

**The anniversary of the death of Thomas Merton prompted the following two pieces. The full articles may be found on the NCR Web site and the PBS "Religion and Ethics Newsweekly" Web site.**

The first article is by Father John Dear, S.J.

The third week of Advent (CNS Graphic by Emily Thompson)

I've been reading the new collection, Thomas Merton: A Life in Letters, (Harper One, 2008) a gathering of his essential letters, to mark Dec. 10, the 40th anniversary of Merton's death. On the tenth of this month, I offered the Dharma talk at Upaya Zen Monastery near Santa Fe, New Mexico. As Buddhist teachers do, I began the lecture by invoking one of my teachers, in this case, Merton, the peacemaking monk. I'm astonished that he continues to inspire and challenge me and so many others.

Merton's life is a mystery to many of us, and I think was a mystery to himself first of all. That he would become the most widely read, most famous Christian monk in modern history; that his autobiography would have such an impact on the church; that he could speak out on issues of race, war, ecology, and nuclear weapons before most; that he might reflect on everything from Islam and Judaism to Latin American poetry and Buddhism -- these show me not only what the contemplative life looks like but urge me to keep pushing the boundaries toward new life: for myself, for others, perhaps for the church.

Another interesting new book titled Soul Searching: The Journey of Thomas Merton (Liturgical Press, 2008), offers fascinating reflections on the meaning of Merton's life. It is chock full of observations and reminiscences from Merton scholars and friends, such as John Eudes Bamberger, Daniel Berrigan, Christine Bochen, James Conner, Lawrence Cunningham, Colman McCarthy, Michael Mott, William Shannon, Bonnie Thurston, even myself. Accompanied by a DVD, the book explores the meaning of Merton's life for us today.

I regard Merton an Advent person. Indeed, he is forever marked as one by the calendar of sacred events of his life. He entered the monastery on Dec. 10, 1941, in the heart of Advent, and died twenty-seven years later to the day. And the intervening years, they were one long season of Advent.

He constantly awaited the coming of Christ, pointed to Christ like John the Baptist, and practiced peace, patience, wisdom and hope. And he urged us to do likewise. His letters, like all his teachings, prod us to wake up, look to Christ, practice the Advent disciplines of peace, hope and nonviolence, and do what we can to welcome the coming of Christ and his gift of peace on earth.

In honor of Thomas Merton, I offer a few excerpts from his letters for our Advent meditation:

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I think that we as citizens of the United States, as a nation ought to make more serious efforts to act our age and think in proportion to our size. For this, a whole lot of people who never thought about anything serious in their lives are going to have to wake up and start thinking about their moral and political responsibilities. (1963)

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I am a revolutionist -- in a broad, nonviolent sense. I believe that those who have used violence have betrayed all true revolution, they have changed nothing, they have simply enforced with greater brutality the anti-spiritual and anti-human drives that are destructive of truth and love in humanity. I believe that the true revolution must come slowly and painfully, not merely from the peasant, but from the true artist and intellectual, from the think and the person of prayer. (July, 1958)

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The question of peace is important, it seems to me, and so important that I do not believe anyone who takes his Christian faith seriously can afford to neglect it. It is absolutely necessary to take a serious and articulate stand on the question of nuclear war. And I mean against nuclear war. The passivity, the apparent indifference, the incoherence of so many Christians on this issue, and worse still the active belligerency of some religious spokesmen, especially in this country, is rapidly becoming one of the most frightful scandals in the history of Christendom. I do not mean these words to be in any sense a hyperbole. The issue is very grave. (Dec. 22, 1961)

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This is purely and simply the crucifixion over again. Those who think there can be a just cause for measures that gravely risk leading to the destruction of the entire human race are in the most dangerous illusion, and if they are Christian they are purely and simply arming themselves with hammer and nails, without realizing it, to crucify and deny Christ. The extent of our spiritual obtuseness is reaching a frightful scale. (Oct. 25, 1961)

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We are all walking backward toward a precipice. We know the precipice is there, but we assert that we are all the while going forward. This is because the world in its madness is guided by military men, who are the blindest of the blind. (Aug. 9, 1962)

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I am against war, against violence, against violent revolution, for peaceful settlement of differences, for nonviolent but nevertheless radical change. Change is needed, and violence will not really change anything. At most it will only transfer power from one set of bull-headed authorities to another. But the problems of humanity can never be solved by political means alone. Over and over again the Church has said that the forgetfulness of God and of prayer are the root of our trouble. This has been reduced to a cliché. But it is nevertheless true. (July 1968)

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It is sometimes discouraging to see how small the Christian peace movement is, and especially here in America where it is most necessary. But we have to remember that this is the usual pattern, and the Bible has led us to expect it. Spiritual work is done with disproportionately small and feeble instruments. And now above all when everything is so utterly complex, and when people collapse under the burden of confusions and cease

to think at all, it is natural that few may want to take on the burden of trying to effect something in the moral and spiritual way, in political action. Yet this is precisely what has to be done. (January 1962)

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Do not depend on the hope of results. When you are doing the sort of work you have taken on, essentially an apostolic work, you may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all, if not perhaps results opposite to what you expect. As you get used to this idea you start more and more to concentrate not on the results but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself. And there too a great deal has to be gone through, as gradually you struggle less and less for an idea and more and more for specific people. The range tends to narrow down, but it gets much more real. In the end, it is the reality of personal relationships that saves everything & all the good that you will do will come not from you but from the fact that you have allowed yourself, in the obedience of faith, to be used by God's love. Think of this more and gradually you will be free from the need to prove yourself, and you can be more open to the power that will work through you without your knowing it. (To Jim Forest, Feb. 21, 1966)

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BOB ABERNETHY, anchor: There are ceremonies and gatherings all over the country this month and next remembering the late Trappist monk Thomas Merton on the 40th anniversary of his untimely death. Through his prolific writing, Merton opened the door to spirituality for generations of believers, as Judy Valente reports.

JUDY VALENTE: Sunrise at the Abbey of Gethsemani in the misty hills south of Louisville, Kentucky. The 55 Trappist monks who live here awake at 3:00 a.m. to begin their daily regimen of prayer and work in silence. They gather for communal prayer several times a day. They will rarely venture outside the walls. For most, their lives will end here. The monks support the abbey by making fruitcakes and other products which are sold to the public. Much of the monastery's 2,300 acres is leased to local farmers.

Brother PAUL QUENON (Trappist Monk, Abbey of Gethsemani): The essence of the Trappist life would be living in God, and I don't think I would want to say much more than that. And of course, you're living in God with other people in the same community, and it's a life of continual prayer, and it's a life of deepening ¶ going deeper into your own capacity to love and live with God.

VALENTE: In 1941, Merton, then an aspiring young writer and a recent convert to Catholicism arrived here seeking to radically change his life. Merton was to have a striking message.

MORGAN ATKINSON (Documentary Producer): He said that anybody could have a deeply spiritual life if they care to. Any person on the street, if they were committed to it and devoted to trying it, then that path was open to them.

VALENTE: For Merton, the deeply spiritual life meant the experience of God's presence and love at all times, combining that with action in everyday life. Paul Pearson oversees

the Merton Center at Bellarmine University in Louisville.

Dr. PAUL PEARSON (Director and Archivist, The Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University): The essence of Merton's spirituality is, I think, the humanity of it, that he really speaks to ordinary people. He knows so well the great classics of Christian spirituality, but he can interpret them in a way that people in our world today can understand and relate to.

VALENTE: He spoke especially to lay Catholics in what was then a firmly hierarchical church.

Dr. PEARSON: Spirituality really belonged to the monks and nuns and bishops and what have you, whereas, you know, your ordinary lay person went to Mass on Sundays, the Mass was in Latin, they said the rosary, and that was the extent of it. And Merton, I think, really opened up that whole realm of contemplation and spirituality for people.

VALENTE: Merton's parents had died when he was young. By his own account, he lived a rootless, hedonistic life. It was rumored he had fathered a child out of wedlock while a student at the University of Cambridge. At New York's Columbia University, he continued to feel morally adrift, emotionally bereft. As a world-weary 26-year-old, Merton wrote these words, read by Morgan Atkinson.

Mr. ATKINSON (reading from Merton's journal): Finally has come the time to go the Trappists and try to get in and be completely quiet in the front of the face of peace. It is time to stop being sick and get really well. Out here I could think and yet could not get to any conclusions. But there was one thought running around and around in my mind: to be a monk ¶ to be a monk!

VALENTE: Thomas Merton not only became a monk. He would become a best-selling author and one of the most influential spiritual thinkers of his time. A fellow writer called him an investigative reporter going into the inner workings of the soul. As a novice at Gethsemani, Brother Paul Quenon received spiritual direction from Merton, known as Father Louis.

Brother QUENON: He doesn't think of the whole world as, you know, monks. But on the other hand, he can talk to the monk in each person. He sees it as a deep enough thing, that somehow everybody has the capacity to come to the same intensity and depth of experience of God.

Dr. PEARSON: This exhibit is all of Merton's published work with their varying editions and foreign translations. Merton's now been translated into I think it's 30 languages.

VALENTE: In 1948, when he was 33 years old, Merton published his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, taking his title from a scene in Dante's *Purgatory*. The book became an overnight bestseller.

Sister SUZANNE ZUERCHER, OSB: I knew I needed to be in monastic life. I knew he was someone who spoke to me as no one had ever spoken to me. He's funny, he's profound, he's human, he's down to earth, he's practical, he's concrete.

VALENTE: Mike Brennan is a baggage handler for American Airlines in Chicago. His home is full of Merton books and memorabilia.

MIKE BRENNAN (Baggage Handler, American Airlines): Working at O'Hare Airport, noisy, crazy, constant activity, constant stimulation, it's really nice to find a way to let go of all that stimulus and activity and think of being connected with the Lord, and I learned that from Merton.

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VALENTE: He would later get permission from his abbot to live as a hermit in this tiny cottage about a half-mile from the monastery.

Brother QUENON: He loved being in the midst of nature, you know. The birds were his friends.

VALENTE: What do you think he did out here?

Brother QUENON: Well, read a lot and wrote. For him, praying was just to abide in the presence, the presence of the Lord.

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Mr. ATKINSON (reading from Merton's journal): For myself I have only one desire and that is the desire for solitude: to disappear into God; to be submerged in His peace; to be lost in the secret of His space. I have gone to the hermitage not because I hate the world. I go to the hermitage to deepen my consciousness, to be more in communion with the world.

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VALENTE: In 1966, Merton spent several weeks in a Louisville hospital, recovering from back surgery. There he met and fell in love with a young student nurse. He was 51 years old at the time.

Sister SUZANNE ZUERCHER, O.S.B. (Merton Author): It was very brief. It was very intense. It was very passionate. He sometimes felt he had abandoned his vows, and at other times he felt he was living the vows of growth and fulfillment.

VALENTE: The two would sometimes meet clandestinely in secluded parts of the monastery grounds. Within a matter of months, the relationship was over. But Merton had been changed.

Sr. SUZANNE: From that time on he never again thought of himself as being unloved or unlovable, and he himself learned to love in this relationship and that it was the part of himself that he always felt had been underdeveloped.

VALENTE: Merton rededicated himself to his monastic life. He became increasingly interested in Buddhism and Asian monasticism. In 1968, he received permission to attend a conference on monasticism in Bangkok. There is rare footage of Merton from that conference.

THOMAS MERTON (in video from 1968 Bangkok conference): That's a thing of the past now, to be suspicious of other religions, and to look always at what is weakest in other

religions and what is highest in our own religion. This double standard of dealing with religions this has to stop.

VALENTE: Hours after this film was made Merton was dead, electrocuted after touching a fan with faulty wiring in his hotel room. He was 53. His reputation has only grown since his death. Working with manuscripts he left behind, scholars have published 60 more of his books, including seven volumes of his personal journals. But as a monk, Merton left behind few personal possessions: his work shirt, a cup, boots, eyeglasses.

Dr. PEARSON: With the death of Thomas Merton we lost really one of the great Catholic voices, one of the great prophetic figures within the Catholic Church, and I think that's why his books are still selling, why they're still being translated, because that message is as relevant today as when he wrote it.

VALENTE: Toward the end of his life Merton wrote, "Our real journey is interior. For those seeking to take that journey, he remains an essential guide."

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**The following article is out of sequence. However, it is just as appropriate for Advent as it will be for the Christmas Season. It describes the faith journey of Rose Murphy, and was (will be) released on December 26<sup>th</sup>.**

### **Praying in mystery**

My current, critical reading about religion and my growing disenchantment with the Catholic Church do not proceed without some pronounced unease. I feel driven to question beliefs I once held with assured confidence. But am I needlessly cutting off a strong spiritual lifeline by going so rarely to my local church? Am I wallowing in intellectual smugness and neglecting an insistent Catholic tie that goes beyond logic? It is difficult to stay loyal to a church whose members once unleashed cruel forms of the Inquisition on presumably evil non-believers and whose clergy so recently and secretly protected pedophilic priests. But I am more disillusioned by dogmatic bans on birth control that afflict poor women in developing countries and that too often obscure the core message of Christ's call for compassion.

Impossible now to recapture that ardent, unquestioning faith I had as a child, and into adulthood: that Christ was physically present in communion, that I had a special guardian angel, that certain prayers chipped away at Purgatory time. Even after outgrowing those fantasies, I continued to keep a core faith in the larger Church tenets: that Jesus was the Son of God, that he died for my sins, that I was preparing for an afterlife where I would see God and presumably my parents and all those who had gone before me. Today all of that doctrine is hazy to me, not so much rejected as irrelevant. I know now that humans can never penetrate the idea of God; certainty is – and has always been -- an illusion.

Intellectually, I can reject much of the Catholic Church, but emotionally it reels me in whenever I wander from it. I am still nourished by certain Mass rituals: the Prayers of the Faithful (with touching reminders of so much pain among my neighbors), the Sign of Peace and the communal grasp of another hand, the preparations for Eucharist, and the walk up the aisle to receive communion. Just what am I receiving? I know the act of

communion matters to me, feeling the host on my tongue is significant, but I don't know why.

But slowly, I am becoming more comfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity. And I find that meeting the challenge of practicing compassion in this troubled world is much more difficult than showing up for Sunday Mass. More and more, I see Christ as a rebel, an advocate for the poor, an agitator, an outsider who spoke truth to power and paid the ultimate price for it.

His message focused on loving one another, without reservation, not on explaining the Trinity. And whether or not he is the Son of God seems a pointless discussion.

Such realizations still do not alleviate feelings of restlessness and guilt when I choose a bike ride and coffee on Sunday morning instead of Mass. But on those Sundays when I do slip into church, I hear a foreign language all around me, especially when it comes to the Apostles Creed. I cannot dutifully mumble it any longer. I cannot relate to ecstatic utterances about a "personal relationship" with God, because for me such a relationship is impossible. It smacks too much of a cozy, privileged connection with a physical being who sits among the fluffy clouds and notes all the details of my daily life. I can imagine a spiritual force at work in the universe, something that connects all life, humanity and nature, but I cannot personify it or give it the familial name of "Father" or "Son."

But rather than reject a lifetime spiritual path, perhaps I need to get more comfortable with the idea of metaphor in Catholic doctrine and look beyond the literal pronouncements; then it becomes easier to see Christ as a symbolic son of God, as a presence that helps me find the divine spark (God) within myself, and more importantly serves as a model for truly compassionate living.

Receiving the spiritual nourishment of communion then becomes a reminder of so many people who lack food or the means to acquire it.

So can I continue to call myself a Catholic? A friend once framed the dilemma in whimsical language: "I can no more stop being a Catholic than a Navajo could stop being a Navajo." Ultimately, I think this struggle will always be with me, and that I will come to accept, and perhaps even embrace, a natural state of discomfort. Despite all the ambiguity, I would like to think I am still welcome at the communion table.

**Rose Murphy is a writer based in Sonoma, California, who explores current events and also focuses on Irish culture and history.**