

Remembering Jim Forest, Friend of Merton

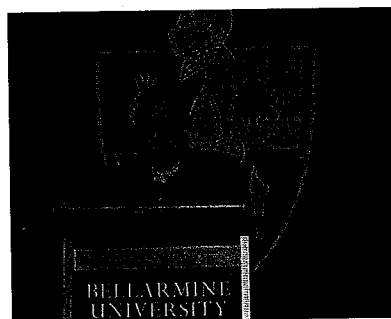
By Gordon Oyer

I first spoke with Jim Forest in 2010, and in the years that followed, our occasional interactions led me increasingly to appreciate him and the eventful life he lived. That first encounter involved a telephone interview for a book I was writing on the 1964 retreat of fourteen peacemakers that Thomas Merton hosted.¹ At the time, Jim represented one of just five retreat participants who then survived. With his passing this January, only one of those five, Tom Cornell, remains with us, and our access to lived memory of Thomas Merton has shrunk significantly.

We exchanged several emails over the twelve years between that interview and Jim's death. He graciously fielded my questions when I reached out to probe his memory for details about Merton or the Catholic Peace movement of the sixties, in which Jim played a vital role. We also met in person three times: at a small Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) gathering in Louisville; at Kirkridge Retreat and Study Center in Pennsylvania, where Jim led a three-day retreat on Dorothy Day; and at a Bellarmine University conference to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the retreat on which I'd written. My hopes to accept the invitation to visit his home in the Netherlands were never realized, however.

During that first phone interview, as I probed for a better sense of who Jim was and his life journey beyond that 1964 event, he responded candidly though somewhat reservedly to this aspiring author. I especially remember Jim's restraint in clarifying his succession of early short-lived marriages until, as he put it, he "finally got it right" with his wife of nearly forty years, Nancy Flier. But as our interactions increased over time, Jim's humor and engaging reflections grew more relaxed and spontaneous. His memories usually meshed with what archival resources conveyed, and he readily clarified them when questioned. As that aspiring author, I greatly valued hearing Jim's perspective on the emotional fulfillment of "birthing a new book" and his affirmation of my efforts. Recalling his pragmatic comments on the impossibility of publishing a perfect book reassured as I sometimes cringed when rereading my own words in print.

As I came to know more of Jim's rich life, I hoped he would document



Jim Forest at anniversary conference on peacemakers retreat, Bellarmine University

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Gordon Oyer

it also, not just the lives of others. Eventually, after the appearance of his revised biography of Dorothy Day (2012),² a study of Merton's peace writings (2016),³ and a biography of Dan Berrigan (2017)⁴ – followed by talk of one on Thich Nhat Hanh – Jim published his illuminating personal memoir, *Writing Straight with Crooked Lines* (2020).⁵ He then managed to add the book on Nhat Hahn (2021) for good measure.⁶

Another obvious way to get better acquainted with Jim is through that memoir. Its accounts of Jim's independence and inclination to think for himself at an early age especially struck me. That independence was virtually required of him as the older of two brothers, reared from the ages of two through fourteen by a single mother. It surfaced in various ways: interest in attending churches despite the professed atheism of his Communist-affiliated parents; insistence on traveling across country alone by bus at age thirteen to visit his father – and then moving cross-country at age fourteen to live with him; enrollment in the Navy at age seventeen; conversion to the Catholic faith, exit from the Navy as a conscientious objector and joining the New York Catholic Worker community, all at age nineteen.

Jim's mid-1961 arrival in New York proved fortuitous for his ground-floor entry into the heady world of 1960s New York-based activism. Over the next decade Jim was perfectly situated to engage in the growing movement against nuclear weapons of the early sixties, the expanding civil rights movement of the mid-sixties, and the contentious anti-Vietnam War movement of the late sixties. His months in the Catholic Worker community enabled him to lend assistance toward founding the Catholic peace organization PAX, modeled on a British group of the same name and later evolving into today's Pax Christi. Those months at the Catholic Worker also offered him the chance to serve as managing editor of its iconic newspaper,⁷ which not only initiated his relationship with Merton but launched him into peace-movement journalism.

After leaving the Catholic Worker in early 1962, Forest found work with Catholic Relief Services and briefly edited the Committee for Non-Violent Action newsletter. The following year he rubbed shoulders with the revered peace movement leader A. J. Muste, both as an assistant editor for *Liberation* magazine (April 1963-January 1964) and as a volunteer editor of the War Resisters League newsletter. In order to make ends meet as a new husband and father Jim reported for the *Staten Island Advance* in 1964 before joining Catholic Peace Fellowship (CPF)/FOR staff full time in early 1965. Through this series of positions he became a colleague and friend of other key peace movement figures besides Day, Merton and Muste. These included Tom Cornell, Dan and Phil Berrigan, John Heidbrink and Alfred Hassler of the FOR, Thich Nhat Hanh, and later, after moving to Europe to work for the International FOR, Henri Nouwen.

In addition to reflections on many of those peace movement experiences and interactions, Jim's memoir also captures his deep and expanding spirituality, along with his creative spirit and finely tuned aesthetic sensitivities for literature and art. Over time those qualities led Jim to build bridges with and eventually join the Orthodox faith and nurtured his appreciation for that tradition's iconography. His long-standing commitment to peace and nonviolence culminated with his efforts to help found and administer an Orthodox Peace Fellowship.

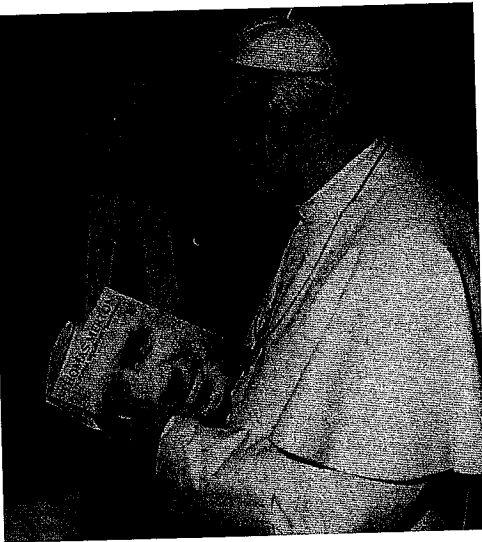
Aside from the stories in his memoir, Jim's relationship with and interpretations of Thomas Merton provide another avenue to know Jim. We unquestionably understand this monk of Gethsemani Abbey better because Jim Forest became part of Merton's life. This shows most apparently in Jim's

two books on Merton: a biography (2008)⁸ and his study of Merton's peace writings. Jim also shared several insightful essays on Merton, formally published in anthologies and informally posted to his web site.⁹ His particular lens, made credible through their close personal relationship, has profoundly shaped our understanding of Merton.

Jim also provided irreplaceable real-time, on-site documentation about the monk during Merton's lifetime. They met in person twice (1962 and 1964) – Jim often recounted Merton's uncontrollable laughter at their first encounter as he inhaled the "Catholic Worker perfume" that poured from the feet of Jim's traveling companion after three days of unbathed hitchhiking. They also compiled a massive volume of correspondence over their seven-and-a-half years of friendship. Forty-seven letters from Forest to Merton have been archived at Bellarmine University's Thomas Merton Center, along with about one hundred transmissions from Merton to Jim.¹⁰ At least thirty more uncollected letters from Forest to Merton are mentioned or alluded to in Merton's journals and letters. Beyond these letters, Jim recorded nearly two rolls of photos at that 1964 retreat. Coupled

with his notes on their group discussions, those photos proved crucial resources to decipher what unfolded fifty years earlier over those three days. Without those photos, for example, the presence at the retreat of Boston priest Charlie Ring would have remained undetected.

Diving more deeply into his correspondence with Merton for my second book¹¹ raised my appreciation of Jim's role in Merton's life to a new level. That exercise focused not so much on searching out pithy Merton thoughts, but on better grasping the nature of their relationship and the mutual support they shared. Viewed decades later through those letters, it seems a rather remarkable relationship in which Merton's vulnerability with and faith in Forest stand out. Here was a middle-aged, internationally renowned author and respected spiritual guide, a monk for twenty years and a priest for twelve, sharing deep personal doubts and ecclesial frustrations with a newly converted Catholic barely in his twenties.



Jim Forest and Pope John Paul II, holding Jim's first Merton biography.

Merton's assertions of his confidence in Forest's integrity and character recur in letters and journals, even (perhaps especially) in times of stress and tension. Some examples: Forest arrived at the New York Catholic Worker in the midst of disruption among its volunteers. Some who roomed with Forest tended toward the "beat" culture of the period, and their behavior stretched Dorothy Day's patience. While Jim was away on the visit to Gethsemani Abbey in late February 1962, Day learned of alleged misuse of her newspaper's printing machinery by that contingent. She promptly expelled them from the community by locking them – and through his association with them, Jim – from their apartment. When Day reported her side of the kerfuffle to Merton, he responded sharing

his sympathy for her "interminable troubles with the well meaning young men" who volunteered there and pointedly added: "I was glad to meet Jim Forest who seemed to me to be exceptional."¹²

Then in November 1965, Catholic Worker volunteer Roger LaPorte self-immolated in front of the United Nations building in protest of the Vietnam War, and he later died. Merton felt the Catholic Worker community and the CPF had become too entangled in a broader movement that he feared implicitly inspired or sanctioned such "unchristian" actions. Feeling pressure from recent criticism for his influence among those activists, Merton resigned as a CPF sponsor. Forest as a key CPF leader worked hard with other New York activists to convince Merton otherwise. He wrote Merton to explain what had transpired, assure LaPorte's lack of consultation with anyone at the CPF or the Catholic Worker, demonstrate the value of the CPF's work, and ask Merton to reconsider his resignation. Forest's letter is a masterly example of patient, candid, clear reasoning that resisted reaction and greatly served to ease Merton's anxieties. It was a gesture of friendship, taking into account Merton's uninformed isolation, as well as a demonstration of CPF leadership.

Merton agonized for weeks over the situation, but eventually agreed to terms that would permit him to remain a CPF sponsor. In journal entries that processed his deliberation, Merton's core faith in Forest's integrity comes through. In November he commented: "I don't want to quarrel with them and Jim Forest at least is an excellent and competent person."¹³ Another undated entry from that time (probably written in late November or early December) reviewed his interactions over the incident and added: "I trust Jim Forest to respond intelligently anyway" (*DWL* 341); and in the midst of this, on December 4, he also wrote to John Heidbrink of the FOR that "I have always accepted Jim as a person of unusual integrity and promise" (*HGL* 425). Soon after he resolved that tension, Merton wrote to Ping Ferry in January 1966: "As to Jim Forest, I think he is a most promising person and I have great affection for him. I think he will do a great job" (*HGL* 225).

Merton expressed his faith in Forest during yet another point of tension with Dorothy Day in 1967. At the time, Jim's first marriage had disintegrated and he had begun a new relationship – a move of which Day thoroughly disapproved, and she threatened to withdraw *her* sponsorship of the CPF. In response to Jim's request for counsel, Merton advised that "If [resigning] means the collapse of the CPF, which it well might, then you should not do so," even if it meant the loss of Day's support (*HGL* 302).

Over these years, Jim's letters to Merton were often lengthy, newsy reports on events in his life or in the peace groups they both supported. They might also include updates on mutual friends, and they invariably referenced clippings and other material Jim had been collecting to share with Merton. They suggest that Merton relied on Forest as a key source of information on current events. His 1964 letters, for example, provided Merton with detailed observations about the expanding conflict in Vietnam, which Jim was watching closely well before intensified US involvement and its draft expansion caught the public's sustained attention in 1965. He also reported on increasing urban racial tensions that year, and provided Merton with a reflective account of an FOR tour of European churches, East and West, in which he participated. Jim's responses to Merton's 1962 censure against writing on war and peace are also quite interesting. He assured Merton that his impact had already been significant and had inspired considerable reflection on the topic among Catholics, lay and clerical alike. Jim also suggested that Merton write under a pseudonym, which he did on one occasion under the name "Benedict Monk."¹⁴ (This was not an entirely new idea for

Merton, though; even prior to censure, Merton had sent a letter to the editor of *Jubilee* magazine signed "Marco J. Frisbee."¹⁵)

Merton's letters to Jim, on the other hand, are especially valuable in documenting Merton's ideals for social movements and his resistance to their pitfalls. These exchanges in their first year or two of friendship capture Merton's efforts to grapple with how best to challenge the era's proliferation of nuclear weaponry. In fact five letters to Forest from this period appear in his collection of "Cold War Letters,"¹⁶ more letters than to any other individual. He conveyed support for the fledgling effort to establish a U.S. Catholic PAX organization, and he described the broader peace movement as having "a great potentiality" while still considering it "terribly superficial" (*HGL* 270). These letters to Forest show his priority for cultivating personal and collective conscience and his concern that those opposing nuclear weaponry not simply relinquish that conscience to compulsions driven by myths and causes that can animate movement activism. He counseled "deep and patient compassion" for the fears people hold and the urgency to inspire a "totally new outlook on the world" (*HGL* 272).

Along these lines, Merton reported to Jim on a 1962 book he had recently read about conscientious objection written by two French Dominicans, Pie-Raymond Régamey and Jean Yves Jolif.¹⁷ He considered the topic "one of the most cardinal moral issues of our time, one on which the witness of the Church will depend." He also denounced the tendency of clergy to "tell the laity they are obliged to fight because the Pentagon or Time magazine says so" as a "handing over of the Christian conscience" to secular power (*HGL* 271-72). Merton's emphasis on conscience, meeting people where they are, and seeking change through dialogue in these early letters laid groundwork for the counsel and guidance he later offered as Forest assumed his CPF leadership role.

Another key period in their correspondence came in late 1965 surrounding the LaPorte affair. After Merton's initial reaction of withdrawal as CPF sponsor and Jim's request that he not do so, Merton wrote a string of letters to Forest that collectively provide an outline of Merton's maturing philosophy toward peace activism. In them he reached a compromise in which the CPF would distribute a written statement by Merton to clarify that he had withdrawn as a hermit and was not actively involved in the decisions or actions of the CPF, though he remained a sponsor. It also expressed his wish to support the CPF's pastoral work, and he offered general moral support for Catholic actions that reflect church teaching. Jim distributed the statement with a CPF cover letter that publically affirmed all that Merton's statement had expressed. Upon receiving word of the distribution, Merton wrote in his journal that "The business with Jim Forest and the Catholic Peace Fellowship is settled charitably. . . . These are authentic Christians" (*DWL* 328).

This public setting of boundaries with Catholic activism did not curtail Merton's personal support for Jim's work. In the three letters that follow the release of his statement, Merton offers comprehensive counsel to Jim in his peace activism. The first two letters set down Merton's vision for the CPF as a pastoral Catholic organization, favoring the "massive and undramatic apostolic work to clarify the Church teaching" over a more "dramatic and provocative type of witness." He specially emphasized the principles of "personalism and the unity of the human family" taught within the Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*HGL* 291-92). The third of these letters to Forest would become Merton's most famous, his "Letter to a Young Activist" which personally encouraged Jim in a time of discouragement. In it he famously advised not to "depend on the hope of results" or the American "myth of getting results," and to

“be free from the need to prove yourself.” Instead, Merton encouraged placing hope in “the truth of the work itself” and “in God who is making something good out of it in some way we cannot see” (HGL 294-97).

Their correspondence continued into the late summer of 1968, shortly before Merton left for Asia. Merton expounded on his vision for CPF at least once more in a February 1967 letter, but most of their remaining correspondence attended to personal matters or the mechanics of publishing things Merton wrote or the exchange of news articles or comments on matters and events of mutual interest. Merton dedicated his 1968 book *Faith and Violence* to Jim and Philip Berrigan.

Their letters show the give and take of a friendship which sought to meet one another where they were and offer support and candor when needed. Beyond simple camaraderie and affection, their relationship proved invaluable to the work of both. Jim Forest provided a crucial window for Merton into both the inner workings of the peace movement and current events unfolding beyond his monastery. Merton repaid this flow of perspective with providing various articles for publication in the various periodicals and organizations for which Jim worked. He also lent Jim – and through Jim, the Catholic peace community as a whole – the voice and considerable credibility of a well-respected spiritual leader in the Church.

As the Vietnam War intensified, Jim’s role within the FOR expanded beyond the CPF and he assumed leadership in its program to aid war refugees. Jim also joined the era’s third major draft board raid to protest the war and its draft when he was arrested on September 24, 1968 as one of the Milwaukee 14. He was handed a two-year sentence and paroled after thirteen months of incarceration. In years that followed, Jim would serve as editor of FOR’s *Fellowship* magazine before moving to the Netherlands in 1977. There he headed the International FOR for twelve years, and then held the job of preparing material for the Peace Media Service publication. During these years Jim authored numerous books (his website lists nineteen) which addressed various spiritual, peace and Eastern Orthodox Church topics. This includes a number of children’s books. Given Jim’s love of the Russian Orthodox Church and his labors for the Orthodox Peace Fellowship, he surely would have been crushed by that Church’s support for Russia’s Ukrainian invasion had he lived to see it.

Jim closed his memoir reflecting on his many mentors and a question Thich Nhat Hanh once posed to him, asking “Who is Jim Forest?” He observed that “Whoever God had in mind in calling me into existence, it was not a mish-mash of others, however admirable. . . . I had to discover my own true face” (Forest, *Writing* 317). Though he described that as a work in progress, one suspects he surely succeeded. Within all that Jim has left for us to remember him by, we can see the fruit of a rich and varied life that embraced risk and change, one that sought integrity in all its facets – work, personal, political, spiritual. We will miss his voice.



**Jim Forest with the “Bellarmino Merton”
– sculpture by David Kocka**

1. Gordon Oyer, *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest: Merton, Berrigan, Yoder, and Muste at the Gethsemani Abbey Peacemakers Retreat* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014).
2. Jim Forest, *All Is Grace: A Biography of Dorothy Day* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011).
3. Jim Forest, *The Root of War Is Fear: Thomas Merton's Advice to Peacemakers* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2016); subsequent references will be cited as "Forest, *Root*" parenthetically in the text.
4. Jim Forest, *At Play in the Lions' Den: A Biography and Memoir of Daniel Berrigan* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2017).
5. Jim Forest, *Writing Straight with Crooked Lines: A Memoir* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2020); subsequent references will be cited as "Forest, *Writing*" parenthetically in the text.
6. Jim Forest, *Eyes of Compassion: Learning from Thich Nhat Hanh* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2021).
7. Jim appears on *The Catholic Worker* masthead from November 1961 through February 1962, though his work on the paper began as early as July 1961.
8. Jim Forest, *Living with Wisdom: A Life of Thomas Merton*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), first published by Orbis in 1991 and itself a revised and expanded version of *Thomas Merton: A Pictorial Biography* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980).
9. See the chronological list of his writings on Merton below.
10. See the complete list of extant correspondence at: <http://merton.org/Research/Correspondence/y1.aspx?id=668>.
11. Gordon Oyer, *Signs of Hope: Thomas Merton's Letters on Peace, Race, and Ecology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2021).
12. March 21, 1962 letter to Dorothy Day, in Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 143; subsequent references will be cited as "HGL" parenthetically in the text.
13. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 318 [11/21/1965]; subsequent references will be cited as "DWL" parenthetically in the text.
14. Merton published his review of Ignace Lepp, *The Christian Failure* under this pseudonym in *The Catholic Worker* 29 (January 1963) 5-8.
15. This February 1962 letter to the editor (Edward Rice) of *Jubilee Magazine* was not published at the time and appears for the first time as the Appendix in Forest, *Root* (213-15).
16. Thomas Merton, *Cold War Letters*, ed. Christine M. Bochen and William H. Shannon (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006) 58-60, 69-70, 121-23, 132-34, 177-78 (## 25, 31, 61, 69, 101).
17. Pie-Raymond Régamey and Jean Yves Jolif, *Face à la Violence: Pour un Statut des Objecteurs de Conscience* [*Facing Violence: For a Statute of Conscientious Objectors*] (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1962) [note: in *Signs of Hope* this book was misidentified as Régamey's *Non-Violence and the Christian Conscience* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1966), for which Merton wrote a Preface (7-14), subsequently included in Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 30-39].