

Notes on Thomas Merton Talk
Jennifer Lewis Priestley, Ph.D.
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On Thursday September 24, 2015, Pope Francis addressed the US Congress. The event was historic – it was the first time a reigning pontiff had ever addressed a U.S. Congress. His remarks canvassed a wide range of themes regarding the values that have made our country so great – with references to hard work, self-sacrifice, commitment to our families, to our communities and to our country.

He then said “*I would like to mention four Americans who represent these values...Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton.*” <SLIDE 1>

If you are like most Americans who heard his speech live or read his remarks later, you likely nodded in affirmation at the first two names, but

had to quickly pull out your smart phone to look up Dorothy Day and

Thomas Merton. In fact, here is what that day looked like on Google

Trends **<SLIDE 2>**

That spike represents the Google search volume for these two individuals

on the day of the Pope's address. Dorothy Day is tagged in Google Trend as

“journalist” and Thomas Merton is tagged simply as “writer”. But clearly,

there is so much more to both of these people that lead to their reference by

Pope Francis as 2 of the greatest Americans.

When I initially was invited to speak during the summer series on living the

Beatitudes, I wanted to speak about both Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton

– because for both of them, the second half of their lives read like human

manifestations of the Beatitudes. But, because their respective stories are

so rich, I elected to focus my summer talk on Dorothy Day...and after

getting the call from George and Cathy, I was happy to be invited to speak

here this morning to complete my talk from the summer...now I realize that they just needed a substitute teacher for their class. ☺

This morning, I would like to turn my attention to Thomas Merton.

Before I dive into the context of why I think Pope Francis referenced

Thomas Merton, I would like to begin with how I was first introduced to

Thomas Merton in 1999.

In 1999, Steve and I were living in London. We attended this little church

<SLIDE 3> around the corner from where we lived (Holy Trinity¹) – it was

one of those churches where they literally rang the huge bell above the

church about 10 minutes before the service. When they started ringing the

bell, we left our flat and walked down the sidewalk to join the 6 other

people who attended service there – most Sundays the choir outnumbered

the worshippers. The vicar <SLIDE 4> was this impressive and learned

¹ <http://www.htsk.co.uk/37-2/>

woman – Ulla Monberg² – who was one of the first women to be ordained in the Anglican Church. I regularly sought Ulla out for coffee, dinner – any available time that she would gift to me. She became a good friend. Before Steve and I moved back to the US, she blessed me with a book that she thought I would appreciate – it was the *Seven Storey Mountain* – this was the early autobiography of Thomas Merton (he was 31 when he finished it).

Here is the book – I think I have read it six or seven times and I learn something new about him – and about me – every time I read it. A few points about the Seven Storey Mountain <SLIDE 5>

It was published in 1948. Although the first printing was planned for 7,500 copies, the pre-publication sales exceeded 20,000. By May 1949, 100,000 copies were in print...The original hardcover edition eventually sold over 600,000 copies, and paperback sales exceeded 5 million copies. The book has remained continuously in print, and has been translated into more than fifteen languages. Apart from being on the *National Review*'s list of the 100 best non-fiction books of the century, it was also mentioned in *100 Christian Books That Changed the Century* (2000). Its Amazon ranking holds steady around #3,100...there are over 11million books for sale on Amazon.

² <http://europe.anglican.org/what-we-do/ministry-vocations>

He eventually went on to be a prolific author and diarist, writing over 70 books and dozens of poems, articles and reviews – almost all written after his ordination as a Trappist Monk in 1941. This is likely why Google Trends simply tags him as an “author”. But he was clearly more than this if he was referenced by the reigning pontiff as one of the four greatest Americans ever to have lived.

Francis’ reference to Merton is particularly interesting when you consider the fact that the Catholic Church has had “complex” relationship with Merton. From Catholic.Com³, editor Anthony Clark described Merton in his less-than-complimentary way:

“Fr. Thomas Merton was a man of a thousand lives. He was at one time a womanizer, a member of the Young Communist League, an English student at Columbia, a peace activist, an English teacher at St. Bonaventure University, and a social work volunteer. He was an orphan, the father of a child, a Catholic convert, a Trappist monk, a priest, a poet, a writer, and a Zen Buddhist. It is difficult to distill the essence of Thomas Merton: He and his works are complex.”

³ <http://www.catholic.com/magazine/articles/can-you-trust-thomas-merton>

More specifically, much like Dorothy Day, he very much lived a bifurcated life. He was born in 1915 in France to an American mother and a New Zealander father. As an infant they moved to Long Island to live with his maternal grandparents. His mother died when he was 6. He, his younger brother and his father moved to Bermuda and then back to France where his father was a painter. He was sent to multiple boarding schools in England. While in England, his father died of brain cancer. He attended Cambridge but left prior to graduation after fathering a child in 1932-33. He went to NY and attended Columbia. He graduated in 1938 with a degree in English and started a masters degree, but never finished. He eventually became a Catholic in 1938, was briefly an English teacher at St. Bonaventure College. On December 10, 1941 he entered the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky, eventually becoming a Trappist Monk. All of that before he was 26.

He wrote while pursuing his masters degree and wrote as a lecturer at St. Bonaventure – but once he was in the monastery, he wrote with unbridled passion about...everything. He was the quintessential seeker – there is a bumper sticker saying “Dance like no one is watching”. Once he was freed of the restrictions of academia and the perceived judgement of society, he wrote like no one was reading, again, authoring more than 70 books which provided inspiration and spiritual guidance for millions. **<SLIDE 6 and**

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In a recent article⁴ from Time Magazine called “Rhythm of the Saints”, Merton was listed as someone who is deserving of Sainthood primarily as a function of how his writings have touched and influenced millions of people on their respective spiritual journeys... He continues to attract followers almost 50 years after his death in 1968 – the Merton Center at Bellarmine

⁴ http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1850894_1850898_1850891,00.html

College in Louisville (not far from the abbey of Gethsemani where he lived and wrote) still receives over 3,000 visitors every year., but will likely never be formally considered. Reading from their article: <SLIDE 8>

And while I have not had an opportunity to debrief with Pope Francis since his address, I hypothesize that while Dorothy Day is well on her way to canonization, his uplifting of Merton may have been intended as a signal that the Church's position on Merton is evolving or even softening. I think there was significance to his selection of a reference to Merton.

I readily acknowledge that I can't properly do justice to the depth and breadth of his life in the time we have this morning – his writings assumed so many dimensions of seeking, reflection, contemplation, eschatology, spiritual seeking, monasticism but also controversially civil rights, nonviolence and social justice. So, I wanted to focus my comments this morning on the humanness of his life that I have always appreciated.

We have these people who we revere as saints – Saint Patrick, Saint Christopher, our own Saint Philip – and while these were all real people, the “realness” of their existence has been lost to the mythology of their “saintness”. Put simply, it’s difficult for me to relate to most of these people we hold up as saints – I get the justification of reverence for the beauty of their contributions – but it feels very dualistic to me with the most relevant half missing – all mythos and no logos. I understand that much of their humanness (the logos) was lost to history and/or was sanitized by the church and what we are left with is the mythology of their lives (the mythos) – and maybe that’s the point. But that’s why the lives of most saints don’t really resonate with me – at this point, my life feels like it is all logos. In fact, last Sunday, I ran into a good friend in church, and happened to notice that she was holding a folder titled “Thomas Merton”. I said, Oh, are you speaking on Thomas Merton? She said yes – on the

following day in a class that she teaches. I said “don’t you enjoy Thomas Merton – I get so much from him” – and she said “Yes...he is so human...so messy...he teaches so much about real life”.

I think that is why I have always gravitated to Thomas Merton – the Church regularly describes him as “complex” – but I think it’s this complexity – this intersection of this great spiritual writer and this very messy, flawed character all within the same person that has always drawn me to him.

In a few months I will be 50. I am sort of amused by the fact that Merton effectively did almost everything that ticked off the Church between the time he was 50 and his untimely death at 53. If you read his journals, there is definitely an awakening that he experiences around 50 – he talks about listening to Bob Dylan, Joan Baez...he openly makes reference to his appreciation of wine, beer and whiskey...and regularly complains about his “boss” (the head of the Abbey). I get this. As I enter into my 50s, I find

myself listening to an increasingly wider variety of music with new appreciation for David Bowie, Eminem, and Pitbull (potentially inspired by having two teenagers in the car regularly), opening myself to new experiences and a relationship that I likely would not have been receptive to a decade ago.

Some may call this a midlife crisis – it feels deeper than that. As I enter my 50s, I think I am just more confident in who I am and what makes me happy and less interested in what others may think. I have a girlfriend who is experiencing many of the same things – we have decided to call this “a mid life confidence”.

Maybe Merton was experiencing his “mid life confidence” when he hit his 50s.

From the Time article about why Merton deserves to become a saint but never will, they highlight three reasons – two of which I think are

intimately intertwined – that I would like to highlight – not for their salaciousness but rather because I think knowing his humanness helps us appreciate his holiness at a more meaningful level. Knowing the logos helps to put the mythos into better context.

The first of the three are part of what Time refers to as “...a variety of sins throughout his career.”

When Thomas Merton was 51 he had to go to a local hospital for back surgery. During this time, he met a nurse with whom he had a very intense, passionate (although never consummated) affair for several months. Much of their affair is recorded in his 6th (of 7) personal journals – this journal is titled “Learning to Love”. He wrote literally hundreds of pages about his intense feelings for this woman, including beautiful poems that would rival those written by Shakespeare or Milton or Robert Browning – they were all published posthumously. In fact, there is a sub chapter in his diary called

“A Midsummer for M.” It’s worth noting that prior to entering the monastery he had admittedly lived as somewhat of a playboy with multiple relationships – none of which apparently inspired him and he makes reference to this in his writings. Ironically, twenty five years after he made his vows of celibacy, he found a relationship that moved him in ways that he had never previously experienced. She very much became a muse for him – his writings from 1966 until his death in 1968 feel very different with a passion and humanity that were not present before 1966.

But what strikes me about his writings during the height of his relationship with M was the gentleness and respect that he consistently demonstrated for her, for himself, and for his vows – he tried to hold all three in balance.

He experienced these very human feelings of love, joy (he describes the flutters of his heart when he received a call or letter from her), craving for another person – he recognized that denying the existence of these feelings

– like denying emotions of anger or sadness – was not only unhealthy, but unrealistic. From his diary:

“I realize that the deepest capacities for human love in me have never even been tapped, that I too can love with an awful completeness. Responding to her has opened up the depths of my life in ways that I can’t begin to understand or analyze...I am struck by the fact that the social rules of thumb for handling such situations offer no real structure, no authentic answer...”

Again, within the context of recognizing the depths of his emotions and the weight of his commitment to his vows:

“A voice says in me – love: trust love. Do not fear it, do not avoid it...believe in it... without rebelling against the whole structure of the church, without ignoring or neglecting concrete obligations which you may have, but love within the actual framework where you are...”

As he continued to see her, communicate with her and deepen his relationship with her, he continued to act with unmitigated respect and gentleness...but was increasingly cognizant of the eventual end point:

“Today I begged God to forgive me and not to take away the gift of love He gave us...”

He struggled to properly order his relationship with M with his vows, but in the end his hand was forced - the relationship was brought to an end after several difficult conversations with the head of the Abbey who learned of the relationship from another monk who had overheard a phone conversation. His love for her continued to influence his writings until his accidental death 18 months later. Although he expressed regret later for any pain that was created – specifically for her – he never expressed regret for the experiences of love and joy that he had with her.

The second and third aspects of Merton's "complex" relationship with the Catholic church as cited by Time are "...his radical pacificism, which caused him to be censored even in his lifetime; because his curiosity regarding Eastern contemplative traditions struck some as heretical".

My opinion is that these two elements – pacificism and inter-religious dialogue were related to each other. He wrote three books on Eastern faiths in the last years of his life between 1965 and 1968:

- The Way of Chuang Tzu
- Mystics and Zen Masters
- Zen and the Birds of Appetite

The seeds of interface dialogue were sown in Merton even before his conversion to Catholicism and his entry into the Monastery.

In the Seven Storey Mountain, he writes about when he was 23, he met a Hindu monk who advised him, not to read Hindu scriptures, but some of the Christian mystical literature, especially Augustine's "Confessions" and the medieval devotional work by Thomas a Kempis, "The Imitation of Christ." It's interesting in retrospect that it was a Hindu who pointed him to Catholicism.

During his first years at the Monastery he read and his writings were informed by Gandhi <SLIDE 10> – he references Gandhi’s saying that “one can find the deeper roots of one’s own religious tradition by becoming immersed in other religions--and then returning “home” to see one’s own heritage in a transformed way, with a transformed consciousness.” As a contemplative and proponent of quiet and contemplation, his practice of Catholicism linked him, at the root level, with Buddhism and Buddhists that he met. He wanted to be the good Buddhist only because he found himself to be more Christian than ever.

"The Dalai Lama is most impressive as a person. He is strong and alert... A very solid, energetic, generous, and warm person, very capably trying to handle enormous problems...The whole conversation was about religion and philosophy and especially ways of meditation... In general he advised me to get a good base in Madhyamika philosophy (Nagarjuna and other authentic

Indian sources) and to consult qualified Tibetan scholars, uniting study and practice. (Asian Journal, p.101).

In turn, the Dalai Lama would later say about Merton that “more striking than his outward appearance which was memorable in itself, was the inner life which he manifested. I could see that he was a truly humble and deeply spiritual man. This was the first time I had been struck by such a feeling of spirituality by anyone who professed Christianity.” (cf. Canon Allchin’s Address).

The Franciscan priest and author Murray Bodo relates that “the Dalai Lama credits Merton with opening his eyes to the truth that Tibetan Buddhism does not hold the world’s only truth. ‘As a result of meeting with him, my attitude toward Christianity was much changed... Thomas Merton is someone we can look up to. He had the qualities of being learned, disciplined and having a good heart’”

At that same gathering where Merton met the Dalai Lama, Bodo also says that “the Dalai Lama (encouraged) each of us to remain faithful to our own tradition. He says, ‘We need to experience more deeply the meanings and spiritual values of our own religious tradition--we need to know these teachings not only on an intellectual level but also through our own deeper experience. We must practice our own religion sincerely; it must become part of our lives.’”

At this very time Merton would write in his personal journal:

“Last night I dreamed I was, temporarily, back at Gethsemani. I was dressed in a Buddhist monk’s habit, but with more black and red and gold, a ‘Zen habit,’ in color more Tibetan than Zen... I met some women in the corridor, visitors and students of Asian religion, to whom I was explaining I was a kind of Zen monk and Gelugpa together, when I woke up” (“The Other Side of the Mountain,” p 255.)

A compassion for people in distress also led Merton to begin writing on the social issues of the late 1950s and early 1960s, including civil rights, nuclear weapons, war and peace, and the Viet Nam War. In fact, his religious superiors silenced him because of his literary protests.

In a 1961 letter written to Catholic social activist Dorothy Day, he said: “I don’t feel that I am called in conscience at a time like this to go on writing just about things like meditation, though that has its point. I cannot just bury my head in a lot of rather tiny and secondary monastic studies either. I think I have to face the big issues, the life-and-death issues.”

Thus as the Vietnam War expanded and exploded on the American conscience, Merton could not remain silent and became an eloquent voice for peace and non-violence. In *No Man Is An Island*, Merton discounted the idea of an enemy writing: “Violence rests on the assumption that the enemy and I are entirely different: the enemy is evil and I am good. The

enemy must be destroyed but I must be saved. But love sees things differently. It sees that even the enemy suffers from the same sorrows and limitation that I do. That we both have the same hopes, the same needs, the same aspiration for peaceful and harmonious human life. And that death is the same for both of us. Then love may perhaps show me that my brother is not really my enemy and that war is both his enemy and mine. War is our enemy. Then peace becomes possible.”

As the Vietnam War intensified, so did Merton’s feelings about the insanity of that war and war in general. Writing for *The Catholic Worker*, Merton challenged Christians to struggle against war: “What is the place of the Christian in all this? Is he simply to fold his hands and resign himself to the worst, accepting it as the inescapable will of God and preparing himself to enter heaven with a sigh of relief? Or, worse still, should he take a hard-headed and ‘practical’ attitude about it and join in the madness of the war

makers, calculating how by a 'first strike,' the glorious Christian West can eliminate atheistic communism for all time? . . . The duty of the Christian in this crisis is to strive with all his power and intelligence, with his faith, hope in Christ, and love for God and man, to do the one task which God has imposed: work for total abolition of war. There can be no question that, unless war is abolished, the world will remain constantly in a state of madness.”

Writing specifically to a group of students at the University of Louisville, Merton challenged them to discover the power of silence: “We are perhaps too talkative, too activist, in our conception of the Christian life. Our service of God and of the Church does not consist only in talking and doing. It can also consist in periods of silence, listening, waiting. . . . Silence has many dimensions. It can be a regression and an escape, a loss of self, or it can be presence, awareness, unification, self-discovery. Negative silence

blurs and confuses our identity, and we lapse into daydreams or diffusive anxieties. Positive silence pulls us together and makes us realize who we are, who we might be and the distance between the two.”

While in the US, Nhất Hạnh stopped at Gethsemani Abbey to speak with Thomas Merton.^[13] When Vietnam threatened to block Nhất Hạnh's re-entry to the country, Merton penned an essay of solidarity entitled "Nhat Hanh is my Brother."

In the end, I think I would summarize Merton using the story of the three blind men and the elephant...with each have a very real but very different experience of Merton depending upon where they have found him on their own journey...