has been described as “a deeply learned yet highly accessible exploration of the whole of Merton’s spiritual journey,” with special attention to key aspects of Merton’s Catholic imagination, Eucharistic spirituality, and social justice commitments.

Both of these books, quite different in approach, style, and purpose, have been praised both within and beyond the community of Merton scholars and casual readers alike. While *A Book of Hours* is composed of meditations in the voice of Merton himself, its editor, Sr. Kathleen Deignan, played a pivotal role in organizing a wide range of Merton’s writings into a cohesive whole, framed by the ancient practice of *lectio divina* and “liturgy of the hours.” *Man of Dialogue*, on the other hand, offers an interpretation of Merton’s legacy across a wide range of themes in the more systematic voice and style of theologian Gregory Hillis.

**Assignment:** imagine you’ve been asked to review and/or recommend one of these books for a national publication for pastoral ministers; your church newsletter; or the blog of a colleague’s ministry website. Your aim is to offer an assessment of the book with an eye on pastoral/practical implications. Questions to consider:

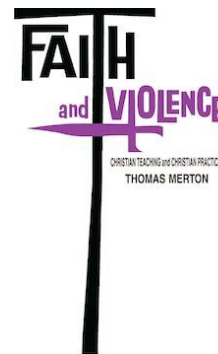
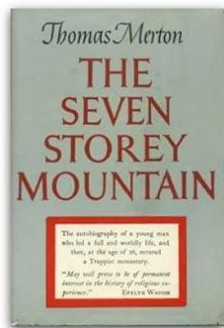
- Whether new to Merton’s writings or long familiar, how would you describe his “voice” in conversation with God as it comes to us in this book? Is Merton’s voice, as structured here by Kathleen Deignan, a fruitful entry point for readers who may be unfamiliar with the practice of *lectio divina*, or “liturgy of the hours”? Why or why not? What lessons might *A Book of Hours* have for readers (and congregations) caught up in the frenzy of contemporary life, social media, social activism, contentious politics? Can a Catholic monk who died almost 60 years ago still speak to the challenges of Christian life and spirituality today?
- As chronicled in *Man of Dialogue*, what aspects of Merton’s witness to Catholic Christian faith still reverberate into the contemporary landscape today? Of the diverse foci in Merton’s legacy that Hillis explores across nine chapters, is there a particular theme or chapter that speaks especially to you, to the challenges of our time, to congregational life, to justice issues faced by the church today? Were there aspects of Merton’s story – of his “Catholic vision,” as Hillis has it – that you find surprising, inspiring, or unsettling?

And finally, would you recommend this book to your chosen audience? Why or why not?

## Note on Merton's Use of Exclusive Language

"Writing in the 1940s through 1960s, Merton observed the linguistic conventions of his day with regard to gender. Readers who have come to expect inclusive language will find Merton's constant reference to 'men' and his exclusive use of male pronouns somewhat jarring. I am not the first to observe that were Merton writing today he would employ inclusive language. But alas he was writing then and not now. Merton's texts are reproduced here as he wrote them. I trust that the inclusivity of his message transcends the exclusivity of his language."

~ Christine Bochen, "Introduction," in *Thomas Merton: Essential Writings* (Orbis, 2000)



## Course Calendar

Given the intensive nature of our time together, it is highly recommended that you complete as much as the following prior to the beginning of the class. The secondary articles, films (Wilkes, Atkinson), and lectures provide historical, theological and spiritual context for the primary readings across the several decades of Merton's "public" life as a writer and monk. You'll meet a range of scholars from diverse backgrounds, presenting via diverse genres beyond printed text. I hope you enjoy!

### I/ Pre-Intensive Assignment: Introduction to Merton

*Primary: two selections from the "early" Merton (1948-1952) and two selections from the "later" Merton (1965-68)*

- a/ "The Seven Storey Mountain," *TMSM*, p. 63-106; b/ "Fire Watch, July 4, 1952", *TMSM*, p. 107-120
- c/ "Contemplation in a World of Action," *TMSM*, 368-87; d/ "Rain and the Rhinoceros," *TMSM*, p. 388-98

*Secondary:*

- "Merton: A Film Biography," dir. Paul Wilkes (1986) – video (1 hour) linked to Canvas
- "Awakening the Heart," Christine Bochen, *Thomas Merton: Essential Writings*, p. 21-49 (PDF on Canvas)
- review syllabus carefully – especially the guidelines for journaling - and please reach out to me via email ([cpramuk@regis.edu](mailto:cpramuk@regis.edu)) if you have any questions

**DUE Jan. 1<sup>st</sup>:** three (D Min: four) *lectio divina* journal entries (preferably gathered into a single document). Please follow guidelines for journaling above.

## II/ Session 1 (Friday Jan 5, PM): Merton as Spiritual Companion

### Primary:

- *A Book of Hours*, Sunday-Tuesday, p. 43-113
- “Day of a Stranger,” *TMSM*, p. 214-22

### Secondary:

- Kathleen Deignan, “Introduction,” *A Book of Hours*, p. 15-42
- “Abbey of Gethsemani: The Hermitage” (video, 10 min.)

## III/ Session 2 (Saturday Jan 6, AM): Witness to Peace I

### Primary:

- “Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander,” *TMSM*, p. 121-64
- a/ “The Root of War is Fear”; b/ “Original Child Bomb”; c/ “The Shelter Ethic”; d/ “A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolph Eichmann” (on PDF via Canvas)

### Secondary:

- “Soul Searching: The Journey of Thomas Merton,” dir. Morgan Atkinson (2006, 1 hour) – linked to Canvas

## IV/ Session 3 (Saturday Jan 6, PM): Witness to Peace II

### Primary:

- “The Black Revolution: Letters to a White Liberal,” from *Seeds of Destruction* (PDF provided)
- “A New Language of Prayer,” from *The Asian Journal* (PDF provided)

### Secondary:

- “Asia on My Mind”; “Everything is Compassion,” Jim Forest (PDF via Canvas)
- “Thomas Merton and Race,” Christopher Pramuk (video lecture, 2015 Festival of Faiths, 20 min.)

### Recommended/ Optional:

- “Merton, Malcolm X, and Catholic Engagement with Black Lives Matter,” Fr. Bryan Massingale

## V/ Session 4 (Sunday Jan 7, PM): Love, Laughter, and the Power of Personal Relationships

### Primary:

- *A Book of Hours*, Wednesday–Saturday, p. 115-208
- “The Power and Meaning of Love” (PDF via Canvas)
- “Letter to a Young Activist” (PDF via Canvas)

### Secondary:

- “The Feminine in Merton’s Life: Some Notes on His Experience with Women,” Maria Clara Bingemer, ITMS plenary address (2023)

### Recommended/ Optional:

- “I Love Beer, and by that Very Fact, the World: The Humor (and Humanity) of Thomas Merton,” Paul Pearson



## VI/ Session 5 (Monday Jan 8, AM): Toward an Integrated Spirituality I

Primary:

- “A Vow of Conversation,” *TMSM*, 165-213
- “Hagia Sophia,” *TMSM*, 257-64

Secondary:

- “By Bowing My Ear a Little, I Have Received Her,” Christopher Pramuk, ITMS plenary, 2023

## VII/ Session 6 (Monday Jan 8, PM): Toward an Integrated Spirituality II

Primary:

- “Contemplative Life as Prophetic Vocation”; “The Feminine Mystique,” from *Springs of Contemplation* (1967)
- Private Journals, spring 1966, *The Intimate Merton*, p. 269-312 (PDF via Canvas)

Secondary:

- “A Proverb Named Margie,” Jim Forest

Recommended/Optional

- “Thomas Merton and the Feminine Divine,” 2018, Christopher Pramuk (20 min. + panel discussion)
- “Women Who Helped Us Know Merton,” ITMS plenary panel, 2023 (1 hour)

### D Min Students Only

## VIII/ Session 7 (*Man of Dialogue* and asynchronous lectures posted to Canvas)

Primary:

- *Man of Dialogue: Thomas Merton’s Catholic Vision*, Gregory Hillis  
+ Introduction and any three chapters of your choice

Secondary: Lecture I - TBA

## IX/ Session 8 (asynchronous lectures posted to Canvas)

Primary:

- *Man of Dialogue: Thomas Merton’s Catholic Vision*, Gregory Hillis  
+ any additional three chapters of your choice + Conclusion

Secondary: Lecture II - TBA

### **DUE Fri. Feb 9:**

- a. Three (DMin: four) *lectio divina* journal entries
- b. Final Project: Presentation with PP (recorded asynchronously and uploaded via file or link)

**DUE Fri. Feb 16:** Pastoral Book Review (DMin students only)

*His rebellion is the rebellion of life against inertia, of mercy and love against tyranny,  
of humanity against cruelty and arbitrary violence.*

*And he calls upon the feminine, the wordless,  
the timelessly moving elements to witness his sufferings. Earth hears him.*

~ Thomas Merton, *The Behavior of Titans* (1961)

**MY LORD GOD,**  
I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

THOMAS MERTON