

RADICAL ROMAN CATHOLIC RESPONSES TO VIETNAM:
THE NONVIOLENCE OF THOMAS MERTON & DOROTHY DAY

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*“The whole world is plunging headlong into frightful destruction, and doing so with the purpose of avoiding war and preserving peace! This is a true war-madness, an illness of the mind and the spirit that is spreading with a furious and subtle contagion all over the world. Of all the countries that are sick, America is perhaps the most grievously afflicted ...”*¹

Thus began Thomas Merton’s warning cry against what he perceived to be the most dangerous violent conflict America had ever found herself in: the war in Vietnam and the race by Russia and United States to arm, and as quickly as possible. On September 22, 1961, Merton sent the essay to a friend he had just recently begun conversing with, for publication in her magazine *Catholic Worker*.² This friend was the activist Dorothy Day.

Both Merton and Day found Vietnam, the arms race, and the threat of nuclear war to be completely at odds with their understanding of the Catholic faith, or even more primarily, the teachings of Jesus. They believed, as Merton articulated in the latter half of the essay quoted above, that: “[the Church] must lead the way on the road of nonviolent settlement of difficulties and towards 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.”³

Merton and Day, both devout Catholics, fiercely opposed the Vietnam War but found their callings to express their opposition to the war in entirely different ways. The two never met but conversed frequently, from 1959 until Merton’s untimely death in December of 1968, a span of just over ten years. Merton found his calling with the

¹ Jim Forest, "Thomas Merton: The Root of War is Fear," *Jim & Nancy Forest*, September 28, 2006.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

Trappists in the hills of Appalachia, in a little monastery called the Abbey of Gethsemani in Bethlehem, Kentucky. Day lived out each day in what was almost an entirely different world, the dirt and grime of New York City. Both felt an absolute need to confront the horrors of war from where they sat – and so they did, in their own ways, supported by the other’s friendship.

This essay will explore the quiet and not so quiet protests of Merton and Day against the war in Vietnam, focusing primarily on work done before Merton’s death in 1968. Day and Merton should not be considered to be examples of perfection, but rather used as lenses through which to look at the range of Catholic pacifistic responses to both nuclear armament and the Vietnam War.

Section I will explore the Catholic teachings up till the time of Merton and Day on war and peace. Because thought generally precedes action, Section II will explore Merton’s response to Vietnam, and Section III, Day’s response to Vietnam. Finally, Section IV will explore the changing zeitgeist of the Catholic Church towards issues of war and peace in the aftermath of Merton and Day’s work and in the light of Vatican II.

I. The Catholic Church: War & Peace

It was certainly not that there were no Catholic pacifists prior to the Vietnam war. The Catholic tradition can and does point to a host of radical examples of Catholic non-violent expression. One has to look only at Martin of Tours (who famously exclaimed, “I am a soldier of Christ, I cannot fight,”⁴) or John Chrysostom (who Dorothy Day herself

⁴ Roland Bainton, *Christian Attitudes toward War and Peace: A Historical Survey and Critical*, (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Press, 1960), 88.

cited often as saying, “Our Lord [sends] us out as sheep among wolves, [and if] we become wolves ourselves, He is no longer with us.”⁵) This does not even begin to cover the range of Catholics who found themselves opposed to war – and this range includes those like Tertullian and Clement – but it should give the reader assurance that such men and women did exist.

The traditional understanding of the Catholic view of war, however, is the notion of Just War, which was developed most extensively by St. Augustine. Just War theory states that God has entrusted the government with the power of the sword, and it is to use it to protect the innocent and to preserve peace, even if that means violence. Just war, as it came to be developed over the centuries, has three necessary features: it must have a just cause, it must be waged by a legitimate authority (and not just an individual acting on a whim). Finally, the war must be waged with the *motivation* of seeking peace.⁶

The Just War theory was developed and reshaped many times over the centuries by the Catholic church, but, at the time of the Vietnam War, the Catholic church had not developed a cohesive, workable treatment of the doctrine that could stand up to the incredible challenges and moral and ethical questions that modern war (especially nuclear war) posed. Because of this, a pacifistic persuasion, especially when it came to nuclear armament, was necessarily a personal one.

This choice in persuasion was a shift from the past. In the First World War, the Catholic Church came out in support of the American government, and expected American parishioners to do so as well – up to and including dying for their country.

⁵ Mark & Louise Zwick, *The Catholic Worker Movement: Intellectual & Spiritual Origins*, (New York: Paulist Press, 2005), 250

⁶ Justo González, *The Story of Christianity, The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2010), 248.

During the Second World War, the tables shifted slightly, towards a kinder, gentler approach to Conscientious Objectors (those who, for moral or religious reasons, refuse to participate in war), but the Vatican still had not issued any clear words on the spiritual roots that a Catholic conscientious objector might find for support, nor was there any sort of denunciation of nuclear war. It was in this milieu that Day and Merton found themselves having to make space for scripturally and morally grounded ethical thought.

II. In the Foothills of Gethsemani

For someone as fiercely committed to pacifistic ideals as he was, it is interesting to note that Thomas Merton did not actually, in the strictest possible sense of the term, consider himself a pacifist. In an early letter on the subject to a quite understandably confused Dorothy Day, Merton explains his dilemma, saying that he believed that a just war was theoretically possible, and that a Christian could theoretically fight in such a war, but he then goes on to be clear that to attempt to argue in this vein is to effectively enter the realm of semantics:

In practice all the wars that are going around, whether with conventional weapons, or guerrilla wars, or the cold war itself, are shot through and through with evil, falsity, injustice, and sin so much that one can only with difficulty extricate the truths that may be found here and there in the “causes” for which that fighting is going on. So in practice I am with you, except, insofar only, as a policy of totally uncompromising pacifism may tend in effect to defeat itself and yield to one of the other forms of injustice.⁷

Whether or not a strict pacifist, the nuclear crisis weighed heavily on Merton’s soul. He agonized over the morality of the situation for months, weighing his duty: to

⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon, (USA: Merton Legacy Trust, 1985), 145.

speak, or not to speak. By the fall of 1961, however, he decided on a course of action: send his work to Dorothy Day for publication in *The Catholic Worker*. The essay on war and peace would later be published as a chapter in an expanded version of his book, *New Seeds of Contemplation*. “Walking into a known and definite battle,” Merton wrote in his journal on October 23, 1961:

“May God protect me in it ... At any rate, it appears that I am one of the few Catholic priests in the country who has come out unequivocally for a complete intransigent fight for the abolition of war, for the use of non-violent means to settle international conflicts. Hence, by implication not only against the bomb, against nuclear testing ... but against all violence. This I will inevitably have to explain in due course. Non-violent *action*, not mere passivity.”⁸

Merton goes on to express his frustration with his order for remaining so passive about the present situation: “I tried talking to Fr. Clement ... about it, and it was like talking to a wall ... At least I feel clean for stating what is certainly the true Christian position. Not that self-defense is not legitimate, but there are wider perspectives than that and we have to see them.”⁹ The reluctance of his order (and the Catholic Church as a whole) to express a pacifistic persuasion on the war was deeply troubling to him. A few days later, on the 29th of October, Merton described his newest work on peace, lamenting the fact that the livelihoods of so many are caught up in the machine of warfare. “It is to their interest to believe that that way to peace is the accumulation of nuclear weapons. This is disastrous.”¹⁰ By the 30th, Merton was set in his ways. “Convinced I must set everything aside to work for the abolition of war. Primarily of course by prayer.” It was

⁸ Kramer, *Turning Toward the World*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996), 172.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 173

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 175.

in this posture of resignation to work for the end of war that Merton would stay for the rest of his life.

The spring of 1962 found Merton corresponding in earnest with Jim Forest and other members of the Catholic Worker Movement. “Annoyed, gratified and perplexed by the sudden growth of the Peace Movement,” he writes in April of 1962. “I do not fully know where it is going, but it is a good movement.”¹¹ Day picked up on his skepticism, and humorously, if not a tad defensively, wrote to Merton on June 4, 1962. “I do assure you that we are not ‘beats’,” she wrote, then listed the academic accomplishments of her group of friends. “... I say all this because in your letters you associate us with ‘beats’ of whom there have been, thank God, but a few ... I am afraid I am uncharitable about the intellectual who shoulders his way in to eat before the men on the line who have done the hard work of the world.”¹²

But a movement can never be without its detractors. Just as Merton was committed to work for peace, and just as he was growing comfortable with the peace movement, his superiors were committed that he would do no such thing – at least not in the public way that he wished, by writing and publishing theological treatises. Merton had just finished a book on the arms race¹³ (what would be published posthumously as *Peace in the Post-Christian Era* in 2004) and was getting ready to ship his manuscript to Macmillan when he received terrible news. In a journal entry from April 27th of 1962,

¹¹ Ibid., 215.

¹² Dorothy Day, *All the Way to Heaven: The Selected Letters of Dorothy Day*, ed. Robert Ellsberg (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2010), 286.

¹³ Thomas Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, ed. Patricia A. Burton, (New York: Orbis Books, 2004), ix.

Merton wrote: “It seems that the opposition of censors and of the Abbot General ... has become intransigent ... The decision seems to be (it is not absolutely definite) that I am to stop all publication of anything on war.” The reason for the silencing, Merton recounts, is that it “falsifies the message of monasticism.”¹⁴ Merton soon wrote a letter to Jim Forest that was decidedly more blunt, and nuanced with panic. Merton first urges Forest not to publish what he had sent and would send on peace, then gave him the reasoning that his superiors had told him; to write about war would be unfitting for a monk:

“Imagine that: the thought that a monk might be deeply enough concerned with the issue of nuclear war to voice a protest against the arms race, is supposed to bring the monastic life into *disrepute*. Man, I would think that it might just possibly salvage the last shred of repute for an institution that many consider to be dead on its feet ...¹⁵

Merton predicted Forest’s certain objections in the same letter: certainly true obedience would be to seek peace, regardless of the circumstances Merton found himself in or the vows he found himself under. But Merton flatly denied that the issue was that black and white:

I am where I am. I have freely chosen this state, and have freely chosen to stay in it when the question of a possible change arose. If I am a disturbing element, that is all right. I am not making a point of being that, but simply of saying what my conscience dictates and doing so without seeking my own interest. This means accepting such limitations as may be placed on me by authority, and not because I may or may not agree with the ostensible reasons why the limitations are imposed, but out of love for God who is using these things to attain ends which I myself cannot at the moment see or comprehend. I know He can and will in His own time take good care of the ones who impose limitations unjustly or unwisely. That is His affair and not mine. In this dimension I find no contradiction between love and obedience, and as a matter of fact it is the only sure way of transcending the limits and arbitrariness of ill-advised commands.¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid., 216.

¹⁵ Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, 266-67.

¹⁶ Ibid.

In a few weeks, Merton's superiors told him another reason why he could not have his work published: the Church suspected the Catholic Worker of being a communistic organization. "You didn't know you were communist-controlled, did you?" he wrote to Forest in a letter (humorously dated "June 14, 1862 [more or less]") "Soon I will send you a mimeo copy of the book [Peace in a Post-Christian Era] but man you got to be careful with this. I don't mind who you show it to but don't let anybody go print any of it."¹⁷

Over the next few years, Merton would write several essays on war and peace for *The Catholic Worker* and other publications, but almost always under a pseudonym, like one he used several times, "Marco J. Frisbee."¹⁸ Forest and others ended up circulating hundreds of copies of Merton's *Peace* (which was also known as the "Cold War Letters"). By the time that Merton was allowed to start talking about peace again, the current pope of the time, John XXIII, was saying things quite similar to what Merton was circulating on the sly. Indeed, as Jim Forest posits in his introduction to *Peace in a Post Christian Era*, published for the first time in 2004, one has to look no further than the Vatican's condemnation of nuclear war in 1965 and compare it with Merton's *Peace* to see where church officials may well have found inspiration for their document.¹⁹

III. In the Streets of the City

¹⁷ Ibid., 269

¹⁸ Jim Forest, "Thomas Merton: The Root of War is Fear," *Jim & Nancy Forest*, September 28, 2006.

¹⁹ Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, xvii.

Dorothy Day felt just as strongly about Vietnam as Merton did, but often acted as a balm to his panic. “About nuclear warfare,” she wrote to Merton on August 15, 1961, “Juliana of Norwich said the worst has already happened and has been repaired. Nothing worse can ever befall us. On a day like this, the feast of the Assumption, Heaven seems very near.”²⁰ For Day, working for peace was a process, and a hard one at that, but was graciously underpinned by the Holy Spirit and Christ.

The Catholic Worker movement, co-founded by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, was at the forefront of American Catholic pacifist action, and had been since the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima in August of 1945. When the Hydrogen bomb was created in 1950, Day called it “the Satan bomb” in *The Catholic Worker*,²¹ then later called the scramble to find defense within the bomb “utter atheism.”²² The majority of the work done by the movement in the fifties was on draft resistance, including a republication and distribution of thousands of copies of an anti-draft pamphlet “The Immorality of Conscription,” by Father John Marion Casey.²³ The group then began to read and emulate the works of Gandhi, adapting his idea of *satagraha*, or non-violent civil resistance,²⁴ which primed them for the events of the sixties: their own acts of civil

²⁰ Day, *All the Way to Heaven*, 281.

²¹ Mel Piehl, *The Catholic Worker and Peace in the Early Cold War Era*, ed. Anne Klejmmnet and Nancy L. Roberts (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1996), 79.

²² *Ibid.*, 85

²³ *Ibid.*, 81

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 83

disobedience, primarily by refusing to participate in bomb drills, an act that could cause the violator to pay a large fine or end up in jail for a year.²⁵

As the era moved on, the Catholic Workers continued their mission to promote peace, but also to perform acts of mercy, “the causes of civil rights, the farm workers’ movement, poverty, and prison reform.”²⁶ In 1965, the Catholic Worker ran an article that urged readers to neither join the army nor work for the government and manufacture weapons in any way, and asked for signatures. The consequence of signing was the possibility of a \$5,000 fine. Soon, Catholic Workers across the country began to burn their draft cards, leading to the passage of the Rivers Amendment, which made burning draft cards illegal. Indeed, the very first person to be incarcerated for violating the act was a Catholic Worker named David Miller, who was jailed for twenty-two months.²⁷ But some decided that burning draft cards was not enough. On November 9th, 1965, Roger LaPorte, a young Catholic Worker went to the United Nations building, poured two gallons of gasoline over his head, and lit himself on fire.²⁸ Though he was so badly burned that he died the next day from his injuries, he managed to tell those gathered around him at the hospital, “I am a Catholic Worker. I oppose all wars.” Day and the rest of the Catholic Worker staff were utterly shocked, but Day responded graciously: “It has always been the teaching of the Catholic Church that suicide is a sin, but mercy and loving-kindness dictate ... another judgment that anyone who took his life was

²⁵ Ibid., 84

²⁶ Anne Klejment and Nancy L. Roberts, *The Catholic Worker and the Vietnam War*, ed. Anne Klejment and Nancy L. Roberts (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1996), 158

²⁷ Ibid., 160.

²⁸ Ibid., 161.

temporarily unbalanced, not in full possession of his faculties, even to be judged temporarily insane, and so absolved of guilt.”²⁹

But not everyone involved in the movement was able to be gracious. Upon hearing of LaPorte’s suicide, Merton immediately sent a telegram to Day: “Just heard about the suicide of Roger LaPorte. While I do not hold Catholic Peace Fellowship responsible for the tragedy current developments in peace movement make it impossible for me to continue as sponsor for the fellowship. Please remove my name from the list of sponsors. Letter follows.”³⁰ This was a blow. True to his word, Merton sent a letter, first to Forest expressing his horror at LaPorte’s actions, but then quickly back tracked when he received letters from both Forest and Day back again. Day, certainly under terrible stress from the incident, speaks clearly and directly to the issue:

“If anyone had ever dreamed he contemplated such an action, he would have been watched day and night ... None of us can understand what happened. I am only hoping that your reaction, as evidenced by your telegram, that is, holding us responsible, is not general, but I am afraid it may be. We have already received two bomb threats, and I myself have been threatened.”³¹

Merton, chastened by this, backtracked and issued apologies to Forest and Day, and cited his general unease at being asked to comment on issues of peace when he himself was holed up in Kentucky, away from it all. “Jim Douglass [insists] that I write something [on draft card burning.] ... I personally do not agree with card burning.” Day replied that while she agreed with those who chose to burn their draft cards, the reason was that those who did were not under the same obligation as Merton was. “You are a

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, 285.

³¹ Day, *All the Way to Heaven*, 318.

contemplative priest, and your vocation is another one. Our faith does not count for much if we did not believe that your vocation to bring the suffering world and the individual in it before the Lord in prayer was infinitely more important than anything else.” The two remained friends, Day continued to condone draft card burning, and Merton remained on the Catholic Peace Fellowship board.

IV. The Changing Moral Zeitgeist of the Catholic Church on Peace

Dorothy Day worked so prolifically that focusing on all of her work as a witness to peace during the Vietnam era would be entirely overwhelming. Day’s work in the streets of New York protesting bomb drills was of incredible influence to the peace movement, but perhaps her most influential act was merely her example, which caused issues of peace to be addressed at the highest level of the Catholic faith: the Vatican.

In *American Catholic Pacifism*, James Douglass, a Christian writer and non-violent activist, recounts the story of his time in Rome, after his exposure to the teachings and example of Day and the Catholic Worker while doing his undergraduate work at the University of Santa Clara left him with the desire to study issues of war and peace. In September of 1962, Douglass (who would go on to become friends with Merton) moved to Rome.³² It was there that he ran into his Santa Clara ethics professor, Father Fagothey, who was doing a dissertation on the justification of nuclear war within Catholic teaching – an argument that necessitated the non-distinction between civilians and combatants. “The case he argued at the Gregorian [University] was made possible by a partial vacuum,” Douglass writes, “the ambiguities of papal statements on modern war. Father

³² James W. Douglass, *The Leaven*, ed. Anne Klejment and Nancy L. Roberts (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1996), 93.

Fagothey thought no pope or church council had ever been definitive enough in statements against total war to rule out its admissibility in Catholic teaching.”³³ Douglass said that he then “committed my life in Rome for the duration of the [Second Vatican] Council to a project opposite to his: a lobbying effort to encourage the council fathers to make that definitive Catholic condemnation of total war that Father Fagothey was lacking.”³⁴

Douglass writes that Day visited Rome at least twice, first to speak with John Paul XXIII and then to participate in a ten day fast (October 1-10, 1965) with several other women, “as a personal appeal to the church fathers for a strong statement on war and peace ... The women’s fast, and [Day’s] in particular, went to the heart of the total war question: the hunger of the world’s destitute beneath the waste and terror of the arms race.”³⁵

In 1965, the Roman Catholic Church condemned nuclear war completely: “Any act of war aimed indiscriminately at the destruction of entire cities or of extensive areas along with their population is a crime against God and humanity itself. It merits unequivocal and unhesitating condemnation.”³⁶

Day may not have singlehandedly caused the Catholic Church to decidedly shift on the issue of nuclear war, but her witness to the world was clearly, as Douglass calls it in his essay, “the leaven”³⁷ for the bread of peace.

³³ Ibid., 94.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 94, 95.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 91.

V. Conclusion

In First Corinthians, Paul reminds the reader that the Church, those who identify with and pledge their lives to follow the example of Jesus, are themselves the very Body of Christ. “Now there are a variety of gifts,” Paul writes, “but the same Spirit ... To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”³⁸ The reminder is pertinent even to this day. Humans cannot help but compare themselves to one another. But to compare oneself to another is to reject the simple, beautiful truth of humanity: every person is different, and each has been blessed with a different gift.

In his letter to Jim Forest on April 29, Merton knew the questions were about to begin. Why wouldn't he just tell his superiors to “jump in a lake,” or “blast the whole thing wide open?”³⁹ Why couldn't he just do what Forest was doing, or Douglass, or Day?

Merton realized that his gift to the church was *not* physical protest, but instead the quiet, humble work of prayer and writing. Day knew in her heart that her work was to write, of course, but primarily to *act* and organize the action of others. The difference between Merton and Day does not mean that one was better than the other. Indeed, it shows that without the other, neither could have been sustained, and the movement would have been dead in a moment. When the members of the modern Body of Christ extend

³⁸ 1 Corinthians 12:4,7 NRSV.

³⁹ Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, 267.

such charity to one another is when true change may take place, both in the Church and in the world.

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