

## Introduction: Keeping the Faith and Keeping It Weird

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*Deborah Pope Kehoe*

It's when we face for a moment  
the worst our kind can do, and shudder to know  
the taint in our own selves, that awe  
cracks the mind's shell and enters the heart.

Denise Levertov<sup>1</sup>

As Volume 33 of *The Merton Annual* nears completion, I find that Rose Marie Berger's essay "Direct Transmission of Faith," presented at the Sixteenth General Meeting of the ITMS and published in Volume 32 of *The Merton Annual*,<sup>2</sup> keeps coming to mind. Her witty and prodding words seem right for prefacing a collection of articles assembled in the bizarre and tragic year 2020, with its record-setting afflictions and, at the time of this writing, indicators of more turbulence ahead.

A brief recap of Berger's piece may be in order. She succinctly defines the phrase "direct transmission of faith" as "the way that we feed one another" (81). Maybe another way of putting it is how members of the Mystical Body of Christ lovingly support each other throughout our shared earthly life. Berger considers Thomas Merton the embodiment of direct transmission of faith and attributes part of his lasting legacy to his extraordinary openness to the divine love that calls the soul not only to transcendence but also to the things of this world (to borrow a phrase from poet Richard Wilbur<sup>3</sup>). While many modifiers could be used to describe that quality, Berger prefers "weird." Taking some poetic liberties with etymology, she enhances the definition of "weird" to include such charged synonyms as "feral," "malleable" and "generative" (87) and signs off with the imperative "KEEP. MERTON. WEIRD" (92), an urgent call to emulate and disseminate the example of Thomas Merton's pilgrim soul and contemplative witness to the gospel and his resolute resistance to potentially

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1. Denise Levertov, "On the Mystery of the Incarnation," *The Collected Poems of Denise Levertov*, ed. Paul A. Lacey and Anne Dewey (New York: New Directions, 2013) 818.

2. Rose Marie Berger, "Direct Transmission of Faith," *The Merton Annual* 32 (2019) 78-92.

3. Richard Wilbur, "Love Calls Us to the Things of This World," in *Richard Wilbur: New and Collected Poems* (New York: Harvest Books, 1989) 233; available at: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43048/love-calls-us-to-the-things-of-this-world>.

rigidifying structures and institutions. Berger's presentation redux segues well into the following pages in which readers will find multiple renditions of Thomas Merton's direct transmission of faith, articles offering intellectual and spiritual sustenance for "keeping it weird" on the journey into and beyond the chaos and cruelties of our temporary home.

Maintaining *The Merton Annual* tradition of opening with primary works by Merton, "'The Pope of the Virgin Mary' and Other Uncollected Writings" contains a handful of items from the mid- and late 1950s, obscurely published original pieces by Merton combined into a single document expertly introduced by **Patrick F. O'Connell**. The one constant throughout these four works is the Virgin Mary, whose role in Merton's life changed over time, but as O'Connell points out, "she continued to be a formative, if often hidden, presence" there. O'Connell further notes that as 2020 is the seventieth anniversary of the promulgation of the dogma of the Assumption of Mary by Pope Pius XII, whose eightieth birthday was the celebratory prompt for the first article in this group, it provides "an appropriate occasion for bringing this group of Marian writings to the attention of a contemporary audience" – in addition to all the other reasons the year might make a person want to read Thomas Merton. The gathering of materials printed here includes the following: first, "The Pope of the Virgin Mary," the aforementioned occasional essay focusing on the accomplishments of Pope Pius XII; next, "Two Meditations for Our Members: The Priest in Union with Mary Immaculate," the outcome of "another Roman project" arising from Merton's correspondence with Archbishop Alfonso Carinci (1862-1963), Director General of the Society for the Daily Perpetual Eucharistic Adoration for Diocesan Priests; finally, two in-house pamphlets originally composed by Merton for conferences with his novices, the first, a reflection on Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem "The Blessed Virgin Compared to the Air We Breathe" and the second, notes and meditations on the *Salve Regina*. O'Connell's introduction gives detailed information about the provenance and evolution of the works as well as commentary on how they reveal Merton's views in the latter half of the 1950s in relation to church teachings and how some of those views changed in subsequent years as Merton's contemplative path led him to further revelations.

The article "Racism Is a White Problem" by **Daniel P. Horan** makes a well-timed entrance into Merton studies with its trenchant analysis of the bane of white supremacy in general, and of Thomas Merton's response to racism in particular.<sup>4</sup> Horan begins with a masterful overview

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4. For additional reading about Merton's response to racism, see "The Struggle for Racial Justice in the United States: A Statement of Commitment from the International

of the concepts of race and racism, in which he draws upon classic and contemporary sources in theology, philosophy and Critical Race Theory before focusing on Merton's views, illustrated through ample references to relevant works, with particular emphasis on *Faith and Violence*. Horan's article is groundbreaking in that after examining the doughty and prophetic nature of Merton's understanding of racism as a white problem – Merton's realization that “nothing would change until white folk surrendered their privilege and unspoken sense of supremacy and normativity” – Horan goes on to point out Merton's limitations and blind spots in recognizing his own unwitting and, to some extent, inevitable participation in that problem. Clearly, Horan affirms the value of invoking Merton's voice to inform conversations about racism, yet he suggests that placing Merton in an updated context including the work of contemporary scholars would benefit future explorations of his insights on this issue.

Adjusting the lens for a macro-view of Merton's texts on social activism, **Michael N. McGregor**'s “Making Ourselves Heard: Lessons from Thomas Merton's Approach to Principled Dissent and Communal Renewal” examines Merton's contemplative model of protest against fracturing forces that menace our world. Referring to the article “Nuclear War and Christian Responsibility,” in which Merton advocates for active and vocal resistance, McGregor points out that “Merton does not say . . . precisely *how* we should make ourselves heard” but adds that “in other politically oriented writings he returns again and again to a few key principles.” McGregor discerns four core values in Merton's discourse of dissent: community, awareness, un-corrupted language and non-violence. He follows this list with a more direct – some would say prescient – guideline from Merton for pursuing the cause of peace and justice: “We have to recognize the implications of voting for politicians who promote policies of hate.”

Addressing a specific genre in which Merton made himself heard – sometimes with the full force of his penchant for the weird – is the article “Murdering Judas: Reconciling the Contemplative and the Poet in Thomas Merton,” in which **Bonnie Thurston** thoughtfully analyzes the growth of Merton's poetic identity. Using what she calls a “biographical and developmental methodology,” Thurston traces the trajectory of Merton's dual vocation as monk and poet through its story of conflict and resolution. She surveys Merton's poetic publication history, noting the hesitations and gaps, apparently resulting from his perception that the poet inside him was a “Judas,” a traitor to his commitment to a life of prayer. Thurston then

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Thomas Merton Society” (July 4, 2020); available at: <http://merton.org/ITMS>. See also “Merton and Racism: A Bibliography,” compiled by Paul M. Pearson; available at: <http://merton.org/Research/Bibliographies/Merton-Racism.pdf>.

proffers a conjecture that Merton ultimately worked out his vocational conflict “in part by his study of the Desert Christians of the fourth century” and may have peacefully dispatched his “Judas” via “the conceptual framework (or epistemology) of hesychasm.” In short, Thurston proposes that during the time that he was not publishing poetry, Merton was reading about the hesychasts, and their example of praying without ceasing opened a new path for him to unite his True Self with the will of God, and, in Thurston’s words, “fostered the reconciliation of the poet and the contemplative.” Apparently, the force of that discovery also propelled a more integrated Merton into reconnection with suffering humanity, that re-orientation “toward the world,” so evident in much of his late poetry.

Reading Thurston’s ideas recalls a passage from Jim Forest’s memoir, *Writing Straight with Crooked Lines*,<sup>5</sup> in which he describes his first night in jail as a prisoner of conscience. He tells of being “fascinated by the subculture of poetry that came to life” at night when inmates would compose and recite a common poem: “It was a poem evolving night by night that had multiple authors, no written existence, nor any end in sight” (126). The phenomenon that Forest witnessed finds something of a philosophical explanation in the work of scholar Robin D. G. Kelley, who, channeling the manifesto “Poetry and Knowledge” by poet Aimé Césaire, asserts: “Poetry . . . is . . . a scream in the night,” “an emancipation of language and old ways of thinking.”<sup>6</sup> Kelley and Césaire, both persons of color and eloquent voices of protest against racist and colonialist oppression, share with Forest’s fellow prisoners and with Thomas Merton a faith in the creative/contemplative imagination to evoke the world in its original unity, and in the unfettered language of poetry, to transmit that vision into the void. Edouard Glissant, Césaire’s fellow Martiniquais writer (both of whom Merton admired<sup>7</sup>), calls this rendition of existence the “whole-world,” a concept that Gray Matthews discusses at length later in this volume.

Next in the line-up are four articles with a common element: they all consider, from various angles and for various ends, Thomas Merton in relationship with another figure of faith, none of whom he knew in the flesh, one that he likely never heard of. Yet these “Merton-and” analyses reveal or suggest a connection or an encounter achieved by the power of reading or by the mysterious workings of grace or a combination of both, not unlike the experience put forth by Thurston concerning Merton and

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5. Jim Forest, *Writing Straight with Crooked Lines* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2020).

6. Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002) 10.

7. See Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993) 57.

the hesychasts. Representing a range of rhetorical categories including persuasive, expository and reflective, together the four essays give new illuminations of Merton's multivalent and malleable faith.

In "Peace beyond Prose: Augustine and Merton on Creation's Useless Speech," **Justin Klassen** sees a kinship between St. Augustine and Thomas Merton in what today's parlance would be called their ecological consciousness. Citing *Confessions*, Klassen relates how Augustine calls human beings to recognize with their own eyes the presence of God in the created world, rather than seek a filtered and perhaps distorted form of revelation through "letters of ink," while Thomas Merton, who revels in the direct experience of divine truth immanent in nature, asserts that such experience must be accepted on its own terms, lest one fall prey to the "'myth' of city life." As Merton explains in his sensuously expressive "Rain and the Rhinoceros," this myth places no value on that which has no price, or as Klassen puts it, "sees the unplanned as impertinent and the gratuitous as fearsome." Informed by the work of contemporary theologians, philosophers and scientists, Klassen surveys the damage such a view of nature has wrought in twenty-first-century society, and supported by the common wisdom of two spiritual writers who lived 1500 years apart, he imagines "what a Christian ethical practice would look like if it were premised on trust that creation's mystery is hospitable rather than alienating."

Desiderius Erasmus, another earlier Christian writer whose works found a receptive reader in Thomas Merton, is the subject of the next article, "If Not for Luther? – Thomas Merton and Erasmus" by **Patrick F. O'Connell**. O'Connell focuses on Merton's "surprising, even startling" evaluation of the sixteenth-century Christian humanist, whose famous essay *The Praise of Folly* was very popular in his time despite its criticisms of the Catholic Church. Still, as O'Connell points out, Erasmus was also a subject of suspicion and scorn because he "tried to remain the voice of mutual understanding and reconciliation" amid the Catholic and Protestant tensions of the day. In O'Connell's reliably erudite but accessible manner, he lays out the story, complete with engaging facts concerning timelines, complications and irregularities, of Merton's attraction to the works of Erasmus, *Ratio Verae Theologiae* in particular, and how Merton, with his characteristic independent and penetrating manner of thinking could claim: "'If there had been no Luther, Erasmus would be one of the greatest doctors of the Church – officially I mean.'"

Also seeing meaningful links between the life stories and theological views of two religious figures, **Cristóbal Serrán-Pagán y Fuentes**, in "Panentheism in Thomas Merton and Teilhard de Chardin: Finding God in All Things," looks at Merton in association with the Jesuit priest and

paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, also a subject of controversy, one who has numerous detractors and apologists. The author divides his substantial article into three sections: first, he defines pantheism and panentheism, two belief systems central to the argument at hand; second, he reviews the personal and cultural historical backgrounds of both writers under scrutiny (including some rehearsed data familiar to regular readers of Merton); finally, and most importantly, he explores their “panentheistic legacy.” Ultimately, with an obvious bank of knowledge and passion for his subject, the author argues that “these two Catholic mystics [Merton and Teilhard] reconciled in their thoughts the apparent tension that exists between divine transcendence and divine immanence.”

The third article in this segment is “The Invisible Order of Grace: Ponderings on the Lives of Thomas Merton and Vladimir Ghika” by **Liana Gehl**. More intuitive than argumentative, the essay is Gehl’s account of how, in her professional capacity as a biographer and linguist with an interest in Merton and Ghika, she discovered numerous coincidences in their otherwise non-intersectional life stories. These findings compelled her into an absorbing quest that yielded a wealth of intriguing facts that intimate truths rather than support conclusions. In a sense, Gehl’s admiration for two contemplative figures became a contemplative exercise in itself, embracing more mystery than it dispels. As one anonymous reviewer puts it, Gehl’s work arouses awareness of “the traces of grace remaining in the historical order like unseen ‘fields’ . . . like dark matter.” Indeed, it is a novel contribution to *The Merton Annual*, and in a year in which a novel pathogen is causing unprecedented division within the human family, it brings a welcome affirmation of the hidden wholeness in which Merton believed.

The subject of wholeness is central to the next article, “Merton and Decoloniality: Facing the Whole-World” by **Gray Matthews**, in which the author defines the phenomenon of “whole-world” as that which “cannot be possessed, overpowered and dominated, a wholeness that outstrips the human systematization of reality.” After some helpful groundwork in which he differentiates the meanings among his essay’s key terms – for example, distinguishing “decoloniality” from “decolonization” and “post-colonialism” – Matthews distils his thesis into two parts: first, that Merton “would, indeed, pay serious attention to decolonial thinkers,” and second, “so should we.” In a wise approach to supporting the first piece of his ambitious claim, Matthews quotes generously from primary works by Merton, with only narrative signposts to guide the reader through the series, basically allowing Merton’s words to reveal on their own the precursive “decoloniality,” i.e. Merton’s prophetic whole-world perspective,



that Matthews perceives in them. He follows by discussing a selection of contemporary decolonial writers with whom he imagines Merton would agree and possibly correspond if he were alive today. In this richly informative and gently persuasive article, Matthews brings his established acquaintance with the life and thought of Thomas Merton into the emerging field of cultural theory and criticism to make a cogent case for applying Merton's "contemplative and poetic vision" to "the tasks of decolonizing the systematic structures that hide the wholeness of [our] living world."

Scripture teaches "A cheerful heart is a good medicine,"<sup>8</sup> a lesson reiterated and illustrated by **Paul M. Pearson**, in the penultimate article, "Wearing Our Mitres to Bed: Thomas Merton and the Need for Humor in 'This Mad Place.'" Pearson's title sets the tone as it refers to a passage in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* in which Merton writes about reading in the breviary of a saint who, in bed at the point of death removed his vestments and lay on the floor to die, a story clearly meant as a lesson in humility, but a lesson deferred because Merton cannot conceal his amusement at the questionable image of the pontiff wearing his vestments in bed. While Pearson calls his article a "cook's tour" of humor in the life and vocation of Thomas Merton, its scope is comprehensive and broadly documented with examples from Merton's poetry, letters, journals and artwork. To demonstrate the early presence and longevity of Merton's sense of humor, Pearson traces the monk's proclivity for laughter from his pre-monastic days throughout his monastic life as well as in the various media in which he indulged. Moreover, Pearson includes evidence of Merton's love of laughter found in the witness of others who interacted with him. Alluding to the previously mentioned passage from *Conjectures*, Pearson, in concert with Merton, concludes his survey with sage advice for survival in "mad" times: instead of "brandishing our croziers and wearing our mitres in bed," we should "like Merton, be able to laugh at our idiosyncrasies and those of our world."

Rounding out the articles segment of Volume 33 is "Beholding New Things and Reconciling All Things: A Bibliographic Review of 2019" by **Joseph Quinn Raab**. Raab leads into his survey of effectively selected publications of 2019 by pointing out salient and distressing similarities between Merton's earthly existence and our own times: "Who among us cannot see in Thomas Merton's own life and times a not too distant mirror of our own?" Raab then draws our attention beyond surface likenesses, "the predictable redundancy of *chronos*," to "the surprising freshness of *kairos*," where reconciling revelations perpetually unfold. He artfully frames his discussion by organizing the review materials under forceful

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8. Proverbs 17:22 (NRSV translation).

headings, each highlighting one of the main facets of Merton's expansive and generative faith: the poet, the prophet, the mystic. In summing up, Raab notes that in all the pieces under review, the authors find in Merton "reliable guidance for how to 'stand fast, girded in truth and clothed with righteousness as a breastplate' against the threatening darkness of these troubling times (Ephesians 6:14)." Complementing Raab's 2019 bibliographic overview is the reviews section in which readers will find nine illuminating analyses of notable books and CDs produced in 2019, by or about or related to Thomas Merton.

### Conclusion

In his "Message to Poets," Merton speaks of an "ingrained innocence," a disposition born of "strong and undeniable" convictions "rooted in fidelity to *life* rather than to artificial systems."<sup>9</sup> The seeds of this innocence can take root only in the soil of faith, and as Merton expresses in his reading, writing and lasting influence on activists, must then be strengthened by prayer, become embodied, and enter the world as acts of love, not merely fulfilled institutional obligations. As Merton writes in *Contemplation in a World of Action*, "He who attempts to act and do things for others or for the world without deepening his own self-understanding, freedom, integrity and capacity to love, will not have anything to give others."<sup>10</sup> In other words, to be a direct transmitter of love, one must be constantly attuned to Truth and resistant to the false messages of enculturation, following the example of the Good Samaritan, who, unlike the religious figures in the parable, disregarded structural norms and answered the needs of one not likely to do the same for him. Some would call that weird. Pope Francis calls it being "present," being a "neighbor to all" with "no questions asked."<sup>11</sup> This "presence" that Pope Francis refers to is a unifying thread among the articles and reviews that make up this volume, for at the center of each discussion, whatever the topic, one can find evidence of the dynamic and fruitful presence of Thomas Merton, continuing what Raab calls his "tireless and faithful" ministry of reconciliation.

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9. Thomas Merton, "Message to Poets," *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 156.

10. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) 164.

11. Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti: On Fraternity and Social Friendship* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020) 36-37.