

DEFENDING ONE'S FREEDOM

Review of

Witness to Freedom:

The Letters of Thomas Merton in Times of Crisis

Selected and edited by William H. Shannon

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To defend one's faith is to defend one's freedom and at least implicitly the freedom of everyone else.

—from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*

Reading the fifth and final volume of Thomas Merton's letters, *Witness to Freedom*, is a moving experience, for many letters chosen so well by William H. Shannon communicate, as only such personal documents can, the pain inherent in Merton's efforts to speak out truthfully about public and personal issues related to "the institutional structures of monastic life, Roman Catholicism, and American life" in the turbulent 1960s (p. ix). As would be expected, the collection of letters written in the last decade of Merton's life reveals the richness of his contacts with persons all over the world. He writes as peacemaker, monk, spiritual director, and friend to a divergent group of private as well as public citizens. Among the famous are Joan Baez, Mark Van Doren, Dr. Benjamin Spock, Rachel Carson, Louis Massignon, Dom James Fox, Naomi Burton Stone, and Victor Hammer. In his letters he covers a wide range of issues related to marriage and sex, death, old age, Buddhism, the Shakers, women's rights, birth control, humanistic and holistic education, war, and vocation.

Shannon had a difficult challenge in bringing unity and focus to what must be viewed as a very general body of material. Yet, he succeeded in unifying the material in a way that is most powerful and meaningful by relating all the letters to the central theme of freedom vs. obedience. Though he divides the letters into four seemingly broad categories — art and freedom, war and freedom, Merton's life and work, and religious thought and dialogue — he provides introductions to each section and even generous prefatory notes for some letters that articulate the links of content to theme and reveal Merton as a witness to freedom.

In his lucid Introduction, Shannon notes that the letters were written when Merton had come to realize that individual freedom is an "inner reality guided much more from within than from without" (p. viii). Monks living in Christ and guided by the Holy Spirit have the right and responsibility to act in concert with their conscience even if those actions are not perceived as dutiful to the dictates of Church or State. The drama of Merton's struggle to honor his solemn vows while keeping a balance between freedom and obedience is played out best in Merton's public and private communications about the crises related to nuclear war and his vocation as monk and artist.

As the letters on war and freedom reveal, Merton's role as monk ironically complicated and simpli-

fied his work as peacemaker. His superiors would not allow him to publish on the subject of war and peace, as his articles were “decidedly harmful to the image of [the] contemplative order in the eyes of the populace” (p. 284). Yet, Merton was committed to exercising his freedom as a man of God. In a letter to Archbishop Thomas Roberts, he wrote: “I have felt that it would be a matter of fidelity to my vocation as a Christian and as a priest, and by no means a contradiction with my state as a monk, to try to show clearly that our gradual advance toward nuclear war is morally intolerable and even criminal and that we have to take the most serious steps to realize our condition and do something about it” (p. 24). In other letters in this volume, Merton speaks with equal conviction about his dedication to protect all persons, for after all, a monk is a Catholic and Catholic means universal (p. 59).

Faced with obedience to God as opposed to obedience to humans, Merton elected to circulate secretly many of his articles and letters protesting war. The Cold War Letters, written in 1961-1962, are a case in point. Fortunately, Shannon includes a generous number of these letters on war and peace along with a fascinating Preface to a proposed book, *The Cold War Letters*/ Merton’s ideas about the dangers of nuclear war put forth in this collection have a striking currency in the 1990s where nations continue to struggle to ensure a lasting peace in the world. Shannon’s historical introduction to “The Cold War Letters” and indeed, his excellent chapter in his book, *The Silent Lamp*, entitled, “The Year of the Cold War Letters: October 1961-October 1962,” provide indispensable background on this series of letters.¹

In the letters in “Vocational Crisis: 1959-1960,” and “Sequel to the Crisis of 1959-1960,” the conflict between freedom and obedience is heightened, as the drama shifts from Merton’s public to his private struggles. Shannon wisely selected letters that enable the reader to experience in some measure some of the events related to Merton’s urgent and time-consuming searches for a semi-eremitical life in Nicaragua, the Virgin Islands, Reno, Nevada, and Cuernavaca, Mexico. This search was filled with ironic twists and grave disappointments. The reader learns that Merton’s urgent quest to go to Cuernavaca ended when the monastery Dom Gregorio Lemercier began was finally suppressed by Rome. Merton was to learn later that Gregorio Lemercier had married. Three letters in “Sequel to the Crisis of 1959-1960,” written to Ernesto Cardenal in an effort to arrange to move to Nicaragua, never reached their destination. Sadly, Cardenal did not send them to Rome because Merton did not seem firm in his decision about where he wished to reside finally.

Merton is strikingly articulate and direct in his letters in explaining his rationale for wishing to leave the wealthy and powerful Abbey of Gethsemani. For example, in his feisty letter to Bishop Matthew a Niedhammer, OFM, he speaks out about the rigidity of the structure of a large monastery: “There comes a point where real development ceases and life enters a kind of stagnation and futility except in certain cases where people called to be Superiors go in a kind of *active perfection*. For the rest, the monastic community is like a convoy of ships in time of war, in which every vessel takes the speed of the slowest in the convoy” (p. 202). Shannon points out that Merton was sometimes “restless in spirit” (p. 226). He was also creative and hardly suited to a life he perceived to be needlessly rigid and ultimately stifling. In the end, Merton remained at the Abbey of Gethsemani as both a free and obedient servant of God. In the two telling letters of 17 December 1959 to Dom James Fox, Merton first neatly made a promise of obedience to his Abbot and then underscored his freedom to act according to his conscience (pp. 216-219).

Merton’s struggles for freedom are discussed in letters not only to public figures but to dear friends. The letters to his friend and literary agent, Naomi Burton Stone (only a small number of which appear in this volume), are invaluable because Merton talked to her as “sister and ‘sometimes’ mother” (p. 123). The reader rarely hears Merton say as he said to Burton Stone: “Yes dammit, your heart should ache for me. Don’t repent of that. Somebody ought to ache along with my ache, even if it’s selfish” (p. 131). In these poignant letters, Merton trusts enough to reveal his feelings of loneliness and sadness. There was a beautiful friendship, and Shannon is quite right in observing the advantage of the reader’s seeing Merton’s letters to her.

The letters to artist and friend Victor Hammer in “Art and Freedom,” though not as intimate, also reveal dimensions of Merton’s soul. In his letter of 14 May 1959, in response to Hammer’s request, Merton clarifies his perceptions about Hagia Sophia with exquisite tenderness. To him, she is “the feminine, dark, yielding, tender counterpart of the power, justice, creative dynamism of the Father,” and the Church is “a manifestation of the mercy of God, who is the revelation of Sophia in the sight of angels” (pp. 4-5). Merton intuitively understood the feminine part of God which enfolds humility, love and mercy.

Though Shannon began the volume with the letters to Victor Hammer, it might have been fitting to end with them. Given Merton’s public and personal crises in the 1960s, surely he passionately wished for the gentle love and mercy of God, not only for himself but for all his brothers and sisters.