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MIDSUMMER LETTER 1968

Trappist, Ky.  
40073

Dear Friends,

For various reasons I was quite busy during May and June, and so for July and part of August I am hoping to cut down all contacts, correspondence, etc., to a minimum. I wish I could cut out all but the most essential letters and contacts, but that is not quite possible, and common decency demands that I at least politely refuse invitations (which come in increasing numbers) to go out and speak, attend conferences, write prefaces, give blurbs, examine unpublished manuscripts, and so on.

It seems to me I have already expressed too many opinions about everything and I wish I could really be silent on controversial events. Yet I doubt if I can honestly refrain from giving some reaction when I am asked. Several magazines asked me to write something concerning the assassination of Robert Kennedy. I refused because I am a bit suspicious of what seems to me to be a growing ritual cycle: murder, public acts of contrition, deploring violence, gestures of appeasement, then everything goes on unchanged and presently there is another assassination. The cycle continues. The sickness seems to be so deep that ritual expressions of sorrow, horror, astonishment, etc., have just become part of a general routine. At such a time perhaps silence is more decent. Certainly the sense of shock is real. People are indeed horrified by the fact that nothing is safe, and that the least safe are the people, the values, that we admire, love and rely on the most. In a word we are beginning to sense in our society a tendency to harm and to destroy the very things we claim to need and to admire. The Kennedys (for all that they had enemies and critics) did offer something of an image of what Americans like and approve of: what they identify with. The fact that this is precisely what is most menaced, and menaced from inside our society, not outside it, is what is significant. It is not enough to say that the assassins of both Kennedys were in some sense "unamerican." They emerged from a society which made their crime easy. In the case of Dr. King, evidence seems to suggest that there was indeed a conspiracy and that the assassin was after money that had been explicitly offered to anyone who would get Dr. King out of the way. In any event, this is my comment: the problem of violence in our society is now critical, and it is not just a problem of a few psychopaths or rebels. The violence that threatens us to the point of possible self-destruction is endemic in the whole of society, and more especially in the establishment itself, the military, the police, the established forces of "order"--they are all infected with a mania for overkill, rooted in fear. The future promises an era of force, suspicion, terrorism with more or less futile acts of protest, violently repressed. Unless we get some really intelligent and creative leadership, our future as a democracy is not bright.

Then of course many ask me about my good friends, Fathers Dan and Phil Berrigan. To many, their acts of protest have seemed incomprehensible, wild, extreme. Well, I think they were intentionally "extreme," though they remained in essence non-violent. They were intentionally provocative. Both Dan and Phil believe that as Christians they must

protest against a futile and immoral war to the point where they are jailed for protest--or else stop the war. This goes pretty far, I admit. It shocks, and is intended to shock. Perhaps the point will never get across to some people, it may be too shocking. All I'd like to say is this: I noticed very little, if any, shock at all when a Catholic bishop had the droll effrontery to speak of the Vietnam war as an act of Christian love. CHRISTIAN LOVE! It seems to me that this fantastic concept of what the New Testament is all about ought to have shocked a lot more people than it did. No, it was accepted, as a bit strange, perhaps, but "normal." Well, because it has become "normal" to regard war--any war demanded by the military--as Christian duty, Christian love, Christian virtue, that a few like the Berrigans, in their desperation, try to show by extreme protest that it is not normal at all.

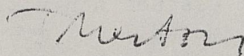
My own position is somewhere in between. It just seems to me that the Selective Service Law, which allows the military to demand the lives of young Americans for a dubious adventure in Asia, should not be on the books at all. It should be abolished, by the normal political means. In this I am not "far-out" at all, and I would note that there are many conservatives who share my opinion. In the atomic era (no matter what one may think of the bomb, it's there and it "deters"), we have absolutely no ground for saying that we need the draft for defense. The draft is being used for aggression, not for defense. It is being used to interfere in the affairs of other nations that we do not even understand.

I apologize for insisting on these points. If I do so, it is mainly in order to let you know where I stand myself, since a lot of people are wondering. Sooner or later I hope I can make things clear enough so that I will not have to continue "clarifying." I am against war, against violence, against violent revolution, for peaceful settlement of differences, for non-violent but nevertheless radical change. Change is needed, and violence will not really change anything: at most it will only transfer power from one set of bull-headed authorities to another.

If I say these things, it is not because I am more interested in politics than in the Gospel. I am not. But today more than ever the Gospel commitment has political implications, because you cannot claim to be "for Christ" and espouse a political cause that implies callous indifference to the needs of millions of human beings and even cooperates in their destruction.

But the problems of man can never be solved by political means alone. Over and over again the Church has said that forgetfulness of God and of prayer are at the root of our trouble. This has been reduced to a cliché. But it is nevertheless true. And I realize more and more that in my own vocation what matters is not comment, not statements of opinion, not judgments, but prayer. Let us pray for one another and try in everything to do what God asks of us. My best regards to all of you.

In Christ,



Thomas Merton