

Signs of Hope: Thomas Merton's Letters on Peace, Race, and Ecology

By Gordon Oyer

Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2021. 275 pages.

Numerous books about the Trappist monk Thomas Merton continue to be published every year, but few intersect as clearly and sharply with contemporary challenges as Gordon Oyer's work *Signs of Hope*. Among Merton's 2,100 correspondents from around the world were poets, protesters, musicians and religious and public figures of various paths and priorities. Portions of his 20,000 letters have been presented in other volumes, notably William Apel's *Signs of Peace, The Courage for Truth* (edited by Christine Bochen), and *A Life in Letters: The Essential Collection* (edited by William Shannon and Bochen).

The sheer quantity of letters is stunning given that in Merton's first four years as a monk he was limited by the Abbot to four letters per year. He made up for lost time in the remaining twenty-three years at Gethsemani. Oyer's choice of letters in this volume reflects a trend across the Merton collection of including, in some cases exchanges that were limited to a few or even a single letter, alongside other more extensive correspondences which Merton built and sustained relationships over the course of several years.

While other letters and his extensive collection of journals focus are introspective, the letters in this collection focus on the relationship of the spiritual life to issues of war, race, and the environment. The recipients of these letters were involved in advocacy movements for social change. Merton spoke to the context of the time, which was mostly the 1960s. His perspective was limited not just by being cloistered, but he often was censored as well. Merton did not speak perfectly to these three issues, but these letters remind us that he frequently anticipated dimensions of those three issues that did not get fully framed or appreciated more broadly until much later.

Each section provides an introduction of the correspondent, the context and manner in which their relationship developed, at least one sample letter, and when possible and known, reflections on the spirit in

which the letter from Merton was received. Dorothy Day, for instance, challenged Merton, as did others, on several issues. Their correspondence included more letters than most, in part because Dorothy Day was also a prolific letter-writer. Merton's replies reveal that, in most cases, he was reconsidering his position on an issue, though occasionally it's clear he either let an issue drop or chose to focus on something he considered more pressing.

The three sections reflect the subtitle of the volume. Part One, entitled "Advocating A Catholic Gospel of Peace," features four correspondents with deep connections to each other, primarily through the work of Dorothy Day and the growing theological and social movement driven by nonviolence. While Daniel Berrigan was being branded a radical revolutionary, which was not totally without merit, his exchange with Merton shows a depth of discernment and measured speech that might have surprised his critics.

The second section, "Reaching Across the Racial Divide," includes letters like Merton's 1963 congratulatory note to Marlon Green, who became a commercial airline pilot after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in his favor that he had been the victim of employment discrimination based on race. Interestingly, it was Green who reached out to Merton first, even though Merton had not yet published his first book on race. Other recipients of Merton's letters in this section include Catholic priest August Thompson of Louisiana, the well-known historian Vincent Harding, and a musician named Robert Williams, who asked Merton to write a series of poems that he would use as song lyrics.

The third section, "Re-Visioning A Fragmented World," is significantly shorter and doesn't hold together thematically as tightly as the first two sections. And yet, the correspondences speak to communicating well across difference, propaganda that masquerades as the truth, the need for an ecological consciousness, and the growing challenges with technology. For example, Merton expressed to Rosemary Radford Ruether in a 1967 letter his concern that, while technology is not itself evil, the lack of critical assessment about technology may lead to it becoming a disastrous weapon against humanity and creation.

This book deserves attention well beyond those directly involved in Merton studies. It is exceptionally well researched and written. War, race, and creation care continue to call for thoughtful, hopeful attention. And while today it seems rather quaint to seek a transformed society through letters, as Oyer puts it, this collection reminds us of the

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conversations among serious people about serious topics that are worth highlighting even now.

William B. Kincaid
Christian Theological Seminary

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