

Theo 297 Thomas Merton: Witness to Peace

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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 Catholic monk and spiritual writer Thomas Merton (1915-1968) is widely celebrated as one of the most important religious figures of the 20th century. This seminar offers a deep 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. In keeping with a Jesuit or Ignatian style of learning, students will not just “study” Merton critically but will be invited to engage his writings personally and holistically, “through the eyes of the heart.”

The course has four objectives:

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 Merton’s life and in the world that shaped the writer he became?
2. To engage Merton’s autobiographical and spiritual writings, as well as his prophetic essays on war, nuclear proliferation, race relations, the revolutionary changes in the Catholic Church during the 1960s, and his dialogue with practitioners of other religions, and to explore the implications of his thought for our lives today. Why are so many people today, and very different kinds of people, still drawn to Merton?
3. To give each student the opportunity to become especially conversant in one aspect of Merton’s thought and to articulate its relevance for our times and in the context of their own life and vocation. What do you find most compelling in Merton’s writings, and why?
4. To offer students resources for developing regular reading and prayer practices such as *lectio divina* (“sacred reading”), which might engender a deeper sense of divine presence and compassion in their 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?

Required Texts

1. Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master*, ed. Lawrence Cunningham
2. Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*, ed. William Shannon
3. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, intro. by Sue Monk Kidd
4. Thomas Merton, *The Intimate Merton: His Life from His Journals*, eds. J. Montaldo and P. Hart
5. Jim Forest, *Living with Wisdom*, revised edition, select chapters

Secondary resources

Articles posted to Blackboard, films, online resources and material on reserve in the library

“Merton: A Film Biography,” dir. Paul Wilkes

“Soul Searching: The Journey of Thomas Merton,” dir. Morgan Atkinson

Requirements: Each student is expected to:

1. **Attend all classes**, prepare all readings, take notes, and be prepared to participate actively in seminar discussions. Each student will be responsible for “setting the table” for discussion once during the semester.
2. Keep a regular **Journal** for *lectio divina* (“sacred reading” or meditative note-taking), recording thoughts, insights, and images from the readings wherever they strike you. Submit 5 excerpts from your Journal to BB at assigned dates through the semester. These will be viewed only by the professor. (Guidelines for *lectio divina* and journaling are provided below.)
3. Write four **Thesis Papers** (4-5 p. each). The aim of these papers is to demonstrate your assimilation of key themes in Merton’s writings, and to reflect on the implications for our lives in society and for spirituality today. Guidelines and due dates below.
4. Working with another student, give one **Presentation (12-15 min.)** on a focused topic or major theme in Merton’s writings of your mutual choice. Schedule and prepare *one formal meeting* with the professor (20-30 min.) to discuss ahead of time.
5. Write a final **“Spirituality Paper”** (10-12 pp.) building from your presentation in which you further develop your topic of focus in Merton, in conversation with your own life and spiritual journey looking forward. Due during finals week. Guidelines will be provided.

Grade Summary

[10%] Attendance/participation

[15%] Journal / “lectio divina” (5 excerpts to BB)

[40%] Thesis Papers (4)

[15%] Presentation and planning meeting with professor

[20%] Final spirituality paper

The Theology Dept. Grading Guidelines mandates the following scale:

B+ = 91-90 C+ = 83-82 D+ = 75-74 F = 67-0

A = 100-94 B = 89-87 C = 81-79 D = 73-71

A- = 93-92 B- = 86-84 C- = 78-76 D- = 70-68

Note that “A” denotes “*exceptional* academic performance.” It is not the grade given for “strong effort” or a “job well done” but rather for “uncommonly high academic achievement.”

* This course qualifies as an elective for the Peace Studies minor.

Class Expectations, Guidelines, and Policies

Students who engage in the readings, journaling, and class discussions with critical depth and openness to intellectual and spiritual growth should do well, and of course will get the most out of the experience. Completion of all readings assigned is especially crucial in the seminar environment. Translation: It will be difficult to “BS” or sleepwalk your way to a good grade in this seminar.

It is important not merely to have “covered” the readings, but to engage them critically. You are asked to keep a dedicated *lectio divina* journal by your side as you read, and encouraged to write down specific ideas or questions in your class notebook that the readings prompt in you.

Attendance is not optional. You may miss a maximum of three (3) classes without penalty, after which 5 points will be deducted from your final grade for each additional unexcused absence. *Please do not waste your free absences.* In the case of unavoidable absences, the rule here is to communicate with me early and often. Please remind me the previous class about an absence approaching.

Active Involvement: This course is built on a seminar model in which students are expected to take full ownership of their learning. Minimally this means to prepare all required readings, take notes, raise pertinent questions, engage in the conversation at hand, and so on. This does *not* mean that everyone must be an extrovert—it does mean all are expected to come prepared for the kind of discussions one would expect to find (and enjoy!) in a Jesuit-styled humanities course.

Journal: One of the aims of this course is “to offer students resources for developing regular reading and prayer practices” such as *lectio divina* (sacred reading) and meditative writing. Such practices are not typical of most undergraduate courses. Doing so involves developing a different kind of discipline and set of learning tools, distinct from a purely “objective” or “scientific” approach to learning. In the first place, meditative reading and journaling requires you *to slow down*, and to place yourself as much as possible in an environment conducive to quiet reflection.

You might think of journaling as your act of periodic resistance, your protest against the non-stop activity of college life. While doing so can be difficult, especially at first, finding your “quiet space” is like good coffee: once you’ve tasted it, filling up your whole person, you’ll keep coming back for more. There is something deeply liberating in the act of slowing down, of freeing yourself to listen deeply, to feel, to think, and then to respond through writing – not texting, or typing – but writing, pen to paper, in a journal that you have dedicated *only* to that unpredictable, revelatory process.

On specified dates (5), you will post excerpts from your *lectio divina* journal to BB, which only I will read. Excerpts may range from 3-4 paragraphs, more or less, depending on the material at hand. Occasionally I may ask you to bring journals to class and (if you wish) share a short passage of your choice. I will check your progress in journals at mid-term and again at end of semester.

Remember: the Journal is *not* about quantity – another hoop to jump through – nor is it necessarily about explicit religious belief or “faith in God,” though it may be. The Journal is intended to facilitate the quality and depth of your engagement with Merton’s life and writings—whatever your religious background, however you may self-identify religiously, or see yourself presently in your spiritual journey. Guidelines below.

“Setting the table”: Review carefully the readings for the session, and locate the “gems” in the text: particular quotes or insights you find most thought-provoking. On a half-page, quote at least 2 key points from each of the readings that you’d most like to discuss. Then formulate 2-3 questions (total) you would like to propose for discussion. Feel free to think “outside the box” – your main goal is to propose questions that will help us *make larger connections* between the readings and everyday life or spirituality here at Xavier or in U.S. society. Add your questions to the half page, with your name and date, and print enough copies for everyone (18).

Note on writing for this class

Theology is a reading and writing-intensive discipline. At the same time, I try to affirm a range of learning styles, and welcome the distinctive gifts each of you brings into the class. Careful presentation of the four Unit Thesis papers is *essential*, especially so as you progress in your studies at Xavier. Last minute writing at deadline will almost never yield your best results. Sloppy papers or work with errors in grammar, spelling, or careless content will be significantly downgraded. I am happy to work directly with students who show a sincere and concerted effort to improve their writing skills. For all writing, please do not hit the “print” button until you are confident you have attained, through careful proof-reading and editing, your best work.

Use of the Writing Center (CLC) is strongly encouraged, especially in writing and editing the four Unit Thesis papers.

Late policy: All assignments are due at the beginning of class on the designated date. For each *calendar day* an assignment is late, 4 points will be subtracted, up to one week, after which it will not be accepted without explicit permission for an extension from the professor. Please remember that *communication* with me, preferably in person, is essential if you have difficulties with any assignment.

No course material will be accepted after the final exam. “Incomplete” grades are discouraged and granted only in extraordinary circumstances.

Academic Honesty: This course will be conducted in keeping with Xavier University’s policy on academic honesty, which includes the use of Turnitin.com for the four Thesis papers. In all material submitted for this course, both the ideas and wording must be your own, or must be clearly attributed to their proper sources using full citations. When in doubt, cite your source. Re-submission of any work used for a previous course, whether yours or that of another student, is a serious violation. **Never** present material found via the Internet as your own. **Please don’t put yourself, or me, in the very uncomfortable position of having to pursue such an inquiry.**

Disabilities. If you have a documented physical or learning disability requiring academic adjustments for this course, please contact the Learning Assistance Program (Kuhlman Hall/745-3280), and see me in the first week of class to discuss any necessary arrangements or ways I can be of assistance.

Athletic or academic team commitments. It is your responsibility to ensure that I am aware ahead of time of any scheduling conflicts or absences you may incur due to university sponsored athletic events. Please provide a letter from your coach or adviser with the team schedule and dates highlighted that will necessitate absence from this class. If the number of projected absences is excessive, it may be recommended that another course be taken.

Classroom Atmosphere: Openness, Generosity, Confidentiality

At its best theology involves the whole person, the integration of intellectual and personal engagement, head and heart. The kinds of questions we engage in this class call for an atmosphere of openness, trust, and mutual respect. My presumption is that each of us will do our best to engage with each other in a spirit of mutual respect, critical inquiry, curiosity, and openness to growth.

If you find yourself disagreeing or uncomfortable with another person's position, a good Jesuit or Ignatian rule of thumb is to listen carefully, and try to consider the idea—and above all the *person* advancing it—through the best possible lens, or what we might call a “hermeneutic of generosity.” When understanding fails, it is always helpful to *ask follow-up questions* to give the person an opportunity to clarify or nuance their position.

I would finally ask that we maintain a rule of *confidentiality* if experiences of a personal or sensitive nature are shared during class discussions. No student should ever feel compelled to share things that you are not comfortable sharing. Please trust your best judgment and instincts.

Classroom Protocol

Getting started on time and efficiently is important. The attendance sheet and all handouts will be distributed at the beginning of the period. Our class time together will involve a combination of lectures and discussion, multi-media, film, poetry, occasional music, group-work, and perhaps meditation. Please come prepared with your notebook ready and open for note-taking.

Late entry: If you arrive after attendance is taken, there is a good chance you will be counted absent unless you check in at the end of class and add your signature to the roll sheet. If you find yourself in a situation where being late is unavoidable, better to come late than not at all.

Please resist the temptation to gather your belongings before the end of the class period. I will do my best to end class consistently on time. If I am unaware of the time, feel free to give me a (polite) signal. If for any reason you need to leave before class is dismissed, whenever possible please let me know *before* class begins. Bathroom emergencies are an obvious exception.

No pagers, cell phones, laptops, or other technological intrusions, unless you have a documented learning disability that requires use of a laptop. If you find it impossible not to text during a 75 minute class, please take another course.

What you can expect from me

1. An attitude of respect and reverence for the faith traditions of Catholic, non-Catholic, and non-Christian students.
2. Careful preparation of each session of this course.
3. An attitude of respect for your questions, your input, and the particularities of your journey.
4. Availability outside of class when needed.
5. Every effort to make this class interesting, challenging, and enjoyable.

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

This real I *look* at. I do not analyze or argue it, describe or define it; I am one with it. . . . 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

It is profitable to use the imagination and to apply the five senses [as we consider God’s presence in the world]. I will see, listen, smell, and taste, I will embrace and kiss the places where the persons walk or sit.

~ St Ignatius Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*

Merton kept extensive journals, making notes on books he was reading as well as his experiences of prayer and nature. You are asked to do something similar by keeping a “lectio divina” journal. Your journal entries are not meant to be “scholarly” 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.

St. Ignatius offers a simple method for getting “inside” the life-world of another person, situation, or just about any other “text” at hand. This involves allowing the text (or whole situation) to saturate your senses, imagination, emotions, intellect, and spirit *in a holistic way*. The following method can be adapted to your reflection on Merton’s writings this semester.

Read the text in a quiet environment. Allow yourself to *linger* over a single image, phrase, sentence, or idea. Let it penetrate your heart, rest in it, enjoy it, allow it to provoke. Simply notice. Pay attention to any feelings, images, thoughts, memories that arise. Linger, savor, and attend.

After savoring the text, allow yourself to reflect more deeply:

What is going on here? What is the author saying?	= world “within/behind” the text
What is the author saying <i>to me</i> ? What arises in me as I read?	= world “in front of” the text
Is God awakening something in me through the text (situation)?	
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 in this course. 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.

**Guidelines for Unit Thesis Papers [4 total/ 5 pages maximum each]
Due Feb 4, Feb 27, Mar 27, April 22**

The “Unit Thesis” paper is your opportunity to bring together insights from each unit of the course. In the paper you are asked to 1) **advance a thesis** based on the ideas and passages that most interest you in Merton’s writings; and 2) **develop and support your thesis** by drawing from readings, lectures, class discussions and related material. Your task is *not* to attempt a detailed analysis of all the readings in the unit, but rather to focus and build your paper around a central theme or insight relative to select passages at hand.

How to come up with a thesis? First, review readings, Journal entries, lecture notes, and handouts from the unit. Ask yourself a series of questions: What key images, themes or insights have I found most compelling in this collection of Merton’s writings? What essays, passages, and details most resonate? What do these selections say to our world today, the world “in front of” the text? How does Merton mediate for you through these texts a deeper realization of the human condition? A sense of holy mystery, of God?

Structure your paper more or less along the following guidelines and you’ll be in good shape.

a/ [2-3 pages] Articulate a focused thesis statement in the opening paragraph. Support your thesis in each subsequent paragraph by attending to *key details in the texts that you have chosen to focus on*, and drawing them out for the reader. Pay attention not only to what Merton says (content), but also how he says it (form): images and sense impressions, shades of mood or color, narrative, poetic or lyric details (e.g. the play of paradoxes or opposites), interplay of time and space, deep memory, rhythm and silence, and so on. Every paragraph should in some way illuminate and develop the central theme or insight you’ve chosen to focus on in the paper.

b/ [1-2 pages] Draw from 2-3 supplementary class materials (e.g., videos, lecture notes and handouts, class discussions and/or your *lectio divina* journal) to support your thesis. Here your task is to *make larger connections* between Merton’s writings and what these select essays or passages “say” in the context of our world today, the world “in front of the text.” In what ways does Merton sharpen our understanding of the human condition, and/or mediate a sense of mystery, divine presence, hidden in the world? How have reactions and insights of other students to this material shaped or expanded your grasp of Merton’s writings?

c/ [1 page] Step back and offer your evaluation of the Unit on the whole. What strikes you most in the previous few weeks and why? Has anything surprised you, or prompted new questions you’d like to explore further? What difference, if any, has this material made in your perception or experience of things?

Note on citation: It is important to include ideas and quotes wherever helpful from supporting readings in these papers (part b above), but please avoid lengthy quotes. I’m most interested in *your* take on the material. Wherever you cite readings, simply provide a parenthetical page reference (Saliers, 69; Henri, 64) so that I can easily find the location. A bibliography is not necessary.

Questions I will ask myself in grading the case study Thesis papers:

- a. Is the thesis statement clear, thoughtfully structured, easy to follow?
- b. Does the writing show focused and careful attention to the “world within the text,” that is, particular details of both *content* (ideas) and literary *form* (style) in the work?
- c. How well does the paper integrate analytical and critical engagement with Merton’s writings with a more *personal response* (e.g., from *lectio divina*), or a willingness to engage the work holistically, personally, spiritually?
- d. Is there focus or direction, or does the writing ramble without any apparent structure?
- e. Does the paper reflect close attention to appearance, spelling and grammar?

Course Calendar

~ Subject to Revision: Always Check Blackboard [BB] for Updated Assignments

- Tu Jan 14 Introduction/ Dorothee Soelle, "Speaking of God"
- Th Jan 16 Thomas Merton, "Rain and the Rhinoceros," TMSM 388-98
Christine Bochen, "Awakening the Heart" (see BB); "Chronology" TMSM 56-60
- Unit 1: Early Years: Becoming a Monk and Writer (1941-1956)**
- Tu Jan 21 "The Seven Storey Mountain," TMSM 63-106; *Intimate Merton* [IM] 1-44
Walter Burghardt, SJ, "Contemplation: A Long Loving Look at the Real" (see BB)
- Th Jan 23 "Fire Watch, July 4, 1952," TMSM 107-120; NSC 1-20
Sue Monk Kidd "Introduction," *New Seeds of Contemplation*
- Tu Jan 28 "Thoughts in Solitude," TMSM 241-50; IM 46-89; NSC 21-63
Bruce Lescher, "New Seeds of Contemplation" (see BB)
- Wed Jan 29 **Due: Journal #1 (by 5 pm)**
- Th Jan 30 "Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander," TMSM 121-64
Joan Chittister, "Thomas Merton: Icon of the Voice of God"
- Tu Feb 4 "Called Out of Darkness" (see BB); IM 103-127; NSC 64-103
Dorothee Soelle, "Speaking of God" / "A New Language"
Due: Thesis Paper #1
- Unit 2: Pivotal Years: Turning Toward the World (1957-1964)**
- Th Feb 6 IM 128-154; William Shannon "Introduction," *Passion for Peace* [PP], 1-7
Gregory Baum, "A Culture of Peace" [PDF file attached]
C. Pramuk, XU Video, "Vatican II's *Gaudium et Spes*"
- Tu Feb 11 "The Root of War is Fear"; "The Shelter Ethic"; "Target Equals City"; "Nuclear War and Christian Responsibility"; "Red or Dead: The Anatomy of a Cliché": PP 11-52;
"Breakthrough to Peace II: A Religious Responsibility," PP 99-123; IM 155-180
- Th Feb 13 "A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolph Eichmann," PP199-201; "War and the Crisis of Language" PP 300-14; IM 181-209
Joni Mitchell, "Woodstock" [live YouTube]
- Tu Feb 18 "The Black Revolution: Letters to a White Liberal," PP 154-88; "The Power and Meaning of Love" (see BB)
Monica Hellwig, "Conformity and Critical Dissent"
- Wed Feb 19 **Due: Journal #2 (by 5 pm)**
- Th Feb 20 "Gandhi: The Gentle Revolutionary," PP 202-9; "An Enemy of the State," PP 235-40;
"Blessed Are the Meek"; "Nhat Hanh is My Brother," PP 248-62
In class: "Picture of a Black Child with a White Doll"

Tu Feb 25 “A Vow of Conversation”; “Day of a Stranger,” TMSM 165-222
C. Pramuk, “Imagination and Difference: Beyond Essentialism in Church Teaching and Practice” [*New Theology Review*, online]
In class: Merton and the Banality of Advertising, Jeffrey Kiernan [powerpoint]

Th Feb 27 “The Street is for Celebration” [see BB]; “Rain and the Rhinoceros” (TMSM 388-98)
C. Pramuk, “Sacred Silence: Lessons from the High Desert Plains,” *America*
Due: Thesis Paper #2

Mar 3-7 Spring Break / No Class

Unit 3: Hermitage Years: Exploring Solitude, Love, and Freedom (1965-1968)

Tu Mar 11 “Hagia Sophia,” TMSM 257-64
Jim Forest, “Waking from a Dream”; “Hagia Sophia”
C. Pramuk, “The Birth of ‘Hagia Sophia’” (PDF)

Th Mar 13 IM 213-67
C. Pramuk, “Presences” (PDF, from *Hope Sings, So Beautiful*)

Tu Mar 18 IM 269-312; NSC 126-57
Jim Forest, “A Proverb Named Margie”

Th Mar 20 *Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani*: “Contemplative Life as Prophetic Vocation” / “Prophecy and Alienation” / “The Feminine Mystique”

Fri Mar 21 Due: Journal #3 (by 5 pm)

Tu Mar 25 “Learning to Live,” TMSM 357-67; “Contemplation in a World of Action,” TMSM 368-87
Thomas Berry and Christine Bochen, *When the Trees Say Nothing*, selections

Th Mar 27 “The Inner Experience,” TMSM 294-325
Wendell Berry, select poems / Howard Thurman (selections and powerpoint)
Due: Unit Thesis #3

Unit 4: Witness to Peace: Race Relations and Dialogue with Non-Christians (1958-68)

Tu Apr 1 Jim Forest, “Monk in the Rain” / “Fr. Louis: Hermit”
“Letter to a Young Activist” (Merton to Jim Forest)
Maya Angelou, “Mom and Me and Mom” (NPR Interview)

Th Apr 3 “Boris Pasternak and the People with Watch Chains” (BB); IM 313-25

Tu Apr 8 “Ishi: A Meditation” / “The Meaning of Malcolm X,” TMSM, 263-75
Robert Schreiter, “The Impact of Vatican II” [PDF attached]
Interview with Malcolm X (YouTube)

- Th Apr 10 "Toward a Theology of Resistance" (see BB)
C. Pramuk, "Streets" (BB) / Stevie Wonder, "Big Brother" (YouTube)
Maureen O'Connell, "Painting Hope: The Murals of Inner-City Philadelphia" (in class)
- Fri Apr 11 **Due Journal #4** (by 5 pm)
- Tu Apr 15 "The Asian Journal," TMSM, 223-37; "A Christian Looks at Zen," TMSM 399-420;
IM 325-63
Jim Forest, "Asia On My Mind"
- Th Apr 17 NO CLASS / EASTER HOLIDAY
- Tu Apr 22 Letters to DT Suzuki
Jim Forest, "Everything is Compassion" / "Jonas Overshadowed" / "Conclusion"
Due: Unit Thesis #4
- Th Apr 24 James Martin, "Thomas Merton: The True Self"
C. Pramuk, "The Song of Faith: Hearing Music Again with Thomas Merton"
Team Presentations
- Tu Apr 29 NSC 290-97
David Foster Wallace, "On Life and Work"
Team Presentations
- Wed Apr 30 **Due: Journal #5**
- Th May 1 Pedro Arrupe, SJ, "Men and Women for Others"/"Facing the World 25 Years after
Hiroshima"
Team Presentations
- Tu May 6 Adolfo Nicolas, SJ, "Between Music and Silence"
Due: Final Spirituality Paper