

THOMAS MERTON'S PLACE IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

I AM GRATEFUL for Michael Woodward's generous invitation to reflect on Thomas Merton's place in the new millennium for *The Merton Journal*. With the recent publication of *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* by such distinguished scholars as Msgr. William H. Shannon, Drs. Christine M. Bochen, and Patrick F. O'Connell, it would appear that Merton is with us to stay. The encyclopedia responds well to "everything you ever wanted to know about Thomas Merton but never dared ask." This is the most helpful resource for Merton readers, both the aficionados and the scholars, until *A Thomas Merton Concordance* appears on the scene. With the publication of the five volumes of Merton letters, as well as a number of volumes containing both sides of the correspondence, such as Merton with Boris Pasternak, Robert Lax, Rosemary Ruether, Ernesto Cardenal (in Spanish), Czeslaw Milosz, "Ping" Ferry, Ad Reinhardt, James Laughlin, Jean Leclercq, and Daisetz Suzuki, we are now in a better position to evaluate Merton's enormous contribution to our times. Added to this the seven volumes of Merton's personal journals, which tell us more about Merton's prophetic voice as we enter a new era.

After the seven volumes of Merton Journals were published, HarperCollins of San Francisco decided to bring out an abridged and

edited version in a single volume, which was titled *The Intimate Merton: His Life from His Writings*. To the editors great surprise and delight it took off in all directions and has now been translated into all the modern languages as well as a planned publication in Chinese and Korean.

Witness also the many Merton conferences and retreats being given all over the world from Poland and Russia to Africa and the Far East. Local chapters of the International Thomas Merton Society have been established in many parts of the world; especially thriving is the one in Brazil which boasts of the largest number of members to date. Some years ago a conference was held in Prades, Merton's birthplace at the foothills of the Pyrennes Mountains in southern France. The Vancouver Chapter in British Columbia, Canada, has been conducting week-long yearly pilgrimages to this picturesque site, which attracts many followers of Thomas Merton. *The Merton Journal* and *The Merton Seasonal* continue to list these events which become more numerous each year. All this seems to indicate that Merton's influence is stronger than ever with no diminishment in sight.

A new entity, The Thomas Merton Foundation, during the past several years of its existence has launched a number of well-attended conferences including one on 'Merton and Sufism'

a few years ago, and another more recently on 'Merton and Orthodoxy' as well as one on 'Merton and Judaism.' The proceedings of these are being made available to the public through Fons Vitae Press of Louisville, Kentucky. The same Foundation hosted a 'Merton Retreat 2002: Spirituality and the Environment' which drew ecologists and environmentalists from around the world to Gethsemani to prayerfully consider our responsibility to planet earth.

Last year the East-West Dialogue group known as M.I.D. sponsored a second week of dialogue between Buddhist and Christian monks at Gethsemani. Although the Dalai Lama was unable to attend this encounter due to his doctor's orders, this second meeting of the 'Gethsemani Encounter' group met at Gethsemani in April of this year for what was considered a more in-depth discussion of our respective witnesses as monks dedicated to peace and justice and a mutual respect for the environment. Plans are afoot to continue these fruitful discussions in the years ahead.

The most recent development, sponsored by the Merton Foundation is a 'Thomas Merton Curriculum' available now for the School Year of 2003. It contains education materials for educators who wish to give students a brief introduction to Merton's life, contemplative spirituality, commitment to social justice, and practice of inter-faith dialogue. It is designed for both college and high school students and can be used in three or four class sessions or else expanded into multi-class or even multi-week units.

I think Merton would be delighted to see his message reaching the younger generation in this way.

How does one account for such a phenomenon? I am convinced that Merton's prophetic voice will have an appeal for persons of every race and religious affiliation because he was speaking honestly and from his own experience to the human person about what really matters in our lives. As Abbot Flavian Burns said in Merton's funeral homily thirty-four years ago: "Father Louis was an artful minister of the Word." And his words continue to touch hearts. Or as Archbishop Jean Jadot, former Apostolic Delegate to the U.S.A., said of Merton in *Thomas Merton: A Film Biography by Paul Wilkes*: "Merton was a kind of prophet" who did not discover new things but found old things and tuned them into a language that speaks to our age.

I foresee Merton scholars pondering more deeply Merton's preoccupation with such areas as inter-racial justice, religious ecumenism and technology, nuclear war and peace (what would Merton make of the recent terrorist attacks?), not to mention the need for a renewed respect for the personal conscience and for a more profound reverence for all persons (young and old) created in the image and likeness of God. Never was Thomas Merton's words of wisdom, his personal contemplative experience of the faith, more necessary than at this time. May the Lord continue to bless the efforts of all who are striving to make Merton's thought a living reality in this new millennium, so that all may live in peace and harmony on this green earth.