

**THOMAS MERTON:
A PROPHET FOR THE 21ST CENTURY
PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS,
ITMS FOURTH GENERAL MEETING,
SAINT BONAVENTURE UNIVERSITY, 15 JUNE 1995**

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When I first told a couple of people the title of this presentation, they looked at me sort of askance as if to say “here we go again; another Merton cultist.” In actual fact, I do not consider myself a cultist, but I do have a profound appreciation and sense of gratitude to Thomas Merton, or Fr. Louis as we knew him.

When my predecessor as President, Bonnie B. Thurston, gave her address last time, she began with a disclaimer, saying that she had no interest in Thomas Merton the man. She went on to express in her typical powerful way what it is about Merton and his thought and life which attracted her. For myself, however, I would begin by saying that I have always been profoundly interested and influenced by Merton the man. I have frequently said that one of the greatest graces and blessings for me was the fact of living with and under him. He showed me in simple ordinary ways what it means to be a monk and what it means to be a human person. But he also showed me what it means to be a child of God in Christ.

In any case, however, it is Merton that we celebrate at this conference. And I would still propose him as a prophet of the 21st century. In saying this, I am not merely indulging my own zeal for him as a cause. I am mainly simply looking at a fact of history and at the same time looking to see what history has to offer to the future. In many respects it is amazing to realize that Thomas Merton has now been dead for twenty-seven years, and yet works by him and about him are still appearing regularly. Most of his writings, whether of a spiritual nature or a social level, are just as applicable and pertinent today as they were when he wrote them — sometimes even more so. The reasons behind this are many. Certainly human nature remains the same today as it was in the 1960s. And many of the issues of his time remain alive and fruitful for the foreseeable future. Thomas Merton wrote and spoke of these issues not from the realm of theory, but of experience, and it is this which gives him such a universal appeal.

Pope John Paul II speaks and writes about many of the same issues that preoccupied Merton: the value of the human person; peace and justice for all; dialogue and communion among all peoples and all cultures and religions; the primacy of Christ for all, whether believer or non-believer. And yet something distinguishes them as well. Merton wrote not from a basis of Thomism, although he certainly knew St Thomas and Scholastic philosophy; not from a basis of natural law, even though he taught that to many students at Gethsemani. He did not so much try to give answers as he brought the reader or the hearer into touch with basic questions which all too often remain hidden within our hearts and which we frequently even fear to face.

One thing that I frequently heard Merton say was that if you

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really want to know what the Will of God is for you, then simply honestly listen to the deepest yearnings of your own heart, and believe that expresses the Voice of God for you. Such a statement gives one confidence both in God and themselves. It also gives one a profound sense of compassion for all others. For only then can one experience the deep questioning that goes on in the depths of one's being. Merton gave people permission to face this questioning without feeling that it must always yield to answers or certainty.

Today all of society is deluged with ersatz answers: answers which avoid the questions rather than face them. To supply people with such answers even in the name of religion or revelation is to do an ultimate disservice. And Merton's prophetic stance was in his ability to face the solitude of uncertainty with the faith that God is therewith us. John Tracy Ellis, in the Foreword of the book by David Givney, remarks that "prophesy does not consist solely in the ability to pierce the veil that hides the future and to predict its course; it partakes as well of the quality of a herald of God's message to humankind."¹ And God's message remains ever the same as that given to Moses and later to the apostles: "I am Who Am" or "I am Always with you" (Exod. 3:14; Mt. 28:16).

Merton saw the whole of his writings as centered around this theme. When he deposited his papers at Bellarmine College, he wrote: "If I have written about interracial justice, or thermonuclear weapons, it is because these issues are terribly relevant to one great truth: that man [sic] is called to live as a Son of God. Man must respond to this call to live in peace with all his brothers in the One Christ."² His prophetic stance, then, came from his faith in the Incarnation, but an Incarnation which was not just a dogmatic statement but an actual *experience* of God's presence among us. As he writes in his final book: "The dimensions of prayer in solitude are those of man's ordinary anguish, his self-searching, his moments of nausea at his own vanity, falsity and capacity for betrayal. The way of prayer brings us face to face with the sham and indignity of the false self."³

Merton's prophetic stance was based, then, on an honest appraisal of both the best and the worst in the human person, with an ability to show compassion towards both. His writings were not judgmental of human failures and weaknesses. He was too conscious of both of these in himself, and it was precisely his spirit of prayer and solitude which enabled him to face these with equanimity. But he also serves as a guide to encourage each person to follow in this same path of truth and sincerity, confident of the fact that God has said He would be with us in every circumstance of life.

The circumstances of our world of today have basically not changed that much since the time when Merton was writing. Certainly history has moved on. The "Cold War" is supposedly over, but the greed, violence, lust for power and prestige, abuse of human persons continues on whether this is done by a Communist power or big business or even by national or local government in democracy. The cynicism and disillusion with government which has been so obvious in recent years and which contributed to the results of the '94 elections shows no signs of relenting. In one sense this is perhaps just as well. For people need to recognize that people like Newt Gingrich or Bob Dole or Phil Gramm or Ralph Reed are no more the solution for the 90s than Bill Casey or Ronald Reagan or Jerry Falwell were for the 80s. Perhaps it will be necessary that people flounder in such pits for some time yet in order to overcome the tendency to place their hope in someone — anyone — who promises that they have the answers. In actual fact it is necessary to realize that only God has the answers, and those answers are sown within our hearts if we would but listen.

In his Bangkok talk, the day of his death, Merton spoke of the difference between the Marxist and the monk, and what he said applies equally as well to the difference between the doctrinaire right wing or left wing politician, churchperson or ideologue and the monk or any person who seeks the life of the Spirit. He says that

the monk is essentially someone who takes a critical attitude toward the world and its structures The monk is one who says, in one way or another, that the claims of the world are fraudulent Christianity and Buddhism alike, then, seek to bring about a transformation of human consciousness . . . it will seek to transform and liberate the truth in each person, with the idea that it will then communicate itself to others The monk is one who has attained, or is about to attain, or seeks to attain, full realization. Not that he has acquired unusual or esoteric information, but he has come to experience the ground of his own being

in such a way that he knows the secret of liberation and can somehow or other communicate this to others.⁴

He ends this section of his talk with the remark of a Tibetan lama faced with having to flee Tibet: "From now on, Brother, everybody stands on his own feet" — along with the Zen saying: "Where do you go from the top of a thirty-foot pole?" (*AJ*, p. 338). The new Republicans want to effect a "Contract with America" here; the Christian Coalition wants to establish a "Contract with the American Family;" Pope John Paul wants to celebrate a millennium; some want isolationism in dealing with the world; others demand the right to their guns and militias. But none of this will change the fact that we are on the top of this thirty foot pole with no place to go but UP! Or, as the lama said: "From now on, everybody stands on his own feet."

Merton hastens to state that this is not a Pelagian statement, as if we could save ourselves by our own power. Rather it is "a statement to the effect that we can no longer rely on being supported by structures that may be destroyed at any moment by a political power or a political force. You cannot rely on structures. They are good and they should help us, and we should do the best we can with them. But they may be taken away, and if everything is taken away, what do you do next?" (*AJ*, p. 338).

Perhaps something of this is what is meant by another prophet of our times, Karl Rahner, when he said that "the Christian of the 21st century will be a mystic or will not be a Christian at all." Perhaps it is also what Jesus meant when he told the Samaritan woman that "the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth. God is spirit and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth" (Jo. 4:21-24).

By this Merton means that the monk, or the liberated human person, is brought to that freedom of the children of God by which we depend on God alone and find the fullness of our life in Him. This does not mean that one becomes removed from ordinary circumstances of life. On the contrary, it means that one can enter into every circumstance of life and find the possibilities that exist therein because God is present there also. As he says, it means that "once you penetrate by detachment and purity of heart to the inner secret ground of your ordinary experience, you attain a liberty that nobody can touch, that nobody can affect, that no political change of circumstances can do anything to" (*AJ*, p. 342).

This is closely aligned with his remarks regarding a "sacred society." In such a spirit the person admits no dependence on anything lower than himself or even "outside" himself in a spatial sense. His only Master is God. Only when God is our Master can we be free, for God is within ourselves as well as above us. He rules us by liberating us and raising us to union with Himself *from within*. And in so doing He liberates us from our dependence on created things outside us.⁵

All too often one depends on structures and on society, whether civil or ecclesial, in order to be artificially reassured of our own goodness or rightness. But the prophet calls us as in the Old Testament, to rely on God alone; to believe in His covenant and fidelity to us. If one believes in this, then it is no longer necessary to fabricate a false self or image to cover over the nothingness one experiences when facing ourselves. Again Merton says "The truly sacred attitude toward life is in no sense an escape from the sense of nothingness that assails us when we are left alone with ourselves. On the contrary, it penetrates into that darkness and that nothingness, realizing that the mercy of God has transformed our nothingness into His temple and believing that in our darkness His light has hidden itself" (*IE*, p. 213).

This was the mission of the prophet of old, and remains the mission of the prophet in every age. The prophet is not some extraordinary person pronouncing oracles for the future. The prophet is simply a person who is in touch with the demands of the actual situation and the presence of God in that situation. By Baptism, every Christian is called to be a prophet. And it is in this sense that I apply the term to Thomas Merton. Walter Brueggemann develops this in concrete terms for our own day: "When we speak of prophecy we are talking about a new way of life, a way of regarding the brother or sister, a new discernment of ourselves, and a new investment in the history we share with our brothers and sisters."⁶ The prophets have always spoken in concrete terms. John the Baptist, whom Jesus called the greatest of the prophets answered clearly when asked what people were to do: "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has

food must do likewise . . . Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you . . . Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages” (Luke 3:10-15). Such injunctions were based on the revelation of God’s Word that every person is precious in God’s eyes, engraved in the palm of His hand, espoused to Yahweh in love, and that Yahweh looks out particularly for the *anaweim*, the poor. The Beatitudes given by Jesus are much the same, and in very concrete terms.

When Merton says, then, that all that he has written is based on the fact that all are children of God and all are called to live as brothers and sisters in Christ, he certainly has in mind the totality of his writings, both spiritual and social. What we have considered up to now reflects more his spiritual doctrine, but he himself applied this concretely in his social writings — his zeal for race relations, for abolition of war and nuclear armaments, for justice for blacks, Native Americans, for truth and integrity and love. And part of his prophetic stance at present and for the future is based precisely on the fact that most of these same problems still remain with us in one form or another. Society has obviously not progressed very far in these areas in the thirty years since he was writing. In fact, in some respects, society has even regressed.

If this is true, it is because society has failed to recognize and incorporate the essential oneness and wholeness of his writings. It has separated the body of writings into spiritual and social. Some have even complained that his social doctrine was an aberration of his role as a monk and a spiritual writer. In actual fact, just as the Mystery of the Incarnation proclaims the extent to which God has entered into this world in the flesh, so Merton’s life and mission proclaim the same truth. If Merton were alive today, one might speculate on what issues his prophecy would manifest itself. Just as his words of the past were stirred by current crises and situations such as race relations, the Cold War, nuclear armaments, the Vietnam War, so his words for today would be directed toward current issues and situations.

Walter Bruggemann cites a number of factors which enter into a time of crisis when prophecy is particularly needed. (1) Respect for authority in every phase of life is on the wane in every social group, whether church or state, families or education, business or government. Today the general response to this is the clamor for law and order. We see this today in the one-up-manship of Congress and other officials calling for more and tougher penitentiaries, quicker use of the death penalty, “three strikes, you’re out,” resentments towards gun control, and now even strident militia movements. I feel confident that Merton would have little patience with all of this. He would see it for the cynical panic that it is, for the fact of being centered on “my world and my rights” rather than the true needs and benefits of the other. Even within the church the clamor for removal of dissent and clinging to centralization would be seen by him as foreign to the spirit of the Gospel and a refusal to face actual situations. (2) Economics and social responsibility are large issues today and ones that Merton would have definite ideas about, particularly when the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. I feel sure that he, like many others, would be appalled at some of the changes that the current Congress are talking about. He would recognize the tendency of selfishness and individualism in some of our policies and the way that they fail to take into consideration the needs of all. He never was, nor would he be today, a proponent of socialism. But he would emphasize the responsibility we all have toward one another and especially the poor and minorities. (3) The issue of people refusing to stay in “their places” is a critical issue today. New countries on all continents are wanting to take their full place at the table of world government and world resources. Many are impeded due to the weight of debt and interest to richer countries, particularly our own. Merton would be clamoring for a reorganization of world debt and highlighting the duty that rich nations have toward the poorer. This entails facing the economic colonization that is prevalent in all parts of the world. On other levels groups of society are demanding equal recognition and equal rights to the rest of society. Women’s groups, gays and minorities state their right to a full share in the rights of society. Merton would be able to see these in the light of his basic doctrine of the sacredness of every person and the rights they have as children of God. In this same vein one can see the powerful issue of the right to life for the unborn and the whole issue of abortion. I cannot picture Merton demonstrating outside a clinic, but I would see him championing the cause of the sacredness of life on every level. (4) Automation and cybernation have transformed the work place and the job market. Merton was certainly never a lover of technology during his lifetime, and I am sure he would recognize the dangers which are prevalent today. He would surely emphasize the primacy of the person over the marketplace and the need to ensure that persons do not become just “cogs

in the wheel” of productivity and prosperity for the rich and powerful. (5) Advances of medicine and biochemistry, particularly in the areas of health care and the aged, raise many ethical and practical problems for current thought. Here again Merton would be a strong proponent of the dignity of the person and the need to consider this in all of the questions involved, but particularly in issues of euthanasia and extraordinary measures to prolong life. (6) Merton’s prolonged involvement in issues of peace and nuclear arms would surely bring him into the forefront of such topics today. He would be quick to point out the hypocrisy of demanding dismantlement of arms in Russia and at the same time being slow to pursue the same program ourselves. He would be a strong proponent of the test ban treaty and the dismantlement of ALL nuclear arms in every nation, beginning with our own. He would be quick to point out the fact that even in the post-Cold War era, our military budget still takes precedence over the needs of the poor and the elderly in many cases, as can be seen by cuts recommended by the current Congress.

These are but some of the issues that Thomas Merton would probably be writing and speaking about in these final years of the 20th century. But, once again, he would not be involved in these issues simply as a social activist, but as a contemplative who recognizes that if we honestly believe in the dignity of each individual person as a child of God and see every person and every culture as a manifestation of God to the world, an Incarnation in our own time, then we must put our money where our mouth is and act accordingly on all levels. He would highlight the danger of leaving our Christianity disincarnated — that is, as a theory which pertains to religion but which has little if any bearing on daily affairs. He would emphasize the fact that we are *stewards* of creation, not masters, and that we have a profound responsibility towards every person. And this responsibility must be *acted* on, not just thought about. Jesus was aware of this same responsibility. When the disciples of John came and asked if he was the one who would bring the reign of God, he cited the actions he had done. “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me” (Mt. 11:4-6).

This is the reason I propose Thomas Merton as a prophet for the 21st century. Merton was a social critic precisely because he was a contemplative. He sought the monastery and solitude because “it is clear to me that solitude is my vocation, not as a flight from the world — but as my place in the world.”⁷ Merton believed that the contemplative must share in “the universal anguish and inescapable condition of mortal man. The solitary, far from enclosing himself in poverty, becomes every man. He dwells in the solitude, the poverty, the indigence of every man.”⁸ As he also said: “It is deep in solitude that I find the gentleness with which I can truly love my brothers [and sisters]” (*SJ*, p. 261). He perceived and lived out that dialectic between choosing the world and rejecting it. The monk ironically rejects the falsity of the world in order to find God in the truth of the world. And this entails a whole life work. He said: “To choose the world is to choose to do the work I am capable of doing, in collaboration with my brothers [and sisters], to make the world better, more free, more just, more livable, more human.”⁹

If we strive to honor Thomas Merton, then, it cannot be simply by talks, conferences or articles. It must be like the Eucharist itself. At the end of the Mass the priest dismisses the congregation with the words: “The Mass is ended. Go in peace to love and serve the Lord and one another.” And so I say to you!

NOTES

1. David W. Givney, *The Social Thought of Thomas Merton* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983), p. xiv.
2. Thomas Merton, Alfred F. Horrigan, and John Howard Griffin, *The Thomas Merton Studies Center* (Santa Barbara: Unicorn Press, 1971), p. 15.
3. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1969), pp. 25-26.
4. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*; edited by Naomi Burton, Brother Patrick Hart, and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973), pp. 332-333. Hereafter referred to as *AJ*.
5. Thomas Merton, “The Inner Experience,” *Cistercian Studies* (1983), p. 213. Hereafter referred to as *IE*.
6. Walter Brueggemann, *Tradition for Crisis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1968), p. 141.
7. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1956), p. 251. Hereafter referred to as *SJ*.
8. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), p. 18.
9. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1975), p. 164.