

Thomas Merton, Trappist 1915-1968

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: Upon learning of Thomas Merton's sudden death, she quotes a letter from him refuting the suggestion he was leaving monastic life. In the quotes, Merton clarifies his role in the peace movement and gives a Christmas message of hope at a time when we need courage. (DDLW #901).

A year ago Thomas Merton was sending out his Advent-Christmas letter and telling of the death of three close friends by heart attacks. "Both were about my age," he wrote. "So if I suddenly follow their example I will be the last one to be surprised." He was fifty-three years old when he died. On Wednesday, December 11, we received a telegram from the abbot, telling of his death. We had no details of his dying from the New York**Times** that morning, because we had an early edition which ran only his prepared obituary. It was from a later issue of the paper that we learned the details. I felt certain that it was indeed a heart attack which had caused him to fall against a standing electric fan in the monastery in Bangkok, which in turn fell upon him, burning him severely. He had arrived in Bangkok a week before to attend a meeting of Roman Catholic monks who had gathered to discuss monasticism in the Far East.

All of us at Tivoli and at St. Joseph's House of Hospitality on First Street in New York were shocked and saddened by the loss of this friend of the *Catholic Worker* and of the peace movement. He had been writing to us since the Fifties and we had published a great number of his articles. Ever since he wrote **Seven Storey Mountain**, which was published in 1948 and made the best seller lists, he was kept busy by his abbot, writing more books and essays. The New York**Times** said of him that he was a writer of singular grace about the city of God and an essayist of penetrating originality on the City of Men. He had become a Catholic in 1938 and joined the Trappists at Gethsemani in 1941 and lived at Bardstown, Kentucky, first in the monastery and then as a hermit on the property. A few months ago he wrote us that he was asked by his abbot to attend a series of meetings with monks of the Eastern religions and to visit Trappist monasteries in the Far East. He regarded this journey as a great opportunity to increase his study and contribute to his writings about the mystical life of East and West. His books can be obtained at any library and indeed in drug stores and bus stations and wherever paperbacks are sold.

Today I heard the comment made by one of a group of people who were helping mail out the November issue of the **Catholic Worker** that Merton intended to leave his monastery and was very discontented at the way the Trappist monasteries were run.

I would like to reprint a few quotations from some of his letters to me, and these quotations will serve to answer this kind of gossip and also serve as a Christmas greeting to us all.

“I am trying to get all the material I have done on peace together in a book. Do please pray that the obstacles to this and the various difficulties may smooth themselves out, by God’s will. I think at any rate the picture is rounding out and I am getting clear on what to say.”

A Month Later

“Yesterday I mailed you a copy of the book which is **not** to be published: **Peace in the Post-Christian Era**. My superiors, having been alerted by zealous individuals in this country, felt that I was ‘going too far’ and getting away from the contemplative vocation into ‘dangerous ground,’ etc. etc. The book has not even been censored, just forbidden. I accept this with good will and I think humor, because there is a lot of irony in it after all.”

“. . . Since I am not writing anything about war anymore, I have gone back to the Fathers, to Cassiodorus, Cyprian, Tertullian, etc. I will try to type out bits of things they say that could be used in the CW here and there and will send them along. I will probably do a few translations, and maybe write some prayers. I have to do a book on Cassian some time, and thanks again for the translation you sent. We always use it.”

“It is no use speculating too much about the world situation, but it is certainly a very risky one. The whole world is under judgement and one feels it keenly. Without saying that I think something is going to happen, I think I can say reasonably that there is just no reason for it not to happen. I think the evil in us all has reached the point of overflowing. May the Holy Spirit give us compunction and inner truth and humility and love, that we may be a leaven in this world, and that we may help and bring light to those who need it most; and the Lord alone knows who they are, for the need of all is desperate.”

About Leaving the Trappists

" . . . I know that I cannot really expect them (some pacifist friends) to take the slightest interest in the peculiar problem I have, trying to live an authentic life of solitude (which I certainly think will do more for the peace movement than anything I write) . . . X. Y., by the way, in a long letter argued that my whole monastic life was a pure evasion, that I ought to be back in the world leading a life of authentic involvement like himself, etc., etc. Don’t worry, I have heard enough of that to know what I think of it. I am more determined than ever on my present course, in spite of what they may think about it. In fact their opposition is to me another reason to continue obeying God rather than man . . . "

“I honestly realize that my function now is not to try to be a voice in the peace movement. I feel that such an attempt would be clearly false on my part, playing a role God does not now ask of me (unless in some particular situation it becomes

evident that He does require me to speak) . . . It is more and more clear to me that if I pretended to keep up with politics here and tried to utter profound judgments from my solitude I would be deceiving myself and perhaps others. . . . My solitude has to be completely genuine, otherwise what use it is? . . . I have had enough experience in 24 years of monastic life to know that even if certain measures of superiors may be a little unfair, one never loses anything by obeying, quite the contrary. And God sometimes reserves special gifts and an extra fruitfulness for us, something we could not have gained without this sacrifice . . . However, Superiors will have to learn by experience that the Decree on Religious, in the Council, meant what it said; that subjects are to be trusted more and given more latitude in important matters. Maybe some will learn the hard way. . . . the religious should obey and trust God. There is no better way. If there were our Lord would have shown it to us. His example led to the Cross.”

A Christmas Greeting

Reading over again Thomas Merton’s last year’s Christmas letter, sent to all his friends, “The times are difficult. They call for courage and faith. Faith is in the end a lonely virtue. Lonely especially where a deeply authentic community of love is not an accomplished fact, but a job to be begun over and over; I am not referring to Gethsemani, where there is a respectable amount of love, but to all Christian communities in general. Love is not something we get from Mother Church as a child gets milk from the breast; it also has to be given. We don’t get any love if we don’t give any . . . Christmas then is not just a sweet regression to breast feeding and infancy. It is a serious and sometimes difficult feast. Difficult especially if for psychological reasons we fail to grasp the indestructible kernel of Hope that is in it. If we are just looking for a little consolation we may be disappointed. Let us pray for one another, love one another in truth, in the sobriety of earnest Christian hope, for hope, says Paul, does not deceive.”