Faith & Reason Honors Program

SENIOR THESIS

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“Christian holiness in our age means more than ever the awareness of our common responsibility to cooperate with the mysterious designs of God for the human race.”¹ Thomas Merton, born in 1915 in the Pyrenees Mountains, ² knew that the state of humanity in the twentieth century, as well as the state of Christianity, could not stand passively against the forces of society and change. A man who traversed the globe from his earliest days, Merton recognized the difficulties confronting the Christians of his time. He saw the necessity of Christian participation in the world and its problems and the importance for every human being to rise to all challenges while holding fast to one’s values. In his treatise Life and Holiness, however, Merton cautioned, “We must be careful not to confuse genuinely human values with the rather less than human values that come to be accepted in a disordered society.”³ This is precisely the issue at hand.

Thomas Merton spent decades writing on a virtually boundless range of topics that he rightly considered critical to citizens of his time. Merton lived through World War I, World War II, the Great Depression, the American Civil Rights Movement, and the Vietnam War, to name a few tremendously significant global and American events. He tackled issues that many seemed unwilling to address. His work shows an admirable depth and breadth of insight. However, the remarkable contribution of Merton’s work lies not only in his courage to confront these challenges vehemently and openly; his mastery is evident, rather, in the timeless and universal applicability of this work. This piece attempts to consider Merton’s most significant ideas, in their original context, before then applying them
to their late twentieth- and early twenty-first century counterparts. Of all Merton’s works, the following are those chosen as most relevant for comparison to contemporary sociological issues: the celibacy crisis of the priesthood, American Catholic youth education, war and peace, and technology and the immediacy of the oral culture. Merton wrote about all of these topics in the mid-1900s, but they remain ever relevant.

The opening discussion will be comprised of Merton’s concern for the condition of celibacy in the Catholic priesthood. Unfortunately, the omen that Merton addresses in his writings about priestly celibacy has become all too real to the American faith community. While many choose blindness to the fact that the overwhelming majority of Catholic priests remained faithful to their vows of Holy Orders, it is impossible to deny that the Church is currently grappling with a serious crisis. Even more unfortunate is that many people have chosen to use this blindness as an excuse to doubt the Church at large, lacking faith in those who are called to lead. This discussion is particularly difficult yet poignant for a national community of faith.

Second, Merton feared that the decline in enrollment or support for religious education could very detrimentally affect the future of American youth. Merton identified one cause as the dearth of religious vocations, which formerly served as the sole source of educators at Catholic educational institutions. One can very easily relate this concern to Merton’s foresight regarding the possible effects of a crisis in priestly celibacy. Merton spoke to the fact that Catholic parents assumed a
heavy burden of responsibility by choosing to withhold children from Catholic schools, making themselves the exclusive religious educators. Unfortunately, since Merton’s time, the condition has only worsened. The late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries have seen an even more drastic decline in support for the Catholic education system, a severe concern for those like Merton who saw the potential consequences for society.

Merton believed that the possible consequences included a crisis in morality among the future leaders of the world. He saw a direct connection between the drought in Catholic youth education and decisions made by American leaders; his ideas on religious education are very much connected to his stance on war and peace, which comprises the next section. He encouraged the positive interaction of the citizens of the world, and his thoughts on pacifism and its role in the twentieth century are inextricable from this encouragement. His ideas related primarily to the Vietnam War during his own lifetime; however, his thoughts ominously parallel the concerns of American citizens of the twenty-first century; this country and the world continue to cope with the effects of the attacks on New York City on September 11, 2001, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation Enduring Freedom. Merton understood that many people excused war by using it as a justification for deaths already caused by violent conflict; however, he never seemed to value this as a worthy rationalization. His opposition to the draft law connects to the fear of many American citizens that the government might reinstate the draft to outfit current operations.
Finally, Merton’s staunch pacifism and position on sociological factors regarding violent conflict certainly relate to the larger views he had about the ever-changing state of global communication and interaction; his ideas on technology and the oral culture are presented within the bounds of his own time then taken into consideration within the context of the turn of the century. Merton discussed in his works the challenges and benefits associated with the changing technological culture, both nationally and globally. He lived in a time during which society was beginning to see the tides turn in favor of technological development and global communication. However, the challenges and benefits that can now be associated with this technological culture have evolved with years. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, spoke on the issue years after Merton, and his words will be considered representative of the views of a new time in order to complement those of Merton’s time. Additionally, the dangers that now confront the immediate and ever-growing technological culture will be discussed, including virtual predators, perpetrators of other technologically-based criminal acts, as well as the potential for physical harm that has been caused by many of these advances.

The proceeding sections on the aforementioned topics will attempt to unite Thomas Merton’s writings under a single banner: universal applicability and timeless relevance. Everything which Merton discussed at length remains significant for the contemporary society of both the nation and the world. One must regret that Merton, whose life was cut short by a devastating electrocution, did not have the chance to shed light upon the conditions under which humans now live; it
seems, from the following discussion, that his thoughts could have been great help for the sociological state of humanity.

**Celibacy in the Priesthood**

According to the *New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia*, “Celibacy is the renunciation of marriage implicitly or explicitly made, for the more perfect observance of chastity, by all those who receive the Sacrament of Orders in any of the higher grades.”  

Within recent years, the Catholic Church in America has suffered a crisis unlike any in contemporary Church history. This crisis in the celibacy of the priesthood has unfortunately resulted in the loss of confidence of many American Catholics in the Church and its priests.

Thomas Merton addressed the celibacy of the Church priests in his writings. The impact of his thoughts does not end with the fact that they are still applicable in today’s situation, rather, that Merton spoke out about clerical celibacy decades before the crisis surfaced in this country. He believed that priests were not properly taught how to handle their vows of celibacy and that priests should actually have the option to marry. This stance on the issue is not unfamiliar to American Catholics following this crisis, however, it is still a widely debated one. His thoughts have been echoed by scholars and Catholics throughout these years of turmoil:

> Nobody has really told [priests] what celibacy is all about. The other part of this, which I think is perfectly true, is that celibacy should be optional for the secular clergy. Because there is just no reason why not. If a priest wants to stay celibate, fine, but if not, there’s no reason
why he shouldn’t be married, except for the historical reason that in the Latin Church it’s always been connected with a state of good discipline and ecumenicity.  

Merton recognized that these ideas were radical for the Church and that many people would force the issue of marriage on the priesthood. He did not see the value in compelling priests to marry, only in allowing them the option of choosing what might make them the best priests and representatives of Christ that they could be. He did not necessarily believe that all Catholic priests would rush right out and marry. However, he did believe that the choice of marriage would be effective for the small number of priests who might see that as the best option for themselves:

I think the program of married priests is symptomatic but not realistic. They’re speaking out about a real issue, but I don’t think the solution is for a lot of priests to get married. I think the solution is for priests to be able to get married if they want to, but I don’t think large numbers of them really want to. Many priests think they have to marry now because there’s a certain pressure to do that.

Very much connected to this idea of Merton’s that not all priests even want to marry was an article published in The New York Times, printed in 1994, decades after Merton’s death and amidst the exposure of the scandal in the Church. In this article, Andrew Greeley, author of “Priests: A Calling in Crisis,” argues the logic of many Americans that celibacy was responsible for the sexual deviancy of the accused priests. He cites that because only four percent of Catholic priests have been guilty of such crimes and abuses, it is illogical to accuse celibacy as the culprit. In reality, priests seem to be happier with their vocation than most people are with their chosen professions. According to a Los Angeles Times 2002 study that Greeley
references in the article, “93 percent of the more than 1,800 priests surveyed said that they would become priests if they had to choose their careers again.” With contentment such as this in one’s chosen vocation, knowing that celibacy is a chosen aspect of that vocation, Greeley does not believe that one can logically blame celibacy for this sexual crisis of such a small population of the priesthood. “Abusers,” Greeley said, “it seems clear, aren’t being driven to crime by celibacy but by their own demons.”

Merton spoke about the issue of priestly celibacy over fifty years ago, before the crisis with which America is so familiar today. He expressed the complexity of this issue; however, he acknowledged that whatever decision was to be made, something needed to change in the Church. He expressed dissatisfaction not only with the education of priests in their vows of celibacy but with the priesthood and the system of worship in the Church, as a whole:

I think the whole thing needs to be changed, the whole idea of the priesthood has to be changed. I think we need to develop a whole new style of worship in which there is no need for one hierarchical person to have a big central place, a form of worship in which everyone is involved.

These statements by Merton, made decades before the crisis truly surfaced, only grew in relevance as time passed. As Greeley cited, although only four percent of priests were guilty of such abuses, the scandals soiled the name of the priesthood. A shadow of doubt was cast over the institution of the priesthood and over the Church as a whole. Contemporary American Catholics must now take the responsibility, along with the Church, of reassessing the necessity of celibacy, the
roles of the priesthood, and the manner in which they respond to this historical institution.

According to Crescenzio Sepe, Titular Archbishop of Grado and Secretary of the Congregation for the Clergy, and his article, “The Relevance of Priestly Celibacy Today,” celibacy has just as much of a role in today’s Catholic priesthood as it ever has. However, he demands that Catholic reassess their own definitions and misconceptions about this vocational choice. He insists that a relief of the celibacy vow will not result in an influx of new vocations or a panacea to all priestly problems. Very much like Merton, Sepe does not believe that disbanding clerical celibacy will heal all transgressions among its members:

Celibacy cannot and should not be thought of in a merely negative sense or in reference to the purely natural aspect, according to which it is believed that, once the ‘obstacle’ or the ‘no’ to marriage has been removed, a ‘boom’ in priestly ordinations will be the immediate and natural result. 10

Sepe calls on Catholics to reanalyze their own interpretation of the celibacy of their priests and to expect realistic, not impossible, results of a decision that would change a two-millenia institution.

The importance of Sepe’s statements is far-reaching because the priests, nuns, and religious are not the only ones called to celibacy. In fact, all people, called to single life, married life, or a dedication to the priesthood or religious life, are called upon to live their vocations purely and celibately. Sepe proposes that Catholics reconsider a demand to rescind celibacy from the priestly vows, seeing as they would be attempting to excuse religious leaders from a standard to which they
should be holding themselves. Catholics should truly assess the effects of such a
decision on the institution of the priesthood, as well as the effects on widespread
Catholicism and those in the single or married life.

Sepe agrees with Merton’s belief that a root of the problem lies in the lack of
education for priests in their celibacy vow and how best to keep it faithfully:

The problems encountered in a correct training for chastity are, from
this point of view, the same ones as anyone encounters who aims to
attain full maturity of personality. The specific aspects of education,
both at seminary and in afterlife, to perfect chastity in priestly
celibacy are to be understood not on a merely anthropological terrain
but rather on that of grace, in the sphere of which celibacy is not ‘the’
problem but one among others, and is ‘contained’ within a symphonic
context of priestly training. Human maturation and religious
maturation ever go hand in hand and are mutually integrated. 11

Such a connection between human and religious maturation could prove very
helpful in a re-evaluation of priestly education. How may Catholics truly hold their
clergy accountable for something in which they were never completely educated?
According to both Merton and Sepe, the education of the clergy must evolve not to
fit the “times,” rather, to fit the human person as he is, both physical and spiritual.
Any ignorance of this physical and sexual nature is to deny a dimension that God
deliberately created in each man and woman. Sepe calls on Catholics and the
clergy to acknowledge and welcome this natural component and to teach it in
conjunction with the supernatural component:

The problem of celibacy comprehends both the natural component,
bound up with our sexual nature as the Creator has willed it, and the
supernatural component pertaining to the order of grace. Today above
all, we tend to emphasize the problems bound up with the first of
these elements, simply because hedonism has made us lose certain
authentic human values. 12
Sepe insists that Catholics release their misconceptions from the bonds of such “hedonism” so that they may focus not exclusively on this sexual nature. No education for the celibacy may be complete, Sepe believes, if it does not include both the physical and supernatural dimensions, as God originally intended for humanity. The bishop teaches that celibacy must be taught within the indispensable supernatural dimension of humanity and must not be excused as some culturally exclusive property. Sepe cites that this vow of celibacy came about from a historical basis and was instituted by those guided by the Holy Spirit, thus making it inherently spiritual:

If we are to understand the problem of the relevance of priestly celibacy, we must study it within its true dimension: that of the supernatural. To say that priestly celibacy *per se* is not a dogmatic datum must not be taken as meaning that it can be relegated to some ‘cultural context’ or other. For we have to bear in mind that neither the doctrine nor the life of the Church can be reduced to formally revealed truths and everything else be regarded as arbitrary. On the contrary, these things are to be regarded as the fruit of the guidance and assistance of the Holy Spirit, and part of the Church’s two-thousand-year-old tradition.\(^\text{13}\)

Pope Benedict XVI also offered his own opinion on the American scandal when he visited Washington in April 2008 for his first official visit to the United States. Of course, he expressed his discontent with the guilty priests, stating, “It’s difficult for me to understand how it was possible that priests betrayed in this way their mission to give healing, to give the love of God to these children.”\(^\text{14}\) He expressed his deep shame over the pedophilia of his own priests and made a very poignant statement, connected with both the crisis in the priesthood as well as the vocational
crisis, saying, “It is more important to have good priests than to have many priests.”

Thomas Merton confronted these same issues, calling on Catholics and the Church to reanalyze the priesthood and its vow of celibacy, identifying the situation as problematic half a century before the crisis truly surfaced into the global consciousness. Ironically, Merton’s statements went unnoticed, or unacknowledged, for too long, allowing the situation to worsen until it ultimately came to light.

Church officials who express their own discontent attempt to explain the source of these transgressions, acknowledging that “the public’s confidence has been shaken by the scandals.” Additionally, these officials and vocational directors, as well as the Pope, are aware that these scandals are a factor in the devastating decrease of vocations. According to these officials, “An increasingly secular and materialistic culture, reluctance among the young to accept lifelong celibacy, and anger over the church’s handling of sexual abuse scandals have all contributed to the precipitous drop.” This blame on the materialistic culture identifies yet another contemporary issue with which the Church must grapple, which will be addressed later. The two-thousand-year-old institution of Christianity must tackle the onslaught of technological and informational advances that may challenge the traditions of the Church.

*Catholic Youth Education in America*

Unfortunately, this decrease in vocations affects more than just faith and parish life within the Church. Although Pope Benedict XVI saw the value in
“quality” over “quantity,” quantity is still important. The Catholic education system in America is suffering for many reasons, just one being that same shortage of nuns, priests, and religious, who in past years were solely responsible for administering education to young Catholics, and Merton saw this problem decades ago. In particular, he was overwhelmed at the thought of the responsibility Catholic parents take on if they decide not to send their children to Catholic school. Merton knew that non-Catholics may not understand how important it is to Catholics to be instructed in their faith beginning early in life and that a misconception exists that the Church uses Catholic educations as a means of increasing its already fantastic wealth:

Is it any wonder that there can be no peace in a world where everything possible is done to guarantee that the youth of every nation will grow up absolutely without moral and religious discipline, and without the shadow of an interior life, or of that spirituality and charity and faith which alone can safeguard the treaties and agreements made by governments? And Catholics, thousands of Catholics everywhere, have the consummate audacity to weep and complain because God does not hear their prayers for peace, when they have neglected not only His will, but the ordinary dictates of natural reason and prudence, and let their children grow up according to the standards of a civilization of hyenas.¹⁸

Merton lived during a time when the crisis was that of Catholic parents not sending their children to parochial schools. Now, however, that crisis has evolved to include the closing of many Catholic schools altogether, leaving parents even without the choice to send their children.

In 1884, the American Catholic bishops set the goal to place “every Catholic child in a Catholic school.”¹⁹ Unfortunately, this goal has never quite been met.
However, at the end of Merton’s life, American Catholic schools were still flourishing, whether or not all Catholic parents were sending their children to them. In 1965, “the church’s network of parochial schools numbered more than 12,000 in the United States,” many of which were opened at the turn of the century at the command of Catholic bishops to build one in every parish. Even though the bishops had not reached their goal, according to the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA), about half of all American Catholic children attended a parochial elementary school.

That figure has since dropped to only 15 percent of American Catholic children attending Catholic school. Even more disheartening is the population of Latino-American Catholic children, part of the fastest-growing church group and “soon to comprise a majority of Catholics in the United States,” only 3 percent of whom attend Catholic school. President George W. Bush identified the crisis that inner-city faith-based schools, in particular, are facing. According to the NCEA, “nearly 1,200 of these schools closed between 2000 and 2008, displacing over 400,000 students.” As these schools close, more and more students are sent out of the schools. In the last 40 years, “enrollment in the nation’s Catholic schools has steadily dropped by more than half from its peak of five million.”

This crisis is farther reaching, however, than just the American Catholic community. According to Paul Vitello and Winnie Hu of *The New York Times*, recent studies have identified the declining number of parochial schools as a crisis “not just for Catholics but for society.” Particularly knowing that 97 percent of
American Catholic high school graduates go on to attend college, this decline could be very damaging to the American youth. Especially in the impoverished urban neighborhoods of this country, those which President Bush noted were facing this crisis, “the losses have already been deeply felt.” The poor and minority students in these neighborhoods seek in parochial schools “havens of safety and order from troubled public schools.” So many of these students do so, in fact, that about “20 percent of parochial school students are not Catholic.”

Parents, administrators, and experts alike cite multiple reasons for the dwindling presence of American Catholic schools over the past few decades. First of all, many people believe that recent demographic changes are largely responsible for the change. In general, populations have moved away from cities, toward the suburbs and rural areas, to escape the danger and higher expenses of city living. As these populations move out of urban areas, there are simply fewer families in these city neighborhoods to send their children to parochial schools.

These demographic changes lead directly to another frequently cited cause: financial struggle. Many families are no longer financially able to support the schools; both parents and education professionals note rising tuition as a major factor. Behind this obvious financial struggle, however, lies an added one. Not only can families no longer support the schools, but “neither can the local parish, which has been the traditional model for Catholic elementary schools.” Especially amidst America’s current economic struggle, people do not have the income to pay
tuition bills, and those in the parish without children cannot afford to contribute to parish collections as generously as in the past.

According to Vitello and Hu, many of the proposals to aid in the crisis of the American parochial school system are based on “broadening the base of financial support.” They want to search for new and untapped sources of backing to keep remaining schools from going under. Some are looking beyond the parish level to reach all Catholics in the diocese, while others seek additional aid from those wealthy and generous enough to give it. Some plans are seeking to merely get more children in the schools, whether they are Catholic or not. However, some feel that this takes away from the essence of the tradition of the parochial school:

But it is that small community of family and friends that Catholics cite as the heart of the parochial school experience: looking around in church on Sunday and seeing one’s classmates, or knowing the names of the solemn young altar servers at the funeral Mass of one’s parent. It is the parochial in the parochial school.

Merton clearly believed that all Catholic children should be in a Catholic school. Unfortunately, if he had been alive to see what the system has become, he would have been tackling an entirely new crisis. His belief in the necessity of Catholic schooling for children of the faith is part of that same tradition that people feel through their involvement in both parish and school life. By immersing children in the life of faith as early as possible, parents give not only their children a monumental advantage, but they also relieve themselves of exclusive responsibility for the religious education of their children. Especially in Merton’s time, when priests and religious were still an indispensable part of Catholic school
life, parents entrusted their children not only to Catholic educators but to the same men and women they respected for having dedicated their lives to God.

Unfortunately, this is no longer true of the American Catholic school system. “In 1967, 58 percent of the teachers in urban Catholic schools were nuns, priests, or brothers. Today, they comprise barely 4 percent. Lay teachers make up 96 percent of all Catholic school teachers.”34 These religious are experiencing a true crisis of their own, dwindling drastically in number over recent years. This “shortage of nuns and priests who once ran the schools at no extra cost and have been replaced by lay staff with pension benefits”35 unfortunately presents a compounding financial difficulty that has much more extensive effects for American society as a whole.

**War and Peace**

While Merton diagnosed the problem of the drought in Catholic youth education, he also saw the far-reaching effects of the issue, which did not stop at the Catholic schools. He was concerned that American Catholic parents who chose not to send their children to Catholic schools would be responsible for releasing into the world future adults who would not have the strong moral basis necessary to tackle global issues of goodness. Merton feared that the American “civilization of hyenas” would only be able to expect so much of people who were not properly educated in the faith when they were children. These children would be the ones making the decisions for the world in the future, and Merton’s fervent pacifistic
side instantly saw this as a problem. Merton was firmly against war and began his most ardent writings on non-violence during the Vietnam War. As United States military involvement increased in Vietnam, discontent and disapproval grew, as well. Merton tackled the ideas Americans had of this conflict, challenging the nature of war itself, particularly one in which many citizens thought we did not belong.

Merton offered a very poignant statement on the Vietnam War and other conflicts of the twentieth century. It struck him “that a lot of the wars we have now are wars that somebody has started to prove that we ought to have a war, to prove that war is necessary.”36 One can conclude from this statement that Merton believed America joined the conflict to justify violence as a necessity in defending American people and ideals, as if it was the only way to do so. He believed that such heavy military participation resulted from a kind of guilt. If America sent men to Vietnam who were eventually killed, its leaders felt responsible to avenge those first lives by sending more men. As more men died, more were sent, and a vicious cycle of violence continued.

Of course, Merton’s identification of this guilt did not excuse in his mind the increased American military participation. Rather, he thought that the draft law was “absolutely wrong.” 37 He did not see any benefit to the United States for participating in the Vietnam War, let alone the value in drafting American men to fight in a war of such controversy. United States military involvement began with the bombing of military targets in North Vietnam in 1964. When the Marines
landed overseas as the first ground-force units in Vietnam in 1965, they brought the total U.S. military numbers to 27,000. After repeated attempts at peace talks, President Lyndon B. Johnson announced further increases in American forces. By 1969, the year after Merton’s death, “U.S. military strength in South Vietnam had peaked at over 541,000.” In such a rapidly growing conflict, Merton’s condemnation of the draft law can certainly be understood, and he was not alone. By 1972, “an estimated 70,000 draft evaders and ‘dodgers’ were living in Canada.”

The previous decades had also been dominated by the expansion and development of nuclear weapons. Merton lived with other Americans through years of enduring the threat and fear of nuclear war. After the American monopoly on atomic weapons ended in 1949, the United States and Soviet Union spent the next decade developing the hydrogen bomb, intercontinental ballistic missiles, and sophisticated control systems. The Operation Alert program of the Federal Civil Defense Administration initiated the use of evacuation plans, radio alert systems, warning sirens, school air-raid drills, and films on how to survive a nuclear attack. In May 1961, President John F. Kennedy appeared on television to urge a national shelter program. Ultimately, the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 left the United States feeling more wary than ever of potential nuclear attack, after a frightening week involving a blockade on Cuba and negotiations with Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev to dismantle and remove missiles that had been placed in Cuba.
According to “From Activism to Apathy: The American People and Nuclear Weapons, 1963-1980” by Paul Boyer, American cultural and intellectual historian, this period of preoccupation and fear of nuclear war, ending in 1963, surfaced at all cultural levels,” and Boyer specifically cites Thomas Merton’s meditations as manifestations of this fear. 

Amazingly, Merton’s quest for peace at home and abroad outlasted the country’s concern for the same. As Boyer states, 64 percent of Americans listed war, particularly nuclear war, as the nation’s most urgent problem in 1959. However, that percentage of concerned Americans had dropped to 16 by 1965, soon to be gone from the list completely. Interestingly enough, the United States performed more nuclear testing in these last five years of Thomas Merton’s life than in the five previous years, “some tests involving weapons fifty times the size of the Hiroshima bomb.” Unfortunately, Merton’s meditations on peace, as well as other movements espousing non-violence, were no longer the focus of concern, even in this continued period of profoundly destructive weapon development.

In 1965, political theorist Werner Levi addressed morality in political relations in his article “The Relative Irrelevance of Moral Norms in International Politics.” Levi’s points offer an interesting take on the same opinions Merton had on war, but from a political rather than religious perspective. According to Levi, “An analysis of decision-making in foreign policy and of the nature and function of moral norms leads to the conclusion that morality has little effect upon international politics.” He believed that the nation’s protection often took priority
over the moral justification for military and political action. Levi hoped that a movement emphasizing common values between countries, rather than common morals, would aid in preventing violent international conflict. Furthermore, he stated in this article that the “interpretability, flexibility, and selectivity of moral norms and moral systems makes it possible to find a moral justification for almost any national behavior.” It is at this point that Levi’s and Merton’s ideas deviate.

Merton did see the usefulness in fostering common morals between people and nations. Particularly, he thought that very frequently, the root of violent conflict lay in the lack of faith and spirituality incorporated into public life. Merton stated of pacifism, “The point of non-violence is to make other persons see that something is as true for them as for you. Others have to be able to see and agree, from what you are doing, that there is a higher truth which is better than what they’re committed to.” In order to live in a peaceful world, Merton believed that God was a necessity. By including God and morality in the discussion on international political and military activity, he saw the possibility for peace and non-violent resolution of human conflict.

Unlike Levi, Merton clearly found value and potential for change in commonly held morals, originating first in the individual and then shared openly and publicly in conversations to end the movement of violence as the only successful road to peace. According to the Merton Institute for Contemplative Living website,

At the core of Thomas Merton’s spiritual writings is the search for the “true self” and our need for relationship with God, other people and all of creation. He finds that when we are apart from God we experience alienation and desolation. He concludes that we must discover God as
the center of our being to which all things tend and to whom all of our activity must be directed. 48

Stemming from this conclusion of God as our center was Merton’s connection to the peace movement. Merton’s followers see that “the degree of humanity’s alienation is reflected in the unrelenting violence of our time.” 49 The degree to which the path of the human race deviates, in both actions and endeavors, from the direction of God, the further it ultimately deviates from peace.

Unfortunately, many people believe that the prevalence of war and violence is proof of God’s non-existence. Merton understood that many people echo the same question, “How can there be a good God who lets such bad things happen to people?” However, Merton actually took this question as an opportunity to confirm the existence of God. He posed questions that challenged those who saw the evils of the world as proof that there is no God. He cited God’s love and forgiveness as the only force preventing humans from having long ago destroyed His creation:

Consider how in spite of centuries of sin and greed and lust and cruelty and hatred and avarice and oppression and injustice, spawned and bred by the free wills of men, the human race can still recover, each time, and can still produce men and women who overcome evil with good, hatred with love, greed with charity, lust and cruelty with sanctity. How could all this be possible without the merciful love of God, pouring out His grace upon us?50

Merton’s arguments presented a refreshing and optimistic view of the world, one that can still be very much applicable today. Even though Merton’s work for the peace movement ended with his death in 1968, his teachings and meditations on non-violence and pacifism certainly mesh with the condition of the twentieth-
century United States and world at large. The globe continues to be embroiled in violence, half a century after Merton taught people how to avoid it.

The World Trade Center and the Pentagon were attacked on September 11, 2001, killing 2,752 people and instigating an American war on worldwide terrorism. Operation Enduring Freedom began on October 7, 2001 on the mission to expel from Afghanistan Osama bin Laden, the Al Qaeda terrorists, and Taliban supporters. The Homeland Security agency was created “to protect the United States and its shores against further terrorist attacks.”

On March 19, 2003, the United States led an invasion into Iraq after 12 years of Iraqi noncompliance with the United Nations Security Council’s (UNSC) request “to scrap all weapons of mass destruction and long-range missiles and to allow UN verification inspections.” According to the Deployment Health Clinical Center website, Operation Iraqi Freedom, as the initiative has been named, was sent with the objectives of ending the regime of Saddam Hussein, eliminating Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, and capturing and driving out terrorists from Iraq. Almost six years after the invasion, “coalition forces remain in Iraq to help restore Iraq's degraded infrastructure, deliver humanitarian support, and to create conditions for a transition to a representative self-government for the Iraqi people.” However, this conflict involves more than just the United States and Iraq. In fact, Operation Iraqi Freedom has brought into war, in some way, Albania, Australia, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, the Republic of Korea, Italy, Kuwait, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, the Slovak Republic, AOR, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom.
According to the United States Military Casualty Statistics, in Operation Enduring Freedom, 577 have been killed, a total of 2,409 wounded in action. In Operation Iraqi Freedom, 30,568 have been wounded in action, 4,149 of them killed (as of August 2008). Thomas Merton did not live to see these operations or the conditions that brought them about. Of course, Merton would have condemned the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon as absolutely wrong. It can be assumed that Merton’s pacifism most definitely extended into the realm of these attacks, in which thousands of innocent lives were taken and the confidence of millions in their nation’s safety shattered.

Following the attack on the United States in September 2001, many Americans felt that the enemy deserved violent retaliation for what had been done to the nation. Families of victims sought some kind of justification for the loss of their loved ones. The angry shock wave overtook many in this country as a demand for vengeance called for the elimination of possible terrorism in the future. Thomas Merton would not have wanted this, as is clear from his work in the non-violence movement. He most likely would have been criticized by a large percentage of the American public, whether for weakness or apathy. However, Merton’s was not a message of passivity or ignorance. He wrote in the Catholic Worker in 1961:

Peace demands the most heroic labour and the most difficult sacrifice. It demands greater heroism than war. It demands greater fidelity to the truth and much more purity of conscience. That Christian fight for peace is not to be confused with defeatism. Merton did not propose that the people of this world sit back and allow themselves to be victims of injustice. He suggested that perhaps people should take care of not
only themselves but others, as well. He thought that if humans worried about the safety and lives of their fellow man, violence could be eliminated as a means of resolution.

Merton called upon Christians, in particular, to live out their lives peacefully, encouraging others to do the same. He gave them the task of evangelizing others of the importance of peace in all areas of life:

Christians have got to speak by their actions. Their political action must not be confined to the ballot box. It must be clear and manifest to everybody. It must speak loudly and plainly the Christian truth and it must be prepared to defend that truth with sacrifice, injustice and even imprisonment or death...This means an unremitting struggle for justice in every sphere—in the workplace, in race relations, in the “third world” and above all in international affairs.  

Unfortunately, even Merton’s fellow religious did not always understand the importance of his message, let alone the common Christian man or woman. In 1962, just a year after his piece in Catholic Worker, he was actually silenced by his superiors and banned from writing on any matter pertaining to war and peace. They eventually saw their error, allowing him to write again before his death a few years later. Merton’s message was so critical to his time and is no less critical today. America and the world still face constant danger, and fear will always hover, especially as the country is still involved in violent affairs overseas. Merton’s non-violent teachings remain, however. Pax Christi, the International Catholic Movement for Peace, best captures the essence of Merton’s pacifist work:

To Merton, nonviolence was not just a subtle strategy for getting your own way, but an attempt to focus people’s minds on where the truth lies. He saw it as a realistic alternative to violence and killing, by trying to win peoples’ minds instead of destroying their bodies.
Technology and the Oral Culture

Merton did not believe, however, that violence was the only source of distraction from the truth. As a member of the rapidly changing technological culture, his beliefs on pacifism relate directly to his status as a human in the advancing world. For example, the Vietnam War was the first war during which Americans could actually see evidence of the action overseas; no war before allowed Americans to see photographs or footage of the war on a regular basis as it was occurring. This opportunity, made possible by this growing technological culture, changed the minds of many Americans regarding the war.

During Merton’s life, many technological advances surfaced in both the United States and the world. For example, in 1949, network television began in America. Five years later, radio sets in the world outnumbered radios for the first time. The audio cassette came out of Holland in 1963. In 1967, the year during which Merton spent his time on retreat that eventually became Spring of Contemplation, pre-recorded movies were sold on videotape for home televisions, cordless telephones came into existence, and approximately half of the 200 million telephones across the globe could be found in this country.  

Although the world was experiencing many technological changes during Merton’s lifetime, he wondered how people across the globe, particularly Christians, could and would handle these developments:

Even technology can pry into private lives. We are living in an electronic world where it is possible that a person may have no privacy at all. I am against reducing silence to muteness, against depriving
individuals of their right to a many-voiced silence, their right to hear both on the level of grace and on the level of nature. When there’s real silence, we’re able to hear. And we all need to hear.\textsuperscript{61}

Merton clearly expressed concern over this electronic culture that can frequently “pry” into the lives of those within it. His concern was justified at the time as television, radios, and other communication technology grew. However, his concern did not end there. Unlike many Americans from Merton’s generation who see reading and written language as the most valid and authentic method by which to acquire knowledge, as opposed to younger generations who delve into internet-based and technological means, Merton actually worried that Americans were being flooded by the written word:

Twenty-eight thousand books are published every year in this country, not counting magazines, papers, catalogues, manuals, and other things. This has a great negative effect on people. The mentality of someone nourished on printed words is different from the person who learns in a predominantly oral culture. TV helps to develop this culture, it influences the way people think. Young people who have grown up on TV are apt to be much more intuitive about things that a reading person may not even be aware of, because TV has so much immediacy. Of course, there’s a lot of junk on TV, too.\textsuperscript{62}

Although Merton acknowledged the benefits of the immediacy of this new oral culture as well as the “junk,” his opinions might have been colored differently if he had known where this visual and oral technology was going to take America. Since Merton’s life, American communication culture has experienced rapid and tremendous change. For example, the Apple I was introduced in 1976, while only five years later IBM introduced its personal computer, and the laptop computer was born. Cable shopping networks followed in 1986. Surfacing with the rise of cellular
phone use was the unfounded rumor that these devices actually caused brain cancer. In 1993, the graphical worldwide web began, just one year before the RCA digital satellite system began broadcasting. The following year, the CD-ROM disk became capable of holding a full-length feature film, and in 1996, web-television was launched to use televisions to access the Internet.

One problem that confronts contemporary Americans that perhaps Merton did not anticipate is the acceptance of technology as the gauge of man’s progress. Many people identify the development of man with the development of technology, which, according to the Church, is a misguided notion:

Science and technology are precious resources when placed at the service of man and promote his integral development for the benefit of all. By themselves however they cannot disclose the meaning of existence and human progress. Science and technology are ordered to man, from whom they take their origin and development; hence they find in the person and in his moral values both evidence of their purpose and awareness of their limits.

As much as Americans and citizens of the world must be thankful for the advances made by man that help to improve the human race and its quality of life, they must also recognize that this progress would not have been possible without the man himself. God granted man and the world the gifts with which to make these developments; therefore, technology and its uses cannot lie outside of the scope of human morality and values without denying its true nature.

Merton certainly saw the distinction between the generation comfortable with the written word and that which was more familiar with oral communication, as well as the benefits to the latter. However, as identified in the Catechism of the
Catholic Church, technology must be able to “promote the integral development for the benefit of all.” The question arises of what must be done if these technological developments, such as those praised by Merton for advancing the thoughts of the younger generation, no longer serve as a benefit for all.

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, currently Pope Benedict XVI, saw the possible dangers involved in this technological culture. He acknowledged the benefits of this culture, as Merton did, but also recognized the concerns one should have:

The whole is overlaid today, however, with a single technological culture which, though it can be compared with other cultures, increasingly determines the situation of humanity. It has produced a unity of mankind such as never existed before. But it has also created tensions, because it has not been able to answer the essential questions of man.

This statement very much parallels the Church’s position on the benefits of technology in the contemporary world. One must be prepared to accept the tensions and inabilities of the technological culture, not merely the possible benefits. It is impossible to deny that technology has swept influence over the entire world, but this influence must be considered with caution rather than blind acceptance.

Ratzinger praises the communication that the technological culture facilitates but considers it in the context of its potential dangers. This technology opens up innumerable lines of communication, but one must wonder if all of this increased communication truly aids in the development of the human mind and soul. One must address the question of whether or not these limitless means of contact actually advance humankind in any meaningful way. Ratzinger addresses the very issue:
When one considers the effects of technological civilization upon the unity of mankind, a remarkable contradiction comes to light. On the one hand, technology has developed into a comprehensive form of life and thought; in the language of technology, there is an unbroken possibility of communication across all barriers. On the other hand and at the same time, with the advance of the kind of positivistic thinking which technology encourages, the language of philosophy has become more and more fragmented...Hand in hand with the universalizing of technological communication goes a break-off of communication in the questions of meaning, in the realm of the really human, which no longer appear to be communicable. The unity of mankind is thus more sharply threatened than ever before.  

Ultimately, Ratzinger’s fear was that faith, because of this progress, “has lost its language.”

Ratzinger relates his concerns not only to the Catholic Church but also to the human race at large. They deal not only with the Church institution but with all mankind, as well. According to Ratzinger, “The question—how technological development can be carried further without ending in the self-destruction of mankind—becomes the fundamental problem of existence in this, our world.” He reminds everyone of the importance and necessity of humane standards for technological developments and of what a lack of standards could do to humanity:  

The worldwide protest of youth, in spite of the questionableness of many of its forms, is ultimately grounded here, is an uprising against a science which describes itself as value-free, yet hands man over to a value-less existence and in so doing destroys him. The technological world, which begins by making faith speechless, thus turns into a direct question to faith: By what standards can true humanity be measured?  

While Ratzinger certainly acknowledges that this younger generation is different from the older because of this technological culture, his explanation for the
“worldwide protest of youth” expresses much more concern than Merton’s statements did in the mid-twentieth century.

Ratzinger’s fear for this younger generation of the technological culture is well-founded. Merton’s generation did not face the same dangers that youths face today as they encounter and adapt to the growth in technology. Communication barriers, as Ratzinger said, have been virtually eliminated, but one must question how this will hurt this same culture. The topic inevitably arises as to whether or not humankind is capable of safely tackling the growth in communication and oral culture without putting themselves at even greater risk.

The late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries have seen great advances coupled with great danger in the communication field. One must only read the newspaper or watch the local evening news to see products of these dangers. Americans, particularly American youth, have been sucked into this culture without proper preparation or precautions, at times causing catastrophe for young people. Especially Christians need to consider how they can and must properly care for this young and impressionable generation amid this technological culture.

On February 6, 2009, the ABC News Bureau covered a story with which many Americans are all too familiar: “Virginia Girl Latest to Be Lured by Xbox Predator – Rhode Island Man Charged with ‘Carnal Knowledge’ in Girl’s Disappearance.” This story, published by ABC News correspondent Sarah Netter, confirms the justified concerns that parents should have for their children in this technological age but, unfortunately, often lack. The Microsoft Xbox 360 game
system allows players to make contact with other gamers across the nation or even globe. While this enhances the quality of the games, it also increases drastically the risk for those who choose to play. Andrew Holloway, a 21-year-old from Rhode Island, allegedly traveled from his home to meet the 13-year-old Virginia girl after first meeting her through the Xbox game system’s chat capabilities. When the game system broke, Holloway continued the relationship over the Internet. After days of searching for the pair, police responded to a 911 call and arrested Holloway, charging him with three counts of “carnal knowledge” and “two counts of soliciting a female younger than 15 over the Internet.”

Even within the supposed safety of her own home and even under the supervision of her parents, this young girl became a victim of the limitless communication in this technological culture. Many game systems such as the Xbox 360 system allow and encourage contact among users, and Holloway saw the chance to lure this girl and took it. Unfortunately, this was the third case in only several weeks at the beginning of 2009 in which minors were lured by predators using this gaming system, which according to the article, as a Microsoft product, actually “has the most advanced security checks and the most comprehensive guide to parental controls.”

The danger does not end there, however. According to mother Stacey Rieberger, whose 16-year-old daughter was another who was lured by a man over Xbox just days before the Virginia victim, “The cell phone is another way the predators can get to them. That’s how they got to my daughter.” Cellular phone
use has brought a new degree of safety to teens, and many parents support their children having cell phones as they enter the new world of driving responsibility. Parents feel safer knowing that they should be able to reach their children whenever and wherever necessary in the case of an emergency. Unfortunately, parents are not the only ones capable of immediate contact with their children, and adolescents frequently use their cell phones for reasons they would not want their parents to know about.

As a mid-twentieth century thinker, Merton never could have foreseen the dangers that would grow from the use of cell phones in his country. ABC News reported on a rising issue in the American teenage world that should be a concern for all Americans. On February 12, 2009, ABC News reporter Emily Friedman published the story, “‘Sexting’ Teens May Face Child Porn Charges.” Thirteen-year-old Ben Hunt, an eighth grader at the Lawrence School in Falmouth, Massachusetts, and five other teens “may face felony charges for transmitting a photo of a semi-nude female classmate on their cell phones.” While Hunt’s father feels that his son is being treated too severely for his behavior, Lawrence School principal Paul Fay sees this situation as an opportunity to show the dangers of teenage cell phone use:

“There are great uses for cell phones in terms of parents being able to communicate with their kids but there are downsides—they can be distractions, or in this case they can be used to transmit inappropriate words or images,” said Fay.

According to Bill Albert, the spokesman for The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, “a recent report by the organization that surveyed
more than 1,000 young adults aged 12 to 26 shows that ‘sexting’ [the term used to describe the transmission of an indecent photo from one cell phone to another] is on the rise.” Albert stated that the organization’s research suggests that “one in five teens freely admit that they have either sent or posted electronically nude or semi-nude images of themselves.” Perhaps the most puzzling statistic that the organization found, however, is that while three-quarters of those surveyed do believe that “sexting” can lead to long-term, serious negative consequences, three-quarters of them also described it as a “fun, youthful and flirtatious activity.”

Fortunately for Merton’s generation and unfortunately for Ben Hunt’s, current adolescents are the first to confront head-on the dangers of widespread cell phone use among its members. However, the risks do not end at sexual predators or “sexting.” Unfortunately, these dangers can absolutely affect those around these cell phone savvy teenagers. According to an article published by AP Business Writer Paul Foy, concerns are on the rise regarding drivers, especially young drivers, using their cell phones for conversations or text-messaging while driving and the unacceptable dangers associated with such activity. Although the National Safety Council recommends a total ban on cell phone use while driving due to the increased risk of accident and death, the Insurance Institute of Highway Safety identifies only 18 states that restrict cell phone use for some or all drivers, many of whom accept the risk and break the law anyway. Last year in New York, five teens were killed in one of the worst accidents when the 17-year-old driver drove while texting and ultimately collided with a tractor trailer.
Although many companies are trying to construct devices for and within cell phones that would make use while driving impossible, all of these creations pose their own ethical questions of technology’s proper place in the life of humankind. WQN Inc., a Dallas-based software company, has developed a surveillance service that uses GPS technology to determine how quickly a person is traveling and lock the phone. Of course, questions have arisen as to whether the phone can identify if the person is actually driving or merely a passenger in a moving vehicle. However, this is inconsequential to the question of morality. The real dilemma arises because the surveillance service also can monitor a person’s whereabouts:

[The service will notify] parents by text messaging when their children step out of designated zones or return home. It also can turn off a cell phone at school, preventing cheating by text messaging during classroom tests, based on a reading of the school’s location. The question parents would have to ask themselves is whether they’d want to prohibit their children’s activities this way.\textsuperscript{84}

Parents must decide for themselves whether they want to accept the responsibility for perhaps destroying the environment of trust that must be established in a healthy and successful parent-child relationship. This very much parallels Merton’s own concern for the invasion of communication and the oral culture into the private lives of men and women. This is precisely the concern that he identifies with his statement of a “technological world” in which one may have no privacy whatsoever. Although parents are responsible for their children’s safety, one must question to what lengths they will go, to what extent they will use the seemingly limitless bounds of communication, to monitor their children.
Merton saw the potential that technological advances had for America and the world in his own time. However, it was impossible for him to foresee the dangers that would accompany these advances. “Junk” on television seems to be the least of the worries. The growth of this “muteness” of which he was so aware seems to parallel that of the technological culture, mirroring the deprivation of privacy and what Merton calls people’s “right to hear.” Just as Merton was concerned over the inability of people to truly hear the messages necessary to live a healthy spiritual life in the twentieth century, Ratzinger addressed the same concern in the twenty-first century. The technological culture has destroyed barriers of communication while simultaneously causing this “silence” of individuals’ true human thoughts.

All of the discussions put forth above relate to Merton’s ultimate concern: the “silence” that sociological and moral complexities can cause. Merton did not see the Church as a perfect institution that should be followed blindly by individuals who could or would not think deeply about their faith and its role in their lives. He challenged Catholics to prove their faith in times of difficulty, to address the concerns within the Church and its hierarchy and members, and to humbly work towards mending tears in the community.

Merton encouraged all Christians, all people, to value their thoughts and positions on issues in the world. He wanted the faith community to recognize the problems in the Church and the world and confront them with conviction:

Hence, though there are real abuses always present in any institution, even in the Church, they must be faced with honesty, humility, and
love. They cannot be glossed over or ignored. Not everyone can ‘do something’ about problems which are too vast for a single individual to understand. But all can use them to good purpose in their own interior lives, regarding them as opportunities to purify their faith, their spirit of obedience, and their supernatural love of the Church.  

He recommended the following as the proper response of Catholics to any blemish in the Church: “The Christian must learn how to face these problems with a sincere and humble concern for truth and for the glory of God’s Church. He must learn to help correct these errors, without falling into an indiscreet or rebellious zeal. Arrogance is never a sign of grace.”

In conclusion, Catholics around the world must recognize that because the Church is comprised of human individuals, conflicts and errors will surface in time. The crisis caused by the errors of such few members of the priesthood caused many to doubt the path of the Church and its leaders. The devastating decline in vocations is affecting the faith community and the religious education of young Catholics more now than Merton might have ever possibly considered it would. The dearth in morals resulting from this educational faith dilemma is a cause for concern for the children of today’s society, who will ultimately be taking their moral foundation, perhaps shoddily laid, into the world and setting the course for the future of the world. The violence already rampant across the globe could only worsen if we choose to sacrifice the faith of Catholic youth as a secondary or irrelevant concern. The world still faces turmoil and conflict each and every day, a problem that will most likely never cease. And as we continue to grow technologically into this age of development and communication, Catholics must
take caution not to allow these advances to degrade humanity or individuality in any way.

All of Merton’s ideas connected; they all interrelated to show Merton’s concern that the world and its citizens need faith. This was true not only of his time but today, as well. Although the situations that contemporary Americans and humans across the globe are confronting have changed with time, their central issues remain the same. Merton’s writings were applicable to the people of his age and continue today to serve as sound, faithful, honest advice for humankind. One must balance faith with reason whenever considering moral issues, whether sociological or directly related to Catholic belief. However, considering the guidance of Thomas Merton, a man who probably could have offered even more insight had he lived to experience further changes in society, can aid any and all Catholics, all people, in humbly and honestly answering questions of life and faith.

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