# Thomas Merton, Nonviolence and Me: A Conversation with Daniel J. Berrigan, SJ

Introduction by **Paul M. Pearson**

"Thomas Merton, Nonviolence and Me" was originally planned as a conversation between Daniel Berrigan and John Dear, to be held on November 13, 2003 at Bellarmine University. Dan, for various reasons, chose to book the latest possible flight to Louisville out of New York City, a flight that would get cancelled due to strong winds. So, though the original evening went ahead with John Dear, it allowed this important conversation to be extended into 2004 with Dan agreeing to speak at Bellarmine on April 16, the Friday of Easter Week, 2004. The evening was sponsored by the Thomas Merton Center and the Cathedral Heritage Foundation (subsequently renamed the Center for Interfaith Relations).

Dan agreed to begin with a short talk about his friendship with Thomas Merton, but then preferred that the evening continue, as originally planned, as a conversation. The conversation was chaired/conducted by the Director of the Cathedral Heritage Foundation, Terry Taylor, and was then opened up to a conversation with the audience. (Terry, who had previously been assistant director of the Thomas Merton Foundation, would subsequently serve as director of Interfaith Paths to Peace before his retirement in 2015. His book, *A Spirituality for Brokenness*, was published by Skylight Paths in 2008.[1])

Three memories of a most memorable evening stand out for me. Firstly, as we were advertising and promoting the evening both the Merton Center and the President's Office at the University received a number of complaints about us having Dan to speak on campus. One such complainant asked: "How in the heck is the school allowing a criminal to come and speak? It really is a disgrace to those who did their duty answering the call of their nation. As an officer, I do not claim to know what wars are just and which ones are unjust; all I know is that we have a job and the President decides where we go to do it. . . . When was the last time BU had a true hero come and talk?" In introducing Dan at Bellarmine I shared this quotation with the gathered audience, who responded by giving Dan a lengthy standing ovation. As Martin Sheen has said, it was Mother Teresa who drove him back to Catholicism but it was Daniel Berrigan that kept him there! Secondly, in the audience that evening was Mother Mary Luke Tobin, on what would be one of her final visits to Bellarmine before her death in 2006, and prior to his presentation, she and Dan sat together for an extended conversation. Finally, Terry Taylor had asked Dan if he could recall how long it had been since he was last arrested. Dan's answer, much to the surprise of many present, was quite simply "last Friday" – Good Friday, when he'd been arrested at an anti-war protest in New York City.

**Daniel Berrigan, SJ, Paul M. Pearson, Mary Luke Tobin, SL**

Dan Berrigan was in many ways the very embodiment of words Merton had used to describe himself in his introduction to a

Japanese edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, published in 1963, writing:

> It is my intention to make my entire life a rejection of, a protest against the crimes and injustices of war and political tyranny which threaten to destroy the [world and the whole human race]. By my monastic life and vows I am saying NO to all the concentration camps, the aerial bombardments, the staged political trials, the judicial murders, the racial injustices, [the nuclear weapons and wars] . . . . If I say NO to all these secular forces, I also say YES to all that is good in the world and in [humanity].[2]

Those words describe clearly the life and action of Daniel Berrigan – who spent his life saying NO to the principalities and powers and YES to the creative work of the Spirit of God, a witness and vocation he lived right up until his final days.

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It was suggested earlier that it would be helpful to say a few words about how Thomas Merton and myself first met. The occasion was, I would venture, about 1960, and he had written an article published in the New York *Catholic Worker* under the aegis of Dorothy Day, and it was a hair-raising article on the reality of nuclear weapons and the probability – possibility, or more – of nuclear war.[3] And I read it and it was one of those watershed moments, and I wrote him and thanked him and said that article had been part of a great awakening on my part, and he wrote back very graciously and said, why not come on down and let's talk; and that started it, and until '68 when he left for Bangkok and ultimately, as we know, died – and tragically died – I was down there at least once a year.[4] I always thought, especially in view of his untimely, unspeakably difficult death, that the chemistry was so good. Immediately on arrival the first time, I still remember the scene outside the gate there, and this very substantial figure in white coming out and saying a great booming welcome and "Come on in" and so on, and so it went every year.

I wanted to start, though, with a difficult ending, and then kind of roam backward in time. I'm talking about, of course, that horrible *annus horribilis*, the terrible year of '68. I named it in retrospect the year of everything awful – on second thought not entirely; '68: up and down and to and fro the pendulum swung. I felt at the time as though I were fastened to it. First there was that crossing of the world in a voyage to Hanoi in January to bring home those captive pilots,[5] and the education of being under American bombs night and day, especially by day, and being in bomb shelters all night, and realizing that the contempt even for the military by the government was so great that it would if possible inhibit the release even of their own pilots. Spring and summer brought the murders of Dr. King and Robert Kennedy, as we also recall. May brought a momentary clearing of the skies as we went to Catonsville, nine of us, and burned the draft files with homemade napalm.[6] Thomas Merton departed for Bangkok that autumn for a conference, as we know. There was no chance to talk over the action that had taken place in May, and that remained a great grief and a great puzzle for a long time. October came and the nine of us were tried in Baltimore and found wanting – thumbs down by Dame Justice and a three-year sentence as indicated. We were released on appeal and I returned to Cornell and teaching, not a whit chastened in spirit. Then that December, in the blank snows of the upstate countryside, signaled that an awful year at long last was giving up the ghost. December 10, 1968 and I was at a late meeting on campus with leaders of the Students for a Democratic Society about our antiwar activities. The students, as I recall, were not so slightly shedding a nonviolent ethos. There

were ominous changes underway in the community as matters turned. Throughout the evening there was a disturbing rumble, just barely audible, as though a kind of underground quake of impatience and ill-feeling were surfacing, and oh it was cold, cold. At night, as I trekked somberly home, it seemed in more senses than one to be the bitterest weather of the year. Arrived, I turned on the television, curious to learn the local temperature, and a fragment of a news band crossed the tube: "famous Trappist monk today in Bangkok" – that was all. Now what event was crowning that terrible year, yet another plate of thorns? I began calling TV stations. It was after midnight. The world had shut down. Finally a New York voice confirmed the worst: the operative word was "died." Thomas Merton was dead. No question of sleep – I trudged about all night in the snow and from that night the quote from Ezekiel was verified once more. For a decade I could not utter a public word about my friend. Even tonight, 36 years later, an old pang strikes. So much of memory leaps from the book of friendship which has never really closed – friendship – indefinable, unmistakable, showing its sweet and mournful features and gone beyond recovering – but of course not altogether so, because in gratitude is a certain recovery. I had wished at one point as Merton mania gathered force and the PhDs proliferated, and the lode of Merton's life was mined to exhaustion, I had wished that my poor friend might be allowed to rest in peace at last. Ashes to ashes my dream: Tom Merton going out with the current of a Kentucky river, a kind of Gandhian dying fall.

Tonight I summon the monk again, the writer, the would-be wanderer, the curious far-ranging penetrating mind that arrived among us – wrote volumes from a kind of scripture, ancient church writers and modern, a pen that dug further and further into Zen and Gandhi, into the hieroglyphs of postmodern poetry, a pen that crossed the safe parameter of monastery and church and whiteness and America and male: all those handrails and posted warnings that promise safe footing and deliver a sodden heart. He taught novices, as we know, and welcomed friends and raged against the dark: the dark of the times, the dark of his order, the dark of God. Among other guises – all was consciously and mostly with good humor – he put on the robe of a kind of monastic Job. Then with an abruptness that stopped the heart in its tracks, he was summoned, in a lightning bolt, and I am still in wonderment and half-appalled.

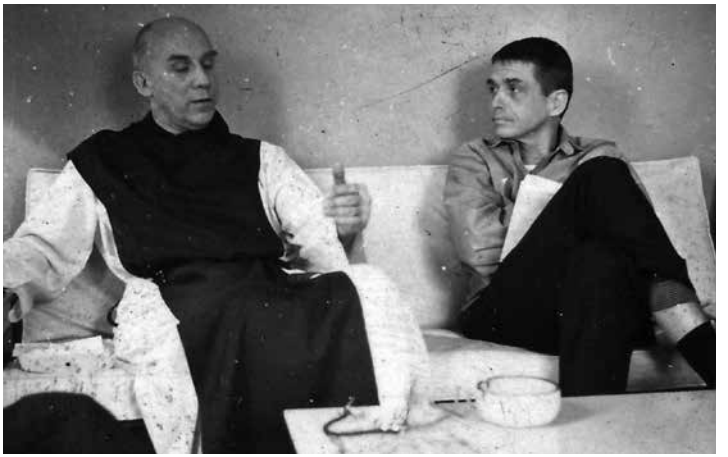
To tell his story with no hint of burbling and a large measure of admiration and gratitude: this it seems to me is the task of the evening. Over the years I forgot much but I recall again tonight how Merton moved to a one-room apartment with a wrought-iron balcony at 35 Perry Street in Greenwich Village.[7] For years I passed that house each week en route to an AIDS patient dwelling further along on the same street. The iron balcony had vanished. I wrote myself a memo: kiss your hand to #35. I recall tonight in 1940 he took a job teaching English at St. Bonaventure's University in Olean, New York. I recall several years ago being invited to speak at the same campus. I remember, proudly they showed me the Merton collection there of letters and manuscripts. Impressed no end as I was, I was shortly to be depressed; on this campus of the Friars Minor of St. Francis, that champion of nonviolence and an end to war, past the library, past the relics, marched the squads of ROTC. "Do the Merton papers rustle in a wind of incoherence and dismay?" I thought. Would they, if the will were the way, would they self-destruct? He wrote at the time, which is to say wartime, which is to say any time: "The valley is full of oil storage tanks, and oil is for feeding bombers, and once they are fed they have to bomb something."[8] O prophetic soul.

From Olean he entered the Trappists and pronounced vows and was eventually ordained into the priesthood. He "was troubled by the toxic fertilizers being used on the fields, the noise of machinery,

and the sense that the monastery was imitating corporate America. There were dead birds in the fields [he wrote], and sick monks in the infirmary with illnesses Merton didn't think had visited the monastery in the days before crop dusting."[9] Thomas was long dead – the time was the late '80s – I visited another monastery of Merton's order. A group of us had gathered there for a day of prayer, preparing for civil disobedience.[10] The courteous Trappist community welcomed us to worship in their chapel, and later the abbot himself joined us for a picnic lunch. Still another undercurrent to the scene: throughout the morning, our prayer was noisily interrupted; time and again a small plane veered south to north overhead, back and forth; it was toil and trouble; they were dusting the wheat fields with chemicals. The wheat was to be ground and baked in "monks' bread," the financial mainstay of the community. When questions arose from our group, as father abbot joined us, he brooked no discussion: "This is a safe and sound procedure."

To revert: the year was 1965; Merton received a group of pacifists for a retreat on "the spiritual roots of protest."[11] How could one know at the time? The retreat proved a watershed for many who took part. Most went to prison; some died; no one walked away untouched. Something funny happened too. The abbot had given strict orders to be transmitted by Thomas Merton to the effect that no Protestant in attendance at Mass was to be offered communion. With considerable chagrin and embarrassment Tom transmitted the order to us. Friends of the quality of A. J. Muste, who was a kind of Protestant equivalent of Dorothy Day, and the great Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder – these were present, each beyond doubt for the first time, at a monastery Mass. Still, such things tend to right themselves. My brother Philip and a friend careened in late, having driven all night from New Orleans. The Eucharist by now was well underway. Philip had of course heard nothing of the stern abbatial pronunciamento, so when communion was passed, he passed it on to everyone present: as they say in the moral theology book, *sic solvetur*: thus was the matter resolved.

Another fragrant and humorous memory: a Venetian architect named Lorenzo Barbato brought Thomas Merton a gift, a liturgical vestment, a stole that had been worn by John XXIII during his installation as pope.[12] Now sometime in the early '80s, friends gathered in Louisville for a two-day conference on Merton. and the Gethsemani community invited us to pass an afternoon at the monastery. Among other events of that day a Mass was offered in the novitiate chapel, and I was invited to offer the homily; someone in the community – I believe it was Merton himself – suggested that I don the above-mentioned stole. It was extremely and splendidly baroque in character and laced with jewels and gold and whatnot. Placed weightily on my shoulders, the marvel offered quite a contrast with



**Thomas Merton and Daniel Berrigan at the peacemakers' retreat – November 1964**

my attire – jeans and a denim shirt. I arose and disquisitioned with merciful brevity on the gospel of the day, which was the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi, and all during the homily I could hear behind me – where a clerical circle was assembled in the sanctuary – I could hear the drumming of a shoe on the stone floor, insistent and plainly audible to all. I learned later that the foot in question had as its owner a former Jesuit. He was thus conveying in his own peculiar morse code his annoyance, whether at my words or my attire or both remains to this day uncertain; but no matter – the delicious wackiness of the scene, the splendid tatterdemalion, won a gargantuan belly laugh from Tom.[13] All thanks to my great friend and monk. Let these words of his serve as a kind of epitaph: "No matter what mistakes and illusions have marked my life, most of it I think has been happiness and, as far as I can tell, truth."[14]

I thought I would sort of conclude with a couple of quotes from Tom that have meant a great deal to me and I'm sure to perhaps many of you, and then maybe a couple of references to events of the day that I think Tom would be consoled by. My first quote from him is one of my favorite letters of all that vast collection. This is a letter written in September of '59 to the poet Czeslaw Milosz – remember, he was a Polish poet who later won the Nobel Prize and he and Merton of course corresponded from Berkeley to Gethsemani. And a little bit of background: evidently in prior correspondence, which I have not seen, Milosz was bemoaning the very, very heavy difficulty of having been forced out of Europe and having to start over in America. And Tom writes him this: "We should all feel near to despair in some sense, because this semi-despair is the normal form taken by hope in a time like ours." O what a mouthful! I'll repeat it:

> We should all feel near to despair in some sense because this semi-despair is the normal form taken by hope in a time like ours. Hope without any sensible or tangible evidence on which to rest. Hope in spite of the sickness that fills us. Hope married to a firm refusal to accept any palliatives or anything that cheats hope by pretending to relieve apparent despair. And I would add, that for you especially hope must mean acceptance of limitations and imperfections and the deceitfulness of a nature that has been wounded and cheated of love and of security: this too we all feel and suffer. Thus we cannot enjoy the luxury of a hope based on our own integrity, our own honesty, our own purity of heart. Yet on the other hand [he continues], our honesty consists in resisting the temptation to submerge our guilt in the collective deluge, and in refusing to be proud that our "hands are dirty" and making the fact the badge of adaptation and success in the totalitarian world. In the end, it comes to the old story that we are sinners, but that this is our hope because sinners are the ones who attract to themselves the infinite compassion of God. To be a sinner, to want to be pure, to remain in patient expectation of the divine mercy and above all to forgive and love others, as best we can, this is what makes us Christians. The great tragedy is that we feel so keenly that love has been twisted out of shape in us and beaten down and crippled. But Christ loves in us.[15]

Powerful!

We'll get into discussion later about – more nearly about Merton's view of – my sense of his growth in the understanding of nonviolence and especially the crises that arose because we were doing certain things, but we'll talk about those, I hope.

I thought Merton would have liked this quote: it's from a book by a veteran, Tim O'Brien, and the book was called *The Things They Carried*.

> A true war story is never moral. [There's a start for us.] It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain [people] from doing the things [people] have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie. There is no rectitude whatsoever [in war]. There is no virtue [in war]. As a first rule of thumb, therefore, you can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil. . . . You can tell a true war story if it embarrasses you. If you don't care for obscenity, you don't care for the truth. . . . True war stories do not generalize. They do not indulge in abstraction or analysis. For example: War is hell. As a moral declaration the old truism seems perfectly true, and yet because it abstracts, because it generalizes, I can't believe it with my stomach. . . . It comes down to gut instinct. A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe.[16]

Are there any developments in this death culture, this wasteland that we are asked to inhabit and to do something with or about or against? One thing that has heartened me has been the creation since 9/11 of a group, borrowing a term from Dr. King, called Families for Peaceful Tomorrows. This is a group of families, all of whom lost loved ones in the September 11 tragedy. One of my dear friends, Colleen Kelly, came to me shortly thereafter, announcing that she was working very hard to form this group. She had lost her brother in the Twin Towers, and she wrote at that time: "It is a spirit of healing and understanding that we want to bring to the world in memory of those we have loved and lost," and the description goes on. Members of the organization included a delegation of family members who recently returned from Afghanistan to highlight the plight of those innocent families affected by U.S. bombing. They also led a walk for healing and peace from the Pentagon to the World Trade Center in November of the next year. They were joined by other families who have spoken with concern about the U.S. response to the tragedies. Another member wrote: "We believe that the American people have been denied a dialogue on appropriate responses to the events of September 11"; and he goes on: "Our single-minded rush to war has been made without thoughtful consideration of long-term consequence for our own safety, security and freedom. But we will use our voices to promote a discussion about better ways to go, based on justice rather than vengeance." I am teaching presently – have been for a number of years – at Fordham University in the Bronx and in Manhattan, and the head of our Sociology Department is a Latino, Orlando Rodriguez, who lost his son in the Twin Towers, and the parents wrote President Bush the following after their loss: "Dear President Bush, Our son is one of the victims of Tuesday's attack. We read about your response to the last few days and about the resolutions of both Houses giving you undefined power to respond to the attacks. Your response does not make us feel better about our son's death. It makes us feel worse. It makes us feel that our government is using our son's memory as a justification to cause suffering for other sons and parents in other lands. It is not the first time that a person in your position has been given unlimited power and came to regret it. This is not the time for empty gestures to make us feel better. It is not the time to act like bullies. We urge you to think about how our government can develop peaceful, rational solutions to terror, solutions that do not sink us to the inhuman level of our opposite number."

Well, dear friends, I introduce these documents because they're signs; it seems to me they are signs of hope and very helpful to that degree.

Thank you. Thank you and God bless.

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**Terry Taylor:** You and I had chatted a little before we started this evening about what we would be talking about here; we didn't talk exactly about this but I think it's kind of fortuitous that you concluded your remarks by talking about September 11 and the response to it. I don't know how many of the people in the audience are aware of this, but right after September 11 someone drew our attention at the Merton Foundation to Merton's poem called "Figures for an Apocalypse" which was published in the 1960s,[17] and in it Merton writes:

> How are they down, how have they fallen down
> Those great strong towers of ice and steel,
> And melted by what terror and what miracle?
> What fires and lights tore down,
> With the white anger of this sudden accusation,
> Those towers of silver and of steel? . . .
>
> "This was a city
> That dressed herself in paper money.
> She lived four hundred years
> With nickles running in her veins.
> She loved the waters of the seven purple seas,
> And burned on her own green harbor
> Higher and whiter than ever any Tyre.
> She was as callous as a taxi;
> Her high-heeled eyes were sometimes blue as gin,
> And she nailed them, all the days of her life,
> Through the hearts of her six million poor.
> Now she has died in the terrors of a sudden contemplation
> – Drowned in the waters of her own, her poisoned well."[18]

It's a time of great conflict in our world, a time of great despair, as you said, and I think when I look around at the walls of our city, at the walls of our country, I see the words I remember from a film of the 1970s: *Apocalypse Now*. You talked a few minutes ago about hope, hope from the parents of young people killed in the towers on September 11, 2001. I guess the question for you to begin would be: where do we go for a source of hope in the face of all of this?

**Daniel Berrigan:** Well I can say a few words about what we're doing in New York, which I think is modest, and doesn't seem to have any kind of great public prevailing voice, but at the same time it keeps the community together, and I think that's the primary question, you know. But the only group in New York City that has kept the vigil going every Saturday in all weathers at the Union Square park, which was the southernmost point where all traffic stopped on 9/11. So it was turned into a memorial

park, and people by the thousands were gathered there immediately after eleven, posting photos of those killed, lighting candles – and all in silence. So we took up our stand there and we kept at it ever since. We leaflet; we hold banners with quotes from Thomas Merton, from Dorothy Day, from other choices, and spend two hours there, and it's been a great help. Then on Dr. King Day we process from Bryant Park to the U.N. on the East River. The U.S. warlords were gathered trying to make some understanding with the U.N. about our future in Iraq and Afghanistan and there about twenty of us crossed the police line and were arrested – that little gesture. And so it goes. I think I believe something that's a truism that happens to be true: genuine activity in a biblical sense requires of us that we give up the other end of our actions into other hands, and that we do as the Buddhists say: we do the good because it is good, not because it goes somewhere. I even happen to believe that if we do the good because it's good it *will* go somewhere, but if we do it with the proviso that we have to change things, or make an impact, or be successful, or prove ourselves and so on and so forth, it seems to me it's at that point that things go nowhere. An opinion.

**TT:** Another question for you. We were talking earlier about Thomas Merton's commitment to nonviolence and to nonviolent direct action, and your own. Would you talk a little bit about your thoughts on that, what you saw in Merton and how the two maybe diverged or didn't diverge toward the end of his life, around the time of the Catonsville Nine.[19]

**DB:** The word that occurs to me when a question like this comes up, maybe one path or one voyage branching into two. When I think back with the rhythm of our friendship it has something to do with solitude that had become in many senses isolation as he became a hermit, and a consequent loss of context. So that crises would arise as it did with the self-immolation of young Roger Laporte at the Catholic Worker in New York – you probably remember that horrible episode. Tom knew nothing about young Roger Laporte or what impelled him to do that and what kind of community was he part of etc. etc. He had no context. And so he fired off a letter resigning from the Catholic Peace Fellowship and just saying, things like that are going on, I want no part of it. Eventually a few of us got down here and gave him some context and he relaxed.[20] Now to bring the matter forward to Catonsville in '68: part of the tragedy was my inability to get down to Gethsemani after our action in May; the summer was just too crowded to be able to move out, and then he left, and then he died, so I never was able to offer a context for Catonsville: how many months of preparation, spiritual preparation and strategic preparation and so on and so forth, went into that action which of course hit the headlines from nowhere, but it came from somewhere. So it was very strange: twenty-five years after his death, when I was able to speak again about Merton, I was at a big parish on Long Island, preparing to celebrate publicly the anniversary, and they put me in a room in the rectory there to be quiet for a while, and I came on a book on one of the tables there and it was the letters of Merton – a slim volume of letters – to John Howard Griffin, who as you remember had been the first biographer, and on the last page, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of that, I came on this concluding remark, evidently from his last letter before he died, at least his last letter to John Howard Griffin; and in effect he wrote the action at Catonsville he had been pondering since he left, and it was making him wonder (I'm paraphrasing) how long he could keep the law, so I finally was able to close that chapter with great gratitude and to know that he had eventually come to understand what we were trying to say.[21]

**TT:** And what was that, Dan? What was it you were trying to say – what was the understanding you think he came to?

**DB:** Well, I think he came to understand something about the context that issued not out of despair but out of hope, and that the symbolic use of napalm was very important, as being a substance that had been used against children and the aged indiscriminately in Vietnam, and we were using it against what we were calling hunting licenses against humans – draft cards. We were trying to convince people of the horror of that use, that misuse, against innocent people.

**TT:** I don't know how many people in our audience tonight are familiar with the basic concepts of nonviolent direct action. Could you talk about that for a second: what the sources are spiritually?

**DB:** Well, I wish we had many hours on that one, because obviously we spent many years on the question. Our first resource has always been our scripture: that puts the matter simply and plainly. We were also, as we matured, at least to a degree, we became rather convinced that the prime matter before us was not of tactic at all; it was not about doing this or that which might be effective or not. The question was a spiritual one: it had to do with the conviction that the death and resurrection of Christ had given a slight edge – a very slight edge and a very vulnerable edge – to life over death, even in such a world as we are blessed or cursed to inhabit – even in such a world a slight edge of life over death, and that there were ways of enacting that drama of life and death. I was much heartened years ago by reading an old, old hymn, that evidently was part of an Easter service in which women dramatized their walk to the tomb in the sanctuary, and the Latin is very instructive: the hymn went – they sang, they sang as they went toward the tomb: *mors et vita duello conflixere mirando* – life and death locked in a mortal combat.[22] I thought that's what we were trying to get at – the slight, ever so slight, vulnerable edge of life over death granted us by Christ. How enact that? Well, that's what we tried.

**TT:** Tell us a little bit about what you've been doing recently. When we were talking a little bit before the program tonight, Dan obviously undertakes nonviolent direct action fairly frequently and is sometimes face-to-face with the law and I said, "Dan, when was the last time you were arrested?" and he said, "Last Friday." You want to tell us a little bit about that?

**DB:** Sure. Well, I think this is the fifteenth year that we have sponsored – our religious groups have sponsored – the stations of the cross across Manhattan. We start at the U.N. about 8:30 in the morning and walk and pray and sing and stop at fourteen places where human life is being actively assaulted or degraded along 42nd Street, from the east side to the Hudson River, and we end up with the fifteenth station, called the resurrection, and the SS Intrepid, which is an obscene war museum anchored in the Hudson River, and I won't go on about all that. The latest weaponry used against Afghanistan and Iraq is paraded there in this beautiful river and children are brought there by the busload and so on and so forth, so we end there summoning those who run that place to resurrection, and that implies of course crossing the police line to get the message out. That's what we do. They don't get the message yet, but they will.

**TT:** I want to ask you a little bit of an obscure question but something that's important to me. I said to you earlier there seems to me to be a very deep connection between creativity, poetry if you will, and

the prophetic imagination. I think we have a long history of this in our own Judeo-Christian Bible. What do you see as the connection? I know both you and Merton have been well thought of as poets; you've also been thought of as prophets. What do you see as the connection?

**DB:** Well, I'd like to maybe ground the question a bit in an experience. When Philip and I were together, which we were for almost two years in prison in Connecticut, in '72 – '71 – '70 – around there – poetry meant a great deal to us, and the writing of poetry meant a great deal to me, and they were taking all our writings seriously at that point; it was a little bit of the atmosphere of a gulag in that even poetry became kind of dangerous activity. But see they weren't attuned to us and didn't know quite what to do. They were always on the lookout for people who were trying to bring forbidden material into the prison – drugs or whatever – but they weren't attuned to the fact that we were trying to get stuff out of prison – like poetry. So I got a whole volume of poems out of prison[23] that ordinarily would have been destroyed or seized by the FBI and so on and so forth. Not only writing poetry but making poetry available to other prisoners: we were always joined by – especially – young people who were resisting the draft and were in prison for it and there was always a community of about a dozen or fifteen, and we made a pledge that we would gather on Sunday morning in the prison yard and those who went to Mass – okay, and then after that we would recite a poem that we had memorized that week or written that week, and it was a way of saying all sorts of interesting things about ourselves and the place – things like: they don't own us; things like: we're not crawling on all fours, we're walking, and we have enough life in us to give some of it, some of the overflow; we're not merely surviving in here, we're celebrating in here. Poetry: yeah, things like that, and so it went, and we kept that up for all those years – a poem a week.

**TT:** And is poetry still an important part of your nonviolent commitment to the world?

**DB:** I would say so, though I have to admit that since my brother's death the springs have pretty well dried up. It doesn't mean that I'm untowardly depressed or anything, it's just that I'm still trying to recover balance. When Merton died I was trying to realize the enormity of what I had lost, and I remember saying to myself at one point, I said to myself, the only comparable loss in my life would be the loss of my brother Philip – that was how deep it went. But when Philip finally died it wasn't by any means as traumatic as the death of Merton because we had had all these years, and it was easily mitigated at least by gratitude, which I believe is a way of recovering.

**Daniel Berrigan at Gethsemani – November 1964**

**TT:** I want to ask one last question. This is a quote from Merton in his book *Faith and Violence*, in his essay "Peace and Protest," and of course this is a time when there were large protests here in Louisville against the war and against violence in our city and against injustice; but Merton writes: "All protest against war and

all witness for peace should in some way or other strive to overcome the desperation and hopelessness which lead man now, in fact, to regard all his existing peace-making machinery as futile beyond redemption."[24] And in this there seems to me to be something that begs us to go back to Gandhi about the idea that the basic underlying premise of nonviolent action in going to jail, breaking laws, is not to defeat, crush an enemy, to destroy the person on the other side, but rather to help the person on the other side see the truth and see that they've just been thinking about things in the wrong way – so literally, in the way that Christians talked about it, love your enemy. How do we do that in a context like today when we're seeing a government that doesn't seem to listen to millions of people who are very, very concerned about what's going on. How do we engage and speak to this government in a loving way?

**DB:** I want to just tell about our last family liturgy with Philip. He had come and I had come to our older brother's home in Syracuse. This was about a month before Philip died, and on that weekend, that Sunday, we had a liturgy in the living room and pretty much this question came up in the course of the liturgy. What can we offer those in charge of this war? What can we offer? What can we do? And Philip said something very simple, you know, which one isn't inclined to forget. He said, "Well, I think our task is twofold: we pray for them and we resist them."

1. Terry Taylor, *A Spirituality for Brokenness: Discovering Your Deepest Self in Difficult Times* (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths, 2008).
2. Thomas Merton, *"Honorable Reader": Reflections on My Work*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 65-66.
3. Berrigan's first letter to Merton has apparently not survived, but an October 1961 note from Merton, thanking Berrigan for his "very fine letters" (the first extant piece of correspondence between them), makes clear that the article in question must have been "The Root of War," *The Catholic Worker* 28 (October 1961) 1, 7-8, the only article Merton had published in the paper at that time (see Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*, ed. William H. Shannon [New York: Crossroad, 1995] 11-19; subsequent references will be cited as "*PP*" parenthetically in the text).
4. Berrigan's first visit to Gethsemani, accompanied by his brother Philip and their friend Tony Walsh, director of Labre House in Montreal, took place in mid-August 1962; see the journal entry for August 21, 1962 in Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 238. For subsequent visits in May-June 1965, mid-October 1966 and May 1967, see journal entries for June 3, 1965 (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] 253; subsequent references will be cited as "DWL" parenthetically in the text), October 13, 1966 (Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen [San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997] 149; subsequent references will be cited as "*LL*" parenthetically in the text) and May 10, 1967 (LL 232-33).
5. For an account of this trip see Daniel Berrigan, *Night Flight to Hanoi: War Diary with 11 Poems* (New York: Macmillan, 1968).
6. This protest action took place on May 17, 1968; see the dramatized account of the court case that followed in October in Daniel Berrigan, *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970).
7. For Merton's description of the apartment and its balcony, see the journal entry for February 11, 1941 in Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation. Journals, vol. 1: 1939-1941*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995) 308-309 (subsequent references will be cited as "*RM*" parenthetically in the text) and Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 234-35.
8. Journal entry for June 16, 1940 (*RM* 231).
9. Jim Forest, *Living with Wisdom: A Life of Thomas Merton* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991) 112; a slightly altered version of this passage is found in the revised edition of this biography (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008) 121 (subsequent references to this version will be cited as "Forest" parenthetically in the text).
10. The monastery in question is evidently Our Lady of the Genesee in Piffard, NY.

11. The retreat actually took place in November 1964; for a detailed account of the event see Gordon Oyer, *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest: Merton, Berrigan, Yoder, and Muste at the Gethsemani Abbey Peacemaker Retreat* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014).
12. For details see Forest 141-42, which includes a photograph of the stole, now at the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University; see also Merton's April 11, 1960 letter to Pope John expressing his gratitude for the gift (Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon [New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985] 485).
13. Berrigan is evidently conflating two separate events here, one during Merton's lifetime and the other after his death, unless the references to Merton's suggesting he wear the stole and the belly laugh at his confrere's response are intended to be taken figuratively. The ex-Jesuit monk is Fr. Raymond Flanagan, the other famous Gethsemani Trappist author, who was an extreme conservative both politically and religiously.
14. Journal entry for January 30, 1965 (the eve of Merton's fiftieth birthday) (*DWL* 199).
15. Letter of September 12, 1959; see Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993) 62; also found in Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz, *Striving towards Being: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz*, ed. Robert Faggen (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1997) 52-53. Berrigan's quotation is not completely accurate and has been corrected by reference to the text of the letters.
16. Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried: A Work of Fiction* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990) 68, 69, 78.
17. This eight-part sequence is actually the title poem of Merton's third volume of verse: Thomas Merton, *Figures for an Apocalypse* (New York: New Directions, 1947) 13-28; subsequent references will be cited as "*FA*" parenthetically in the text.
18. "Figures for an Apocalypse: VI. In the Ruins of New York," ll. 19-24, 35-47 (*FA* 22-23).
19. Merton published a brief article entitled "Nonviolence Does Not . . . Cannot . . . Mean Passivity" in *Ave Maria* 108 (7 Sept. 1968) 9-10, in which he expressed his reservations about the Catonsville action (see *PP* 322-25; Thomas Merton, *The Nonviolent Alternative*, ed. Gordon C. Zahn [New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980] 231-33).
20. For an account of this incident and Merton's response, see Forest 186-88.
21. Berrigan's recollection here is not quite accurate; the passage in question is not from one of Merton's letters to John Howard Griffin (never collected in a separate volume) but to a journal entry that Griffin quoted in his biographical work on Merton, published as John Howard Griffin, *Follow the Ecstasy: Thomas Merton, The Hermitage Years, 1965-1968* (Fort Worth, TX: Latitudes Press, 1983). The passage reads: "The news came through on May 28 that Fr. Philip Berrigan, S.S.J. had been sentenced to six years in prison for pouring blood on the draft files in Baltimore, and that he would also be tried, along with his brother, Fr. Daniel Berrigan, S.J., for burning other draft files. 'Six years! It is a bit of a shock to find one's friends so concretely and tangibly on the outs with society.' He concluded that both Phil and Dan were being persecuted for saying openly what more and more Americans were beginning to believe – that the U.S. was becoming a totalitarian society. 'Their way of saying it is a bit blunt, and a bit [*sic*] of people are so dazed by the statement that they don't grasp it at all. Those of us who do grasp it are, to say the least, sobered. If, in fact, I basically agree with them, then how long will I myself be out of jail? I suppose I can say "as long as I don't make a special effort to get in" – which is what they did. All I can say is that I haven't deliberately broken any laws. But one of these days I may find myself in a position where I will have to'" (194-95). For the original journal entry of May 28, 1968 (which reads: ". . . a lot of people . . ."), see Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey. Journals, vol. 7: 1967-1968*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998) 124.
22. This line is from the Easter sequence ("*Victimae Paschali Laudes*") that is actually still in use in the liturgy today.
23. Daniel Berrigan, *Prison Poems* (Greenville, NC: Unicorn Press, 1973; New York: Viking Press, 1974).
24. Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 46.