

The Merton-Gandhi peace pilgrimage

John Dear | Sep. 5, 2006 On the Road to Peace

The year has turned again; Sept. 11 approaches. This year it marks not only the fifth anniversary of the terrorist attacks, but the 100th anniversary of the beginning of Gandhi's satyagraha movement in South Africa. A measure of the man, his leadership and spirit, he inspired 3,000 to profess a vow of nonviolence.

In commemoration, some 50 of us will gather this week for a retreat at a Hindu temple in Louisville, Kentucky, and then on to the Abbey of Gethsemani near Bardstown, where Thomas Merton lived the monastic life. We'll set off from Merton's hermitage Friday morning, Sept. 8, and make a 52-mile peace pilgrimage by foot to Louisville. Our destination: the downtown corner where Merton had his storied revelation, recorded in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*.

He wrote:

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers.

It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.

In honor of both, Merton and Gandhi, we'll gather where Fourth and Walnut once stood, on the afternoon of Sept. 11, and profess a vow of nonviolence. We'll commit ourselves to the lifelong pilgrimage of Gospel nonviolence towards God's reign of peace.

I began studying Gandhi in 1982, the year I entered the Jesuits, along with the other great peacemakers such as Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day, the Berrigans and Thomas Merton. And to my amazement, Merton, long dead, the context in which he wrote long departed, spoke to me. The man speaks to me still. Amid a darker world, a world gone madder than he could have imagined, I find his voice still rings with sanity, reason, faith, clarity and hope.

A few years ago, someone posed a question to the great theologian David Tracy. What is the future of theology in the U.S.? He returned without missing a beat: "For the next 200 years, we'll be trying to catch up with Merton."

Merton has been a North Star to me over the years in my work for peace, has kept me in religious life and kept me in the church. I often find myself in trouble as I pick my way along the path of justice and peace. And now

and again I'm beset by discouraging times. But I fondly recall how Merton, putting his vision to words, wrote against war and racism and nuclear weapons -- and how often he was in trouble himself, silenced, censored, imprimaturs withdrawn. Yet he stayed put, remained faithful, did what he could, said his prayers and carried on. I take heart from Merton; he bore it all with love. And many look to him still -- his sufferings continue to bear fruit and bear many of us up in hard times.

Merton based his life on prayer, contemplation and mysticism. But here he turned down a counterintuitive avenue. He practiced contemplation not to turn an escapist's eye toward wars and dominations and imperial aggrandizements, but to discover the path toward communing with the living God and loving one another in peace.

Which is to say, Merton invites us to become contemplatives, mystics of nonviolence. Contemplation, meditation, adoration and communion take us into the presence of the God of peace. They teach us of the nonviolence of Jesus. In other words, the spiritual life begins with contemplative nonviolence. God disarms our hearts of inner violence and transforms us into people of Gospel nonviolence. We learn to let go of violence and resentments. Merton took this work very seriously, and wants us to do the same.

Then God sends us on a mission of disarming love. We grant clemency and forgiveness to everyone. We move from anger, revenge and violence to compassion, mercy and nonviolence. We radiate personally the peace we seek politically. "What is important in nonviolence is the contemplative truth that is not seen," Merton writes. "The radical truth of reality is that we are all one." Merton spent his life looking for that radical truth, and invites us to do likewise, despite the world's blindness.

Merton shows us a thing or two more. By his example we learn that we should be students and teachers of nonviolence. Merton was a great teacher. But more, he was the eternal student. He constantly studied, learned, searched in every intellectual byway for the truth of nonviolence.

He started reading Gandhi in the 1950s. And then he reached out to peacemakers such as Daniel Berrigan, and the folks from the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the Catholic Worker movement. What wisdom he gleaned he applied to the issues of the world, the church and the monastery. I think that's what we have to do -- study, learn, practice and teach the holy wisdom of nonviolence.

Students of nonviolence to apostles of nonviolence. He wrote in *The Catholic Worker* newspaper:

The duty of the Christian in this time of crisis is to strive with all our power and intelligence, with our faith and hope in Christ, and love for God and humanity, to do the one task which God has imposed upon us in the world today. That task is to work for the total abolition of war. There can be no question that unless war is abolished the world will remain constantly in a state of madness and desperation in which, because of the immense destructive power of modern weapons, the danger of catastrophe will be imminent and probable at every moment everywhere

The church must lead the way on the road to the nonviolent settlement of difficulties and toward the gradual abolition of war as the way of settling international or civil disputes. Christians must become active in every possible way, mobilizing all their resources for the fight against war. Peace is to be preached and nonviolence is to be explained and practiced. We may never succeed in this campaign but whether we succeed or not, the duty is evident.

And he wrote at the beginning of his posthumously published book, *Peace in the Post Christian Era*: "Never was opposition to war more urgent and more necessary than now. Never was religious protest so badly needed."

From mystics of nonviolence to students of nonviolence to apostles of nonviolence. But one thing more. We're to become prophets of nonviolence. "It is my intention," he wrote, "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 whole human race and the whole world. By my monastic life and vows I am saying NO to all the concentration camps, the bombardments, the staged political trials, the murders, the racial injustices, the violence and nuclear weapons. If I say NO to all these forces, I also say YES to all that is good in the world and in humanity."

Just before he died, Merton wrote to Jean LeClercq, a Benedictine monk and scholar from the Abbey of Clerveux in Luxemburg, to this effect: The purpose of monasticism is not survival but prophecy -- to speak truth to power, to announce God's word of peace to a world of war, to proclaim God's way of nonviolence in a culture of violence.

I think that's our task too -- not survival, but prophecy. As Merton learned to reject war and speak for peace, he cleared a way for us to follow. So as we set off from Merton's hermitage this week on a pilgrimage of peace, we will try to become like him, nonviolent Christians embarking on Merton's path -- and Gandhi's -- a path toward a new world without nuclear weapons, poverty or war, where everyone is shining like the sun.

John Dear is a Jesuit priest and peace activist. His book, *The Sound of Listening: A Retreat Journal from Thomas Merton's Hermitage* was republished this week by Wipf and Stock publishers. For information about the Merton-Gandhi peace pilgrimage, see www.interfaithpathstopeace.org [1]. Also, see: www.fatherjohndear.org [2].

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