

# PILGRIMAGE TO PRADES

13–23 May 2002

AS MY TRAIN FROM ENGLAND ARRIVED, there were clouds covering those 'French mountains on the borders of Spain' where Thomas Merton came into the world. How wonderful then next day to awaken to snow-capped Mount Conigou in full sunshine almost at arm's length outside. An auspicious beginning.

The pilgrimage experience unfolded on many levels, from mundane to mystical. Each seemed important. When far from home, getting your emails and doing the laundry are obviously vital. Thomas Merton was present perpetually, however, a reliable guide and bridge between the ordinary and sacred.

Don Grayston of the Humanities Department at Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia, and Judith Hardcastle of the BC Chapter of the International Thomas Merton Society (ITMS), tour leader and co-ordinator respectively, both familiar from Oakham this year, are to be thanked for again arranging this excellent study tour. The 'faculty' included Lynn Szabo, Professor of English and Creative Writing at Trinity Western University, Langley, BC, and Brother Paul Quenon OCSO, a monk for 42 years at the Abbey of Gethsemani. Paul was a novice under Father Louis, as Merton was known to his brother monks and is, like him, a poet and photographer. There were twenty-one 'pilgrims' in addition to these four, all but two from North America.

Ever present, it is the mountain that makes this lovely place sacred. Its stability, height and purity repeatedly capture the attention. Without it, there would be no rain in this place, no rivulets and rivers, no plant life, no fertility,

no agriculture, no people, and so no religion. There would be no churches, no monastery. There would be no beauty, and there would not have been visitors like Ruth and Owen Merton to paint it. *The Seven Storey Mountain* would have begun, and might well have continued, quite differently. Prades, a name meaning 'Green Prairie', is a charming and characterful town. Whatever might happen, it was already a blessing to be there.

Merton was born in a house little changed since 1915, bar the name plaque, less than a minute on foot from the plane-tree lined main square adjacent to the still-functioning 12th century bell tower and the atmospheric, 17th century St Peter's Church, inside which is the tallest baroque altarpiece in Europe. This is where, at Pentecost, we witnessed a delightfully musical confirmation service.

Worship was important for the whole group. Led by Paul, some members did the gentle daily half-hour uphill walk, past poppy-strewn fields and ripening orchards of cherries and apricots, to St Michel de Cuxa for Matins at seven, said and chanted (in Catalan) by the six remaining Benedictine monks and their small congregation. One afternoon the whole group enjoyed a tour of these beautifully carved 12th century cloisters, the majestic 10th century pre-Romanesque church and the circular, womb-like 11th century crypt. Paul also led Vespers after classes, and Compline at night. Nothing was compulsory, but even those absent were glad that meditation, scripture, prayers and psalms remained part of this pilgrimage package.

The twenty formal sessions included

engaging personal discourses from teachers, one of whom refers to Thomas Merton as his 'spiritual director', and another to Father Louis as his 'mentor' and 'spiritual father' even now, years after his death. Lynn took a slightly more academic (but no less personal) approach, concentrating on Merton as poet. Some serious work was to be expected – four of the group were on accredited university courses with papers to write – but on the whole these sessions were fun.

Most were held in an agreeable and peaceful classroom, the town's voting hall. An exception was the introductory, 'What Merton Means To Me', held in the fascinating Pablo Casals museum. This famous cellist lived in Prades for twenty years until his death. He arranged the annual music festival, which is still held, to raise funds needed to restore St Michel de Cuxa, in disrepair since the French Revolution.



The illustration is by Kathleen Archer

In an early presentation, Don asked, 'What is pilgrimage?' suggesting seven components: The Longing (the Awakening) / The Call / Departure / Companions / The Labyrinth (that which tests us—the hero's journey) / Arrival / Bringing Back The Boon (the Blessing). His later themes included, 'Merton's childhood', relevant when we went for two days to St Antonin, 'Merton as Social Critic', and, 'Merton and the East', the latter with slides from Don's own recent pilgrimage to Asia, where he too encountered the Dzogchen master, Chadril Rinpoche. Paul's themes included personal recollections and reflections on Father Louis: 'Merton and Monasticism', 'Merton and Contemplation' and, 'Merton our Brother'.

Here are some extracts from my journal:

**16 May, St Antonin** Four hours by coach, a glimpse of Carcassonne and arrival in this exquisite mediaeval town, exactly as Merton describes it (in *SSM*). We enjoyed a memorable midday meal at the Auberge de la Source on the banks of the Aveyron: one long table under an awning, bright sun, delicious menu, good conversation and plentiful *vin rouge*. Afterwards, a visit to the house Owen built—Villa Diane. The twin poplars have grown very tall. Later, congregating at eventide, we hear the plaintive call of the angelus bell.

**17 May, St Antonin** Good talk from Paul this morning on the terrace of Hotel des Thermes, right under the white cliffs and trees. Loud, competitive croaking from frogs in the river below. Paul reminded us of TM's idea of 'seeds', seeds of contemplation, mentioning the chapters (in *New Seeds*) dealing with what contemplation *is* and what it *is not*. For Merton it was both 'An awareness of life' and 'A long, loving look at the real'. Paul mentioned Genesis: 'God saw that it was good', as the prime example of this kind of contemplative seeing, and

St Augustine: 'God comes into our heart and contemplates nature through us.'

In Montaubin, at the Collège Ingrès (formerly the Lycée—now a co-educational day college) the headmaster greeted us with records of Merton from 1926-7. 'Good at fencing'.

**18 May, Prades** In March '58 Merton has his 'Fourth and Walnut' experience (*Conjectures*) and, Don suggests, after completing his personal, monastic spiritual journey, is now fully awakened to his loving connections with others. That year he writes to the Pope (John XXIII) what Don calls, 'Merton's mission statement'. In '61 he becomes a spokesman for the peace movement. His abbot is instructed by the Trappist authorities to tell him to stop publishing this material, so TM does so privately in what became 'The Cold War Letters'. In '63 the Pope himself published the encyclical *Pacem in Terris* and Merton became free to write openly again... Don mentions the September 11th attacks. He asks what TM would have said. There is lengthy discussion.

Paul eventually steadied us, by remarking that Merton was 'pretty hard to predict', adding (to laughter) that a lot of people might say he would have agreed with them! 'Merton's main concern had to do with a lack of a spiritual subculture in our civilization.' Of his own reaction, Paul said he had not felt at peace until he recollected, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do'. To a silent room, he added, 'Then I realized that what I had to do was pray for Osama Bin Laden'.

**19 May** Last night's poetry reading after the stupendous 'Catalan dinner' went well. *Ibn Abbad* and *Ground Zero* were both hits, but perhaps eclipsed by Paul's own poetry and his reading of Merton's 'found poems'. Sublime!

**20 May, Espirà de Conflent** Convivial evening barbecue and entertainment as guests of the friendly Prades' Merton group once again. Much laughter and singing,

then a late visit to the beautiful church to see the 12th century wood-carved Virgin and Child. The churchwarden here, Ray, a D-Day survivor, is Welsh!

**21 May, Prades** Free morning to inspect the colourful open-air market, which takes up the main and subsidiary squares and most side streets every Tuesday. The sky is blue. The sun is high, and the mountain continues imposing gently upon us its cooling influence. (*Nirvana* means coolness.)

After hearing about his Asian Journey from Don, we had a discussion this afternoon about 'Merton and the Interfaith Encounter'. We note that Merton was very well grounded and centred in his Christian faith before he went to the East in 1968. Paul agrees, saying in regard to interfaith dialogue, 'What Merton had to offer was his whole life... coming to the experience of the wholeness of Christianity'. Paul again: 'In going down deep enough, you get to the water-table from which *all* the springs come up'... 'Through embodying the truth, we become authentic enough for people in other religions to recognize us as on the same spiritual wavelength at the level of truth.' Don added that he thought Chadril Rinpoche recognized TM in this intuitive way as a 'soul friend', and was such a person himself, one who had gone deep enough.

\*On Sunday, a free day, many went high into the hills on the *petit train jaune*, others to Perpignan or Villefranche. For me, after church, it was a beautiful stroll to Eus (perhaps a contraction of 'Emmaus'—pronounced 'oos'), a picturesque town visible from Prades, clustered around its church atop a prominent pinnacle of land next to the river Têt. I had a picnic in the sun amid spectacular scenery, and time for Mertonian solitude, contemplation, photography and the composition of another poem, 'The Monk'.

This pilgrimage has been a superlative

experience. The blessings were manifold. The companionship, real love and kindness among those brought together by the Holy Spirit to follow 'Father Louis', seemed to me particularly special. Lifelong (at least) 'soul' friendships have been discovered and cemented here. 'Going down deep enough' also usually means 'letting go': letting go of attachment to something, to someone, to some cherished idea or false self-image perhaps, to a measure of selfishness certainly.

Merton said (in *Love and Living*), 'Where there is no more selfishness, there is only love'... 'Love is a transforming power of almost mystical intensity'... 'We discover our true selves in love'. These ideas are easier to understand now. Sometimes the sacrifice, the letting-go, is joyful, a release. Such joys are better shared. Often, however, it involves struggle and loss, hence frustration and emotional distress. Isn't it so much easier to bow down and make the necessary surrender when supported by spiritual friends?

I think so, and take this chance to honour my fellow pilgrims in Prades, without exception, offering each one my most heartfelt thanks. It seems we ripened, just like the cherries and apricots in fields beneath that sacred mountain, travelling almost timelessly together towards spiritual maturity in the warmth of the sun and of each other's care, affection and love. From *Love and Living* again: 'Love is not only a special way of being alive, it is the perfection of life'.

As I waited for my train on the final morning, having said my goodbyes, the clouds again covered the mountain. It was perfect. Closure. Completion...

At least, until the next time!

For information about future similar events see Simon Fraser University website: [www.reg.sfu.ca/iess/merton](http://www.reg.sfu.ca/iess/merton) or contact Don Grayston at: [grayston@sfu.ca](mailto:grayston@sfu.ca). The next visit to Prades is scheduled for May 2004.