

The Bishop was pleased — Stephen Dunhill

A few days after his return from Alaska where he had been for 2 weeks in the Autumn of 1968 seeking a possible site for a hermitage, Merton wrote in his journal :

Last Monday - flew to Dillingham (Alaska) over the volcanoes. A fine wild spot - desolate as Siberia. I like the lakes that are to the north of it. Tuesday - a day of recollection for priests there. Many chaplains. I spoke most of prayer. The Bishop was pleased.

The final phrase intrigued me for a long time. Why exactly was the bishop pleased? Was it because of what Merton talked about, or what he did *not* talk about?

The bishop in question was in fact Archbishop Joseph Ryan (1913-2000), who in 1966 was appointed the first Archbishop of the Archdiocese of Anchorage, Alaska. During the war he had served in the Naval Chaplain Corps, being present at the marine landings on Okinawa. Later in his life he was appointed Archbishop for the Military Services, responsible for providing pastoral and spiritual care for Catholics in the United States armed forces. On the face of it an establishment figure, one of a conservative cast who would possibly not welcome any talk about war, civil rights or other religious traditions.

How wrong I was to harbour such thoughts. A closer reading of the Merton's journal entries and letters collected in *Thomas Merton in Alaska* reveal a different story. Rather than having misgivings Archbishop Ryan welcomed Merton with open arms, and appears to have gone out of his way to help him in his search for a hermitage.

In Alaska Merton gave 8 talks to priests and religious, all of which were collected and published in *Thomas Merton in Alaska*. According to Bonnie Thurston, in her article, 'I spoke most of prayer', in *The Seasonal*, volume 35:3, they form 'one of the richest sources for Merton's mature teaching on prayer'.

On the day Merton left Alaska, Archbishop Ryan penned the letter opposite, thanking Merton for 'everything you gave us', and assuring him of a warm welcome on his return. Alas that was not to be. And poignantly one wonders whether this letter ever caught up with Merton before his death in Bangkok?

The original of the letter is held by The Thomas Merton Centre at Bellarmine University. I am grateful to Paul Pearson for providing this copy. The copyright for the letter has not been traced.

ARCHBISHOP'S RESIDENCE
1552 ORCA STREET
ANCHORAGE, ALASKA

October 2, 1968

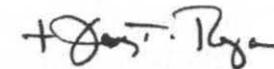
Dear Father Merton,

I really do not know how to express my thanks to you adequately. Having you with us has been a great experience for all who met you and has certainly helped our faith. Thank you very much for everything you gave us. I have written to Father Flavian to thank him for allowing you to come and I invited Father Flavian to visit us here as soon as he might find the opportunity. I suggested to him that he might come with Dom Augustine Moore whom I also have been urging to come.

To have you with us, living as a hermit, would be a great spiritual boon to this great land of Alaska. I pray that you will be back next spring. I will investigate the renting of a proper small house somewhere near Cordova.

May your trip to the Far East be fruitful and may God continue to fill you with an abundance of His Grace.

Sincerely yours in Christ,



+ Joseph T. Ryan
Archbishop of Anchorage