

Meeting Thomas Merton

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My introduction to Thomas Merton came through a school chaplain, Father Tony Cornish, who used to teach occasional religion classes at St. Boniface's College, in Plymouth. This particular lesson he started off by telling us a little of the story of Thomas Merton and about the book that contained that story – *Elected Silence*, as it was called in England, better known in the United States as *The Seven Storey Mountain*. (Almost sixty years after it was first published Robert Giroux, Merton's American editor of this book, still expresses his horror at Evelyn Waugh's editing of *The Seven Storey Mountain* and his nerve at changing the title!)

I was very interested in reading the book the chaplain had spoken to us about. All these years later I can still close my eyes and picture the cover of the paperback edition that he held up for us that day. At that time however, the book was long out of print and for some reason I never thought of asking the chaplain to borrow his copy. Instead I hunted in local libraries and bookshops searching for the book but without success. In fact, the only book I could find in print and available at that time in England was *The Monastic Journey* which had just been published. As many readers of *The Merton Journal* will recall there was quite a lengthy period in England when there was a real dearth of materials by and about Merton in print. This began to change, I

would say, with the publication of Monica Furlong's biography, *Merton: A Biography* in 1980.

As *The Monastic Journey* was the only book by Thomas Merton that I'd managed to find I bought it. Looking back it is certainly not the first book I would recommend to anyone asking where to begin reading Merton, especially not a teenager of fourteen or fifteen years old which would have been my age at that time. A few quotations from the jacket blurb will, I trust, serve to illustrate this:

Thomas Merton wrote several books on monasticism including *The Waters of Siloe* and *The Silent Life* which became best sellers. But he also wrote many shorter essays and articles on the monastic life describing its beauties and demands, and emphasizing its essentials: the basic values of silence, solitude, prayer and purity of heart. Some of these were issued by the Abbey of Gethsemani, others circulated in monastic journals and some were never published. A selection, all written during the last decade of Merton's life, is published here in book form for the first time. It reflects his mature thought on both community monastic living and the solitary life...

The first three pieces describe something of the mystery of the monastic vocation and make a strong statement on the basic verities of the monastic way of life. The middle section discusses monastic themes in detail and the book ends with a deeply moving monograph in praise of the hermit life.¹

"A deeply moving monograph in praise of the hermit life...!" – not exactly the reading of most teenagers. But, I read *The Monastic Journey* and although, looking back on it, I probably did not understand much of it, it sowed a seed of desire for me in the same way that *The Seven Storey Mountain* had done for a whole generation of readers in the years after the second world war.

I wanted to read more, and so my "love affair" with Merton began. It is hard to put a finger on exactly what the attraction was – what the attraction is. Initially there was something of a romantic view of monasticism – and it took a novitiate in a Benedictine monastery to break through that veneer.

However, as my own spirituality has grown and developed Merton has frequently been one of the catalysts. Having been brought up in a traditional Catholic family Merton's early writings appealed to that background. But as I continued to read him his writings led me forward into a much broader, deeper, world-embracing spirituality. My interest in ecumenism and inter-faith dialog developed hand-in-hand with my reading of Merton. Similarly my awareness and involvement in social issues.

I cannot, for certain, say those changes

were a result of reading Merton, my spiritual life might have gone in that direction anyway, but Merton was certainly a companion through all these changes and continues to be so.

In attempting to put a finger on the core of this attraction I think I would point to a number of factors though behind them all I think is Merton's searching spirit, and central to that is his quest for God. St. Benedict in his Rule for monks makes it quite clear that the focus of the novitiate is to truly discover whether the novice is seeking God or not. It is not a question of whether the novice is called to a particular kind of ministry or vocation, but simply, whether the novice is seeking God. It was this search that preoccupied Merton.

Merton's calling to seek God, his "love of learning and desire for God,"² led him to the contemplative and ultimately the solitary life. At Gethsemani he mined the Abbey library and the treasures it held of the essential works from the Desert Fathers, the Eastern and Western Church Fathers, the Great Mystics of the Church and other sources. Merton, with his skill in languages, was one of the few who could read these texts in their original languages and, at that stage, many of them had not been translated into English, including some of the works of St. Bernard, one of the founders of the Cistercian Order.

These sources Merton used in his conferences at the Abbey as Master of Scholastics (1951-1955), Master of Novices (1955-1965) and in other lectures at the Abbey from the late forties up until his death in 1968. They also served as well as the basis for many of the books he wrote. Through this study and writing Merton

went back to the great sources of the Christian tradition. As Merton mined these sources he reinterpreted them for the modern world and made them available in an accessible and engaging way to a readership who would never had had access to them previously.

Prior to the Second Vatican Council, certainly within the Catholic Church, spirituality was really the domain of monks, nuns and priests. The average Catholic in the pew went to Church on Sunday (for a mass in Latin), recited the rosary and kept an unread family bible in the cupboard at home. So many of the things we take for granted now were unheard of for the majority of Roman Catholics at this time – lay ministry, married deacons, spiritual direction, retreats, prayer groups, Centering prayer, meditation, – the list is endless. As a rule the study of theology belonged to those who were studying for ordination. (Even religious sisters had little or no decent training in theology, as opposed to “piety.”) The proliferation of universities offering degrees in theology, especially tailoring courses for lay Catholics, is a very recent phenomenon and would have been unimaginable prior to the Vatican Council.

How was Thomas Merton involved with bringing this change about?

With the publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain* on October 6th 1948 Merton achieved the best-seller status he had so desired before his entry to the Abbey along with international recognition. The book was published at a truly unique moment in history. There were vast numbers of servicemen recently returned after the wars in Europe and the Far East; people starting to come to terms with the use of nuclear weapons on Hi-

roshima and Nagasaki, and the horrifying effects on the local population; information coming out of Germany about the Nazi horrors, in particular the concentration camps and the holocaust; a changing world geography with major changes across Europe after the second world war, the setting up of the State of Israel, the partition of India etc.; the rise of communism and the raising of the Iron and Bamboo curtains – the list is endless. Against this background Thomas Merton's story of how one talented young man, gifted at languages and writing, turned his back on the world and found meaning within an enclosed monastery in rural Kentucky, following a strict medieval regime, captivated people.

Many who read *The Seven Storey Mountain* then wanted to read more of Merton's story and devoured the books that flowed from his pen.³ Through these books Thomas Merton introduced vast numbers to the contemplative tradition within Christianity – to the writings of the Church Fathers and the great Christian Mystics.

When he entered the monastery in 1941 he thought he was turning his back on the world. He soon discovered that this was not the case. If the search for God is really genuine we find in that search not only God, but also our sisters and brothers and our true selves. As Merton went deeper and deeper into this journey to God so the world came back to him with a force. The Canadian Merton Scholar Ross Labrie once summed this up in a nutshell saying that Merton introduced contemplation to the world and the world to the monastery.

Merton began to address the pressing issues of his day, viewing those issues

from his perspective within the monastic tradition. For many Catholics, especially in the United States, this application of spirituality and the Church's wealth of teaching on social issues to the issues of the day, was not acceptable. They wanted Merton to write about spirituality only in their narrower understanding of it, this wider application did not sit well, especially with a Catholic community that was at last gaining acceptance and recognition, especially with a Catholic now resident in the White House. As Merton wrote to the Nobel laureate Czeslaw Milosz: “Conservative Catholics in Louisville are burning my books because I am opposed to the war in Vietnam.”⁴ Yet, Merton's position was in line with the Catholic tradition, as well as the biblical prophetic tradition and, with the publication of *Pacem in Terra*, this also soon became the position of the international catholic community led by Pope John XXIII.

Merton's understanding of the Christian tradition of spirituality led him to introduce many to the contemplative dimension of life. It led him to take a prophetic stance in regard to many of the issues facing humankind, issues as pressing today as when Merton wrote about them over forty years ago. It shaped his approach to ecumenical and inter-faith dialogue, leading the way for this dialogue to take place on the experiential level, not solely on the doctrinal level. Finally it shaped his approach to monastic life and to his leadership of monastic reform.

Thomas Merton was continually attracted to earnest manifestations of God's spirit – the poetry of Blake, and Hopkins; the Desert Mothers and Fathers, mystics of many traditions, the Celtic Hermits and the Shakers. The Shakers belief in the

manifestation of the Christ spirit was a realized eschatology, a witness to the living presence of Christ. It was this Christ Merton first caught sight of in Rome as a teenage in the early nineteen thirties and whom he sought, religiously, if you'll excuse the pun, for the rest of his life.

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *The Monastic Journey* (London: Sheldon Press, 1977): jacket blurb.
2. The internationally recognized Benedictine scholar Dom Jean Leclercq used this phrase as the title for his groundbreaking book, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, (New York, Fordham University Press, 1961) which defined monasticisms experiential approach to theology and which sums up very well Thomas Merton's approach to the subject.
3. One effect of this was that *The Waters of Siloe*, Merton's history of the Cistercian Order in the United States, published shortly after *The Seven Storey Mountain*, spent months on the New York Times bestseller list although it is far from one of his most popular books.
4. Thomas Merton, *Striving Towards Being: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz*, edited by Robert Faggen (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), p.175.

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