



The Pointing Finger

IT WAS IN 1995 (just prior to the Southampton meeting) that Danny Sullivan described the Merton Society to me.

My dormant interest in someone I had read avidly years before, and sporadically since, was aroused, and I was intrigued enough to get myself to the gathering.

To tell you the truth, I was also a little wary of what I might find. I knew Danny was okay, but I imagined I might encounter a load of people obsessed with the relative growth of Merton's toe-nails in the 50s and 60s, and suchlike minutiae. Or could I expect folk quaintly kitted out in Cistercian habits and/or denim? Would there be a lookalike competition?

I MANAGED a day at the Southampton meeting. And what a day it was. The buzz of the participants gripped me quite apart from the quality of the speakers. There was a contemplative awareness, together with a fizzing excitement about ideas rarely encountered since college days; fine bookshops (the Cantrells were there), the sheer friendliness and informality put everyone, from eminent speakers and society officers to the youngest students, on the same level. Being locked in a chapel with seventy people creates its own feeling of solidarity too.

I AM fortunate that some that I met that day have since become good friends, and with many others I have been able to share perceptions, anxieties and ideas across a range of subjects, even if it is only once every two years.

RICHNESS AND diversity are two particular strengths that this unusual group has in spades. I am keen for us to tap more of it in the pages of the Journal in the months ahead.

THIS IS a good moment for celebrating strengths and looking forward. I was lucky enough to celebrate Easter with my family at Worth Abbey, with three hundred other people. One of the points made was the existence of real presences outside the Eucharist. We can encounter the living Christ in the Word as well as in sacraments. I have often found a special sense of the presence of God in gatherings, too. It was there this Easter, and I have experienced it before, notably at Oakham and Southampton. It is the burning heart of the remembered Emmaus story.

THOMAS MERTON himself is curiously unimportant in all this. Bonnie Thurston memorably stood up and began her 1993 Presidential address to the International Merton Society with the provocative sentence 'I am not very interested in Thomas Merton.' She went on to say that the individual Fr Louis was far less important than the legacy of his ideas and concerns: the moon is more significant than the finger pointing at it. And Merton consistently points beyond himself. Bonnie went on to draw out how Merton fought against the heresy of individualism:

TO STRIVE to 'find' only ourselves, to promote only that narrow self, to understand it as a distinct unit set apart from others is precisely the heresy that Merton so magnificently repudiated in his own life. His ability to move so freely and easily in so many circles, to have profound friendships with so many 'sorts and conditions' of people is precisely the mark of the lack of individualism in Merton...[his] rejoicing in his connectedness to others.

BONNIE THURSTON and Merton remind us that we are all in this together: we are the people whom God created, whose flesh he took on, and for whose sins he died. THE NATIONAL Lottery advertises 'It Could Be You'. Actually, it's already us.

'I am not very interested in Thomas Merton'