January Reflections, 2016 Vol. 38 No 5

In his historic address to a Joint Meeting of Congress on September 24, 2015, Pope Francis raised up the Trappist monk Thomas Merton (1915 – 1968) as “a source of spiritual inspiration and a guide for many people.” The pope quoted a line from Merton’s best- selling 1948 autobiography *Seven Storey Mountain*: “I came into the world free by nature, in the image of God. I was nevertheless the prisoner of my own violence and my own selfishness.” Celebrating Merton’s conversion, Francis went on to describe him in glowing terms: “a man of prayer;“ “a thinker who challenged the certitudes of his times and opened up new horizons;” “a man of dialogue, a promoter of peace between peoples and religions.”

 Through his well-publicized address to Congress, Pope Francis brought Thomas Merton to the attention of millions of people, many of whom knew little or nothing about him. For those more familiar with Merton, the pope left open the question of how a young man imprisoned in his own selfishness became a man of prayer and dialogue.

 In his book *The Franciscan Heart of Thomas Merton*, Daniel Horan makes the case that we can gain a better understanding of Merton’s spiritual journey by examining the often overlooked influence of the Franciscan tradition on him.

 Thomas grew up without much structure in his life: his mother died when he was six and his artist father travelled a good deal, at times leaving his son with relatives and friends. At age 18, Thomas spent a year at Cambridge University in England, where he drank too much, was sexually active, and fathered a child, never mentioned or named in his voluminous writings. After one year at Cambridge, he enrolled at Columbia University in New York, where he majored in English, earning a BA in 1938 and an MA in 1939. During this time he became interested in Catholicism and after taking instructions was received into the Church on November 12, 1938. A year later, Merton took an elective course from an expert on Franciscan theology, Daniel Walsh, who became his confidant, advisor, and lifetime friend. Walsh not only introduced his protégé to the Franciscan tradition, but set up a meeting for him with a Franciscan priest, Edmund Murphy, to discuss joining the order. The meeting went well and Merton’s application was favorably received, but he had to wait until the following August to join a new novitiate class. After the interview, Thomas began to have doubts about his decision, especially whether his experiences at Cambridge disqualified him from being a Franciscan. He eventually shared his story and his doubts with Fr. Murphy, who suggested he withdraw his application at least for a time, which he did.

Still interested in the Franciscan tradition, Thomas spent the next year and a half at St. Bonaventure College, where he lived the ascetic life of a friar, praying the Office and attending daily Mass. He also used this time to learn more about the Franciscan spiritual and intellectual tradition. He developed a great respect for Francis of Assisi (1181 – 1226), founder of the Order of Friars Minor (OFM). Later Merton wrote: “I will always feel that I am still in some secret way a Son of St. Francis. There is no saint in the Church whom I admire more than St. Francis.” He saw the great saint as a man who joined himself so closely to Christ that the wounds of the Lord were imprinted on his body. He admired the way the deep contemplative life of Francis issued in the active life of preaching the Gospel and attending to the poor. The famous Canticle of Creatures, composed by Francis at various stages of his life, spoke to Merton’s heart, reinforcing his intuitive sense that the beauty and power of nature reveal the omnipotent Source of all beauty.

St. Bonaventure (1217-1274), who taught at the University of Paris and served as head of the Franciscans, was of special interest to young Thomas, especially his spiritual classic*, The Journey of the* *Soul into God*, which detects vestiges of God in nature and our inner life. This book, along with his study of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, inspired Merton to think of the spiritual life as an ascending journey leading to final union with God.

With the help of colleagues, Thomas also wrestled with the difficult theology of the great Franciscan scholar, John Duns Scotus (1265-1303), who studied at Oxford and taught at the University of Paris. From Scotus he picked up some insights that served him well throughout his life including a great respect for the unique character of each individual person and thing as well as an expansive Christology that sees Jesus not only as our Savior from sin but also as the fulfillment of human existence.

When Merton entered the Abbey of Gethsemane in 1941, he saw himself leaving the cares and joys of the world, including his passion for writing, in favor of living as a contemplative monk. Over the years he began to see that contemplative prayer was leading him back to care for this world and for its struggles to achieve justice and peace. Twenty years after he began his life as a monk, he wrote in his journal that he was “at the turning point of my spiritual life,” noting that he was one of the few priests advocating the abolition of war and the use of ”non-violent means to settle international conflicts.” That same year, 1961, he published an article “The Root of War” in Dorothy Day’s paper, *The Catholic Worker*, arguing that Christians have an obligation to mobilize against a possible war between the United States and the Soviet Union. From then until his death in 1968, Merton served as an active participant in the peace movement, drawing on the Franciscan tradition that joined prayer with the active life of doing good in the world.

 St. Francis himself gave shape to that tradition by his peacemaking efforts during the fifth crusade. In 1219, he travelled to Damietta, Egypt, where the Christian army was locked in a deadly battle with the Saracens led by Sultan Malik al-Kamil. Francis, who was a minority voice in opposing the crusade, spent time with the crusaders, challenging them to consider if this bloody battle was really the will of God. At one point, Francis and his companion Brother Illuminato crossed into the Muslim camp where they were seized and beaten. Eventually, Francis got to the Sultan, known to be a kind and just man, and engaged him in religious dialogue hoping to convert him. According to some accounts, the Sultan was impressed with Francis and asked for his prayers before allowing him to return to the Christian camp.

 In the spirit of St. Francis, Merton contributed to the peace effort in various ways. Convinced that the movement needed greater structure, he supported the founding of the Catholic Peace Fellowship in 1964. That same year, he hosted a retreat for peacemakers, including Phil and Dan Berrigan as well as the Mennonite John Howard Yoder, and led a discussion on the spiritual roots of protest against war. Worried that some types of protest, such as burning the American flag, were counterproductive, Merton argued that the peace movement needed patient, constructive pastoral work, rather than protests that “antagonize the average person.” In 1965 he wrote a letter to Jim Forest, widely circulated as a “Letter to a Young Activist,” warning him “not to depend on results,” and reminding him of the importance of personal relationships, which “save everything,” and urging “the less dramatic “ apostolic job of helping people “change their minds,” about war. The letter included wise spiritual advice for all peace activists: “the big results are not in our hands so we should allow ourselves to be used by God’s love;” by trying to “serve Christ’s truth, we can do more and be less crushed by the inevitable disappointments;” and our real hope is not in something we do but in God “who is making something good out of it in some way we cannot see.”

 Merton argued that all Christians have a special vocation to be peacemakers. In a commentary on Pope John XXIII’s 1963 encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, he wrote that peacemaking “is not a matter for a few individual consciences, it urgently binds the consciences of every living man. It is not an individual refinement of spirituality, a luxury of the soul, but a collective obligation of the highest urgency and immediate need which can no longer be ignored.“ In other words, he insisted that we are all called to be peacemakers, first of all by our common humanity as creatures made in the image and likeness of God. The more we appreciate the inherent dignity and worth of every human being the more committed we will be to establishing peace in our world through non-violent means. Merton believed this essential truth about human nature is manifested in the world religions. For example, he praised the Hindu, Mohandas Gandhi, as a believer who had “an inner realization of spiritual unity in himself,” grounding his “spiritual and personal freedom” which enabled him to liberate India from colonial rule.

 For us Christians, the example of Jesus of Nazareth provides added meaning and motivation for our vocation as peacemakers. When he walked this earth, he followed the path of peace marked by mercy, forgiveness and reconciliation. He brought peace to sinners and outcasts, to those possessed and grieving. In his great sermon, he proclaimed: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.” He refused to follow the path of violence and warned his disciples against the self-destructive character of violent tactics.

 By virtue of our baptism, we are incorporated into Christ, sharing in his death and resurrection. We now participate in his peace mission, confident that he strengthens us for this often arduous task. Our faith tells us that the work of peace will be completed only in the final fulfillment, but that in the meantime we must do our part to further the process. For Merton, this faith perspective provides us with motivation for the long haul and inoculates us against short term disappointments.

 Thomas Merton’s appropriation of the Franciscan spiritual tradition, including its emphasis on non-violent peacemaking, does provide us today with a rich resource as we embrace our vocation to bring peace to our families, our worksite and our troubled world.