

# THE PEACEMAKER: Merton's Critique and Model

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Honored friends of Thomas Merton, brothers and sisters. It is a great honor and joy to be with you this evening.\* And it is very festive. I sometimes wonder how Thomas Merton would feel in this situation, sitting between Terence Cardinal Cooke and the President of Columbia [William J. McGill]. I think he would think it's a big joke.

I am afraid if we take it all too seriously, the joke will be on us, but if we take it very lightly, we will find that this is, after all, a very serious moment. It is very serious because one can hardly fail to hear somewhere the echoes of Jesus' own words in the Gospels, "You hypocrites. You are building sepulchers for prophets and adorning the tombs of the just. And so you become guilty with your fathers who killed the prophets."

Thomas Merton stands before us as a prophet. Another prophet of our time, Father Daniel Berrigan, very rightly said about Thomas Merton, "Enticed as he was, enticed as we all are by a corrupt culture that asks us to become celebrities at the expense of life and death issues, he never yielded. And it is in this way that he became truly a prophet."

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There are two ways of becoming celebrities. One is to stay within the environment, to stay within one's community, and to conform, and not to speak out. The other one is to get out and to criticize from the outside. But the prophet lives with this terrible tension of remaining within and yet speaking out. It is precisely that tension which characterizes Thomas Merton's life as it characterizes Daniel Berrigan's life. The question before us is, then, how should we honor a prophet without making a celebrity of him? How should we celebrate the memory of Thomas Merton? Certainly not by building sepulchers. What is to be celebrated here cannot be buried. It is alive.

Not by adorning monuments, as people do who have Merton's works in beautiful editions and never read them. But by understanding the message. That means by standing under the judgment that this message implies. By living out the consequences each in our own way. You might say, using the terminology of the title of this lecture, by applying Merton's model to our lives, Merton's model of peacemaker to our peacemaking. But here we come across a serious problem. We cannot really apply Merton's model because if we submit to Merton's critique of the peacemaker, it shatters all models. Because Merton's critique is not a critique of a peacemaker who criticizes warmakers but it is a radical critique of "would-be" peacemakers in the light of the one and only peacemaker and that is the spirit and the power of God. On this insight that God is the only peacemaker -- that *God* is the *only* peacemaker -- on this insight hinges everything that Thomas Merton ever thought, taught, and suffered in the cause of peacemaking. So we could ask ourselves in celebrating Thomas Merton's memory: what were for him the consequences of this model-shattering insight that God is the one and only peacemaker?

The first consequence was, if you want to express it somewhat paradoxically, that Merton no longer sought peace, no longer, at any rate, the illusory peace of our willful manipulations but he sought to know God whose will is our true peace. Or you may put it this way: he no longer attempted to rush into doctoring up the world, but he, rather, tried to hold still long enough to allow the Great Peacemaker to heal his heart. That is more difficult. This meant for him entering a monastery. Now, this fact raises some very difficult questions. The first question might be: Well, is then the monastic life, for Thomas Merton, the model of peacemaking?

The answer is a clear "No." It is one form among many forms of channelling God's peacemaking into our world. We might ask: Well, why was it Merton's form of peacemaking? And the answer, in Merton's words,

would simply be:

"It is God's will. And God's will is our peace."

God's will was not revealed to him through some voice that whispered into his ear and said that he should become a monk, but in a very confused and everyday way, feeling a certain attraction and circumstances conspiring to allow it. That's all! Very much in the way anyone's vocation comes about. Then he found himself a monk and then he tried to channel peace through this medium into his world because it simply was his calling.

But then you might ask: if Merton lived as a monk a life so foreign to most people, of what help can he be to them? The answer is that the forms are many, but the authentic inner gesture is one for all of us. The only difference may be that the monk has no alibi, no excuse, for making that inner gesture while most of us in other walks of life have all sorts of other things with which we can busy ourselves and which we could put in the foreground instead of making that one identical gesture, the gesture that is identical for all of us, the gesture of finding God and God's will because his will is our peace.

There is no model and monasticism itself is no model and for those who are not so well acquainted with monasticism, it might seem like a nice and well-defined model but when you come to look more closely at monasticism itself, it is a model-shattering model in itself. You have within one and the same monastic world stability, as one form of living out monastic commitment, and *peregrinatio*, never resting anywhere, from one place to another. Both for the same reason.

You have, on a much more superficial level, those monks that never let their hair be touched by scissors. There is no model even in haircuts in monastic life. You have the poverty of security. Benedictine poverty is a poverty of security. If you get into that monastery, you've made it. And you have the poverty of absolute insecurity. One is not more monastic than the other. You have, within one and the same monastic community, obedience of following orders and obedience of giving orders. The monk who followed orders yesterday may be the Abbot tomorrow and may be giving the orders. There is no model of obedience that says that you follow anybody else's orders because no one is quite as autonomous in the Church as a Benedictine Abbot. Almost. Well, of course, all of us want models for the sake of security and monks also are no exception to that. Merton had to take a very strong prophetic stance not to follow anybody's model. He kept repeating: "Don't call me a hermit. I'm not going to live up to anybody's standards of what a hermit should be like." And when he referred to

himself, he would say: "A hermit of sorts." Or something like that -- very qualified.

In many other ways, faithful to the monastic tradition, that model-shattering monastic tradition, he became rather disturbing to monastic convention. But because he doesn't fit any preconceived model of monk, that makes him a monk in truth. So what is emphasized, when the particular form of life loses its ultimate importance, is life itself. Aliveness. When the focus shifts away from the form of life, the source of life comes into focus. God. The Great Peacemaker. In the Rule of St. Benedict, the rule, as you probably all know, that Thomas Merton followed as a Trappist, there is one decisive criterium for the acceptance or rejection of a candidate. "Si vero Deum vult." One criterium -- "If he truly seeks God, nothing else matters." But, obviously, this is a life and death criterion, not only for monks, but for all of us. Do we truly seek God? Do we ultimately seek God and so find ourselves for, "God is more intimate for each one of us than we are to ourselves." Or as Merton used to say, paraphrasing St. Augustine: "God isn't somebody else."

Do we seek ourselves and so lose ourselves in the very seeking? Of course we can never be sure of the answer. We can never be safe from self-deception either inside the monastery or outside the monastery. Yet the human heart cannot find peace unless we continue to let that question spur us on. It is precisely this question which unites Merton with all monks and with all human beings. It was a great discovery for him when he met Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, to discover how deeply they shared. When he met Tibetan monks later towards the end of his life, he experienced their deep union in the monastic quest. Not only with monks is he united but with all of us because that question, "Do we truly seek God?", is the life and death issue for all of us. We all long for that healing that comes from encounter with God -- that healing which Christian tradition calls salvation or peace. Peace and salvation in Jewish-Christian Biblical tradition are practically interchangeable.

There are four great terms for the reality of salvation in our Biblical tradition and they are "salvation," "blessing," "righteousness" and "peace." Another consequence of Merton's insight that God is the only peacemaker was that he was thrown directly into the hard reality of that Biblical paradox of peace, not by speculating about it as a theologian but by living it out, by suffering it out, in his life. Salvation in Biblical terms means the saving encounter with God, an encounter that takes place in history and in community. The response is joy. Blessing -- very similar, with only a slight

change of accentuation -- means the communication of life from God in history, in community, and the response is thanksgiving. Righteousness is the term which is most misunderstood in popular theology today. Righteousness is very close in its meaning to salvation and blessing. It is not rooted in a legal notion nor is it exhausted in a legal notion. It is not socio-ethical but religious. Justice is not a virtue we possess, not primarily, but rather a realm we enter -- the realm of God's justicing. God makes whole and thus, entering that realm of wholeness, we can respond in holiness. All these -- salvation, blessing, righteousness -- are summed up in the notion of peace in the Bible because peace stands for that fullness of communion with God -- in history and beyond history. Here the response is universal love, the fullness of communion with God and God's will, all of which St. Augustine calls "*tranquillitas ordinis*," the dynamic "stillness of order," order as the form in which love celebrates its creative freedom. Merton entered into this reality by seeking God alone.

It was perfectly clear to him that the initiative comes from God, and that is the characteristic of the Biblical notion of salvation, blessing, righteousness, and peace. The initiative comes from God. A key quotation in this context is the one that Cardinal Cooke used in his introductory remarks this evening: "Nonviolence is not primarily the language of efficacy, but the language of *kairos*, of God's own good time." God chooses when it is time. Nonviolence does not say "we shall overcome" so much as it says "this is the way of the Lord and whatever happens to us, He shall overcome." I think that Merton might have said today: "She shall overcome."

Let us not forget that this saving event takes place in concrete historical circumstances. That is the second important aspect of the Biblical notion of salvation, blessing, righteousness, and peace. It takes place in history, in concrete history. Therefore, Merton could say:

In practice, the way to contemplation is an obscurity so obscure that it is no longer even dramatic. There is nothing left in it that can be grasped and cherished as heroic or even unusual. And so for a contemplative, there is a supreme value in the ordinary routine of work and poverty and hardship and monotony that characterizes the lives of all the poor and uninteresting and forgotten people in the world.

That again is a bond of communion. The response to God's initiative in history, the response of joy, of thanks, of love, of wholeness and holiness is the response that comes from the heart and that is where we are most truly ourselves and most intimately united with all others and with God -- the place where we are really together -- a togetherness that is the very opposite of alienation, violence, and war. So, the realization that God is the

only peacemaker makes us aware that all other "would-be" peacemaking that does not flow from God as its source either comes from alienation or leads to alienation -- or both. Therefore, Merton had to confront within himself and around him (and that was another consequence of his realization that God is the only peacemaker) the brokenness of the Western tradition of peacemaking which is cut off from its Biblical roots. He had bitter things to say about it at the end of his life. In one of the last things he wrote, he said:

The decline of the classic Graeco-Roman civilization that first flowered in Homer, the nobility, the idealism, the chivalry, the humanity that we encounter in our cultural tradition have become a pile of non-descript linguistic rubbish -- sentimental jargon without any real force, based on no deep experience of life but rather devised to justify alienation and evasion.

We encounter clearly that linguistic rubbish and alienation from the true tradition that Merton suffered when we find, for instance, law and order opposed to justice and peace, when justice should be the root and fruit of law and order, should be the root and fruit of peace. An image that comes to mind when I think of the brokenness of the Western tradition of peacemaking that Merton suffered is an image that many of you may have seen and so I would like to call it to mind. A film was made about Father Daniel Berrigan when he was in hiding from the FBI. The one part of the film which most impressed me was a long scene in which Berrigan's mother was interviewed. You only heard the voice of the interviewer and saw the face of this old farmer woman. It was a moment in which the brokenness of our peacemaking tradition was brought home to her and to all those who watched her. The interviewer first asked her whether she agreed with what her son was doing and she said, "Yes." Then he said, "But it's against the law." There was this long silence in which you simply saw the woman's face trying to make sense of these words -- a woman who had lived all her life in a simple, rural community -- trying to make sense of what law meant for her. Then she said, "But it isn't God's law." That was the only answer and that brings home to us that brokenness, that brings home to us the Bible's words: "My thoughts, says the Lord, are not your thoughts. Neither are your ways my ways. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts."

Merton, almost paraphrasing this if we listen carefully, said:

The chief difference between violence and nonviolence is that violence depends entirely on its own calculation. Nonviolence depends entirely on God and God's word.

God's word. Not some Bible reading that we occasionally listen to, but God's creative word that makes everything what it is, that makes us what we are, that makes peace of all. As the wonderful Psalm verse says: "I am listening. What is God saying?" What God is saying means peace, a peace that may be a very disturbing peace. Since the creative word of God which means peace makes each thing what it is and makes each one of us what we are, it will mean for us peace in that full sense that it has in Hebrew and in the Bible. That is a good time. It will be a good time even when it is a hard time.

That brings me to another consequence that directly flows from Merton's insight that God is the only peacemaker, and that was his choice, the crucial choice, of opting for a good time in the sense of genuine self-fulfillment in the freedom of obedience rather than becoming a "do-gooder." There is a wonderful passage in the prologue to the Rule of St. Benedict and it runs something like this: "The Lord, looking for His workmen in the crowd, cries out and says 'Where is the man who wants life? Where is the man who wants to see a good time?' And if you hear that and say 'That's me,' then the Lord says: 'If you really want to have true and eternal life then seek peace and chase after it.'" St. Benedict comments on this and says: "Oh, my brothers, what can be sweeter to us than that voice of the Lord inviting us. Oh look, in His Fatherly Love He shows us the way to life." To seek peace, that is to listen to that word of God which each one of us is and so to become truly ourselves. That option includes the option against the "do-gooder."

Merton saw that, and when he talked to his novices, he said:

If we make the monastic life a constant project of seeing ourselves doing good, we are in trouble. Wanting to see ourselves doing good is a real source of trouble around here.

And he prayed:

If You send me work I shall embrace it with joy and it will be rest to me, because it is Your Will. And if You send me rest, I will rest in You. Only save me from myself. Save me from my own, private, poisonous urge to change everything . . . . Let me rest in Your Will and be silent . . . . This is what I live for. Amen, amen.

He kept emphasizing that the good of this world, including the monastic world, vastly outweighs all evil. He certainly had a good time. If there is anything that is characteristic about Merton, it is that he had a good time. I am delighted to see Brother Patrick [Hart] nod because he knew him a lot better than I did.

Particularly in solitude he found this good time, because that was the word that God spoke in his heart. He had great compassion for people who

would not be able to spend any time in solitude. He said so. For him that was the word. He said:

So much do I love this solitude that when I walk out among the roads to the old barns that stand alone, far from the new buildings, delight begins to overpower me from head to foot and peace smiles even in the marrow of my bones.

We may say that that is very romantic but what is the purpose of all of that? If we ask that question, we stand already under the judgment of Merton's message. We need more than purpose to survive. If it helps you to think of a little bit of purpose, think of the solitude of the monk as an antenna but an antenna for meaning, relatively free from the static of purpose. After all that, not everything has to be useful. In fact, the most meaningful realities in our lives, when we look closely, turn out to be largely useless. Merton said that beautifully in one passage where he writes:

The rain has stopped. The afternoon sun slants through the pine trees and how those useless needles smell in the clear air. A dandelion, long out of season has pushed itself into bloom between the smashed leaves of last season's day lilies. The valley sounds with the totally uninformative talk of creeks and wild water. And the quails begin their sweet whistling in the wet bushes. Their noise is absolutely useless and so is the delight I take in it.

It isn't that "do-gooders" were not well-intentioned in their purposefulness. Yet you start doing good to others and the next thing is that you know best what is good for others and then you find that they just don't know what is good for them, and then you might end up killing them in their own best interest. We have all seen it happen. Merton writes: "The greatest inhumanities have been perpetrated in the name of 'humanity,' 'civilization,' 'progress,' 'freedom,' 'my country,' and of course, 'God.'" If I had the courage to admit to myself that I seek a good time, then I soon realize that the good time one has is not really fully a good time until all have a good time. That is a different approach to peacemaking, or as Merton says: "Life should be joyful and easy in our uselessness. Then I don't have to sell myself to the world, but I am happy to be what I am."

That should be the happiness of the peacemaker or, rather, of that channel for God's peacemaking. To be happy as who I am. To be happy with what I am. I think that was, in a sense, the core and the most easily accessible expression of Merton's peacemaking. It clearly shows that there is no model to it, because there is no model to what each one of us can be if we are truly ourselves and become truly ourselves. As I was preparing thoughts to share with you -- these thoughts -- it seemed to me several times that I almost heard Merton speak. I had this beautiful picture of a friend and

brother of mine, a portrait made of him, kind of looking over my shoulder and I kept hearing him say: "Don't give them too much abstract thought. Why don't you read a poem to them? And be sure it's not one of my own." So I would like to read a poem to you in celebration. It is a poem that is quite central to his thought and quite central to the notion of peacemaking about becoming who you can be, about being happy with what you are, and about having a good time. It is a poem of which Merton himself was very fond. You might remember that, at one time, he wanted to write his thesis here at Columbia on Hopkins and then ended up writing it on Blake, but Hopkins was very close to his heart all his life. I will read this poem hoping that it is familiar to many of you because it doesn't come across all that easily. Then I would like to illustrate it with a few parallels from Merton's own writings. It's the sonnet "As Kingfishers Catch Fire."

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;  
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells  
Stones ring: like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's  
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;  
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same;  
Deals out that being indoors each one swells;  
Selves -- goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,  
Crying *What I Do Is Me: For That I Came*.  
I say more: the just man justices;  
Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;  
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is -- Christ.  
For Christ plays in ten thousand places,  
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his  
To the Father through the features of men's faces.

It almost sounds like a paraphrase on this when Merton writes: "The forms and individual characters of living and growing things, of inanimate beings, of animals and flowers and all nature, constitute their holiness in the sight of God. Their inscape." That word obviously gives away Hopkins, "Their inscape is their sanctity. It is the imprint of His wisdom and His reality in them." That holds not only for things, that holds for everyone of us if we have what Merton calls "the humility to be myself." He writes: "If I find him, I will find myself, and if I find my true self, I will find Him. . . The only One Who can teach me to find God is God Himself, Alone."

There is a beautiful passage which I recommend to you to read. It's in *The Sign of Jonas*, on page 275, somewhere around there, and I can only read you the last passage but again it has to do with this "selving," with this being yourself. After describing how a hawk came down and swooped up a starling in a field with many, many starlings, Merton writes:

I tried to pray afterwards. But the hawk was eating the bird. And I thought of that flight coming down like a bullet from the sky behind me and over my roof, the sure aim with which he hit this one bird, as though he had picked it out a mile away. For a moment . . . I understood the terrible fact that some men love war. But in the end, I think that hawk is to be studied by saints and contemplatives; because he knows his business. I wish I knew my business as well as he does his.

He describes again and again in his work, you will remember, all these wonderful things in which God dwells, and who live out of God, and who glorify God. He says:

And in the midst of them all, I know you. And I know your presence and you love me. And my love is precious because it is yours rather than my own. Precious to you because it comes to you from your own son but precious even more because it makes me your son.

Through being himself, from living out of that word -- that creative word that makes each thing what it is and makes each one of us what we are -- through living it out, Merton's recognition that God is the only peacemaker drew him deeper and deeper into the mystery of the heart as the source of nonviolent power. He wrote: "To be here with the silence of sonship in my heart is to be a center in which all things converge upon you God and this is surely enough for the time being."

In this center of his own heart where he listened to the word of God, he felt deeply at one, deeply united with all. He also tapped that source of power for nonviolence. He wrote:

The basic problem is not political, it is apolitical and human. One of the most important things to do is to keep cutting deliberately through political lines and barriers and emphasize the fact that these are largely fabrications, and that there is another dimension, a genuine reality, totally opposed to the fictions of politics. The human dimension which politics pretends to arrogate entirely to themselves. This is the necessary first step along the long way toward the perhaps impossible task of purifying, humanizing and somehow illuminating politics themselves.

From that heart he also saw clearly because there is no eye with which we can truly, clearly, see except the eye of the heart. He saw the task. This is why, if we really want to be channels of God's peace, we have to go to the heart and open the eyes of our heart to see the task. The task, as Merton saw it, is to work for the total abolition of war. There can be no question that, unless war is abolished, the world will remain constantly in a state of madness and desperation in which, because of the immense destructive power of modern weapons, the danger of catastrophe will be imminent and probable at every moment and everywhere. The task of abolishing war totally he saw as the great Christian task of our time. Everything else is

secondary. For the survival of the human race itself depends upon it. We must at least face the responsibility and do something about it. Now, the crucial moment came when Merton, because of the choice he made in light of the fact that God is the only peacemaker, because of the choice to become a monk, was silenced about peace. He was not allowed to write about peace. That was the crucial point of his peacemaking. He faced, as squarely as anyone else would have faced, the situation, and wrote:

Now you will ask me: How do I reconcile obedience, true obedience, which is synonymous with love, with a situation like this? Should I just blast the whole thing wide open, or walk out, or tell them just to jump in the lake?

And his answer was:

I am who I am. I have freely chosen this state and have freely chosen to stay in it when the question of a possible change arose. I am a disturbing element. All right. I am not making a point of being that but simply of saying what my conscience dictates and doing so without seeking my own interests. This means accepting such limitations as may be placed on me by authority, and not because I may or may not agree with the ostensible reasons why the limitations are imposed, but out of love for God who is using these things to attain ends which I myself cannot at the moment see or comprehend.

In hindsight, we can clearly see that God had reasons which were greater than anything that one could have comprehended at that time. But that also meant that by recognizing that God is the only peacemaker, Merton had to pay the price for what Eliot calls "a condition of complete simplicity, costing not less but everything." He wrote:

He who is called to be a monk is precisely the one who when he finally realizes that he is engaged in the pure folly of making an impossible demand, instead of renouncing the whole thing, proceeds to devote himself even more completely to the task. Aware that precisely because he cannot meet it, it will be met for him.

Here we have reached the final point:

Here where love burns with an innocent flame. The clean desire for death. Death without sweetness, without sickness, without commentary, without reference and without change. Clean death by the sword of the spirit in which is intelligence and everything in order purges and delivers us.

For my part my name is that sky, those fence-posts, and those cedar trees. I shall not even reflect on who I am and I shall not say my identity is nobody's business because that implies a truculence I do not intend. It has no meaning.

Now my whole life is this -- to keep unencumbered. The wind owns the fields where I walk and I own nothing and am owned by nothing and I shall never even be forgotten because no one will ever discover me. This is to me a source of immense confidence.

Only when we have somehow reached a point where we realize that beyond this point is the Merton whom we will never discover, have we gone to where we should be when we commemorate the prophet. We can ask ourselves: Do we seek peace or do we seek the source of peace -- God? Can we live with the Biblical paradox of Christ who is our peace and yet says: "I have not come to bring peace but a sword"? Can we face the brokenness of our Western tradition of peacemaking? Can we make the crucial choice of opting for a good time? Do we dare to stand at the place of the heart? Are we willing to pay the price for a condition of complete simplicity costing not less but everything? This is how Merton prayed. This is how he might pray at this point:

*ALMIGHTY AND MERCIFUL GOD, in your will is our peace.*

*Help us to be masters of the weapons that threaten to master us.*

*Help us to use our science for peace and plenty, not for war and destruction.*

*Save us from the compulsion to follow our adversaries in all that we most hate, confirming them in their hatred and suspicion of us.*

*Resolve our inner contradictions which now grow beyond belief and beyond bearing.*

*Teach us to be long-suffering in anguish and insecurity.*

*Teach us to wait and trust.*

*Grant light.*

*Grant strength and patience to all who work for peace.*

*Grant us prudence in proportion to our power;  
wisdom in proportion to our science;  
humanness in proportion to our wealth and might.*

*But grant us, above all, to see that our ways are not necessarily your ways.*

*That we cannot fully penetrate the mystery of your design.*

*And that the very storm of power now raging on this earth reveals your hidden will and your inscrutable decision.*

*Grant us to see your face in the lightning of this cosmic storm, oh God of holiness, merciful to all.*

*Grant us to seek peace where it is truly found.*

*In your will, oh God, is our peace. Amen.*