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The lifelong Advent of Thomas Merton

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

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 Edue 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:

“Here I come with a noise out of the woods, something to say for Christmas?the wise men are on the way, and the shepherds, and our own childhood. And it will be Christmas again, with all the invisible grace of His coming, His revolution. We do not understand that this business about the crib is the real revolution that once for all turned everything upside-down so that nothing has ever been, or can ever be, the same again. But we try hard to sing the “old song” instead of the new one: the song of war, of money, of power, of success, of having a good time: when it is really all much simpler than that. Life is much more fun when you don’t have to have a good time or force anybody to do anything or put anything across.” (Dec. 20, 1962)

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“People often ask why I am here in the first place, and what the contemplative life means to me. It means to me the search for truth and for God. It means finding the true significance of my life and my right place in God’s creation. It means renouncing the way of life that is led in the “world” and which to me, is a source of illusions, confusion and deceptions.” (1963)

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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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“Milosz, life is on our side. The silence and the Cross of which we know are forces that cannot be defeated. In silence and suffering, in the heartbreaking effort to be honest in the midst of dishonesty (most of all our own dishonesty), in all these is victory. It is Christ in us who drives us through darkness to a light of which we have no conception and which can only be found by passing through apparent despair. Everything has to be tested. All relationships have to be tried. All loyalties have to pass through fire.

Much has to be lost. Much in us has to be killed, even much that is best in us. But Victory is certain. The Resurrection is the only light, and with that light there is no error.? (To Czeslaw Milosz, Feb. 28, 1959)

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?The only thing that is to be regretted without qualification is for a person to adapt perfectly to totalitarian society. Then he is indeed beyond hope. Hence we should all be sick in some way. 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.? (To Czeslaw Milosz, Sept. 12, 1959)

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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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?This is a crucial and perhaps calamitous moment in history?. Certainly an age in which Christianity is vanishing into an area of shadows and uncertainty?Everything healthy, everything certain, everything holy, if we can find such things, they all need to be emphasized and articulated?. We are all nearing the end of our work. The night is falling upon us, and we find ourselves without the serenity and fulfillment that were the lot of our fathers?. This is to be taken as a greater incentive to trust more fully in the mercy of God, and advance further into God?s mystery. Our faith can no longer serve merely as a happiness pill. It has to be the Cross and the Resurrection of Christ. And this it will be, for all of us who so desire.? (November 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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?Christians must rediscover the truth that the cross is the sign of life, renewal, affirmation and joy, not of death, repression, negation and the refusal of life. We must not refuse the providential opportunities that come to us in the midst of darkness.? (June 23, 1963)

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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)

John Dear will speak at the legendary Mabel Dodge Luhan House in Taos, N.M., Dec. 18, and offer a liturgy at Trinity Catholic Worker house in Albuquerque, N.M., Dec. 20. To order his autobiography, *A Persistent Peace* (Loyola Press) or his latest collection of essays, *Put Down Your Sword*, (Eerdmans Pub.), go to www.amazon.com

See also: www.johndear.org and www.persistentpeace.com To hear an interview with him last week on ?Interfaith Voices? radio, go to www.interfaithradio.org.

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