

Pope Francis references Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day in address to Congress

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In what was already the most widely anticipated speech of Pope Francis's pastoral visit to the United States this week, the Pope's references to two American models of Christian living—the renowned author and Trappist Monk **Thomas Merton** and co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement **Dorothy Day**—have surprised many. As a Merton scholar, a three-term member of the board of directors for the International Thomas Merton Society, and the author of the recent book [The Franciscan Heart of Thomas Merton](#), I couldn't be more delighted at the mention of Merton!

Pope Francis highlights how these two giant figures of American Catholicism “offer us a way of seeing and interpreting reality.”

Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day knew each other, corresponded, and represent to many Catholics the depth of an engaged Christian spirituality that extends beyond the personal relationship with God to reach the margins of society and respond to the most pressing concerns of our day. Their lives and model of Christian living anticipated what was made universal by the Second Vatican Council and expressed in *Gaudium et Spes*, that Christians are called to interpret the “signs of the time” in “light of the gospel.”

This didn't happen overnight for either figure. For Merton, there was a growing awareness of the need to engage matters of peace and justice in the world that came when his life of prayer and contemplation awakened within him a sense of interconnectedness with all women and men. He recognized an “original unity,” as he put it in one of his last lectures, that was founded on the “hidden ground of love.”

In a letter to Dorothy Day written on August 23, 1961, Merton acknowledges this growing awareness and turn toward the world:

I don't feel that I can in conscience, at a time like this, go on writing just about things like meditation, though that has its point. I cannot just bury

my head in a lot of rather tiny and secondary monastic studies either. I think I have to face the big issues, the life-and-death issues.

This awakening of his conscience led to addressing concerns of poverty, racism, violence, nuclear armament, the Cold War, economic inequality, among other pressing concerns of his day (and, sadly, still our own).

Both Merton and Day, the latter whose cause for canonization is currently underway, have been somewhat polarizing figures over the last half-century. Those who feel religious people should talk about God and prayer and not the pressing or controversial concerns of the time have dismissed Merton and Day. Some feel that they represent some kind of “liberal” or “progressive” face of Catholicism. Pope Francis’s references help to put down that sort of polarizing image, pointing to them as icons and models of Christian discipleship for all people!

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