

# MEETING THOMAS MERTON

The address given at the meeting of the  
Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland  
at St Lawrence Church in Winchester, England,  
29th November 2003

ONE OF THE ODD THINGS ABOUT Thomas Merton is that one occasionally runs into people who relate stories of meeting him at times and places far from where Merton actually was. The story tells I've run into take offense if one tries to convince them that the encounters they remember could not possibly have occurred. Their memories are more real to them than anything that happened in the past hour. They ran into him serving soup at a Catholic Worker house in St Paul, Minnesota. They discovered him in the main reading room of the New York City Public Library. They happened to meet him at the National Gallery in London. He had just gotten out of prison for anti-war activities. He was married and had children. He was unmarried but living with a model. He had become a Buddhist monk. He was a Hindu ascetic. He was a Sufi. He was on his way to Nepal to disappear among the mountain hermits.

The oddest memories are those placed after his death. It turns out he didn't die at the Red Cross Conference Center near Bangkok on the 10th of December in 1968 but slipped away and has been living incognito ever since, through the mirage of death at last escaping the imprisoning grip of his abbot, the Vatican, Catholicism and even Christianity.

I rarely raise objections when I hear such tales. My supposition is that what seems to be a memory is in fact a combination of intimate wish and vivid dream, but so ultra-real that it has proved more enduring than many waking experiences.

All these stories remind me of how deeply Thomas Merton has entered the

lives of many of his readers and what a key figure he remains. He has become part of our dream population.

His influence has been wide spread. In my travels I can't recall visiting a country in which I didn't encounter people with a passionate interest in Merton. Even in Soviet Russia, when the iron curtain seemed indestructible and where imported western books were extraordinarily hard to come by, I occasionally met people who had obtained and treasured volumes by Thomas Merton.

We are part of that crowd of beneficiaries. Though few of us met him face-to-face and perhaps none of us possesses any dreams-turned-memories about him, Merton has nonetheless touched our lives to such an extent that he has managed to bring us together here in Winchester to mark the tenth anniversary of the founding of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland.

It is very nearly 35 years since he died, only 53 years old. And here we are, wondering about his place in a new century. Will there be a similar meeting ten years from now? Or is Thomas Merton becoming dated?

These are not questions that I can answer with confidence. It's a mystery why certain lives touch us so powerfully, to the extent memorial societies like ours spring up. But there is never a guarantee that the next generation will be similarly interested.

Each of us has a memory of Merton's entrance into our lives. Usually it has to do with coming upon one of his books. It is the same for me.

I recall being an eighteen-year-old boy waiting for a bus in Manhattan's Port

Authority Bus Terminal. It was 1959 and I was on leave from my Navy job at the U.S. Weather Bureau. Christmas was a few days away. I was en route to a monastery for a week-long stay. Until that moment, the closest I had come to monastic life was seeing a film called *The Nun's Story* starring Audrey Hepburn. With a little time on my hands, I was browsing a carousel full of paperback books that was off to one side of the waiting room's newsstand and came upon a book with the odd title *The Seven Storey Mountain*, by someone named Thomas Merton.

The author's name meant nothing to me. It was, the jacket announced, "the autobiography of a young man who led a full and worldly life and then, at the age of 26, entered a Trappist monastery." There was a quotation from Evelyn Waugh, who said this book "may well prove to be of permanent interest in the history of religious experience." Another writer compared it to Augustine's *Confessions*.

It proved to be a can't-put-it-down read for me. In the bus going up the Hudson Valley, I can recall occasionally looking up from the text to gaze out the window at the heavy snow that was falling that night. Merton's story has ever since been linked in my mind with the silent ballet of snow flakes swirling under street lights.

In 1948, the year *The Seven Storey Mountain* was published, Merton was only 33. His book had been in the shops eleven years when, in its umpteenth printing, it reached my hands.

Had I known it, the book's author was now quite a different person than the Merton I envisioned on my first reading of his autobiography. The Thomas Merton I imagined had found his true home on the 10th of December 1941, the day he came to stay at the Abbey of Gethsemani, and was as firmly and

peacefully rooted there as an oak tree in a national park. He was that blessed man who finds not only faith but the place to live that faith, and though accidentally made famous by a book, was living happily in medieval obscurity in rural Kentucky.

I would later discover that the actual Thomas Merton, far from being happily rooted, was in fact eager to transplant himself. It wasn't something he mentioned in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, but he had found sleeping in a crowded Trappist dormitory hard going and often found his monastery factory-like. He had dreams of becoming a hermit, but there was no tradition of solitary life in his order.

As it happens, 1959 was the year he made a major effort to get permission to move. His idea was to become a hermit associated with a more privative monastery somewhere in Latin America, with Mexico the leading contender. On the 17th of December 1959, just a few days before I began reading *The Seven Storey Mountain*, he had been on his knees before the Blessed Sacrament opening a letter from Rome that told him, though his request was viewed with sympathy, permission could not be given for him to leave the Abbey of Gethsemani. "They were very sorry," he noted in his journal later that day.

They wanted the right words to pour balm in certain wounds. But my departure would certainly upset too many people in the Order as well as outside it. They agreed with my superiors that I did not have an eremitical vocation. Therefore what they asked of me was to stay in the monastery where God had put me, and I would find interior solitude.

[*The Intimate Merton*, p.146]

Two cardinals had signed the letter. And yet the Merton I imagined was not altogether different from the actual Merton. He read the letter

with detachment, without anger, resentment or the temptation to disobey. In his journal he commented:

The letter was too obvious. It could only be accepted. My first reaction was one of relief that at last the problem had been settled.

He found himself surprised that he wasn't at all upset and felt no disappointment but rather "only joy and emptiness and liberty." He saw the letter as bearing news of God's will, which more than anything else was what he was desperate to know. "I accept it fully," he wrote.

So then what? Nothing. Trees, hills, rain. Prayer much lighter, much freer, more unconcerned. A mountain lifted off my shoulders—a Mexican mountain I myself had chosen.

Yet even that day he had in mind the importance of replying to the letter, if only to explain what he understood the hermit's vocation to be and what drew him in that direction. If he was not to be allowed to become a hermit at another monastery, then perhaps the day might come when there would be a place for hermits within the Trappist context.

It was thanks to Dorothy Day, leader of the Catholic Worker movement, that I came in closer contact with Merton. I first met Dorothy a few days before Christmas in 1960, just a year after reading *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Once again I was on leave from my Navy job in Washington, D.C. My first few days were spent at Saint Joseph's House in Manhattan, but one day I went to the Catholic Worker's rural outpost on the southern tip of Staten Island, the Peter Maurin Farm. In the large, faded dining room of an old farmhouse, I found half a dozen people gathered around a pot of tea and a pile of mail at one end of a large table. Dorothy Day was reading letters aloud.

The only letter I still recall from that

day's reading was one from Thomas Merton. It amazed me that they were in correspondence. The Merton I had met in the pages of *The Seven Storey Mountain* had withdrawn from "the world" with a slam of the door that was heard around the world, while Dorothy Day was as much in the world as the mayor of New York. Also I recalled Merton's description of the strict limits Trappists placed on correspondence.

I had assumed he wrote to no one outside his family. Yet here he was exchanging letters with one of America's more controversial figures. Merton told Dorothy that he was deeply touched by her witness for peace, which had several times resulted in arrest and imprisonment.

You are right going along the lines of *satyagraha* [Gandhi's term for nonviolent action; literally the power of truth]. I see no other way... Nowadays it is no longer a question of who is right but who is at least not criminal... It has never been more true than now that the world is lost in its own falsity and cannot see true values.

In this letter, and many similar 'Cold War Letters,' Merton would write during the last decade of his life, one met a Merton who at first seemed quite different from the Merton of *The Seven Storey Mountain*; yet, in fact, the reader looking for a more socially engaged, war-resisting Merton will find much evidence of him in the autobiography. It was in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, after all, that he explained why he had decided not to fight in World War II, though he was prepared for noncombatant service as an Army medic. In a passage which must have startled many readers of the autobiography, appearing as it did just after the war, he explained:

[God] was not asking me to judge all the nations of the world, or to elucidate all the moral and

political motives behind their actions. He was not demanding that I pass some critical decision defining the innocence and guilt of all those concerned in the war. He was asking me to make a choice that amounted to an act of love for His truth, His goodness, His charity, His Gospel... He was asking me to do, to the best of my knowledge, what I thought Christ would do... After all, Christ did say, 'Whatsoever you have done to the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.' [SSM, 311-12]

In the same book, Merton had recorded the experience of being a volunteer at a house of hospitality on 135th Street and Lenox Avenue in Harlem in the months that preceded his choosing the monastic life. He described Harlem as a

divine indictment against New York City and the people who live downtown and make their money downtown.... Here in this huge, dark, steaming slum, hundreds of thousands of Negroes are herded together like cattle, most of them with little to eat and nothing to do. All the senses and imagination and sensibilities and emotions and sorrows and desires and hopes and ideas of a race with vivid feelings and deep emotional reactions are forced in upon themselves, bound inward by an iron ring of frustration: the prejudice that hems them in with its four insurmountable walls. In this huge cauldron inestimable natural gifts, wisdom, love, music, science, poetry, are stamped down and left to boil... and thousands upon thousands of souls are destroyed. [SSM, 345]

It's an easy leap from these sentences to his essays about racism written in the sixties.

Anguish and rage warm many pages in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. The distress with structures of violence and social cruelty that is a major theme of his later writings is evident in the younger Merton as well. If there is a difference in later life, it is simply that the older Merton no longer regarded monastic life as a short cut to heaven. Rather he saw it as a place to which some are called, but in no way a "higher"

vocation than any other state in life to which God calls His children. The question is thus not to seek a "best" vocation but rather to seek God's will in the particular context of one's own temperament and circumstances. The challenge God gives each of us is to become a saint.

After receiving my discharge from the Navy in the early summer of 1961, I joined the Catholic Worker community in New York City. I thought it might be a stopping point on the way to a monastery.

Dorothy knew of my interest in Merton's book and the attraction I felt for monastic life. She shared Merton's letters with me. Then one day she gave me a letter of his to answer. He had sent her a poem about Auschwitz and the Holocaust that he had written during the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, 'Chant to Be Used Around a Site for Furnaces.' In his letter to Dorothy, Merton described it as a "gruesome" work. I wrote to tell Merton of our appreciation of the poem and our plans to publish it. It would serve, I commented, as *The Catholic Worker's* response to the Eichmann trial.

Not many days later I had a response from Merton in which he noted that we live in a time of war and the need "to shut up and be humble and stay put and trust in God and hope for a peace that we can use for the good of our souls." A letter to me from Thomas Merton! I could not have felt more elated had I received the map revealing the location of pirate gold.

Though I didn't fully appreciate it at the time, that single sentence revealed a great deal about the long-term struggles in which Merton was engaged. I thought what he said was aimed at me (how apt the advice was!), but, as was so often the case in his letters, he was addressing himself

as well. He had enormous difficulty shutting up, feared he was lacking in humility, and often resisted staying put.

Though by now I had read several of his books, my own idea of Merton was still two-dimensional. I could not imagine he had problems being humble and staying put.

In December 1961, Merton suggested that perhaps I would like to come to the monastery for a visit. There was never any question in my mind about accepting though there was an issue of the *Catholic Worker* to get ready for publication and a night class in English Literature to finish at Hunter College. I was able to leave for Kentucky early in February 1962.

I had no money for such a journey—at the *Catholic Worker* one received room and board plus small change for minor expenses, subway rides and the like. I never dared ask even for a penny, preferring to sell The *Catholic Worker* on street corners in Greenwich Village, keeping a small portion of the proceeds for my incidental expenses and giving the rest to the community. A companion on the *Catholic Worker* staff, Bob Kaye, joined me. With our nearly empty wallets, we had no alternative but to travel by thumb. Before sunrise one damp winter morning we loaded up on Italian bread still warm from the oven of the Spring Street bakery and set off. I can still recall standing in nighttime sleet at the side of a highway somewhere in Pennsylvania watching cars and trucks rush past, many of them with colorful plastic statues of an open-armed Jesus on the dashboard. The image of Christ's hospitality seemed to have little influence on the drivers. It took us two exhausting days to travel the thousand miles to the Abbey of Gethsemani.

But at last we reached the monastery. After the Guest Master showed us our rooms, my first stop was the monastery church. There was a balcony in the church that was connected to the guest house. Surviving such a trip, a prayer of thanksgiving came easily, but my prayer was cut short by the sound of distant laughter so intense and pervasive that I couldn't resist looking for its source. I hadn't expected laughter at a penitential Trappist monastery.

The origin, I discovered, was Bob Kaye's room. As I opened the door the laughter was still going on, a kind of gale of joy. The major source was the red-faced man lying on the floor, wearing black and white robes and a broad leather belt, his knees in the air, hands clutching his belly. Though the monk was more well-fed than the fast-chastened Trappist monk I had imagined, I realized instantly that the man on the floor laughing with such abandon was Thomas Merton. His face reminded me of David Duncan's photos of Pablo Picasso, not so much in details but a similar mobility of expression. And the inspiration for the laughter? It proved to be the heady smell of feet kept in shoes all the way from the Lower East Side to Gethsemani—the perfume of the *Catholic Worker*.

After that week-long stay at Gethsemani Abbey, *The Seven Storey Mountain* became a new and different book. No wonder the films of Charlie Chaplin were twice mentioned in *The Seven Storey Mountain*! Not only did I become aware that Merton was someone capable of hurricanes of laughter, but I learned that he was far from the only monk who knew how to laugh, though few of them exhibited the trait quite so readily as Merton.

The abbot, Dom James, though a hospitable man, was not initially quite

so positive about a visitation of young Catholic Workers. In those days most American men had frequent haircuts, but haircuts seemed to Bob and me a massive waste of money. The next day Merton apologetically explained that our shaggy hair did not please the abbot. If we were to stay on at the abbey, Dom James insisted we have our hair trimmed. Merton hoped we wouldn't object. A little while later I was sitting in a chair in the basement room where the novices changed into their work clothes; the room also served as a kind of barber shop. While the novices stood in a circle laughing, my hair fell to the concrete floor. Going from one extreme to the other, I was suddenly as bald as Yul Brunner. After the haircut Merton took me to the abbot's office. I can no longer recall what we talked about – it may well have been about Dorothy Day and community life at the *Catholic Worker* – but I will never forget the solemn blessing Dom James gave me at the end of our conversation. I knelt on the floor near his desk while he gripped my skull with intensity while praying over me. He had a steel grip. There was no doubt in my mind I had been seriously blessed. I have ever since had a warm spot in my heart for Dom James, a man who has occasionally been maligned by Merton biographers. I recall another monk at the monastery who had much less sympathy for me and still less, it seemed, for Thomas Merton—or Father Louis, as Merton was known within the community. This was the abbey's other noted author, Father Raymond, whose books were well known to Catholics at the time though they had never reached the broad audience Merton's books had. Merton and I were walking down a basement corridor that linked the guest house kitchen to the basement

of the main monastery building. There was a point in the corridor where it made a leftward turn and standing there, next to a large garbage container, was an older monk who was not so much reading as glaring at the latest *Catholic Worker*, which he held open at arm's length as if the paper had an unpleasant smell. There was an article of Merton's in it, one of his essays about the urgency of taking steps to prevent nuclear war. Father Raymond looked up, saw us coming his way, balled the paper up in his fist, hurled into the garbage container and strode away without a word, leaving a trail of smoke. Once again, Merton's response was laughter. Then he explained that Father Raymond had never had a high opinion of Merton's writings and often denounced him at the community's chapter meetings. "In the early days Father Raymond said I was too detached from the world, and now he thinks I'm not detached enough." Merton laughed once again.

During that visit I had my first glimpse of Merton's openness to non-Catholics and, more striking, non-Christians. It happened the first evening I was there. There was a hurried knock on the door of my room in the guest house. Merton was standing there, but in a rush as he was late for Vespers. He wanted me to have the pile of papers in his hands, a collection of Jewish Hasidic stories that a rabbi had left with him a few days before. "Read these—these are great!" And off he hurried to Vespers without further explanation, leaving me with a collection of amazing tales of mystical rabbis in Poland generations before the Holocaust.

I recall another evening a day or two later when Merton was not in a hurry. He was in good time for Vespers and already had on the white woollen choir



robe the monks wore during winter months while in church. It was an impressive garment, all the more so at close range. I reached out to feel its thickness and density. In a flash Merton slid out of it and placed it over my head. I was astonished at how heavy it was! Once again, Merton laughed. The robe met a practical need, he explained. It was hardly warmer in the church than it was outside. If you wore only the black and white garments that were standard attire, you would freeze to death.

The guestmaster, a monk named Father Francis, knew I was at the monastery at Merton's invitation and thought I might be able to answer a question which puzzled him and no doubt many of the monks: "How did Father Louis write all those books?" I had no idea, no more than he. But I got a glimpse of an answer before my stay was over. A friend at the *Catholic Worker* had sent a letter to Merton in my care. He urged Merton to leave the monastery and do something "more relevant," such as join a Catholic Worker community. (Over the years Merton received quite a few letters telling him that he was in the wrong place.) What is memorable to me about this particular letter was the experience of watching Merton write. He had a small office just outside the classroom where he taught the novices. On his desk was a large grey typewriter. He inserted a piece of monastery stationery and wrote a reply at what seemed to me the speed of light. I had never seen anyone write so quickly. You will sometimes see a skilled stenographer type at such speed when copying a text, but even in a city news room one doesn't often see actual writing at a similar pace. I only wish I had made a copy of his response. I recall that he readily admitted that there was much to reform in

monasteries and that monastic life was not a vocation to which God often called His children, yet he gave an explanation of why he thought the monastic life was nonetheless an authentic Christian vocation and how crucial it was for him to remain faithful to what God had called him to. It was a very solid, carefully reasoned letter filling one side of a sheet of paper and was written in just a few minutes.

When I first met Merton, more than two years had passed since the Vatican's denial of his request to move to another monastery where he might live in greater solitude. In March 1960, nearly a year before my visit, Merton had been given his own small cell in the monastery and soon after plans were made for the construction of a small cinder block building – in principle a conference center where Merton could meet with non-Catholic visitors, but Merton called it his hermitage – on the edge of the woods about a mile north of the monastery. Merton had lit the first fire in the fireplace several months before, on December 2nd. There was a small bedroom behind the main room. Merton occasionally had permission to stay overnight, but it would not be until the summer of 1965 that it became his full-time home. At that point he became the first Trappist hermit.

By the time I came to visit, it already had a lived-in look. It was winter, so there was no sitting on the porch. We were inside, regularly adding wood to the blaze in the fireplace. I recall a Japanese calendar on the wall with a Zen brush drawing for every month of the year, also one of his friend Ad Reinhardt's black-on-black paintings. Of course there was a bookcase and, next to it, a long table that served as a desk placed on the inside of the hermitage's one large window. There was a view of fields and hills.

A large timber cross had been built on the lawn. On the table was a sleek Swiss-made Hermes typewriter. Off to one side of the hermitage was an outhouse which Merton shared with a black snake, a harmless but impressive creature.

What Merton took the most pleasure in when he showed me the hermitage was a sheet of parchment-like paper tacked to the inside of the closet door in his bedroom—a colorful baroque document such as one finds in shops near the Vatican: a portrait of the pope at the top in an oval with a Latin text below and many decorative swirls. In this case it was made out to 'the Hermit Thomas Merton' and was signed by Paul VI.

The week ended abruptly. A telegram for me came from New York with the news that President Kennedy had announced the resumption of atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons, thus another escalation of the Cold War and yet another indication that nuclear war might occur in the coming years. Anticipating such a decision, I was part of a group of New Yorkers who had planned to take part in an act of civil disobedience, a sit-in at the entrance to the Manhattan office of the Atomic Energy Commission, the federal agency responsible for making and testing nuclear weapons. The abbey provided money for our return to New York by bus rather than thumb. Not many days later, now with a slight stubble of hair, I was in a New York City jail known locally as 'The Tombs.' Merton had a part even in that event. I recall a letter from him, sent care of the *Catholic Worker*, being hand delivered to me during the hour or two that we sat on the pavement awaiting arrest. (My monastic haircut made me interesting enough to be featured on the front page of one New York's daily

newspapers the following morning.) I was to meet with Merton face to face only one more time. The next occasion was a small retreat at the monastery on the spiritual roots of protest in November 1964. Would that we had time to talk about that as well! But from the summer of 1961 until his death in 1968, we carried on a busy correspondence. (Most of his side of it is published in *The Hidden Ground of Love*.) On average there was a letter or note from him nearly every month. There were also many envelopes containing copies of essays he had written and sometimes larger works, such as the manuscript of a book never published, 'Peace in the Post-Christian Era,' and his 'Cold War Letters,' an ever-growing collection of letters on topics of the day.

I didn't know the phrase in those days, but, looking back, I realize he became for me what in the Orthodox Church we call a "spiritual father"—someone to whom you open your soul and who in turn can help you stay on the path of the Gospel and help you find your way back to that path when you stray, as I certainly did time and again. If I had understood spiritual fatherhood better, perhaps I would have made better use of his readiness to help me see the way forward and would have made fewer false steps, but even so it was an extraordinarily fruitful relationship. I was one of Merton's adopted children.

In actual fact, as I would later realize, I was about the right age to be one of his children. I was born in November 1941, just five weeks before he left his teaching post at St. Bonaventure's to make his way to the monastery. Merton was then 26...

...to be continued  
in the Easter 2004 issue  
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