
NEW SEEDS

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A LETTER FROM AMERICA

Dear Friends,

For a number of years now I have been coming to Great Britain to lecture on Thomas Merton. It has been my delight to see the gradual rebirth of interest in Merton on the part of readers and publishers. It is a joy, too, to use the medium of your publication New Seeds to bring you greetings from the International Thomas Merton Society headquartered here in the States. In May of 1989 the Society's first general meeting was held in Louisville, Kentucky and was over-subscribed well before the meeting took place. With some fifty speakers talking at main events and concurrent sessions, over four hundred readers and scholars of Merton gathered with great enthusiasm and with a deep sense of community with one another. The four-days' gathering brought people from all over the United States and Canada as well as a number from abroad.

Perhaps no writer of our time (perhaps of any time) in the field of spiritual literature has called forth such interest in so wide a variety of people. No matter where I go to speak about Merton -- and others have the same experience -- invariably I meet people who have a Merton story to tell. There was, for instance, the sister who was chaplain in a federal prison who said that a prisoner who was serving a life sentence for murder asked her if she could get a book for him. When she said she would try, he asked for The Hidden Ground of Love, the first volume of the letters of Thomas Merton. Another example: Sr. Mary Luke Tobin, who had been a good friend of Merton, was travelling last autumn in Hungary. She was asked to address a group of people interested in Merton. At the end of the meeting a man came up to her with a book that looked well used. It was a copy, in Hungarian, of Merton's Thoughts in Solitude. He confided to Sr. Mary Luke that it was the one book he and his wife had taken with them on their honeymoon.

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Why this enduring attraction for so many and such diverse people? Perhaps one explanation is that many people who read him are able to identify their story with his. They see a human person struggling to find meaning and to confront the absurdity that life so often appears to be. He knew loneliness and alienation. His clay feet are there for us to see. Like ourselves he had attachments he had to get rid of and illusions he had to unmask. He was vulnerable in his humanness, yet always honest and striving to be the person God called him to be. He was a man in whom joy ran deep and for whom life and faith were wondrous gifts never to be taken for granted. So much of him was so like what we all are that we find ourselves mirrored in his writings.

But there is more than a shared humanness that makes him attractive. He had a deep wisdom and a marvellous facility with words. He had the ability to articulate, often with brilliance and outstanding perceptiveness, the vagaries of the human condition: hope vying with despair, love with hatred, alienation with communion. He could reach deep into the human heart and surface for his readers questions which, till they read him, lay hidden and unasked, though struggling for expression within their own hearts. Though Merton was not, I think, a creative thinker, he was a creative synthesizer: he knew how to raise to a new level of understanding people's perception of God, prayer, and human life.

In short, Merton is a person who, through his writings, enters into conversation with you. He tells you about himself and you see yourself as in a mirror and, not only yourself, but every person. He digs so deeply into raw humanity that his words, I believe, will reach women and men for ages to come. Because I believe this I welcome the formation of the Thomas Merton Society in Great Britain and hope that contacts with the International Merton Society will prove fruitful for all of us.

William H Shannon

General editor of the Thomas Merton Letters.