

Christ in the desert

John Dear | Jun. 24, 2008 On the Road to Peace

"This is the best monastic building in the country," Thomas Merton wrote on May 17, 1968, while visiting the Monastery of Christ in the Desert in northern New Mexico. I drove over there last week, near Abiquiu, a hauntingly beautiful corner of the world and tasted for myself the "peace which the world cannot give."

My life these days jumbles along. I travel nearly every week to lead a retreat, offer a lecture or join a demonstration against war and injustice. When home on the desert mesa, I write and pray, and do day-to-day tasks -- such as shooing away the six foot long rattlesnake that's been hanging out at my front door, or driving to town for my weekly check-in with the U.S. probation officer. All the routine tasks of the amateur peacemaker.

But periodically I find it a lifeline to visit a monastery and reclaim my spiritual center of peace. And there is no monastery quite like the nearby Christ in the Desert.

It's nearly impossible to find. You drive north past Georgia O'Keefe's house, Bode's General Store, and the Ghost Ranch center. Then after the majestic Pedernal Mesa, you'll veer off the highway and travel several miles along a deserted dirt road. You'll pass endless fields of sagebrush, hemmed in along their perimeters by towering cliffs streaked with red, brown, yellow and white. At the Rio Chama, you'll turn right. Then you'll proceed at a crawl along the dirt road through Chama Canyon. Be patient for 10 miles. Only then does the road end -- right at the monastery nestled at the foot of a wailing wall of chiseled red cliffs.

To call it a road is to give it too much dignity. It's more of a half lane dirt path. And it clings to the edge of a cliff some four stories above the river. Getting there is half the fun. The view snatches the breath, but you must resist the temptation to gape in awe. Otherwise, your last act on earth will be to plunge into the river below.

The trek to the monastery is the ultimate metaphor for the spiritual journey.

The remoteness was quite deliberate. Founded in 1964 by three monks, it remained small and isolated until recent years, when the community welcomed dozens of monks from around the world.

This is one of the places where I go to pray, rest, walk, swim in the Rio Chama, ride horses, and reclaim my inner peace. The landscape never fails to astonish me. The red and yellow cliffs, the cottonwoods, the sagebrush, the stern mountains, the wandering hawks, the bright sun, the pressing silence and expansive solitude.

"A monastery is not a place where a few retire to deepen their own experience of the meaning of life; it is also a center where others can come to re-adjust their perspectives," Merton wrote in May 1968 during his first visit to Christ in the Desert.

"While not blindly rejecting and negating the modern world," he said, "the monastery nevertheless retains a certain critical distance and perspective which are absolutely necessary as mass society becomes at once more totally organized and more mindlessly violent. In its firm assertion of the basic human values as well as of God's message of salvation, the monastery bears witness to the most fundamental and most permanent truths of life. It remains a sanctuary where both monks and retreatants and others may experience something of that 'peace which the world cannot give.' "

"The Monastery of Christ in the Desert," Merton added, "seeks only to keep alive the simplicity of Benedictine monasticism: a communal life of prayer, study, work and praise in the silence of the desert where the Word of God has always been best heard and most faithfully understood."

Merton would make a second visit a few months later. He was considering retiring there. That September, on his fateful journey to Asia, he stopped by again for a few days. This time, he met Georgia O'Keefe, swam in the Rio Chama, and attended the annual fall dance festival on the Jicarilla Reservation.

The monastery rises at the point where the canyon narrows and the road vanishes into rock and brush," Thomas Merton wrote in his journal, *Woods, Shore, Desert*. "The monastic church, designed by the Japanese architect George Nakashima, fits perfectly into its setting. Stark, lonely, stately in its simplicity, it gazes out over the sparse irrigated fields into the widening valley. The tower is a like a watchman looking for something or someone of whom it does not speak. The architectural masterpiece is a perfect expression, in adobe brick and plaster, of the monastic spirit.

The brown adobe chapel is small, shaped in the form of a cross, but rises perhaps three stories to stand out over the canyon. The top two stories are all glass. And as you enter, you see in the center a simple stone altar and on the walls a few beautiful icons, and above, through the glass, a looming bank of red cliffs bearing down. An overwhelming sight.

On a side wall, and just as moving, is a large Mexican crucifix. It bears all the pathos, dignity and hope of the world's crucified peoples.

"The monk is one whose gaze is fixed on God," St. Theodore wrote centuries ago, "who desires God above all else, who applies himself to God, who seeks to serve God alone, in peace with God, and so becoming peace for others."

And in that spirit, I sit awhile in the silent chapel and take it all in. The silence. The solitude. The beauty. The peace. I begin to breathe again. It's as if I've been holding my breath for months, trying to breathe under water, thrashing to stay afloat in our culture of war. I feel healed, disarmed, refreshed. I remember how to live in peace all over again.

This is precisely why I return to this quiet canyon regularly -- so that I may rediscover my own peaceful solitude.

"If we want to change the world and create peace, we can begin by creating peace within ourselves," the Dalai Lama teaches. "If we practice peace, we can teach the rest of the world."

After my chapel time, I visit with a monk and buy a CD of Gregorian chants. Then outside, I head toward the rushing Rio Chama and sit along its banks. There, sheltered by the cottonwoods, I listen to the rapids.

The air, a stifling 95 degrees, makes me wilt like an old carnation. What the heck, I think, and jump in, just as Merton did long ago. I take a plunge and meet with polar temperatures. The jolt wakes me, shocks the system, invigorates my senses.

Merton himself was invigorated when he was here. His time here stirred his imagination for the journey ahead. "In our monasticism," he writes in *Woods, Shore, Desert*, "we have been content to find our way to a kind of peace, a simple undisturbed thoughtful life, and this is certainly good, but is it good enough?"

I, for one, realize that now I need more. Not simply to be quiet, somewhat productive, to pray, to read, to cultivate leisure? There is a need of effort, deepening, change and transformation. Just to go for walks, live in peace, let change come quietly and invisibly on the inside? A return to genuine practice, right effort, need to push on to the great doubt. Need for the Spirit. Hang on to the clear light!

As the sun descends, I start the treacherous and lurching ride back home. On the highway at last, I pass rusting, forlorn trailers where there live many of the poorest people in the nation. And I push past Los Alamos, where some of the wealthiest design sinister methods of global destruction.

But by now the prayerful peace of Christ in the Desert has shored my wobbling knees and fortified my deflated spirit. I feel ready to stand again and proclaim the good news -- the news of the advent a world without war, poverty, nuclear weapons or global warming, news that alas is rarely greeted with thanksgiving, but really is good.

The encounter with Christ in the desert, in any remote monastery, is worth the journey and the time, for it has the power to sanctify our workaday lives and give us new hope. I highly recommend it.

For more information on Christ in the Desert, see www.christdesert.org [1]. John's autobiography, *A Persistent Peace*, (with a foreword by Martin Sheen), available Aug. 1, can be ordered now at www.amazon.com [2]. See also: www.persistentpeace.com [3]. From July 7-11, John will be teaching a weeklong class on "Gandhi, King, Merton and Dorothy Day," at Loyola Univ. in Chicago. See www.retreatsintl.org [4]. For info, see: www.johndear.org [5].

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