Thomas Merton as a Catalyst for Friendship?
Part 2 of a conversation between
Rowan Williams and Bonnie Thurston

Friendship is not so much a matter of two people exploring friendship but of two people exploring other things as friends.
Rowan Williams

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This is second and final part of a conversation held via Zoom on the 19th July 2024 between Susanne Jennings in Cambridge, Rowan Williams in Cardiff and Bonnie Thurston in West Virginia. Part 1 was included in the previous edition of The Merton Journal, *Eastertide 2025, vol. 32:1.*

SJ: If we look at the Benedictine aspect - and you're both steeped in Benedict from what I have read, in terms of its charism and the importance of hospitality which you both touched upon earlier and its proper sense of openness to the other, would you say that this is what underlay Merton's capacity for, and his expression of, friendship?

BT: Not sure how to answer the question. It's a good question. I guess I would respond, first of all, with having spent the whole summer with Benedictines. I've given three retreats to Benedictine Women's houses. I have one more next week. There's something very warm about the Rule. It is a rule, no question about it, but there's something very humane about it. And you could learn how to be a hospitable person by trying to follow that rule and live it. Does that make sense at all? (Oh, it makes a lot of sense – *RW*). Hospice as in hospital. I mean it's a rule that could cure you if you took it to heart.

RW: That's been very much my experience of classical Benedictine communities. But what strikes me – putting my neck on the block a bit – is the very un-Benedictine nature of an enormous Trappist community like that where there is something about the drivenness of it all, the relative impersonality of a lot of it, which seems to be quite a way from the original Benedictine ethos. So, I'm not sure how much that which pertains to the strictly Benedictine shapes Merton's response.

BT: Yes, and also, if I can make another little comment. I have given retreats in both men's and women's houses. Last summer at St John's I gave the monks their retreat. That was a scary experience. But there is a different kind of ethos in women's houses and men's houses in my experience. I mean, I'm all in favour – vive la difference. I'm not judging or saying one is better than the other, but they are quite different. And I do find that there is a certain drivenness especially in big Benedictine houses. Well, I'll leave it at that, but to make the direct connection with friendship would be hard for me. The connection I would make would be more with the formation of the inner life or the quality of one's personhood.

RW: Yes. And the thing that, to me, often springs out of the Benedictine rule itself is that emphasis on a particular kind of attention to the particularity of each person in the community. The Superior really has to know what somebody is good at, bad at, where they need to grow, where they need to be held back. That's very striking. I think it's a particular distillation of one strut of the Desert Fathers' legacy, which is the distinctiveness of people's vocations, and an attempt to build that into a community structure. But I suppose you could say - couldn't you, in a way? - Merton was a little bit at the receiving end of that when he came into the monastery, that he was lucky to have a superior who said, 'Well, you're good at this. Do it.' Rather than just pushing him to keep the machine running.

SJ: Very interesting, thoughtful answers. So, in the light of that, there's equally the Cistercian charter for charity and Aelred's classic on spiritual friendship which I love. I return to it a lot.

BT: I like the part about kissing. I'd forgotten. I hadn't read it in a long time and I forgot that there were three rules about kissing which I thought was kind of fun. See, you've given me the opportunity to think again about kissing. Useless for somebody who's been a widow for 30 years.

SJ: And the warmth with which Bernard of Clairvaux espouses spiritual friendship. So, might this also have had a part of play in the centrality of friendship to followers such as Merton?

RW: I think that the point that Bonnie made about the early Cistercians is important here because they're part of a much older Christian convention, if you like, of spiritual friendship, all that Latin tradition of exchanging letters. Alcuin of York does it, but you can scroll back to

Augustine himself, the correspondence of Paulinus. Look at various figures of the sixth or seventh century who again seem to come through in that way – a very strong, very emotionally charged tradition of spiritual friendship, which flowers in the 11th and 12th centuries in various ways. It's the world that Helen Waddell explores.

BT: Yes, exactly. Well, I was even thinking about the letters of John Henry Newman.

RW: That too, yes. I think that because Merton is so quintessentially mind-formed monastically by the early medieval tradition, the early, monastic mediaeval tradition rather than a Counter Reformation or Baroque spirituality. I think he can slip into that world of intense spiritual friendship without too much trouble. It's part of his European identity, I suspect, Bonnie?

BT: Yes, that's what I was just going to say too. That's a much more European approach. And I also wonder - if we could make a connection. Maybe we can't. - but I mean the desert fathers and mothers, the desert Christians, their writings as we have it were very influential on Merton. And then even his interest in Islam, for example. Muslims are extremely hospitable. If you've lived in the Arab world, don't say that their child is beautiful – they'll give you their child! It's a very hospitable tradition. So I think it's not only the European traditions and the traditions of the church that formed Merton. But as he became more aware of, particularly, I think, the Islamic tradition and the Asian traditions as well, they softened his understanding of friendship a lot.

SJ: I think that's actually really interesting and very apt because if you look at his correspondence with Aziz, for instance, even though he had a warm but limited correspondence with Heschel, there isn't quite the warmth that comes through and the openness that comes through from Merton.

BT: I think he's very warm with Aziz.

SJ: And he seems to have the freedom to really discuss different practices, religious practices and so on in a way that I don't necessarily sense in some of his other interfaith encounters.

RW: I think very often in some of his interfaith correspondence he's talking about things other than practice itself. Certainly, with Heschel and people like that, he's discussing more the issues of the day and large theoretical questions. Aziz somehow gives him permission to hone in on the practice side, I think.

SJ: Yes, it's quite striking. So perhaps it was that element of hospitality that allowed that to . . .

RW: Yes, and the fact that Aziz asks him directly what you do. And he answers.

SJ: Exactly. It's interesting. And this is a bit of a digression but there are parts of Merton's journals when he's had a face-to-face day with friends at the Hermitage, and he chastises himself for talking too much and being too glib, and he needs to cut back on these face-to-face encounters and to be alone again within his Hermitage. Do you have any thoughts on that?

BT: I do because I live alone, and I go for days without talking to anybody. And sometimes, when I'm in company, I find myself saying, 'Am I talking too much?' Because if you don't have ordinary daily contact . . . I can imagine that Merton and I might have that bit in common if you're not accustomed to conversation and ordinary chit-chat when you do sit down to talk. I think there was this baby doll in the United States when I was a child and it was called a Chatty Kathy, and you pulled a ring in her back and she would go, 'Yak, yak, yak, talk, talk, talk.' And then if you wanted her to talk some more, you had to pull the ring again. And I sometimes feel like that, those of us, who have less opportunity for ordinary contact, are a little bit like Chatty Kathy when we get in company. Maybe that's what Merton's experiencing.

RW: Yes. It's an interesting question because I also sense that Merton is always overflowing with things to say, and like a lot of very brilliant people he needs to keep talking in order to find out what he thinks, sometimes, when he's unleashed on other people. You know, he talks about sometimes going to the Carmel in Louisville and dropping in for tea and talking to the sisters a lot. And you can just imagine it very easily, 'Let Father talk,' say the nuns to themselves, and Father Louis just lets rip. And that's how he finds out what he thinks, what matters to him. And there's an element - oh, I think he says somewhere in the early journals or maybe in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, he says, 'Yes, this is the Thomas Merton who showed off across three continents.' And I sort of see what he means. Showing off is a very negative way of putting it, but he is clearly somebody who does at times enjoy performing because he discovers something.

BT: There was a woman who knew Merton very well, and she was very helpful and involved when we were founding the Thomas Merton Society.

Tommie O'Callaghan. I was talking to her once and I said, well, you know, frankly, I don't think I would like Merton very much and I don't really have much desire to meet him. I wouldn't have . . ., and she immediately was just almost excoriatory. She said, 'Oh, he was wonderful to be with. He was so alive, and charming and friendly.' And my thought was, he was showing off. He must have had an enormous ego. That was the introvert's response. But anyway, yes. I do think there are people who figure out what they think by talking. And then there are those of us who figure out what we think by writing.

SJ: It's interesting. I remember exchanging copies of the journals with an Augustinian friend as they came out and when it came to Merton and his experience with the nurse, he said that he really detested Merton throughout that.

BT: I did too. I thought that was a really bad episode in his life, really unpleasant episode.

RW: Sort of pathetic, in a way. You feel . . .

BT: Oh, she was engaged to somebody during the whole time. Her fiancé was a pilot in Vietnam, for heaven's sakes. I mean the whole thing was so unfortunate.

SJ: Yes. And also the fact that he ended up burning her letters, which may perhaps have been a good thing . . . And it's been rather hijacked, the whole episode has been hijacked by some writers who put certain glosses on it. But yes, I think it was not his best moment.

BT: But it's a human moment in a way, too - the need to love and to be loved is a basic component of our humanity, and how we work that out, how we express that, is really critical - I mean, I think it's at the heart of who we are as Christians. How we manage or even transmit the love that we have. I mean, Christian love is transmitted. We don't make it up for ourselves. It was, again, at that end of his life as we were speaking earlier, when he seemed to have lost his centre in some way, you know. And I think that that's another manifestation of the fact that there were too many things, too many in which directions to be pulled. But, by the way, a friend of mine knows the woman and has interviewed her and spoken with her. And I admire my friend for not talking about this or betraying confidences, but the one thing she did say that made me feel much happier was that the woman married and had children and has had a very fulfilling and very happy life. So, I'm happy about that. That makes me feel a bit better about things.

RW: But the other thing which comes to my mind as I read that section of the journals is he's an addict at this period and he's coming at this relationship with an addictive mindset, including all the addict's self-deceit. There's not a word of condemnation. You feel so sorry for him, so sad for him. He's trapped himself in this. And at some level he can't quite not know that's what he's doing because he's a clever man, a sensitive man. Such a complicated episode. As you say, Susanne, it's something people do make hay with but it's a human moment.

SJ: Exactly. Once he'd come through it, he basically repudiated it especially in his correspondence with his superiors, which I think did him a disservice because he hadn't really worked it through or . . .

RW: No, Goodness, no. It really was the cellar door, I think.

SJ: It's interesting that one of the monks at Merton's Abbey who trained as a novice under him observed what he called a natural reserve in Merton rather than a barrier in terms of Merton's interactions with the other monks at the Abbey, but noted that he had maybe one or two friends in all that time to whom he was close. Do you have any thoughts on that?

BT: Yes, I do. Have you ever lived cheek to jowl with the same people of your own sex for ages and ages? There has to be a certain constriction of the self in monastic life. For years I spent several months with Trappistines in Virginia and I was their cheese slave - they need extra hands when they're making cheese, so I go down. But I think in religious communities you almost don't have the luxury of having too many close friends. And also then, you know, particular friendships were so discouraged before Vatican II. You know, people said, 'Do you want to become a sister?', and I think I can give you 15 reasons why not: 1 - Can you imagine how awful I'd be for the novice mistress, and 2 - I couldn't live like that. I couldn't live in that close hot house kind of atmosphere of the monastic life. So, I think part of the reason that was the case for Merton was just self-preservation. And after all, he then did get to go out and live in the woods.

SJ: Yes, I think that's a very fair comment. (Yes - *RW*) I think he found it quite suffocating and especially the way they lived including sleeping in common dormitories. It's just horrible. And do you think that his friendships with people outside the Abbey kept him sane, so to speak, that he had to have those friendships to counterbalance the life that was offered through the Trappist life?

RW: I suppose it goes back to something we were talking about earlier. I think here's an enormous emotional hunger in him, I think, in the early years in the monastery, the devotional fervour that he clearly experienced, relished, sort of dealt with that. And then, as time goes on as happens in people's monastic lives as I gather, that hunger isn't really assuaged, and is not going to be assuaged by ordinary human contact in the monastic setting. So, yes, he's hungry for emotional affirmation, emotional companionship more broadly. And I think for a lot of people who've had, let's say slightly unusual experiences of the religious life, there comes a point . . . You've got a very difficult balance between really living in the community and finding your primary emotional sustenance outside it. And that's not always good for a community or an individual. Probably Merton's solitary status helps to hold that to some extent. But it's an unresolved thing, as it is for quite a few religious that I know, to be honest.

BT: You know, I think it is a charism to be able to live in a religious community. As an adult I have been really formed in religious communities. I almost joined the All Saints Sisters of the Poor when I was finishing graduate school. And then up rode my husband on a white horse and suddenly monastic life didn't look quite so nice. But I think it's a beautiful life for those whom God has called to it. Having said that, it is a very difficult life to live and to be faithful to, and to negotiate the human interactions. I admire those who can do it and I'm happy to live with them from time to time, but come back and fight snakes in the woods.

SJ: Yes, it's interesting. I think again, it was in one of Monica Furlong's writings where she spoke about the fact that Merton culturally felt like an outsider a lot of the time in Gethsemani because, of course, the monastery was absolutely overflowing at the time that he grew as an author with his writing. So, he had to find that sustenance perhaps outside in order to have some sort of balance. Because that's one thing about monastic life, you don't choose the people with whom you're going to live.

BT: Well, I would just quickly say, don't lose your thought. Well, you go ahead, Rowan.

RW: Well, I was just going to say, I've recently been rereading J F Powers' stories (wonderful – *BT*) about American Catholicism in the '50s which are absolutely brilliant. I think most of Merton's fellow monks would have been formed in that kind of Catholicism which is not particularly interested in the arts or in contemplation or anything like that, but just getting on with it, being very American about it and businesslike.

BT: Dom James Fox had a business degree from Harvard.

RW: Yes, that's what Merton has to come to terms with. It's not that this is a community of people like Saint Bernard or Saint Aelred. It's a community of people who have barely heard of Saint Bernard or Saint Aelred, and they're foreigners anyway.

BT: What I was going to say is actually related to that, and it's the idea of being an outsider. It's a real issue and I've just had a long correspondence with somebody at Tymawr [community of contemplative nuns in South Wales], as a matter of fact, about this business of being an outsider. But there is also, if I can use an example, there's a woman in my parish and someone whom I've known for a long time, very well-educated, parents were in the diplomatic corps in Britain, but she's lived here for thirty-five years - her children were here, her husband's an American - but she still will say, 'Well, I don't get this because I'm an outsider.' But there's a point at which you can't really use that excuse anymore. Do you know what I mean? I think there's a point at which, yes, it's true, but also isn't true anymore because you've had lots of opportunities to acculturate. I mean, I lived in Germany for three years and there was a point at which, you know, it simply isn't true anymore. You have to think of yourself as not an outsider. I guess that's what I really want to say that, whether we're outsiders or insiders may have as much to do with our comfort in our own skin as it has to do with, - you know, this person who wrote to me from a community that Rowan and I are deeply in love with in a lot of ways - part of the question was, 'Do you feel an outsider when you're with us?' And I've been with them for 30 years or more, at least once or twice a year. And I said, 'No, I never do, I never have.' But I think that has to do with, you know, I met them after I was sort of a grown-up and not as an adolescent figuring out who I was. Does that make sense, that a sense of being an outsider may have more to do with my own internal insecurity than it does with the quality of hospitality in somebody else's home or country or monastery?

RW: Yes, I think that's very helpful actually, Bonnie. It made me think back to my time at Mirfield. I was in the College for two years but also helping with the teaching, so living with the community therefore, quite a lot of the time for two years, and feeling very much marginal and outside of some ways, but that was also because it was a period where I was wrestling with what to do myself. I was not ready to be at home. So, it's a complicated one.

BT: I guess I'm thinking about this too because I'm writing four talks for

the West Virginia Episcopal clergy's retreat which I think they're going to hate, by the way. But I'm looking at identity and the importance of having a sense of one's identity and being rooted and knowing who we are, so that we can be giving of ourselves to our parish work or whomever, whatever our ministry is. But, I think Americans are very bad at this, there's not very much that invites us in our educational system or in the churches to develop an interior life or to know who we are, or where we came from even. So, I guess I've been thinking about that in the last while.

RW: That's a really important thing, isn't it, because if part of what you're doing in any kind of pastoral ministry is trying to make space for somebody to grow, you have to have that space internally for it to happen.

BT: You can't offer them what you don't have yourself. Remember the old 1926 Evelyn Underhill's *Concerning the interior life*? She is spot on. It was astonishing to read that again 100 years later and to see how much hasn't changed.

SJ: I think that's very profound and spot on, and that sense of – just going back to outsider-ness if there is such a word - I think Merton probably had a certain sense of insecurity, and so ended up projecting those insecurities onto others at various times in his life, as we all have done at some point.

BT: It's very hard to feel at home in the world if your mother has rejected you. The maternal thing is huge. It's a huge thing. (It's true – *SJ*) I'll spare you the autobiography but I know about it and at some point, you know, you really have to grapple with it straight on. That's the root of a lot of things. And I'm not sure that there was anything in Merton's educational experience or in the monastery that helped him to be able to just face that head on and say, 'Well, this is what happened.'

RW: That's right. One of the moments in *The Seven Storey Mountain* that I found most poignant, echoes in my mind so much. It's when he's going to the Franciscan monastery, I think by train, and he sees a child running back home from the garden, and he says, 'I became vaguely aware of my own homelessness.' Vaguely aware, oh yes.

SJ: Very poignant. He was a very complicated man because of these things and I've been reading one of Br Paul Quenon's books. And he talked about a moment when he was a novice, and Merton said something to the effect of 'my mother never liked me'. And to carry that baggage.

RW: Yes. He'd never been able to run in confidently from the garden into

his mother's arms

SJ: It's quite tragic. But Paul Quenon is wonderful. He said in some correspondence that I've had with him, just very brief, that he thought that the reason the monks all look so young, or so much younger than they were, was because they sang every day.

BT: That may be part of it.

RW: There's a lot in that, I think.

SJ: What do you think - this is a very broad question - the wide circle of friends that Merton had from far and wide, what do you think they most responded to in Merton?

RW: Well, I think, as much as anything, it's his intellectual and imaginative appetite. He's voracious. Show him something and he wants to eat it up. Show him your ideals, your hopes, your concerns, your poems, your theology. And he has an appetite for engaging. I think if I were corresponding to somebody who showed that appetite for what mattered to me, I would treasure it.

BT: Well. I think it also is connected with the phrase that you used that resonated so much earlier in our conversation, the freedom to listen, you know, to be open. He has the appetite for it, but also the gift of listening. That's an enormous gift, and especially in the world in which we live when everybody wants to talk. So to have that freedom to be a receiver and a listener . . . It's really extraordinary. (Yes – *RW*)

SJ: I think that's actually true. You said attentiveness, and in today's world so many people just can't bear silence of any kind, and they just fill it with the most meaningless drivel for want of a better word. It's just such a waste.

BT: But I think again it comes back to not knowing who you are. I mean, if you know, if you have a sense of your own identity and are rooted in some way, then you're free not to have to exert your ego by being the answer for every question, or you can listen, really listen, really attend to somebody else. And you don't have to be worrying about your own emotional needs. I mean we all have them, but I think again, and this goes back to this sense of what we can do to help people be really rooted in a deep sense of self-identity, which is what I think monastic formation is supposed to be about.

RW: That's a really, really helpful take on it, Bonnie. I'm very, very grateful for that. I think that's absolutely it.

BT: We got it in Sunday school but we never believed it. 'Jesus loves me this I know,' but we don't know it. You see, that's the issue, we don't know it. We don't take it in, we don't live it.

RW: We don't know it so we worry whether we're impressing God sufficiently . . .

BT: Yes, exactly. Or the person we're having a conversation with. The simplest things are the hardest ones to incorporate, the hardest ones to take on board. That's my experience anyway. The very simplest rudimentary bits are the ones that are the hardest.

SJ: And just one more question, and this has been touched on before. Do you think that one of the main tenets of authentic friendship is to, in effect, remain unknowable and respect that which is unknowable in others? I know that this came up at the start of this conversation. But might this ally with the Imago Dei which is imprinted upon each of us, but which also allows for mystery as in, 'How can I really know others when I never completely know myself.' Does that make sense?

BT: Yes, I think it goes back to this idea that it's really important to reverence the mystery and the otherness of the true friend or the other, and to wonder, to have a sense of wonder about being invited in to the life of another person, and to be grateful and to see that as wonder. But also, to always have in mind that when I'm with you, or when I'm with Rowan, or when I'm with other friends, I'm a guest in the house and I have to be careful not to transgress its boundaries. I mean, I might be able to help with the washing up but it's important not to try to colonise the other person or to take them over. I think that's really important in friendship.

RW: Colonising is a really important word there, I think. But just to pick up on that reference to the image of God, I think it's Gregory of Nyssa in his treatise on human nature who talks about the unknowability of our own selves to ourselves as having something to do with the unknowability of God. And if we're worried about not knowing God, well, says Gregory, just get used to it. You don't know yourself either. And you may think you understand the world you're in, but actually you don't. I'm paraphrasing Gregory very freely but 'Don't Panic', he says in effect,

'That's the way it is.' And if the mystery of God is inviting, there's always more to discover. There's always more sea to swim in. Well, the mysteriousness of yourself and those you love is not necessarily threatening or disempowering. It's just as it is.

BT: The Eastern Church gets this a whole lot better than we do. (On the whole, yes – *RW*) The Eastern Church has listened. I think of Lossky's book, *In the image and likeness of God*, which is, as you know, brilliant.

RW: One of the most formative books I've ever read, I think.

BT: Mine too.

SJ: A final, final question. Do you think that the Buddhist concept of no-self was sort of a major break off point for Merton? I'm not putting this well, because it's just occurring to me. But did it help to free him from carting around this self that he thought he had left behind? Does that make sense? Quite possibly not.

BT: Well, I don't think any of us are ever able to transcend completely the self or the ego. I mean that's part of our ongoing development as human beings. Merton certainly studied the concept of the no-self, and I think that's probably one of the reasons he wanted to go back to Tibet. He might have returned there to explore it more existentially. But it might also be the case that the brokenness of the ego, the brokenness of the human ego or the darkness of the human ego or just our general imperfection as human beings might be the greatest gift. You know, it's that emptiness that gives the space for God to fill, and if we're all full of our ego and ourselves and how smart we are and beautiful and kind and - make the list - and not aware of and willing to, accept and even perhaps be grateful for the words in the darkness, it'll be harder to get to work with the ego. Does that make sense at all? I think it might be that the brokenness of the ego might be either the most difficult thing we have to deal with, but it also might be . . . Darkness is my only friend. Psalm 88, right? We get the darkness part but we forget that it's a friend. It's a companion. That's a positive, that might very well be a very positive thing.

RW: Yes, I think that really resonates with me. Coming back to your question about the no-self thing, I suppose what I pick up from some of my Buddhist friends: how very easy it is for us as Westerners to misread that kind of language as if it's just a kind of flat no to what we understand by our consciousness. Whereas I think - Bonnie will know more than I do about this - but I think what I hear is: Just don't settle with the myth that

your self is a little nut of psychic reality buried somewhere in your body or your psyche, a little hard core of ego. Just don't think that your identity, your soul as I would say as a Christian, is what's shaped in all the relations you stand in with other people, with other things, with God ultimately. And that's not a relationship of dualistic mutual exclusivity. It's a participatory growing, shifting, ongoing reality. The Buddhists I listen to seem to me to be saying something much more like that than just saying forget about the self. The ego, if you like, is the self that we've put in the deep freeze, kind of left to solidify, and contemplation and compassion are meant to liquefy it again, perhaps. Sorry, it's a rather odd image.

SJ: Would you say that one of the most excellent things about true communion in friendship is that in that moment of encounter, we transcend the ego and we become who we truly are? Does that make sense?

RW: In any kind of intimacy, there's a moment where you are just no longer conscious of the image you're curating of yourself, and something then is released - friendship, right through to the depths of intimate erotic love and the love of God. It's the self-forgetting which I think is the transformative dimension. The maddening paradox is, of course, you can't get there by trying to do it. Something called grace as I remember.

SJ: This has been a fascinating conversation from both of you. Do you have any final thoughts?

BT: Well, I just want to say thank you for bringing us together. It's lovely. I don't have this kind of conversation very often, and to pick up with both of you and to sort of be able to talk about things that are so critical to us as individuals and the world that we live in, (the world we're in – *RW*) I'm just very grateful for the conversation. Rowan, I can't kneel and ask for your blessing again for about the 15th time?

RW: Well, I can give it electronically.

BT: Shall I tell Susanne this? A couple of times I've asked for his blessing, and about the third time I did that he said, 'Oh, you need to be topped up again,' which I just loved. The other thing about friendship - we laugh together.

SJ: Yes I think that's essential .

RW: But yes, thank you Susanne. Thank you very much for helping this

happen. It's a joy, Bonnie, to have a chance to talk at more leisure than usual.

Dr Rowan Williams is a theologian, writer and poet. Until his retirement in 2020 he was Master of Magdalene College, Cambridge. He spent much of his earlier career as an academic at the universities of Oxford & Cambridge. After serving as Bishop of Monmouth and subsequently Archbishop of Wales, he was appointed Archbishop of Canterbury, serving from 2002 until 2012. He has a keen interest in Thomas Merton, having been a keynote speaker at the Society's 1998 residential conference and the principal speaker at our meeting in London in 2008 on the 40th anniversary of Merton's death. He has published a collection of his talks & writings on Merton - A Silent Action: Engagements with Thomas Merton.

Bonnie Thurston resigned a Chair and Professorship to live quietly in her home state of West Virginia, USA. She is author or editor of 24 theological and 8 books of poetry, most recently Not Sonnets: Observations from an Ordinary Life (Cinnamon Press, 2022) and From Darkness to Eastering (Wild Goose, 2017). She is particularly interested in Merton's poetry and his inter-religious thought. She was a founding member of the ITMS, and served as its third president. She has written many articles on Merton and given retreats and lectured on Merton widely in the U.S., Canada, the UK and Europe. She has edited several books of Merton's writings, and has written Shaped by the End You Live For: Thomas Merton's Monastic Spirituality (2020). Her work on Merton has been translated into Dutch, German, Italian, and Spanish.