

Editorial

If you picture in your mind's eye an image of Merton, who do you see? I imagine that you picture him either as a monk wearing his Trappist habit, or as a scruffy man in the casual work clothes that he wore during his hermitage years. I doubt anybody would picture him in black and wearing a Roman collar. Indeed there are few images of him as such. I am only aware of a handful from his visit to Alaska and, probably the most well known, that of Merton with D T Suzuki in New York in June 1964. So it is easy to overlook the fact that Merton was a priest for nearly two decades, his ordination on 26 May, 1949 being seventy years ago this year.

The cover image shows Merton celebrating mass at the high altar of Gethsemani in pre-Vatican II pomp. By the end of his life Merton had moved beyond this highly sacerdotal view of the priesthood towards that of a priest being a servant of the people, not caught up in hierarchical tasks and rituals. In March 1968 he counselled a young diocesan priest, Father D., with words that could well have applied to Merton's ministry had he withdrawn to Alaska:

Couldn't you be some sort of 'underground priest' in lay clothes, saying mass in private homes among people you are at ease with, and perhaps also serving some tiny community, some convent, and helping out with shut-ins, people who are forgotten, who suffer, etc.? ... In short, be like a layman, live like a layman, but do some priestly work or service along with it.

Around the time of his ordination Merton wrote the poem '*Senescente Mundo*', one of the few in which he reflects on his experiences as a priest. In his article 'Old World, New Priest', Patrick O'Connell gives us a detailed analysis of the poem, in which Merton 'ponders the meaning of priesthood in and for an age when meaning itself seems increasingly difficult to find.' In her article, 'Being True to Oneself with Another', Fiona Gardner examines the friendship of Merton with fellow priest and Trappist Fr John of the Cross – Edmund 'Cap' Wasserman. She explores

the difficulties Merton encountered with having a true friendship with Fr John, constrained by Merton's insecurities – a need to be liked – and his position within the Abbey, not least as Fr John's confessor for many years. In his article 'Beyond Bystanding', Dan Horan shows us how Merton can be our guide in these distracted times, in the age of Trump and Brexit; and how Merton's inspirational witness can inspire us to 'prioritize solidarity and community over the individual'. In their joint article, 'Harkening to the Silent Word', Sonia Petisco Martínez & Fernando Beltrán Llavador reflect on how Merton's poetry can reveal a 'cartography of silence', leading us on to the unknown, the dark, where we may rediscover our true identity in Christ. Also included are reviews of books by Ian Cowley, Mary Gordon and Sonia Petisco Martínez, and poems by Jay Caldwell and Sarah Law.

This year saw the death of Brother Patrick Hart, aged 93. He entered Gethsemani in 1951, and was secretary to Abbot Dom James Fox from 1957 to 1966. In 1968 he was appointed as Merton's secretary. After his death he took responsibility for collecting together as much as possible of Merton's letters, journals and manuscripts. For the next half century he worked tirelessly to bring Merton's work to the widest possible readership, including acting as general editor of the seven volumes of Merton's journals.

In a 2004 interview with Sister Mary Margaret (Meg) Funk OSB he was asked what he thought would be Merton's legacy for monasticism. He replied in words that could apply to all of us trying to lead an authentic Christian life:

Maybe, that you have to trust your inner life, your innermost self, as you appear before God. Merton was always very strong on this idea of living from the deepest self, the true self, rather than the empirical ego or the external self, the social self. This means that you live as you stand naked before God. I think that's what he would say. He would tell us to listen from the heart and to live a simple, honest life, united to God and one another.

In one of his final letters, sent to Brother Patrick from Bangkok on December 6, 1968, Merton wrote: 'It is getting close to Christmas — let's keep united in prayer.'

Words for us all. May the joy and peace of Christmas be with you through the coming year.

Stephen Dunhill