

Of Many Things

James Martin

“Spots of time” is what the poet William Wordsworth called those places that imprint themselves so deeply into our minds that simply remembering them can lift our hearts—in other words, holy places. I thought about that phrase as I left Kentucky last month after visiting the Abbey of Gethsemani, near Bardstown (actually it’s in Trappist, Ky.), and the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University in Louisville. For me there are a handful of spots that have become such a source of spiritual life that just thinking about them fills me with consolation. The famous grottos at the Marian shrine of Lourdes in southern France is one. The less famous, but no less beautiful, Jesuit retreat house in Gloucester, Mass., hard by the Atlantic coast, is another. And though I have visited it only twice, the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani is a third.

Not long ago I was invited by the Merton Center to give a little talk as part of the center’s continuing lecture series. A few weeks before my visit, the director of the center, a friendly Englishman and Merton scholar named Paul Pearson, mentioned that a visiting group of Elderhostel students would be touring the monastery the morning of my talk. Did I want to join them?

Who knew that Kentucky in the fall is every bit as beautiful as New England? (I didn’t, that’s for sure.) Our bus ride to the monastery took us through amber and russet trees in the middle of

bluegrass country. In just an hour the tall spire of the abbey’s church came into view, like a ship’s mast appearing over the sea. After we parked, I wandered over to Merton’s grave, which stands in the midst of the abbey cemetery, beside the church, and prayed for friends and family.

The monastery has just built a new visitors’ center, in which James Conner, O.C.S.O., (the Father Tarcisius of Merton’s journals) reminisced about his friend, Thomas Merton. “How did Merton react to his silencing over the cold war?,” I asked. With both obedience and grace, he replied, but also with some creativity. (Merton, as is well known, distributed copies of his writings on the topic to friends with access to mimeograph machines.) On the way to community prayer, I met a gray-haired monk standing outside the church. Brother Patrick Hart, formerly Merton’s secretary, greeted me cheerfully. The next day I would meet Tommie O’Callaghan, who knew Merton when she was still a young mother. She laughed as she told stories about Father Louis (using Merton’s religious name). Having met three of Merton’s companions, I could have gone home satisfied. But there was more to come.

The day after my talk, Paul brought me to the Thomas Merton Center. Located in a series of hushed rooms within the library of Bellarmine University, the center functions as a scholarly research

institute housing Merton’s writings and a kind of museum. (It also maintains a website at www.merton.org.) Lining its walls are photographs that I had seen dozens of times in books, but never in person. And there was my hero’s typewriter standing atop a tall wooden stand. “Can I touch it?” Paul laughed and said, “Sure.” I placed my fingers on the keys and wondered if any writing graces would come through this future relic.

“Now I probably shouldn’t be showing you this,” said Paul conspiratorially, “but follow me.” He unlocked a door that led into a room full of bookcases and black metal file cabinets. This, he said, were the center’s archives.

Opening a file cabinet drawer, he reached for a cardboard box. Gingerly, he lifted off its top to reveal an archival bag with something inside. Then he removed a hardbound book and smiled. “Are your hands clean?” I opened the book and saw lines and lines of neat, familiar handwriting. “It’s the journal from the last months of his life,” said Paul.

I turned to the final entry, for Dec. 8, 1968, which, though prosaic, I remembered well. Merton was on a long trip, his first as a monk, and was now in Thailand. “Today is the Feast of the Immaculate Conception.... I’m going to say Mass at St. Louis Church, have lunch at the Apostolic Delegation, then on to the Red Cross place this afternoon.” The writing stops mid-page. Two days later, Merton was accidentally electrocuted and died instantly.

Standing there in the quiet room, surrounded by Merton’s writings, holding the same book that he had labored on, rendered me uncharacteristically speechless. I thought of so many things: the suddenness of Merton’s death, the prodigiousness of his work, the holiness of his life and the graces in our own lives that bring us to these remarkable places - these “spots of time” that we remember for the rest of our days.

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