

Conference Impressions, Oakham 2012

Sarah Burrow

'I like to think of Thomas Merton as being a guardian angel to us all'

'Expressions of graciousness to one another'

'I came to this conference for this kind of relationship and fellowship – not easy to find'.

These are some snippets of conversations, giving a hint of the special atmosphere and the environment of the conference.

I was generously invited to write my impressions of the 2012 conference. All those present could add so much more—but these are my impressions and so please receive this as a token of my gratitude for a most memorable time.

T for Teaching: such a wide range of papers and styles, thought-

provoking, mind-extending and (in the best teaching manner) inspiring one both to read more on Merton and to examine one's life balance (again) in the light of TM.

H for Humour: the visual image Jim Forest gave us of his first meeting with Merton—rolling on the floor, clutching his knees laughing uncontrollably will remain with us all I'm sure! And yes, Jim was a friend of Merton and spoke so movingly in his paper. One phrase lives



Keynote speakers: (l-r) Jim Forest, Liz Carmichael and Jonathan Montaldo

with me: 'If Merton has sold millions of books; millions of meals have been served through the work of Dorothy Day'.

O for WORship: (a modest cheat!). I delighted in the Benedictine framework to the day. With so many words during the day, it was wonderful to have so few during worship, simple Taizé chants; silence uniting us all. The Eucharist was the only way possible to conclude the conference.

M for Meditation: the whole ambience of the conference was one of meditation, 'chewing', reflecting, resting in our Lord's wisdom. I enjoyed the early mornings—acknowledging others going for a walk in the freshness, or observing someone gracefully exercising with Tai Chi; others revelling in the cherry trees drenched in blossom.

A is (I need 3 'A's) for Attention, Acceptance and Artist. Attention to detail—the committee and the catering staff. Acceptance—part of the 'graciousness to one another'. And the artist Robert Wright with

his exhibition of abstract art was a wonderful dimension to the conference. Robert in his talk reminded us of Benedict's words, 'Teach us to return to the heart'. He spoke of the trilogy in art between the viewer, the picture and God; how abstract art provides another language, offering us space to contemplate: 'The power lies in the ambiguity'.

S for Silence and Seeing: I loved the way that every talk began and ended in silence. Jonathan in his address said: 'The witness required from us is a transparency rather than a witness of words'.

M for Meeting: six nationalities were represented—delegates from the USA, from the UK, and two from Italy and one from Sweden, Poland and Germany. Friendships made and renewed. There are plans to set up a society in Italy.

Thank you to all who made the conference so special. I look forward to the next one!

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