

## A Retreat at Gethsemani

by

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There must be thousands like myself who have been encouraged into the Roman Catholic Church by Merton's writings, especially his biography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. This was among the books I devoured from the shelves of Hampstead Public Library in the late '50s. I remember in particular *The Waters of Siloe* and *Bread in the Wilderness*. The plain, direct language he used to speak of the life of faith was very refreshing and attractive, as was his European cultural background which I needed to broaden my mind. There have been gaps in my Merton reading over the years, but now I have come back to him, the First Merton Conference last year helped me to realise that going to Gethsemani and making a retreat there would enrich and deepen my assimilation of his work enormously. I was advised that the Abbey gets booked up a year in advance, so I wrote immediately. Their reply came in August, offering me eight days at the end of May this year, and I was then able to construct an American journey around that time. Throughout his writings Merton describes the Kentucky countryside in all its moods and seasons, and one knows that it played a vital part in his heart's worship and praise of the Creator. I wanted to allow my experience of this and of the monastic rhythm to seep into every pore and give me a brief taste of what he lived all the time.

I arrived at the Abbey in a rainstorm on the Sunday afternoon of Memorial weekend and was given a room in the superb, re-modelled Retreat House overlooking the valley, trees and hills. You are left to find your own way about and this can be quite confusing for the first day. You are requested to be silent in most areas, so it was not surprising that I got lost on my first foray to find the Abbey church. There is an elaborate system of passages, stairs and doors to enable retreatants and monks to move in and out of the Church without encroaching on each other's space, while endeavouring to dispense with the physical barrier of 'enclosure'.

Consequently I had to be rescued from the enclosure where I was found by the Trappistine sister who had greeted me at the lobby desk. I was sent back to the Retreat House through the monks' garden in some confusion, thereafter making a special effort to pay attention to labels and notices on doors and to follow the crowd - a first lesson in humility.

I decided from the beginning that I would skip Vigils at 3.15 am, though the bell wakes you up. I usually slept again until 5.20 am, rising for Lauds at 5.45, then Mass at 6.15. Breakfast at 7.00 is followed by Terce at 7.30, then you are free until Sext at 12.15 pm. I was immediately entranced by the music - the settings to the Grail translation of the Psalms and hymns are wonderful. Fr. Chrysogonus Waddell has certainly done a spectacular job of adapting the original plainsong to the rhythms of the English language, so that it feels right to sing and easy to pick up. His setting of the 'Hail Holy Queen', sung at the end of Compline every day, is spine-tingling in its unearthly beauty. The sequence of psalms seems to have been much simplified in recent years, alternating odd with even weeks, and you soon discover which cards and booklets to use for the different offices. So the first day was spent accustoming myself to the physical rhythm of the hours and the layout of the Retreat House, finding out how to lock the door of my room - and even switch on the table lamps, which of course is different.

Since one conducts one's own retreat, I had to choose a theme in preparation and had looked out various scripture readings on 'spiritual childhood' to bring with me. Albert Nolan OP, in his book, *Jesus Before Christianity* (DLT, 1992), describes the rigidly stratified society of Jesus' time where children had no status at all, no prestige, they did not count, were without legal importance, and consequently at the bottom of the pile, nonentities and ignored. Far from the child being an image of innocence, sweetness and naivety, Jesus was very aware of the immature and irresponsible perversity of children at times and uses this trait for the parable, applied to the Pharisees, of children who refuse both the joyful game of weddings and the mournful game of funerals (Mt 11:16-17). The child as image of the realm of God is a symbol of those who have the

lowest place in society, the poor, the beggars, disabled, prostitutes and tax-collectors, and it is precisely this identification as 'little ones' which Jesus signals to his disciples, who are quarrelling over the highest places in the kingdom, by setting a child before them - only those who make themselves like children in this sense will be admitted. It was this emptying, nothingness and littleness, of which Merton speaks much when writing of prayer, that I wished to explore.

I remembered something we had heard in the Winchester Chapter on Merton's first Cassian tape: that we cannot pray in a focussed way all the time, human beings need some variety of activity to match their physical/psychic/spiritual make-up, and I decided to split the morning and afternoon periods into hour-long sessions of prayer, reading, listening to tapes and walking/photography. This worked well, in spite of the rain which fell in abundance during the week and prevented walks on five of the eight days. However, I was happy to sit in the Lobby and chat to people who were also in search of contact to vary their days. Several were amazed to hear that I'd come all the way from Britain for this experience and I wondered how often the Abbey receives guests from overseas as simple retreatants rather than as scholars or specialist visitors. On Tuesday morning I paid a courtesy visit to Fr. Alan Gilmore, the Guest Master, to introduce myself. When I told him that I'd chosen 'spiritual childhood' for my theme, he said, 'you couldn't have a better' which was very affirming and encouraging. He finds it easy to chat and told me he had been a pall-bearer at Merton's funeral; also that he remembers passing through the church when Tom was kneeling for Confession - his face was like a child's.

The terrace outside the retreatants' dining room was beautiful with purple flags when I was there. At the northern end, it has a lovely bronze of mother and child called 'Epiphany' and as you walk up the slope towards the back of the Abbey church you come to the graves of monks buried outside the enclosure. Many are buried further up beyond the low railing within the enclosure, each with the identical white cross which we know from photographs. Merton's grave is one of those you are allowed to visit and there is a faint hollow in the grass where people have stood over the

years. I got into the way of spending a few moments there after Compline each evening, having a word about what I desired of God during this retreat and in thanksgiving for the journey so far. It was unutterably moving to be there in the wet grass, so quiet and still at the day's end, the pigeons and American robins in their random chorus, the clouds clearing to the north, whispering over the 'knobs' and rain drops splotching from the monastery roof.

I had not imagined this location of the monks' cemetery to be so open to the view, perhaps I thought it would be more hidden as they are 'hidden' in life. But it seems natural to give them the best view of all in death. From there one has a superb range over all the hills from the northeast round to the south - the further ones clad still in their forest covering, the nearer slopes with mown grass and trees planted to enhance the perspective. Over the last 150 years it has become a man-made landscape, certainly, in the middle-range at least, through the farming activities and forest management of the monks. This does not, however, detract from its extraordinary beauty but emphasises the line of the slopes and contours, which are more pronounced than one expects. This small area of hilly land - the 'knobs' - set among the more rolling country of Kentucky could not have been more favourable for the seclusion which the original founders must have sought and has the same feel of a *paysage priant* which is evident at Assisi and other places where prayer has long been valid.

You are encouraged to bring your personal 'walkman' on retreat, since there is a variety of tapes to borrow from the Library, and I had soon chosen a couple of Merton's to listen to. In the first one on Cassian he is very amusing about working too hard and especially on Christmas decorations in the Abbey! The second one reveals him as very funny on 'what is the Church'. He says it is certainly not the Vatican and Curia - even if a bomb fell on them, the Church would still exist, and can you imagine all those files going up in smoke? One reflects that about this time he was being forbidden to publish his writings on peace and the Vietnam War, so his irony was personally felt. When I returned these tapes, I noticed that a 7-tape presentation of a 1996 symposium held in the States on St Thérèse

of Lisieux was still on the table after a couple of days. It seemed to be waiting for me, since my theme was so close to that of her life, and in fact she is constantly a very important person to me. The final two tapes were ground-breaking and simply rivetting - one dealt with her emotional losses, primarily of her mother, and how she mirrored her mother onto Pauline, her father and Marie successively until her first communion when it definitively became Jesus who mothered her as she was fused with him in love (she actually uses the word 'fusion'). She then became able to 'mother' others, even her own sisters.

This tape contained a rich understanding of Thérèse as a woman and of her emotional and psychological development. The other was entitled 'St Thérèse, Doctor of the Church' and explored her teaching methods both in her family letters, of which there were many to aunts, uncles and cousins from Carmel, as novice mistress and in her direct, prophetic use of scripture when it was highly unusual for mere nuns to do so and when the scriptures generally were inaccessible to them. The conclusion was that it would be entirely appropriate, considering the universality of her appeal and mission and the enormous influence her 'Little Way' has had on our century, for her to be declared 'Doctor of the Church' on the centenary of her death in October this year. This was fulfilled by the Pope very recently on his visit to France for the World Youth Day.

Fr Alan showed the hour-long film of Merton's life on Tuesday afternoon in the Conference room as he welcomed the week's retreatants to the Abbey. I had seen it in Winchester but it definitely repays further viewing. I was struck on this occasion by the global nature of Merton's approach - the breadth of his mind and heart to be into so many aspects of faith and modern life, and his unfailing ability to put his finger on the crux and core of each question. I believe this is why his appeal continues for so many today; he was able to see the truth of things beneath appearances and to speak out where there was a lack of truth, so near had he come to the truth himself through all his struggles.

Fr. Alan also explained a little of the present life of the Abbey: that there are 75 monks and a Trappistine sister who is visiting from Our Lady of the Redwoods, California, working alongside the monks in their daily routine, and pulling her weight in the Community. Fr. Matthew Kelty is the Retreatants' chaplain and gives a talk for half an hour after Compline every evening. His first talk was good, he quoted Frost, Tennyson and Emily Dickinson. He is obviously a great poetry-lover and a character. You cannot specify a theme since he wanders from one association to another, mentioning the Holocaust, Dutch Jews, and Edith Stein. Another evening, he read Edith Sitwell's 'Still Falls the Rain', a beautiful poem about the blitz in 1940, a story about James Dean and Alec Guinness from the latter's autobiography and spoke of the failure of the Cross being Christ's glory, of pain and suffering being necessary for salvation.

Half-way through the week I began to feel very tired – the effect of always waking at 3.15 am with the Vigils bell and not always dropping off to sleep again – and decided reluctantly that I would have to take a siesta after dinner before the afternoon session of activities, and thus to miss the 'little' hour of None. I dozed through the quarter bells of the church clock but woke around 3.00 pm feeling well refreshed and able to last through until after the evening talk. It is quite a different rhythm to get acclimatised to and the body takes its own time to do so, I find, as one gets older, it's no good trying to force the pace, especially as one line of the psalm at Sext leapt out at me: 'Enough for me to keep my soul tranquil and quiet' – how glad I was to feel that this was all God wanted me to do for these days. On Wednesday morning when I went down to put postcards in the tray in the Lobby, another retreatant got into conversation and offered to take me to the small brick church of St Thomas, nine miles away on the Bardstown road. Since it was fine, we went straight away, in his enormous Cadillac (which was another kind of experience) to this first Roman Catholic church to be built west of the Alleghenies in 1812. Bishop Flaget led a mission over the mountains from Maryland, building his log cabin first in 1806, then the church next door – a practice, as it turned out, for building the Bardstown Cathedral in 1816. This whole area south of and including Louisville is very

much a Catholic part of Kentucky – settlements with names such as Holy Cross, Loretto, St Francis and St Catherine being indications, as are the miniature Lourdes Grottoes with the Blessed Mother in almost every front garden. The log cabin was the first I had seen and amazed me by being two-storied! Upstairs the bedrooms had string beds with patchwork quilts and were lined with planks nailed to the inner curved faces of the split logs. The church was beautiful, with a brightly coloured fanlight in a very classical-colonial style; we were able to inspect the inside because the organist and a friend were preparing the music for a wedding on Saturday. They were charming to talk to and wished us God's blessing when we parted. I was most grateful to Dave Walkey for taking me, he was a regular visitor to Gethsemani and offered himself to God to be used for others on each occasion; such simplicity of faith was very moving, as was the warm welcome I received everywhere.

I had taken out *Celtic Light* – a re-publishing of Esther de Waal's *A World Made Whole* for Grace, the Retreat Secretary, since it is unobtainable in the States. During our brief chat she had asked me if I would like to speak to Br. Patrick Hart, to which I had replied that I was sure he was far too busy. No, she said, he had heard there was an English lady on retreat and would like to meet her. It was quite awesome the privileges I was getting on this retreat. On Thursday morning Br. Patrick hauled me out of the breakfast queue and we took our coffee and cake to a corner where chat was allowed. I gave him warmest best wishes from the TM Society of Britain and Ireland and the Winchester chapter in particular. He said he was very much looking forward to the Panel of Journal Editors at the Second Conference at Oakham next year and to visiting Fr. Hilary Costello at Mount Saint Bernard's. He also spoke of Donald Allchin's visit to Bellarmine to open the new location of the Merton Center in the WL Lyons Brown Library in October and of how most of the work will be done with the publication of the seventh and final journal volume at the end of the year. Then he said 'Have you been to the Hermitage?' When I said no, I was sure there would be somebody using it, he said he would find out if in fact it was vacant and get Fr Alan to take me. I couldn't believe it, since I

had not expected such a visit and it had certainly not been in my mind to initiate a request.

At 9 o'clock Fr Alan knocked on my door and said he could take me now, as he had brought the truck round because of the wet track. It is only eight minutes' walk from the back of the monastery, down a dip and up into the forest, not as much in the wilds as it sounds in Merton's writings. However, it is wonderfully peaceful and silent, with a clear view of the 'knobs' of Kentucky, and trees on three sides. There is still a woodpile on the verandah and some of the old stools about the place. In the big room are one or two of his pictures and a couple of photographs of him, although most of his artefacts have gone to the archive at Bellarmine. Behind, in the tiny oratory, are two of his icons and two hand-woven folk rugs in the Greek Key design; the famous picture of the Shaker tree hangs still in the kitchen and the air resonates with Merton's strong spirit beyond the plain breeze-block structure. The quality of the silence is impressive and could clearly be appreciated fully only when spending time there in solitude. In the truck on the way back we talked about Merton's individuation and how his personality had come full circle; how he realised this at Polonnarua, so there was nothing left for him to 'do'; and how we couldn't imagine his being 82 this year. Fr Alan also told me he had provided Merton with the work jacket to match his jeans which appears in all the photos - he'd been Wardrobe Master at the time. On the way round the back of the monastery there's a lovely 'Jesus' graffiti on a lintel of the barn (the one that burned down). Fr Alan says it gets freshened up whenever there's a tin of paint around. My gratitude for a wonderful morning was beyond words, I felt I could never adequately express my thanks for everyone's kindness in giving me all these privileges but I tried.

Later in the week Fr Alan lent me *The Music of Silence* by David Steindl-Rast OSB to read, about the rhythm of the monastic hours and the two sorts of time - *chronos* and *kairos*. The seven hours of monastic praise mark different stages in the day's work, when it is 'time' to do different things: waiting for God to come (Vigils), praise for God's coming (Lauds), to start the day's work (Terce), to keep going in the heat of midday (Sext)

and so on, up to the day's completion and sleep (Compline). They also provide an opportunity (*kairos*) to invite God to enter the round of daily activities, to be present and to reveal himself to us afresh. This is quite different from the time we keep with our clocks and watches, though patterned very closely on the agricultural cycle of the early monks, so that one feels continuously that one is also close to the soil, following the sun's movement and relating to one's own bodily rhythms. I found I needed the full eight days to allow myself to sink into an appreciation of this, of how basic it is to our human life and how necessary to recover and incorporate a respect for these rhythms into our lives in the modern world, much of which is marked by artificiality, meeting deadlines and the need for speed. The book's endpapers show the angels of the hours from a splendid Florentine original, with their different robes which the text elaborates. I hope it will soon be in print again, preferably with the CD which accompanied the original publication

On Friday morning the week's retreatants left and the Retreat House was quiet, so I introduced myself to Fr Matthew and we had a good talk. He was most interesting about his nine years as a hermit in Papua New Guinea and his relations with the villagers near his hermitage. He used to patch their clothes on a treadle sewing machine he'd acquired, which made them beholden to him. They gave him gifts and fruit in return and when he spent time away, his house always remained safe and untouched; he was the holy man who lived on the mountain to pray, so he was a respected member of the community whose role they perfectly understood. He was hilarious that evening in his talk, saying that we'd soon have computer screens in the choir stalls with all the hours and music programmed in so that no one would be fumbling round for their place. You would just press the button marked 'Vespers' and up it would all come. And since screens come in peaceful green or mystic blue, we'd have mystic blue to spread the glow around! The Skakel chapel resounded to gales of laughter - all the new guests were hugely enjoying themselves

On Sunday you get an extra hour in bed before Lauds at 6.45 am, which was wonderful. Mass was at 10.30 and was that of Corpus Christi,

my favourite feast, so there was a procession of all the Community, followed by retreatants and people from the surrounding district, all with candles, to the Skakel chapel at the end of the Liturgy. It was a very festive scene on the steps afterwards, people chatting, children running around and the June sun brilliant on the white stonework. Such a release after a rainy week and a solid downpour the previous day. I had really felt the tranquillity and peace of my phrase from Ps 131 over the previous few days and felt it was a fitting note for the end of my retreat, resting in God's loving arms who had truly lavished consolation and tenderness on me. In the afternoon I paid a visit to the Blessed Sacrament - you could *feel* the whole earth rejoicing in anticipation of its redemption by the risen Christ delighting to be with his people. I then went for a walk to the Statues, past what I take to be Monk's Pond and through the woods, very pretty and fresh after the rain.

On my last morning at the Abbey packing and departure were brief. I paid quick visits to Fr Alan and Grace to say goodbye and thankyou once again, then was on my way to Bardstown and the Cantrells' Art Gallery. It was very special to see Jim and Jeanette again after their visit to Southampton for the Conference. After buying the books and tapes I required we had lunch together at a sandwich bar and I heard the story of how the Holy Spirit had pointed them in the direction of new premises following an increase in the rent at Spalding Hall. They were to move in July and were busy with preparations and the refurbishment of their new home. I then visited the Proto-Cathedral of St Joseph and the town museum in Spalding Hall, which is very good. The afternoon was full of Kentucky thunderstorms. Between two of these I made my way to the Loretto Sisters' mother house at Nerinx, about forty miles from Bardstown and twelve from Gethsemani, where I was to spend two nights before the homeward flight. I appreciated the gentle change from the monastery routine and was able to meet many of the retired sisters with their interesting lives. On the final morning in Kentucky I drove into Louisville and was taken by Erlinda Paguio, Treasurer of the ITMS, for a visit to the Merton Center in its beautiful new building at Bellarmine. This was the last treat of this

remarkable two weeks and an appropriate climax, though of course I could have spent much longer looking and talking, since there is a great deal to see.

I have difficulty in assessing, or even realising, the full value of this experience as yet. My first feeling was that God for me was in the people I met, all of whom were kind and welcoming, going out of their way to see that I visited and saw everything. No doubt, further reverberations will make themselves felt for some time to come, as I revisit the scenes and feed on the memories. I felt very strongly that I wanted to share as much as I could, since to my knowledge no one has written in the *Journal* or the *Seasonal* about their own personal retreat to the place which Thomas Merton called home.

