

Roman Empire. But there came a time to be born again and to break free, to overturn the tables of the moneychangers, to refuse allegiance to Empire, to be crucified. Berrigan took to the streets and temples of military-industrial power. Merton went to the woods and sung his protest in Psalms. “I ought to learn to just shut up and go about my business of thinking and breathing under trees,” Merton wrote in 1967. “But protest is a biological necessity.”³

I wish we lived in a world where Berrigan’s demanding spirituality of nonviolent resistance was not so easily dismissed as marginal but reclaimed by people of faith as the truly humane and Christ-haunted center from which we might realize our joy and flourishing as persons in community. Yet so long as the “powers and principalities” are running the show, Merton’s description of spiritual life at the margins feels more apt. To be haunted by the God of the prophets, it seems, is to become ever more a marginal person, a “creative extremist” (Martin Luther King, Jr.), perhaps even “the most maladjusted person in society” (Abraham Joshua Heschel). A God who commands “thou shalt not kill,” “care for the widow and orphan” and “love your enemies” has never found many advocates at the centers of power, nor, for that matter, among young people lingering at the front of lecture halls eager to sign up for such an adventure. If success is a numbers game, Jesus during his lifetime was an unqualified failure.

It was a much younger Berrigan, of course, whom Merton welcomed to Gethsemani for counsel and supported in his social essays. “It was a long, hard road,” Berrigan remembers, “and we needed help along the way and he gave it. He was very important to all of us” (Atkinson & Montaldo 143). One would be hard pressed to name a twentieth-century Catholic who sought after the vocation to unity and peace more tenaciously, publicly and prophetically than Merton. The fruits of his witness are still being harvested today in many who take courage from his example. But is it enough?

“My ideas are always changing,” Merton once confessed, “always moving around one center, always seeing the center from somewhere else.”⁴ Perhaps Berrigan has it right after all: Merton remains a marginal figure only because the rest of us have yet to catch up with him, have yet to discover the “one center,” who is Christ, the Prince of Peace, in whose Spirit he lived. The way of love is a long, hard road. We still need Merton’s help to discern the way.

1. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 305.
2. Morgan C. Atkinson with Jonathan Montaldo, eds., *Soul Searching: The Journey of Thomas Merton* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008) 144; subsequent references will be cited as “Atkinson & Montaldo” parenthetically in the text.
3. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 240 [5/27/1967].
4. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 67 [1/25/1964].

Thomas Merton, Prayer and Us

By Gregory J. Ryan

Like many other people, I have been reading and learning from Thomas Merton for more than 40 years now. (I came late to the party!) For a number of years I have been leading a Merton discussion group. Now and again, I sometimes wonder *why*? What is it about Merton that attracts lay people for

all these years? I think it can be traced back to a basic connection between his foundation and ours: his life of prayer.

Choose whatever theme Merton wrote about or spoke about and you will find a basis for it in prayer: personal, communal, liturgical, scriptural and more. His writing, his art, his photography – everything: all of it based on his prayer; and so his appeal is not just for cloistered monks and nuns, but for everybody, women and men, young and old. A few examples follow.

Contemplative prayer, which was written about by Merton so extensively, was first presented to laypeople in the 1970s by a Cistercian school of prayer popularized by Thomas Keating and William Menninger in the form of Centering Prayer, and a Benedictine school of prayer known as Christian meditation popularized by my teachers, John Main and Laurence Freeman. Centering prayer, of course, is inspired by and borrows the term from Merton’s writing on “finding our true center.” Over the years, countless laypeople have benefited from these schools of prayer, enriching both their family lives and their work relationships. Would that more people – dare I mention politicians? – set aside time each morning and evening for this important work!

Merton realized the importance of meditation in our lives. In his conferences for his novices on Thomas Aquinas he stressed that their meditation was not just “for themselves.” It belonged to the world. Their hearts did not belong just to themselves; their hearts belonged to everyone – especially those who had no thought about prayer. Those people were especially entitled to the monks’ fidelity to their meditation.

Intercessory prayer remained an important part of Merton’s prayer right up to the end of his life. He frequently starts his conferences with references to something going on out in the world or in the community, and he tells the monks to pray for this or that intention. In the same talks on Aquinas, he tells the monks that they should keep people in their hearts during their meditation: the guy you saw on a bus one day (I’m paraphrasing here) pops into your head and you think: “Oh, no! Now I’m distracted!” No, Merton says. God is inspiring you to pray for that “bird.” This may just be the critical moment that he *needs* someone in a monastery praying for him. You’re the one he needs. Pray for him! (On disk 3 of this set of recordings on Aquinas, Merton speaks especially beautifully about this. I don’t do it justice here. Treat yourself and get them.!)

Lest anyone think that once you reach a certain “advanced” level of prayer (What levels?!?!?) you leave other forms behind, just remember that Merton’s personal effects that came back to Gethsemani after his death included his breviary, an icon and a broken rosary. While he appreciated and encouraged the changes in the liturgy following the Second Vatican Council, he continued to celebrate Mass at the hermitage in Latin. He was also fond of relics and collected them at every opportunity – tangible contacts with the communion of saints. Throughout his *Asian Journal* Merton frequently mentions finding a place to celebrate Mass. He stole some precious moments to recite his breviary while pacing back and



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forth under the wing of the plane he would be catching once it was made ready for take-off. Merton prayed the ordinary prayer of ordinary people in the ordinariness of daily life. *Everything* was included.

I once had the notion to write something on Merton's approach to meditation. What deterred me from the project was the many different ways that he referred to meditation. Meditation for him was a big tent that covered many approaches. In the midst of my research, I wrote to one of the monks at Gethsemani who had been a novice under Merton, asking him to describe for me how Merton taught the novices to meditate. Hoping for the "definitive answer" to this question, I was slightly disappointed when he wrote back that Merton never taught them how to pray. He said what Merton did do was create "a kind of Montessori school" for a life of prayer to develop. In the monastic environment each monk was free to find his own way. Since then, I've heard the recordings where Merton explains to the contemplative nuns on retreat at Gethsemani that he really didn't think he or they should tell their young people to "do" anything. They should just provide examples of what the life is all about. "How do we *live*? Live the life." That should be enough.

During the last official conference Merton gave to his novices as he was moving into his hermitage,² he told them about an old monk who had spent many years in prayer and as he left for the desert with a raven perched on his shoulder, he was "kissed by God." Then Merton commended himself to their prayer. I think this story relates to all of us. As we go about our daily lives – maybe without a crow on our shoulder – whether we are aware of it or not, we are kissed by God. So – pucker up!

1. Thomas Merton, *St. Thomas Aquinas and "The Ways of God,"* 3 CDs (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2014).
2. Thomas Merton, "A Life Free from Care," *Cistercian Studies* 5.3 (1970) 217-66.

Merton as Radical Ecologist: Principles for Judging Human Action

By Donald P. St. John

Today, even more than in the 1960s of Thomas Merton, the earth and its biological diversity are perceived primarily as material resources whose "good" is to be transformed into products that will be consumed at an ever-increasing rate, thereby driving human "progress" and the meaningful movement of history forward. To claim that the natural world is intrinsically or inherently valuable as well as a spiritually creative and purposeful process with which we must coordinate human life and technological actions at all levels was and is considered "radical."

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