

Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* & Fr Louis

Paul Quenon

I read *The Seven Storey Mountain* when I was a Junior in High School, at St Peter's in Fairmont, West Virginia. I don't know where I first heard of it, perhaps from the nuns or from an older brother. Previously, my reading of *The Imitation of Christ*, the 15th century classic, had awakened me to personal prayer and to a monasticism where prayer was primary. Sensing this was what I wanted in life, I did not know if there were any contemplative monasteries in the United States. Reading the *SSM* made me aware that there actually was a monastery in the United States — and that a modern man like Thomas Merton could live such a life.

Captivated, I started imitating features of Merton's life, and bought a set of bongo drums. I found my performance disappointing.

Through dumb luck I remained ignorant of any other contemplative monastery in the States, so I made application to the Trappist monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky. I made no assumption that I would have much to do there with Thomas Merton; it was monastic life that I wanted. On my second visit the Abbot, Dom James, agreed to my joining. I was told Fr. Louis, the Novice Master, would walk me to the Novitiate. By then I had forgotten that 'Louis' was the name given to Thomas Merton when he became a Novice. This Novice master seemed a friendly, lively guy. He promised we would soon be going out in the woods to work with axes. That suited me just fine.

I began getting along well with Fr. Louis, relating to him as a Novice Master and my spiritual director. Later I grew curious which one of the priests in choir was Thomas Merton. I had guessed it might be a certain statuesque monk with a dignified manner. It was only a month later that I finally learned that Fr. Louis was, in fact, Thomas Merton! It was on a day when Fr. Louis reached for a new book across his desk by Thomas Merton. I asked: "Have you read it already?" To which he replied: "I wrote it." Well . . . whadda you know!

It made me happy to know that this, my Novice Master, could write books, and not just one or two. I told him I read the *SSM*. He seemed diffident about the book, but said it was good I had read it. He asked me what I thought of the book. In answer, I grabbed an expression I had read somewhere and said: "The book was rather long in the middle." That drew a short huff. However, to my young mind, it did seem long. Eventually I learned the distinguished novelist, Evelyn Waugh thought so

too. He produced an abridged English version for Merton, published as *Elected Silence*. I was regretful that Waugh took out the poems. For me, those were some of the more memorable parts of the book.

It was a good thing that I did not know at the outset that Fr. Louis was Thomas Merton. By then, I was relating to him as my director and Novice Master, not as 'the famous author'. That would have spoiled things. When I did find out that he was, he did not seem all that famous. He was one of the monks, good at doing something extra.

To me, his appearance was nothing like one of the *literati elite*. He was as short as I, heavy but not bulky, sort of like a bowling alley manager. He liked to say he looked like Picasso, or Henry Miller. Since then, many efforts to portray him have appeared on the cover of *The Merton Seasonal*. To me, they seem lacking for the most part. I have seen two or three that capture the subject — most recently by William Hart Mc Nichols on the Summer 2023 cover, rendered in the style of an icon, also one done previously by Jim Cantrell of Bardstown Ky., who never met Merton.

The Seven Storey Mountain itself, as a book, I consider an icon. It endures as more than an autobiography; it stands as a symbol. For all its flaws which Merton regretted, it remains for readers as a window into the presence of a divine mystery, one present and active at the heart of the life of one modern man.

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