

Bearing Witness to the Light

A Personal Reflection on the Eleventh Meeting of
the International Thomas Merton Society
in Rochester, New York, 11-14 June 2009

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This was my second ITMS Conference, the first being that at Bellarmine University, Louisville in 2001, Merton's 'home ground' and therefore quite outstanding. I flew to Rochester on 10 June after several days with my son in Pennsylvania and to a warm welcome from Christine Bochen and Monica Weis and their excellent team of helpers at registration. I had time to admire the beautiful, park-like campus and find the venues for the various events. I quickly located friends Bunny Stewart and Patty Burton from Toronto, who arrived during the afternoon, and went to supper with them at a local restaurant. The theme 'Bearing Witness to the Light' referred to interfaith friendship and dialogue, so many of the addresses and sessions were around that theme.

After lunch on Thursday 11th there was a choice of sessions of which I chose to view the film 'A Tribute to John Eudes Bamberger OCSO', a close friend of Merton in Gethsemani and also his doctor. He knew Merton very well and spoke of Merton's insecurity about giving up one's own will so as to find truth. Merton came to terms with this in time, finding the freedom this gives and learning that mo-

nastic values are counter-cultural to secular values. One gains an inner sense of one's own values and a strong sense of independence. Merton persevered with Abbot Fox, who had to deal with the fact that Merton had something to say to people of his generation and who understood the conditions in which he would function best. He said Merton was the most obedient monk! Merton said that if readers read with attention, they would hear things that are not written in his autobiography and this was the link he made with people of his time, the gift God gave him. I found this one of the most inspiring and spiritually enlightening events of the whole conference.

Another uplifting session was that on 'Abrahamic Traditions in Dialogue', a forum of four local people from the Rochester area—two Christians, a local Imam and a Jewish woman—who explained the real friendships they have with each other and how this enables them to serve the poorest together through soup kitchens, clothes distribution and housing problems. In the state where many religious innovators have arisen in the past, this was an initiative worth noting and copying.

After the banquet Don Grayston gave the presidential address and made the astounding parallel of Merton and Leonard Cohen, the singer and poet, whose stay in a Zen monastery brought a unity to his life. Both he and Merton remained committed to their own traditions, discovering the ability to love. Among all the monastic values, Donald emphasised the hospitality shown by both men: Merton to the many hundreds of his correspondents and Cohen to the ambiance he creates at his concerts, a warm and inclusive welcome. They are both artists who stand on the cultural margins, both spiritual teachers who burst the confines, both monastic in their own way. He ended with the playing of the famous song, Hallelujah, which delighted us all.

Rachel Fell McDermott's address on 'Why Zen Buddhism and not Hinduism?' was excellent, giving us some of the reasons why Merton preferred the former. His apophatic contemplation was a bridge to Buddhism, opening him up to Suzuki, Thich Nat Hanh and their apparent lack of attention to dogma. His inner life experiences were kenotic, self-emptying with dark illumination. He came through these to Zen, its lack of self-consciousness, belief in spiritual realisation and non-doctrinal experiences. He was inspired by Gandhi always, but three elements were problems for him: the necessity in Hinduism for a guru, the emphasis on image-worship and the caste system. He was impressed by Ramana Maharshi, the purest of Hindu sages, who continually asked himself (and others) 'Who am I?'

I was also very impressed by the General Session with Sidney Griffith and Herbert Mason, the first an outstanding scholar of Islam and the second a friend

of Louis Massignon, who translated the latter's masterpiece on the Muslim mystic, Al-Hallaj. Mason went to Paris looking for a 'wise man' and finally found Massignon, a sharer in the search for eternal life, whom he introduced to Merton through a translation of St John of the Cross! Mason and Massignon demonstrated against the war in Algeria and Merton was with them spiritually in this as an American Catholic presence. Mason visited Merton at Gethsemani and found him funny, fraternal and ironic; Merton gave him a clay Mexican crucifix as a fraternal gift. Mason spoke movingly about Massignon's commitment and writings on Sufism and the Muslim world and to the French writer Huysmann's phrase 'point vierge' for the idea of mystical substitution.

All four of the British contingent at the conference attended Fiona Gardner's presentation on 'A Kind of Arduous and Un-thanked Pioneering' under the Spiritual Integration general title. This phrase is taken from Merton's letter to Dona Luisa Coomerawamy and referred to complete unity within the self. If contemplatives could hold the spiritual truth within themselves, this is a preparation for a communion of spiritual realities. He was not alone in advocating this: there is also William Johnston SJ who went to Japan and found Christ in Zen; Henri Le Saux who was drawn to *advaita*/non-dualism and Christianity, and experienced a harrowing agony in belonging to both sides; and Kathleen Raine, the English poet who founded the Journal *Temenos*, a review devoted to the arts of the imagination. Fiona detailed the experience of awakening to God and one's own true self. Merton's 'arduousness' relates to the external

stripping in the monastic vocation and to finding presence in God's being within. She concluded that the degree of arduousness rises if you think about it too much instead of experiencing it!

Judith Simmer-Brown was excellent on Merton as a Trappist yogi and the Tibetan Buddhist perspective. I heard Roger Lipsey on Merton's late writings on contemplation, especially the theme of silence, and Lynn Szabo who spoke on 'Contemplation in a World of Terror' and the need for solitude, silence and contemplative prayer as our commitment to hope. Sadly I did not attend the concert by Kate Campbell but I heard that her singing was truly beautiful. I paid two visits to the library exhibition of Merton's Zen photographs and attended Paul Pearson's guided prayer on 'A Zen Camera' with the same theme, both of which I found penetrating the depths beyond words.

The highlight of the meeting for all of us was the final mass for Corpus Christi celebrated by Fr William H. Shannon, long-time Merton scholar who lives on Nazareth campus. His sermon spoke of the church as all of us, the mystical Body of Christ, taking our sustenance from the eucharist and being life for the world. At the end of mass he sat in his buggy in the foyer to greet each one of us. It was a great privilege and I was overcome with tears! I had not expected to be able to meet him, as he is now ninety-two!

I meditated in the train to Niagara Falls that this had been a memorable conference, not only for the depth of spiritual perception in all the speakers, but for the necessity for depth in personal friendships leading to a real appreciation of the many ways in which God is known and loved in

so many wonderful faiths he has given to the human race. This is a richness in our appreciation of other people's human and cultural identities which can help to solve so many of the misunderstandings and problems in today's world. As well as friends whom I knew already—notably the Cantrells who had driven with a truckful of books from Bardstown, Kentucky—it was good to meet new friends over the lunch or breakfast table and to exchange experiences and knowledge in our search for truth. A real find for me, and an opening to a new spiritual awareness was Fr Shannon's book *Silence on Fire*, in which he gathers Merton's teaching on contemplation and distils it into a beautiful, simple approach which I have found absolutely stunning.

Finally, I must mention that during the conference our own David Scott was awarded an international Louie in recognition of his poetry and his contribution to the promotion of Merton's message!

Kathleen Archer is a founding member of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland, who has been reading Merton since the late fifties.