"...I am glad to be able to tell someone at Oakham that I really bear the school a deep affection, with sentiments of gratitude that will not die... I never regret having gone to Oakham. On the contrary, I am very glad that I was sent there rather than to some larger school, for Oakham had something of simplicity and sincerity about it that one might look for in vain elsewhere."

THOMAS MERTON to C.J. DIXON,
November 9th, 1954

INTRODUCTION

AS I HAVE EDITED THE PAPERS PRESENTED AT THE FOURTH GENERAL Meeting of the Thomas Merton Society, I have been struck both by their variety and by the ways in which they connect together and complement one another. I suppose I should not be surprised by this in that they were all in one way or another seeking to respond to the theme of the conference: *The World in My Blood Stream: Thomas Merton's Universal Embrace*. The first part of this derives from the title of one of Merton's *Eighteen Poems*, 'With the World in my Blood Stream,' inspired by his encounter and friendship with the young student nurse in the summer of 1966. The subtitle derives from that sense of universality and inclusiveness that is increasingly apparent in his writings as he grew and developed as a monk, and as a person, in his years at Gethsemani.

This theme of the conference springs from the simple question, how do we relate to the 'world'? In particular, how do we relate to the modern (or post-modern) world, the world of technology, of commerce and consumerism, the material world, contemporary culture. How are we to live in this shrinking world of instant communication and globalization? The world of multinational companies and power politics where might is right, or *makes* right, the world where overwhelming force is a legitimate instrument of peace. I write this in the immediate aftermath of the Iraq War; at the time of the conference we were a little over six months after 'September 11th' and still very much in its shadow. This was the specific context in which the conference took place and to which many of the presenters were responding, either implicitly or explicitly, and perhaps also explains some of the coherence found in taking the papers as a whole. The question of how we are to live in the world seemed to have taken on an added poignancy and an increased urgency in the light of recent events.

It is also a question (if not *the* question) Merton wrestled with throughout his monastic life and even before—his entry into the

monastery in the first place can be construed as his response to such a question. His writings in books, articles and essays, and in his letters, journals and poems manifest the twists and turns and the development of his own answer to the question of how to live in the world. His writings give us much material on which to reflect, but more than this we are able to see how his thinking developed and changed over time—how he grew as a person through his life. Beyond the writings we are able to appreciate something of the man whose life, like that of his hero Gandhi, was his message.

Merton's struggles resonate with our own because they are essentially the same – how to live in this world – and they are not new: it's the question Christians have wrestled with since Constantine adopted Christianity and made it the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century—and probably before. Indeed, how to live (in the world, for there is no other) is *the* question for those who would be 'holy' men and women of whatever tradition and in any age.

The question implies some sort of distinction between us and the world – a distinction clearly felt by the early Christians who regarded themselves as strangers and aliens, sojourners and pilgrims, not of this world – a sense of not belonging. It's the tension experienced by all those who seek to follow Christ whilst living in the 'world.' Similar tension is found also in other traditions—perhaps put most simply it is the tension between living for peace and justice in a world dominated by power and commerce. Or again perhaps it is the tension, more strongly *antipathy*, between truth and illusion. It is this distinction that drove the early saints into the desert and into the monasteries—and drove Thomas Merton into the monastery of Gethsemani. Yet through his years there he came to experience a new relationship with the world and discovered (or rediscovered) his place in the world – and no longer the aphoristic 'in the world but not of the world' but in the world and in a real sense very much part of it – with the world in his blood stream.

The question of how to live in the world gives rise to two further questions concerning our own *identity* and our *vision* of the world: 'Who am I?' and 'How do we see the world?' The two questions are related: how we understand our own identity (how we see ourselves) will affect how we understand the world and relate to it. Merton's universal embrace derives from his own sense of identity in the

hidden ground of love. For Merton time and again we find that the answer to the question 'Who am I?' and the answer to the question 'Who is the world?' is the same: when we get beyond the illusions of superficiality, the identity of both is 'Christ.' This is not a narrowly defined 'Christ' in the sense of the historical figure of 'Jesus Christ' but rather relates to the 'ground of being'—the Divine identity hidden in the depths of our being. It is the mystical oneness with the creator and source of life that permeates and unites all creation. Our true identity that is identified with universal identity.

These two dimensions, the inward and the outward, permeate the papers gathered here—sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly. In his presidential address, Donald Allchin finds the heart of Merton's universal vision in his learning to recognise God's presence in the depths of his own inmost spirit—enabling him in turn to read God's presence in all things. He comments (as he did in his 2000 address) on how Merton seems to be coming closer to us as we get further away from him in time, echoing Ed Rice's contention that Merton was born at least a century ahead of his time.

Robert Inchausti is implicitly responding to the question of how we are to live in the world in his paper 'Beyond Political Illusion: the Role of the Individual in Troubled Times.' In this paper he contrasts Merton's contemplative vision with two very different contemporary ethics: the 'neo-paganism' of Robert Kaplan's 'Warrior Ethics' and the 'Christian Realism' of Reinhold Niebuhr. Merton, he suggests, allows us to re-think our relationship to secular categories (to the world). In this he draws on the Dante imagery of *The Seven Storey Mountain* which sees the modern world as purgatory—paralleling Allchin's concluding quote about keeping your mind in hell and not despairing.

Inchausti's paper raises questions about how we are to respond to the world and the times in which we live and the role each individual person can play. Our other two keynote papers address different aspects of Merton's universal embrace. Bonnie Thurston explores Merton's relationship with Islam through a consideration of his seven explicitly 'Islamic poems.' In this she parallels Merton's interest in Zen with the 'nonlogical logic of mysticism' found in Sufism and its emphasis on direct experience and 'essence without form.' She makes the point that the reason for Merton's embrace of Islam is Christian—it is Merton's Christian view of God's universal embrace that inspires his reaching out to others. Donald Grayston makes a similar point in

tracing Merton's transculturalism to Christ, 'the true pioneer of transcultural reality.' Interfaith dialogue is very much in accord with the heart of Christianity—it is intrinsically, though not exclusively, a Christian activity. For Christians the theological rationale for being transcultural (crossing the frontiers) is Christ.

Like Bonnie Thurston, Grayston also draws on Merton's contact and interaction with Islam as well as Zen Buddhism. In an unwitting carry-over from the Third General Meeting (*A Mind Awake in the Dark*), he uses Merton's *Day of a Stranger* as a vehicle for his discussion of Merton's universal embrace. He specifically identifies the two dimensions of this embrace outlined above—inner and outer. In the inner dimension he identifies an 'inner ground' that is both more universal than the empirical ego and yet entirely his own and he then relates this to ideas of being reborn. Though not limited to Christianity such ideas found a natural resonance in the post-Easter context of the conference of dying and rising with Christ. In the outer dimension, Grayston picks up the resurrection theme again in what William H. Thompson calls 'the creative underpinnings of a deeper view of Christology.' It is this 'deeper view of Christology' – what we mean by 'Christ' – that enables us to uncover our own true identity and reach out to the world.

The exploration of the themes pertaining to Thomas Merton's universal embrace continue through the variety of the concurrent session papers presented in the morning and afternoon of that warm Saturday in April. Michael Sobocinski gives a very specific illustration of the connection between finding connectedness with others and finding one's own inner identity in the context of his work in the Denver Children's Home. Here we find the transformative power of love, both for the giver and the receiver, as children are helped in the process of healing and becoming fully human through an active empathy in which the carer identifies with the suffering of the child. Merton's distinction between the isolated 'false self' and the connected 'true self' is evident and again the identification of 'Christ' in both oneself and the other.

Two papers follow exploring Merton's relationship with 'the beats.' This falls under that part of Merton's universal embrace that extends towards contemporary culture. David Belcastro characterises Merton's friendship with the beats as a new dimension of his monastic vocation in which he identifies with their position on the margins of, or outside,

contemporary society. They like him experience tension with the 'world,' like him they do not 'belong.' Belcastro explores Merton's take on the beats as 'inside-out Christians' or 'monks in reverse'—'inside-out Christians' refers to their 'fully integrated vision' and their approach from the 'human dimension' of the body and 'the holiness of direct desire'; 'monks in reverse' points up the gap between, for example, Christianity and the churches, and the incongruities and inconsistencies of modern life (the world) in the hope of opening up a larger vision of life. The idea of being outside the institutional Church and yet being able to participate in the Gospel clearly has resonance for many today who feel they do not belong—neither in the world ('square society', etc.) nor in the Church (and here Merton had his own ambivalences and ambiguities!) Merton's relationship with the beats also perhaps helped to get the world pumping in his blood stream by reintegrating back into his life things he'd left at the monastery door.

The second paper dealing with Merton and the beats considers Merton's embrace of Buddhism and the traditions of the east and how this relates to a parallel interest and involvement by beat writers, and in particular Jack Kerouac. The paper emphases the notion of parallel lives by beginning and ending with autobiographical snap-shots taken within the same time-frame for both Merton and Kerouac. The key aspects of eastern thinking that attracted Kerouac and the beats are identified as the ideas of direct unmediated experience of reality and notions of compassion and awareness of human suffering. Both of these strike a chord with Merton and are epitomized in his 'Fourth and Walnut Epiphany' referred to also in a number of other papers. Clearly these resonate too with the twin themes of inward search for true identity and outward relation to reality and the world at the heart of the conference theme.

The next two papers, by Dick Berendes and Earl Madary and by Tom Del Prete, pick up these twin concerns by drawing on the ideas of personalism originating with Emmanuel Mounier and introduced to the Catholic Worker Movement by co-founder Peter Maurin. Berendes and Madary use personalism as a unifying paradigm for their discussion of Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day and the relationship between contemplation and action. A 'person' is contrasted with an 'individual' in the sense that a person is seen as in relation whereas an 'individual,' on this definition, is isolated. Personalism is therefore

both a way of being and a way of seeing others—it is about identity and relating; it is about self-discovery and other discovery. Each person is of infinite value, each person is an epiphany of God—again the twin themes of recognising 'Christ' in ourselves and in others. Berendes and Madary then take these ideas and develop them in a discussion of the relationship between prayer, conscience, obedience (not least to one's true self) and action before reflecting more specifically on how they relate to Gandhi and non-violence and our responses post September 11th.

Tom Del Prete explores in more detail the inner realization of Christ in us – the 'deeper Christology' referred to above – as the true basis for relatedness. Picking up Merton's exhortation to his brothers that it is better to become 'related' than virtuous, Del Prete contrasts relatedness with virtue in Merton's writing and in particular draws on his reading of Chuang Tzu, Gandhi (again) and the Russian Orthodox idea of *sobornost* which emphasises the Holy Spirit and personal encounter with God. He then explores how relatedness works out in community life and, at a wider scale, contrasts an 'atomistic society' as a collective based on self-interest with a 'personalistic society' as a 'mutuality of personhood and love.' Wider still, cultural and transcultural perspectives are introduced linking in to those of Donald Grayston's paper. For Tom Del Prete the phrase 'with the world in my blood stream' is itself a metaphorical statement of relatedness.

Merton's interest in world faiths is examined by Judith Hardcastle's paper where she explores his interaction with correspondents in Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Judaism. She draws out the creative tension between Merton's rootedness in Christianity and his dialogue with people of other faiths. Again his dialogue appears to be motivated by, rather than despite, his Christianity. And again it is apparent that Merton was way ahead of his time and, in the area of multi-faith, is perhaps still some way ahead of ours too. The key to Merton's embrace outward of those of other faiths (whilst acknowledging the differences) seems to be his ability to journey inward beyond doctrines to the 'intuitions and truths' to be found in the 'inner and ultimate spiritual "ground" that underlies all articulated differences' (*Mystics and Zen Masters*, p.204). Again there is that sense of discovering Christ in that 'part of humanity that is most remote from our own' (*Collected Poems*, p.388).

A number of papers draw on Merton's *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* but Paul Pearson focuses in more detail on this book as a whole, using it as a means to examine the issues Merton was facing in the 1960s and how he responded to them. In particular he considers Merton's development in the intervening years since the *Sign of Jonas* was published in the early 1950s. 'Redeeming the Rhinoceros' relates to the underlying question of the Christian's relationship with the modern world that we continue to struggle with. 'The Night Spirit and the Dawn Air' refers to the importance of place and nature for Merton as he seeks to live in the world, and the role of solitude and stability in rediscovering the 'divine child' within and so experiencing God's mercy, which in turn leads outward in the embrace of compassion. Again the encounter with 'Christ' both inward and outward is very much in evidence—'guard the image of man for it is the image of God.'

The final paper here, by Fernando Beltrán Llavador and Sonia Petisco Martínez, draws together many of the themes of the conference. The first part of the paper contrasts Thomas Merton's universal embrace with trends towards economic globalization. Like Robert Inchausti at the beginning of the conference, they help us to 'rethink our relationship to secular categories dominating contemporary thought' (Inchausti)—specifically here *globalization* and its manifestation in the ethics of ends justifying means and in increasingly compulsive consumption by parties that are essentially unconnected. In contrast Merton's universal embrace derives from finding his true identity in Christ (*as* Christ) which is bound up both with the identity of each and every person in Christ (*as* Christ) and the Trinitarian relationship of Christ in the Godhead. Like Berendes and Madary, and like Del Prete, they make use of the idea of a 'person' as being constituted by love and openness (connectedness, relatedness) to both radical Other and neighbouring others—the Biblical relationship to both God and neighbour. This understanding of 'person' is rooted in the Trinity whereby each member is living only for the others—God is understood as the dynamic of three relationships. To be fully human is to be in the image of God (echoing Pearson) and therefore to reflect this dynamic of relationship whereby self-interest cannot but include the interest of others—the kind of mutuality encountered in the Denver Children's Home with Michael Sobocinski. Paradoxically this very Christian understanding provides both the *rationale* for inter-faith

encounter and transculturalism (as we see also in the papers by Thurston, Grayston and Hardcastle), and the *meeting point* with any on or beyond the margins of our cultural frontiers (Belcastro). Thus this Trinitarian understanding is both the impetus that brings us to the table of dialogue and is itself what we bring to the table.

In the second part of their paper, Llavador and Martínez develop this dynamic of identity and relatedness, appropriately enough, in a detailed discussion of Merton's poem 'With the World in my Blood Stream.' In the poem Merton finds his identity not only in Christ (as we heard in our President's address) but also in 'the star's plasm' that runs in his veins—'the star's plasm,' the stuff of the universe, stardust, the material of which are all made. With the world (literally) in his blood stream Merton finds his relatedness not only with his inmost self (Christ), not only with humanity in a general sense (universal embrace), but with another *person*, a woman, flesh and blood, also Christ incarnated in the world . . . that flows in his blood stream with all the attendant risk, danger, elation, foolhardiness, scandal and betrayal that beset those who would truly embrace the universe.

A fitting point at which to draw this introduction to a close and invite you to experience for yourself the varied and enriching contributions that follow—save to point out that the theme of the conference was inspired by a poem and we therefore begin and end with poetry. We begin with Merton's poem 'With the World in my Blood Stream' and conclude with a (judicious) selection of poems read by participants on that Saturday night, both uproarious and mellow. Enjoy!

Angus Stuart

With the World in my Blood Stream

I LIE ON MY HOSPITAL BED
Water runs inside the walls
And the musical machinery
All around overhead
Plays upon my metal system
My invented back bone
Lends to the universal tone
A flat impersonal song
All the planes in my mind
Sing to my worried blood
To my jet streams
I swim in the world's genius
The spring's plasm
I wonder who the hell I am.

The world's machinery
Expands in the walls
Of the hot musical building
Made in maybe twenty-four
And my lost childhood remains
One of the city's living cells
Thanks to this city
I am still living
But whose life lies here
And whose invented music sings?

All the freights in the night
Swing my dark technical bed
All around overhead
And wake the questions in my blood
My jet streams fly far above
But my low gash is no good
Here below earth and bone
Bleeding in a numbered bed
Though all my veins run
With Christ and with the stars' plasm.

Ancestors and Indians
Zen Masters and Saints
Parade in the incredible hotel
And dark-eyed Negro mercy bends

And uncertain fibres of the will
Toward recovery and home.
What recovery and what Home?
I have no more sweet home
I doubt the bed here and the road there
And WKLO I most abhor
My head is rotten with the town's song.

Here below stars and light
And the Chicago plane
Slides up the rainy straits of night
While in my maze I walk and sweat
Wandering in the low bone system
Or searching the impossible ceiling
For the question and the meaning
Till the machine rolls in again
I grow hungry for invented air
And for the technical community of men
For my lost Zen breathing
For the unmarried fancy
And the wild gift I made in those days
For all the compromising answers
All the gambles and blue rhythms
Of individual despair.

So the world's logic runs
Up and down the doubting walls
While the frights and the planes
Swing my sleep out the window
All around overhead
In doubt and technical heat
In oxygen and jet streams
In the world's enormous space
And in man's enormous want
Until the want itself is gone
Nameless bloodless and alone
The Cross comes and Eckhart's scandal
The Holy Supper and the precise wrong
And the accurate little spark
In emptiness in the jet stream
Only the spark can understand
All that burns flies upward
Where the rainy jets have gone
A sign of needs and possible homes

An invented back bone
A dull song of oxygen
A lost spark in Eckhart's Castle.
World's plasm and world's cell
I bleed myself awake and well.

Only the spark is now true
Dancing in the empty room
All around overhead
While the frail body of Christ
Sweats in a technical bed
I am Christ's lost cell
His childhood and desert age
His descent into hell.

Love without need and without name
Bleeds in the empty problem
And the spark without identity
Circles the empty ceiling.

THOMAS MERTON