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**Beyond Merton: Catholic Relief Services, Caritas Internationalis and Catholic
Peacebuilding Network as “Practical Peacebuilders”**

by Fr. William Headley

Abstract: Merton’s major peacebuilding contribution was arguably a new ethic for nonviolence. He also called for strategies that put this nonviolence into action, claiming that this was beyond him. Catholic Relief Services, nurtured by this new ethic, shaken by the Rwanda genocide and now engaged worldwide with local partners is forging an applied, “practical” peacebuilding. Affiliated networks had their own awakenings and now engage in this common task.

Introduction

It is breathtaking to return to the life and work of Thomas Merton after some absence, as I am, and to rediscover the range and depth of his work and influence. Merton himself and commentators after him have divided his writings into three periods. ¹

This presentation will be grounded in the third period beginning in 1959, when he increasingly turned his attention to contemporary social issues. Of particular interest for this discussion will be his reflections on wars: Nuclear, Cold and Vietnam.

It was during this third period (1959-68) that Merton did the majority of his writing on peace. Allow one important caveat: I will not hold myself rigidly to drawing from only Merton’s third, “social issues” period. I will range more freely over his writings. If this seems undisciplined, I must blame Merton’s freer style. Unlike that most systematic and formidable of Jesuit theologians, the Rev. John C. Murray, who was a contemporary sparring partner, Merton’s style was effusive, literary and poetic, defying containment within any given “period.”

Merton-as-Peacemaker stood at a crossroads. He attempted to assess the Catholic tradition on war and peace in three areas: Just war, pacifism and nonviolence. One scholar commented that, “He was not the only or even the first Catholic writer to take up the cause of nonviolence as the Christian alternative to war, but he did succeed better than any other in bringing it to the attention of an American Catholic audience....” ²

I will focus on what I take to be one of his most significant contributions: how his writing and actions on nonviolence opened the door to applied or practical peacebuilding. Peacebuilding is understood here to be “the long-term project of building peaceful, stable communities and societies.” ³ This corresponds generally to what Merton called peacemaking.

In addition, I will argue that there is at least one important consequence of his contribution to the praxis of peacebuilding: Other groups, organizations and individuals rooted in the Catholic tradition and nurtured on the emerging new peace ethos in the church have been emboldened by his practical, active expressions of peacebuilding to “try it themselves.” As a result, the practical

application of Catholic peacebuilding has moved far beyond what he knew or envisioned. Even the briefest survey of these initiatives would be far more than present time or space allow. I have chosen, instead, to focus on three concrete, interconnected examples: Catholic Relief Services (CRS), Caritas Internationalis and the Catholic Peacebuilding Network.

My lead organization will be CRS. I have chosen it not only because I am familiar with the agency and, therefore, it is a convenient example. (Nor, have I chosen it only because they paid my way to this stunningly beautiful city.) As the official arm of the Catholic Church in the United States reaching to people in need across the globe, CRS offers a good institutional vantage point from which to take a reading of how both the theology of peace and its practice have developed in the real life of the world church.

The Practice of Making Peace according to Merton

The treatment of peace in the new Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church is a scant 13 footnote-laden pages long.⁴ It is, perhaps, the footnotes gleaned from the Scriptures and papal documents spanning slightly more than 100 years that best tells the story of the church's rich reflection on peace in recent times. What caused such reflection and where does Merton fit into it?

"Many complex, interactive factors," comes the quick answer to the question about cause.⁵ There are the factors that have been played out in the world-at-large: Two world wars; a Cold War; technological developments that led to real and feared nuclear horrors; and domestic as well as international movements toward freedom. If we add a specific war, Vietnam, we have pretty much built the world stage observed and addressed in Merton's war and peace writings.

Today, adjustments need to be made in the line-up. The proliferation of actual and suspected nuclear nations continues, while the U.S. Administration, "...Has signaled that it is committed to keeping the U.S. nuclear arsenal as a mainstay of its military power."⁶ Real and threatened armed battles that need to be added from our times include: terrorism; two more wars for the U.S. with a preemptive twist; intra- and failed- state battles; genocides; and smaller, ugly identity and pseudo-identity conflicts. In summary, the threat of a big, nuclear war continues with more national actors playing, while variations of smaller, "hot" wars proliferate.

There were, also, factors within the church. The centerpiece was, of course, Vatican II. No single locus, however, can be pointed to as the trigger to what one authority, referring to this ferment of Catholic thought and action on peace that swirled around the Council, called the "New Catholicism."⁷

A hallmark of this new thinking on peace was the growth of a genuine pacifist alternative within Catholicism.⁸ One rushes to add an important qualifier. Pacifism was not, nor has it become in the years since Merton, the dominant perspective. That privileged place in the Catholic repertoire of thinking about war and peace still belong to Just War Theory. What the inclusion of pacifism has done is focus, as never before, renewed attention on nonviolence.⁹ The U.S. Catholic bishops

nearly two decades later would echo this theme by both permitting and respectfully praising nonviolent conflict resolution. ¹⁰

Merton's major peacebuilding contribution was his effort to integrate Gandhian nonviolence into the Catholic theology of peace. ¹¹ In doing this, he moved from an exclusive focus on the theology (theory) of peace to its praxis (practice). As one of the most notable and influential modern church writers on peace, Merton's writing and actions had the cumulative effect of providing a rationale for peacebuilding and giving "permission" for Catholic efforts at making peace to become eminently practical. The prevailing practical peacebuilding expressions of Merton's time were of a nonviolent resistance variety, a technique of action that employs non-cooperation and civil disobedience. ¹²

... We must repudiate a tactic of inert passivity that purely and simply leaves man defenseless, without any recourse whatever to any means of protecting himself, his rights, or Christian truth. We repeat again and again that the right, and truth, are to be defended by the most efficacious possible means, and that the most efficacious of all are precisely the nonviolent one, which have always been the only ones that have effected a really lasting moral change in society and in man.¹³

It would be dishonest to claim that Merton or any single Catholic writer/activist brought nonviolence into the American social arena. Passive resistance was "in the wind" at the time Merton wrote and it had a long, if uneven, history in America. During Merton's time, it was embodied in many forms of community organization. Post-World War II pacifists, for example, found these tactics most useful in dealing with injustice in American race relations, Civilian Public Service camps that provided alternative service for conscientious objectors, and prisons. The work of the Rev. Martin L. King, Jr., so greatly admired by Merton, showed the shining example of an implementer. King and the movement he gave rise to stand as the preeminent examples of Gandhian nonviolence applied to an American social context.

Still, the "New Catholicism" that rose up around Vatican II spawned its own Catholic expressions of nonviolent resistance: Molly Rush, Cesar Chavez, Cecil Roberts and Merton's long-time friend and collaborator, Dorothy Day and her Catholic Worker Movement come quickly to mind. When Catholic nonviolent resistance reached a feverish pitch with the self-immolation of the Catholic Worker, Roger LaPorte, Merton would write heatedly to Jim Forest and Daniel Berrigan, two prominent activists, declaring that the peace movement, Catholic style, was becoming "unchristian" and "a little pathological." ¹⁴

There is no question, however, that within the American Catholic community, Merton was a prime mover. His massive and articulate peace writings are too well known among you to be itemized here. He effectively got his thinking on nuclear war, pacifism and conscientious objectors onto the Vatican Council floor, if not fully into its documents. He associated with numerous peace-oriented groups and projects such as the Catholic Worker, Fellowship of Reconciliation, American PAX Association; as well as Peace Hostage Exchange, Golden Rule, Phoenix and Everyman. All these were peace initiatives. As Merton advanced through the third period of his writings and Vietnam loomed as the dragon to be slain, his analysis, explanations, exhortations and critiques were being tested by real life activists. Notes on the famous November

1964 retreat at Merton's monastery in Gethsemane, Ky. on the "Spiritual Roots of Protest" begin:

We are hoping to reflect together during these days on our common grounds for religious dissent and commitment in the face of the injustice and disorder of a world in which total war seems at times inevitable....¹⁵

Six of the men in attendance were later to be jailed for "crimes" of nonviolent resistance.

Despite all this evidence of at least quasi-activist engagement, Merton claimed, "practical strategizing was beyond him."¹⁶ And, yet, he strongly advocated the need for pastoral and educational work in the area of peace.¹⁷ I contend – and will argue in the remainder of this paper – that CRS and other Catholic institutions that reach out to the developing world have heard his call to praxis. Certainly, an account of common forms of nonviolent resistance used in our day would be interesting. I, however, want to reach beyond this one form of peacebuilding and discuss other expressions that have emerged, different than what Merton would have anticipated but very much in the spirit of his writing and practice. I will discuss three such interconnected groups: Catholic Relief Services, Caritas Internationalis and the Catholic Peacebuilding Network.

The Practice of Making Peace Beyond Merton

Catholic Relief Services

Our age of the church is not exempted from what every age must do: read the "signs of the times."¹⁸ This demand to listen to the Spirit as it moves among the events and people of a given time is as incumbent on each institution in the church as it is on the church as a whole. Catholic Relief Services is one such group that went through its own transformative experience and, as a result, took a radical turn toward being a peaceful institution with enormous rippling effect across the globe. Let me trace this journey ever so briefly.

CRS is no stranger to war. It came into existence because of conflict. The year was 1943. It was the end of World War II. (Merton was just entering the monastery in Kentucky.) The Catholic people of the United States wanted to aid war-ravaged Europe. CRS, then called the War Relief Service, was created in response.

Since then, armed conflict of various sorts – Biafra, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, Indonesia and Sri Lanka – have served as teachable moments in the life of this faith-based organization. Each conflict has had its lessons. No single war experience, however, so affected the direction of the agency, as did the genocide in Rwanda. CRS had been in Rwanda for more than 30 years serving the relief and development needs of its people. We saw the ethnic tensions, knew their origins and learned to work around them.

One dark day in April 1994, a modern genocide began, portrayed in the recent film, *Hotel Rwanda*. Before the killing stopped, 800,000 people were massacred. Our carefully cultivated

development programs were destroyed. Peace had not been part of the mission of CRS. It had not been part of what we did. We had competencies in agriculture, health, education and a number of other social service disciplines. These had been groomed over time as part of this Catholic agency's effort to do excellent development according to the secular standards of the time. And so, CRS did its development work and did it well. What we were not prepared to do was make peace. When the genocide occurred, CRS' projects were wiped out in days; many of the people we had served became the "well-fed dead."

After and partly because of the genocide, CRS took a hard look at itself. This introspection called us to realize that we could no longer just address the symptoms of conflict-stimulated crisis: burned out houses, food shortages and refugee movements. We also had to attack the systems and structures that underlie oppression and poverty. The agency's dominant ethos of being development professionals came under serious question.¹⁹

This soul-searching led us back to our Catholic roots, to a reexamination of Catholic Social Teaching. Reflecting recently on that period, Ken Hackett, CRS' president since 1992 commented in a recent presentation, "We rediscovered a jewel in our religious tradition... Catholic Social Teaching."²⁰

Today, peacebuilding is an agency-wide priority for CRS. We have 75 staff dedicated to this service. There is a team of regional advisors and a headquarters-based technical staff to work with partners. Presently, CRS has better than 100 peace projects in 50 countries. In 2003, we spent \$20 million on justice and peace activities. Each summer, CRS has training programs for our staff and overseas partners at the Mindanao Peace Institute (Philippines) and at University of Notre Dame's Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies. Quietly and steadily without much notice, an increasing number of bishops from developing countries have attended.

In the spring of 2004, aided by U.S. government funding, CRS brought a group of 21 Burundians, including bishops, priests, sisters and a range of lay leaders to the Baltimore area. They were offered three weeks of joint planning and preparation for practical peacebuilding back in Burundi. It was reasoned that in a predominantly Catholic country, where a decade-old conflict still smolders, the church with its array of institutions could play a critical role.

These calls to include bishops in training experiences, to assist national churches and to aid the development of peace institutes and centers has prompted us to think more seriously of an orientation for bishops in the practical skills of making peace. Presently, we are in the design phase of an orientation program for exposing African bishops to skills that will help them become practical peacebuilders.

But, our greatest experience is in a much more local, hands-on context. A few examples will help:

- Following the post-Christmas devastation of the tsunami, none of us needs a geography lesson on where Sri Lanka is located. Prior to these cataclysmic events, a long-standing conflict had been brought to an uneasy peace. The church, with members on both sides of the troubled divide, has established a National Peace Program. This is facilitated through 12 centers across Sri Lanka.

Some of the major CRS-assisted activities are: North/South exchange programs, peace education workshops, rallies and marches, language learning initiatives, peace camps, leadership training, publications of peace education manuals, etc.

- In El Salvador, more than 10 years after the peace accord that ended its civil war, violence is still pervasive. Part of it can be traced to gang members who have been deported from the U.S., who have recruited other Salvadoran youths to join their ranks. A CRS/El Salvador project just funded by the United States Institute of Peace will train and organize 90 high school youth between 16-18 years of age. We will deepen their skills in conflict transformation and restorative justice. They will be enabled to form youth groups. And, they will meet with police, municipal leadership and other institutional actors to develop policy initiatives, which touch on the lives of local young people.

Caritas Internationalis

CRS was not alone in hearing this wake-up call. Others in the international Catholic social service apostolate across the world were experiencing something similar. Collectively, it was prompting an enlargement of what the very practical, hands-on type of relief and development services did. Certainly, relief and development continued to be the cornerstone of their work. But, they began to see it through a new lens, one of justice and peace. This at once expanded and deepened their work.

This transition was formalized at the 1995 General Assembly of what is called Caritas Internationalis. Caritas is a federation of 154 Catholic member organizations with a General Secretariat in Rome and ties to the Vatican. Most Caritas services represent a single national church's charitable outreach to its own peoples, regardless of religion. More developed local churches, such as those in Europe and the U.S., aid the countries of the South in collaboration with their Caritas counter-parts in these nations.

Many of the member organizations of Caritas work with the poor and displaced in war zones or regions recovering from conflict. For them, achieving reconciliation between hostile communities is a daily challenge. When peace and reconciliation was chosen as a priority, ambitious plans were laid: setting up regional intervention teams, adding a peacebuilding specialist to emergency and disaster teams, training bishops, affecting greater networking among groups that are working on peace, etc. The earlier comments about CRS suggest that a number of these efforts are under way.

The Peace and Reconciliation Working Group established by Caritas produced two practical texts: *Working for Reconciliation* (1999) and *Peacebuilding: A Caritas Training Manual* (2002).²¹ The aim of these works is to help Caritas members in the everyday tasks of building peaceful communities. An international team with direct experience in conflict and post-conflict reconciliation wrote the booklets. Eight training programs have been held in different parts of the world. In many settings, these training sessions have been expanded into regional and national levels. Originally translated into three languages, sections of these peacebuilding tools have been

translated into more than one-half dozen additional languages. An Arabic edition of the Manual is forthcoming.

Catholic Peacebuilding Network

No one needs to remind an audience like this of the numerous Catholic-rooted peace groups working quietly and diligently on various aspects of the peace agenda e.g., Pace et Bene, Pax Christi, Saint Egidio Community, etc. There are numerous religious institutes that come quickly to mind: The networking conferences of male and female religious – The Leadership Conference of Women Religious and the Conference of Major Superiors of Men – as well as individual communities such as the Benedictines, Franciscans and Maryknoll. 22

One of the most recent outreach initiatives taking place in the U.S. is called the Catholic Peacebuilding Network (CPN). Established in 2002 and based at the University of Notre Dame 's Kroc Institute, CPN has as its mission the enhancement of communications and sharing of resources, including local knowledge and expertise among the thousands of people engaged in Catholic peacebuilding around the world. The founders include some of the “likely suspects:” The Kroc Institute, where the Network is based; Community of Saint Egidio; Pax Christi; CRS; Maryknoll; and individual members of the faculty/staff of Boston College, the Catholic University of America, the Irish School of Ecumenics and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Though the network is based in the U.S. and most of its members are citizens of this country, CPN wants to serve people caught in conflict the world over. In a May 2004 meeting at Notre Dame, there was an exchange between members of the network and representatives of Catholic peacebuilding efforts of the South. This conference featured a detailed examination of peace efforts by peace agents associated with the church in Colombia, Rwanda and the Philippines. In July 2005, a meeting will be held in the Philippines, attended by representatives from more than 10 countries and will focus on the specific, hands-on efforts at making peace in that sector of the Philippines where Muslim-Christian tensions run high.

A Conclusion...with a Challenge

CRS and the two networks – Caritas Internationalis and Catholic Peacebuilding Network – have taken up the Mertonian challenge to give nonviolence a try. His gift to a church, which wants to be a peace church in deed as well as creed, was to bring Gandhian nonviolence into the Catholic theology of peace. It has been left to our time to bring this beyond nonviolent resistance to a range of practical peacebuilding efforts. And, this is happening. When CRS – and the same could be said of other groups mentioned here – lists the forms of peacebuilding it undertakes, it needs a 15-tier category. The range of activities move across the entire spectrum of the conflict experience: From peacebuilding in education, through integration into various development projects to trauma healing.

And so, the next challenge is for you, those undertaking serious Merton scholarship. Help us with the praxis of peacebuilding. Let me make the point with a practical illustration.

I was delighted to be able to take down from the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University a listing of “Theses and Dissertations about Thomas Merton.” Somewhat thrilled, I thumbed through them, looking for peace work based on Merton’s third period.

In all, I estimated that there are approximately 260 scholarly studies. Perhaps, it is only a very skewed and select sampling. Allow another caveat: Because of language limitations, I could not read a few of the titles. And, I may have inadvertently undercounted the praxis works. Inflating the number by rounding them upwards to allow for mistakes and undercounting, I found no more than 25 studies on topics that even remotely touched on the praxis of peacebuilding. This represents less than 10 percent of the scholarly works on Merton dedicated to the study of practical peacebuilding. The message is, hopefully, clear for the next generation of scholars: teach us about practical peacebuilding.

If it is difficult to accept my challenge, take Merton’s own:

If this task of building a peaceful world is the most important task of our time, it is also the most difficult. It will, in fact, require far more discipline, more sacrifice, more planning, more thought, more cooperation and more heroism than ever war demanded. 23

The task of peacebuilding is not an easy one. But there is none more urgent.

Endnotes:

1 Patricia McNeal, *Harder than War: Catholic Peacemaking in Twentieth-Century America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992) 106.

2 Gordon Zahn, introduction to *The Nonviolent Alternative*, by Thomas Merton (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980) xxviii.

3 Caritas Internationalis, *Peacebuilding: A Caritas Training Manual* (Vatican City, 2002)

4 Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005) 213-226.

5 Stephen Lammers, “Peace,” in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Social Thought*, ed. Judith Dwyer (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1994) 717-721.

6 Robert McNamara, “Apocalypse Soon,” *Foreign Policy* (May/June 2005): 29.

7 Dorothy Day et al., “A New Catholicism,” in *Nonviolence in America: A Documentary History*, ed. by Staughton Lynd and Alice Lynd (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1995) 309-361.

8 Lammers, “Peace,” *The New Dictionary of Catholic Social Thought*, 720.

9 Second Vatican Council, “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World” [*Gaudium et Spes*] in *The Gospel of Peace and Justice*, ed. by Joseph Gremillion (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1975) 314, n. 78.

10 National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1983) 93-97.

11 Zahn, introduction to *The Nonviolent Alternative*, xii

12 “Non-cooperation is simply the refusal to cooperate with a requirement which is taken to violate fundamental ‘truths’ or refusal to cooperate with those responsible for such violations. Civil disobedience is the direct contravention of specific laws.” Joan Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence: The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California, 1969) 8-9.

13 Thomas Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004) 96.

14 Paul Elie, *The Life You Save May Be Your Own* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003) 203.

15 Merton, *The Nonviolent Alternative*, 259.

16 McNeal, *Harder than War*, 122.

17 Ibid.

18 Second Vatican Council, "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" in *The Gospel of Peace and Justice*, 246, n. 4.

19 Peter Steinfelds casts a wide net over a vast range of U.S.-based institutions, when speaking of identity crisis in the U.S. church. ["Catholic Institutions and Catholic Identity" in *A People Adrift* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2003) 103-161] He sees as the stimulant the events taking place both within and outside the church. Not surprisingly, the pedophilia scandal looms large in his analysis. In his study, he strikingly ignores the international outreach of the church in the states, including the institutions that affect it. CRS would be high on that list. Though not recorded by Steinfelds, the agency had its own identity crisis. A pivotal change was from CRS' understanding itself as a "professional relief and development agency" to a "faith-based organization that does professional relief and development." The Rwanda genocide occurred at a critical time when this radical reorientation was underway. How we came to think of our mission and ourselves came to include peacebuilding. It became a priority for CRS after its goal-setting World Summit in 2000.

20 Kenneth Hackett, "Building Solidarity: From Rwanda to the Asian Tsunami" (paper presented at the joint meeting of the Seattle Friends of CRS and the Seattle World Affairs Council, Seattle, Wash., May 2005) 2-3.

21 Both texts are published by Caritas Internationalis (Vatican City). Mailing address is Palazzo San Calisto 16, 00120 Vatican City. Web site is: www.caritas.org.

22 Some of these institutions have a very direct connection with Merton himself. Arguably, Pax Christi has a most immediate connection, as does CRS. When Merton was attempting to make his Vatican II intervention into the *Gaudium et Spes* document, Eileen Egan, who both worked for CRS and was a founding member of what became Pax Christi, was part of the lobbying team in Rome during relevant sessions of the council. McNeal, *Harder than War*, 98.

23 Thomas Merton, *On Peace* (London: Mowbrays, 1976) --.

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