

A Witness of Love: Examining the Correspondence of Four Nonviolent Activists

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As a change agent in society, nonviolence has been employed over the centuries as a response to violent activity in the world. The definitions of nonviolence differ widely, but ultimately they seem to end up with love at the core.

The early Church, the foundation of the Marianist Family, and the United States peace movement are three examples of the practice of nonviolence over the centuries. The early Christian community has as its foundation a most violent action, the death of Christ on a cross; an instrument of torture. During his ministry, Jesus preached peace, speaking often in ways that confused his disciples because of the violent times of the early Roman Empire. He said: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?" (NASB, Mt. 5:43-46) This message of radical love is at the root of nonviolence in the Christian tradition; while the idea is not uniquely Christian, it is central to the lives of four correspondents, William Joseph Chaminade, Adèle de Batz de Trenquelléon, Dorothy Day, and Thomas Merton.

People working for peace cannot act in isolation; they must always be accompanied by others who can support them in their work. This accompaniment is crucial because the path to peace is often quite difficult; encouragement and accountability may be required in order to achieve the goal. At times, support is not possible through physical proximity, as was the case for Chaminade, Adèle, Day, and Merton, so letter writing was employed in order to share ideas, encouragement, and challenge. Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton, two advocates for transforming society through peace, corresponded for many years. Their exchange of letters can be likened to the correspondence between Adèle de Batz de Trenquelléon and William Joseph Chaminade who also sought, about 100 years earlier, to transform society in a peaceful way. These four letter writers sought to share ideas, encourage each other, and inspire hope and optimism—traits often found among the youth—although two of the correspondents lived well into their eighties.

The foundation of the Family of Mary was born in the midst of a bloody revolution. Father Chaminade and Mother Adèle both experienced tremendous difficulty in their native country of France, both before and during the French Revolution. The situation was wrought with difficulty, and in 1792 Father Chaminade lost his friend Father Langoiran to an angry mob in Bordeaux (Burton, p. 26). It was during this uprising that Father Chaminade not only was exiled to Saragossa, Spain, in 1797 but

also where he spent much time with other exiles and prayed before La Virgen del Pilar (Burton, p. 60). Adèle's family also struggled with the turmoil in France; when Adèle was two and a half years old, her father voluntarily went into exile, and the Baroness with her two children followed a few years later (1797) in order to avoid danger (Benlloch, p. 55).

More than 100 years later, in the United States the peace movement developed in the wake of the violent atrocities of World War II, in the midst of the Vietnam War, and during the Cold War. Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton were witnesses to the great instability and fear of this time. Day founded the Catholic Worker Movement in 1933, in the aftermath of the Great Depression, and the movement gained a greater foothold by advocating for nonviolence in the years that followed. Merton entered the Abbey of Gethemani in 1941 and began writing. His writings started off autobiographically but eventually became broader in scope and encompassed many themes, including interreligious dialogue and nonviolence. Merton and Day's correspondence was a source of mutual encouragement as they sought to take concrete steps for peace.

Chaminade and Adèle wrote frequently, and although portions of their correspondence have been lost, there are still many letters that remain. Father Chaminade was a spiritual father for the Daughters of Mary, so Adèle wrote to him about many things, including minutia about personnel and some of the detailed concerns of the Sisters in the early years. Their correspondence, however, was not limited to simply practical concerns; matters of spiritual importance were often discussed as well. Their correspondence was a source of mutual support and inspiration, as evidenced by the events that unfolded in the founding of the Daughters of Mary and the Society of Mary, following the creation of the sodalities. Notably in 1817, Adèle writes to Chaminade: "Your letters are always a great consolation for your children, and your advice encourages them to march ever more boldly toward the goal to which they are called" (Stefanelli, p. 323). Chaminade encouraged Adèle, and Adèle encouraged Chaminade during the course of their writing. This tender concern for one another helped the Founders to faithfully carry out the mission of Mary entrusted to them.

A similar type of correspondence existed between Merton and Day. Day often wrote to Merton concerning practical concerns in the Catholic Worker House where she lived and ministered. She would seek advice and prayerful counsel from Merton, and he would seek the same support from her. They often shared ideas about how to best live, love, and act peacefully. They sometimes did not agree with the actions or perspectives of the other person, but they faithfully continued a correspondence that was mutually enriching. Day wrote to Merton in 1960: "Your beautiful and profound essay on Pasternak [Boris Pasternak, author of *Doctor Zhivago*] kept me awake from midnight until four in the morning, thinking about it. I am using the final paragraph in my "On Pilgrimage" this coming month. It is very exciting, all of it, and I thank you for writing it, and for sending us a copy. I carried it along with me on

my trip west” (Ellsberg, p. 334). The enrichment of Day by Merton, and Merton by Day, helped each of these thinkers to actively live out their vocations.

This type of correspondence—by both Adèle and Chaminade, and Day and Merton—encouraged the personal growth of each of the correspondents. It allowed them to continue working and praying for peace and transformation because each accompanied the other. Youthfulness is typified by hope, vitality, and freshness. Although Adèle died well before Chaminade and Merton died well before Day, I believe their active correspondence before the death of their affiliate helped them maintain youthful ideas and a youthful spirit. The spirit of youth was maintained because of the disposition of the writers to engage in open-minded growth in holiness and virtue. Dorothy Day was surrounded until her death by young people living and working with her in the Catholic Worker Houses of Hospitality. William Joseph Chaminade, except for his final years of imposed exile, also surrounded himself with younger associates in the sodalities and the Society of Mary. I believe the correspondence maintained by all four allowed them to continue to be challenged by new ideas and different perspectives, and it allowed their spirits to remain young, while also growing in wisdom brought by age and grace.

Day, Merton, Chaminade, and Adèle not only sought practical advice but also focused on spiritual matters. Both pairs were men and women of deep prayer, focused first on their relationship with God and then with how to serve the God they loved so much. They focused on growth in virtue and in personal holiness, and they desired to be fully faithful to the will of God in their lives. An edifying passage from Merton to Day speaks about complete reliance on God:

Perseverance—yes, more and more one sees that it is the great thing. But there is a thing that must not be overlooked. Perseverance is not hanging on to some course that we have set our minds to, and refusing to let go. It is not even a matter of getting a bulldog grip on the faith and not letting the devil pry us loose from it—though many of the saints made it look that way. Really, there is something lacking in such a hope as that. Hope is a greater scandal than we think. . . . Hence perseverance is not hanging on but letting go . . . until there is nothing left but God (Shannon, p. 137).

The link between perseverance and hope is a profound insight. Day lived and worked in what many could have viewed as a hopeless situation, yet her perseverance in prayer allowed her to continue offering her life in service to God alone, through care for the poor.

Adèle and Chaminade corresponded over a similar matter in 1820: “My Good Father, pray for your children and especially for me. May God teach me how to guide souls, that I spare no care, no effort, that I never give in to partiality, to which I am naturally inclined. I do not want to deceive myself as to what God is asking of me” (Stefanelli, p. 365). Adèle sought to lead the Daughters of Mary by faithfully following the will of God. Her particular way of serving the People of God was

similar to Day's with regard to the care of the poor. She sought Chaminade's support throughout many letters; in her great correspondence with her other collaborators, she often inspired them to seek the will of God alone even in the midst of tremendous difficulty.

Day and Merton faced great turmoil during the 1960s, and one of Merton's many letters to Dorothy Day spoke about the need for nonviolence in communication and in the Church. He wrote:

Soft-toned and restrained, . . . speaks of love more than of reproof. It is the way a Christian should speak up, and we can all be grateful to you for speaking in this way. . . . What is a church after all but a community in which truth is shared, not a monopoly that dispenses it from the top down. Light travels on a two-way street in our Church: or I hope it does (Shannon, p. 152).

Soft-toned and restrained does not exempt one from speaking the truth, but in fact it allows for the truth to be shared in a loving way so that it may be heard by many. The second part of Merton's quote, about the Church being a place where truth is shared on all levels, not just from the top down, speaks to a radical optimism and hopefulness about the expression of Gospel values in the structural body of the Church. This hopefulness and optimism, I believe, encouraged a youthful spirit in the life of Day.

The foundation of the Daughters of Mary also was a time of great struggle for the Foundress and the early Sisters. In the early years, many Sisters died of disease, and the country of France was less than cordial toward religious practice. The Church at that time also had a strict rule of cloister for religious sisters, so Chaminade and Adèle had to creatively construct a rule that would allow the Sisters to minister to women, children, and the poor. This concrete ministerial practice was rooted in love, and perhaps it could even be viewed as a nonviolent resistance to the structure imposed by the Church. Adèle writes; "As for ourselves, we have adopted the practice of "present love" because the nature of our occupations does not allow us to observe the liturgical hours. We have each chosen one hour of the day during which we do everything for "present love." I find it most consoling that Mary, our Mother, is perpetually honored in our convent, and that during every hour a sister is offering her actions to Mary" (Stefanelli, p. 350). Nearly 150 years later, this action of "present love" is similar to the "soft-toned restraint" of which Merton wrote to Day. It is the idea of conforming one's heart, mind, and soul to God, using Mary as an example of how to most fully love God.

Merton, Day, Adèle, and Chaminade all expressed the profound importance of love in the lives of their associates. Adèle wrote, "O my God, my heart is too small to love you, but I will see to it that you are loved by so many hearts, that their love will compensate for the weakness of mine" (Stefanelli, p. 24). She desired the formation of the souls of her associates to be souls focused on the love and service of God.

Chaminade spoke about faith from the lens of love. Before his journey into exile he wrote: "What is a faithful soul to do in the chaos of events which seem to swallow it up? Sustain itself calmly by that faith which, while making us adore the eternal plan of God, assures us that all things work together unto good for those who love God"(Bruder, p. 49). For Chaminade, faith in God and love of God allows for people to work together for the common good. Building up the common good, taking into consideration the needs of all, not just personal desires, is a way of working toward a more nonviolent world. Merton wrote about love through speaking about Lady Wisdom. "There is in all things an inexhaustible sweetness and purity, a silence that is a fount of action and joy. It rises up in wordless gentleness and flows out to me from the unseen roots of all created being, welcoming me tenderly, saluting me with indescribable humility. This is at once my own being, my own nature, and the Gift of my Creator's Thought and Art within me, speaking as Hagia Sophia, speaking as my sister, Wisdom" (Cunningham, p. 258). Wisdom acts gently and in silence and beckons the soul to share the purity and joy it has received. This sharing, humility in action, is rooted in love and can only occur nonviolently. For Day, nonviolence was manifested through peaceful activism as well as through life in community. She wrote:

But the final word is love. At times it has been, in the words of Father Zossima, a harsh and dreadful thing, and our very faith in love has been tried through fire. We cannot love God unless we love each other, and to love we must know each other. We know him in the breaking of bread, and we are not alone any more. Heaven is a banquet and life is a banquet, too, even with a crust, where there is companionship. We have all known the long loneliness, and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community (Cunningham, pp. 285-86).

Love in community is the answer to the challenges of life. Even when life is difficult, and trust seems to be nearly impossible, looking inside and trying to love oneself and others is a way to peacefully live in a troubled world.

Love, expressed through nonviolence, is a theme that has been important across the centuries of these great spiritual correspondents, but which is also valuable for the People of God at this time. Nonviolence and love foster peaceful unity. Unity only truly occurs in the midst of diversity, so the practice of nonviolence and love is not meant to eliminate diversity, but in fact to affirm it. This practice of loving in the face of diversity requires discipline in life and in prayer. The affirmation and valuing of diverse persons and diverse gifts to the Church and world seems to be a modern way to embrace the tenets of nonviolence and peace outlined by the four correspondents.

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