

## Reflections on the Newly-formed Northern Ireland Chapter

Scott Peddie

*'In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers... I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all of the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed....'*<sup>1</sup>

Meditating on Merton's famous 'epiphany moment' was a powerful catalyst for the formation of the Northern Ireland branch of the Thomas Merton Society. Despite much progress, particularly in recent years, fissures still exist in a society all too frequently demarcated and divided by perceived religious differences.

As we know, Merton was comfortable conversing with Buddhists, Jews, Hindus and Muslims, and was a prodigious letter writer. His natural spiritual curiosity and ability to see past deeply ensconced stereotypes resulted in a plethora of diverse personal friendships. This curiosity was mirrored in his published work which acted as a lens through which his growing readership could focus on points of contact between seemingly irreconcilable and divergent faith systems. Crucially, his entire worldview was underpinned by a deep love of contemplative prayer as a means of understanding the Divine; it was through prayer that his spiritual plurality evolved and grew to maturity.

Merton's firm grounding in the contemplative tradition enabled him to reflect more fully on the nature of Christ, and through this his interest in ecumenical dialogue and understanding grew. Indeed, his own journey can be characterised firstly as an early convert to Catholicism, where he exuded an exclusivist confidence, but which was gradually replaced by a deeper appreciation not only of his own faith, but also that of the wider Christian family.

It is against this backdrop of mutual journeying, understanding and acceptance that Merton is perhaps of most relevance to Northern Ireland. That is at least one of the reasons why the newly formed NI Chapter has generated much interest from diverse quarters. With an informal membership of Presbyterians, Roman Catholics and Moravians, the Christian interest is vibrant, and perhaps not surprisingly, given Merton's affinity with Buddhism, there is also a very welcome input from this faith community also.

Discussions, talks, book reviews and retreats will all form part of the Merton experience in the NI Chapter. The first meeting of the group, in which we got to know each other and discussed our divergent interests in Merton, was held in University Road Moravian Church in Belfast. The second meeting, which focussed on a discussion of Merton's concept of contemplative prayer and how this related to our individual faith perspectives, was hosted by Br. Columba O'Neill O.C.S.O. at Bethlehem Abbey in Portglenone. The Corrymeela Community's Knocklyd Retreat Centre hosted the first NI Chapter day retreat in February 2011. The feedback from the participants was excellent and another day retreat at the same venue is planned for Saturday 11 June where Merton's concept of love will be the focal point for prayer and reflection.

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### Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York, Doubleday 1996).

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## Oakham 2012

Ninth  
Conference  
and  
General Meeting

13-15 April 2012

with

Jim Forest  
Jonathan Montaldo  
and more...

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for call for papers

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