

Meeting Forest – Meeting Merton

Paul Pearson

The first time I met Jim Forest was not in person, but through the pages of Michael Mott's official biography of Merton. It included a story, frequently told by Jim, of his first meeting with Thomas Merton. He found Merton rolling on the floor, with his feet in the air, his face bright red, and his hands clutching the belly in laughter at the smell emanating from Jim's traveling companion's socks after three days hitchhiking to Gethsemani.

I've heard Jim tell this story in person a number of times over the years, including at the Merton conference held in Winchester and organized by David Scott in December 1993 for the twenty-fifth anniversary of Merton's death. That gathering led to the creation of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and from that moment onwards Jim became a firm friend of the Society and a stalwart supporter, graciously speaking at a variety of the Society's events over the years - Southampton, Oxford, Oakham, Edinburgh - right up until the webinar he gave with James Cronin in May 2021.

Jim also used to tell another story of a visit to Gethsemani where the Abbot, James Fox, arranged for him to get a free monastic haircut. Meeting with the Abbot after the hair cut Jim knelt for the Abbot's blessing and recalled the Abbot's hands gripping his head so tightly as he gave the blessing that he thought he would have those fingermarks on his skull for the rest of his life and leaving him with the feeling that he'd been 'seriously blessed'.

All of us who knew Jim were 'seriously blessed' by his presence among us and the way he so freely shared reminiscences of meeting, not just Thomas Merton, but figures such as Joan Baez, Dan Berrigan, Dorothy Day, Thich Nhat Hanh and Henri Nouwen.

Rest in peace 'seriously blessed' friend.

Paul M. Pearson is Director of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University in Louisville, Kentucky and Chief of Research for the Merton Legacy Trust. Resident Secretary of the ITMS, he served as 10th President. He edited *Seeking Paradise: Thomas Merton and the Shakers*, and *Beholding Paradise: The Photographs of Thomas Merton*.