The Merton Retreat 2000

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On a cool sunny Memorial Day evening a few weeks ago a nearly 40-year-old dream of Thomas Merton’s became reality the long-awaited Merton retreat 2000 got underway at the Abbey of Gethsemane. 17 international leaders had come to the knobby hills of Northern Kentucky for four days of in-depth dialogue and quiet contemplation addressing the integral relationship between healthy spirituality and sound leadership.

These men and women traveled to the monastery from Belgium Argentina the Philippines India South Africa and various locations throughout the United States. The group included people from different cultures and races, Senators, activists, ministers, and academics. They were Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Buddhists, and Hindus.

These international leaders were joined by three extraordinarily gifted individuals from the Louisville area: an award-winning writer, an internationally renowned fabric artist, a talented musician who also has the gift to design and create musical instruments native to cultures in emerging nations. To this already impressive array of individuals were added the gifts of three highly trained professional facilitators who would help to guide the group through a practice of contemplative dialogue first suggested by Thomas Merton in his Mount Olivet Letter. In that document, which was written in the early 1960s, Merton wrote, “the contemplative character of the setting and the complete absence of the pressures and routines of organizational life will favor a recovery of spiritual and humanistic perspectives, in which the emphasis will not be on the social process but on the good of man as ‘image of God.’ It is believed that such a viewpoint is necessary if man is to dominate the processes he has created instead of being dominated by them.”

The importance of Merton’s idea is heightened as we enter the Third Millennium. The speed of the Internet, the constant press of instant news from CNN and the ubiquitous sprouting of cell phones together send a clear message that humankind is in serious danger of losing control of the processes that Merton spoke about. We all face an increasing need to slow down – even stop – and take a contemplative look at the most important aspects of our common life. And that effort was the beginning point for Merton Retreat 2000.

The 17 leaders and 3 artists who took part in the retreat were not handcuffed by the usual agenda that such prestigious gatherings often require. They were not asked to draft a manifesto on Leadership for the 21st century; they were not required to issue a call to action; they were not even expected to write a ‘white paper’ on how spirituality can create a new kind of leadership. Instead they were asked to do something much more risky: to be open to what emerged from the encounter without any preconceived notions. According to the lead facilitator for the retreat, Steven Wirth, the facilitation team set several goals.

“The first was to create a process that respected each of the participants as they were..., and didn’t attempt to change the participants in some way.”
“A second goal was to create a contemplative atmosphere. Contemplation simply means ‘to take a long loving look at the real.’ It is compassionately looking at what is before deciding what should be or could be.... Looking contemplatively means to slow down our rush to judgment, and to notice what we must be missing.”

“How another key to the success of the retreat was the practice of asking participants not just to share their conclusions, but also the assumptions and experiences that led them to those conclusions. Rather than speaking in abstract images and soundbites, to slow down and help others to understand how I arrived at the beliefs I hold. A further distinctive quality of the retreat was its attention both to the individuals gathered and to the group as a whole.”

Although there were strong bonds of common concern for issues like the death penalty, human rights, poverty and world hunger, each participant brought a unique history and perspective to the Monastery. Adolfo Perez Esquivel carried the emotional scars of imprisonment and torture for his actions on behalf of human rights. The two South Africans were concerns for the phenomenal problems of AIDS in their country, where more than 20% of the population is infected. Prof. Chakravarty was focused on finding ways to meet the nutritional and health care needs of billions of people in Third World countries. The problems and situations the participants discussed during the retreat included:

- the balance between busyness and quiet intimacy
- the private person and the public persona
- the sense of futility
- how to be present to the immensity of human suffering without giving in to despair
- does the world care about the oppressed and poor
- sources of our personal strength and how do we empower others
- what does wholeness mean in this culture
- is it possible to govern without being corrupted by power
- dealing with the anger that rules the world
- preparing oneself to listen to different voices
- face and lack of faith
- how to be an agent of reconciliation

At the conclusion of the retreat at Gethsemane, the participants traveled to Louisville for a Friday, June 2 public forum at St. Stephen Baptist Church, a primarily African-American congregation in the downtown area. At this event, the retreatants shared with the estimated 600 people in attendance many of the stories that help them to form a common bond during the retreat.

Live audio from the Public Forum was made available, free of charge throughout the world through the webpage of New Dimensions Broadcasting. This organization produces a weekly interview program on spirituality called New Dimensions, which is hosted by Michael Toms. The audio webcasts can now be accessed “on demand” and free of charge over the Internet at www.newdimensions.org or through the Merton Foundation website at www.Merton.org.

[Unfortunately these audio links are no longer live.]
Merton Retreat 2000 Participants

**International Participants**

Indira Chakravarty, Director, All India Institute of Hygiene & Public Health.
Daniel Coughlin, Chaplain, U.S. House of Representatives.
Myriam Dardenne, O.C.S.O., retired Trappistine abbess
John Dear, Executive Director, Fellowship of Reconciliation
Rose Mary Dougherty, Program Director for the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation.
Adolfo Perez Esquivel, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate
Bongani Blessing Finca, South African Provincial Electoral Officer, Truth & Reconciliation Commission member
Edward Kaplan, Chairman, Religious Studies at Brandeis University.
Robert Lehman, President of the Fetzer Institute
Barbara Mikulski, U.S. Senator from Maryland
Julie Murray, Contemplative and Co-founder Of The Center Within
Helen Prejean, M.S.C., author of Dead Man Walking.
Donald Rothberg, Executive Editor of ReVision Journal
Leticia Shahani, President Pro Tempore of the Philippine Senate (1995-96)
Makhenkesi Stofile, Premier, Province of East Cape, South Africa
Douglas Tanner, President, The Faith & Politics Institute

**Artist Participants**

Gregory Acker, musician
Dianne Aprile, author, Gethsemani, Place of Peace and Paradox
Penny Sisto, fabric artist

**Facilitators**

Miriam Cleary, co-director, Centre for Spirituality and Justice
Ginny Schaeffer, spiritual director and psychotherapist
Steven Wirth, Dialogue Facilitator and Spiritual Director, Vice-President for Mission, CMCNY
Retreat Participant Penny Sisto Creates Elaborate Quilt in Just One Day

One of the most astonishing ‘results’ to emerge from the Merton retreat 2000 was an intricate quilt entitled Christ the Questioner was completed in just one 24-hour period by participant Penny Sisto.

As a response to what she heard during the in depth dialogues during the retreat, Penny began sewing and image of a Native American that became the central figure in the quilt. She worked on this piece in her room during time set aside for contemplative activities. She left Gethsemane for her home studio on Wednesday afternoon, May 31, with only this small piece of cloth in hand, and returned the following afternoon with a completed 4’ x 5’ quilt that displays a variety of colors, techniques and images.

The quilt’s images reflect Penny’s response to stories shared by retreat participants during their stay at the Abbey. In explaining the title, she noted that we sometimes ask ourselves if Christ is the answer. She says, “For Christ to be the answer of those us from all responsibility.” Instead, she views Christ as the question, or more accurately put, the questioner who challenges our misplaced values. Among the many other striking pictorial elements in the quilt are a baby Jesus bearing a crown of thorns was about to be born. Below this is a hand opening and giving the blessing of birth. Near that hand is one of several feathers that Penny describes the stigmata. There are also several images of mothers and small children, and picture of Martin Luther King Jr.
One of the most poignant images is that of an eagle with wings spread in flight from which are falling human figures. This is drawn from a story told by retreat participant Adolfo Perez Esquivel. He and other prisoners of conscience in Argentina had been taken aboard a military plane that flew out over the ocean. There a number of prisoners were thrown out an open door to their death.

Penny has made a gift to the quilt to the Thomas Merton Center Foundation.

Image follows