

## FOREWORD

In 1993, a proposal was made for a joint cooperation agreement between the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University and the International Center for Mystical Studies in Ávila. Ten years later, on June 18, 2004, in Birmingham (England), at the Fifth Meeting of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland, the cooperation agreement was formally signed.

One of the aims was to plan an International Conference in Ávila. This Conference finally took place between the 27<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> of October 2006, with over 350 participants from 19 countries. Poems by St. John of the Cross, St. Teresa of Ávila and Thomas Merton were heard in a concert performed by the soprano Azucena López and the pianist Karina Azizova. A Benedictine choir of monks from Santo Domingo de Silos, and Cistercian monks and nuns from across Spain contributed their beautiful liturgical chants. There were times for prayer and contemplation and a Holy Mass was celebrated at the Cathedral of Ávila, presided over by Ávila's Bishop, Jesús García Burillo. It is almost impossible to describe the manifold blessings of the gathering but –suffice it to say– that Merton's presence seemed to help create a very joyful, nourishing, loving and faith-filled atmosphere.

Thomas Merton was convinced that for any radical social, cultural, political, human change to be real and truly effective in the long run, it has to be spiritual. Merton's vision of hope has been succinctly summed up by Patrick F. O'Connell in *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*. These words provided the focus of the Conference and will no doubt serve as the best introduction to this book:

Christianity, according to Thomas Merton, is preeminently “a religion of hope,” founded on the belief that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God and that divine mercy and goodness are more powerful than human evil (*Monastic Journey*, 52). The basis for Christian hope, then, is God’s love and acceptance, as revealed in the cross of Christ (*Thoughts in Solitude*, 38-39), and in the new life bestowed by “the great feast of Christian hope: the Resurrection” (*Road to Joy*, 99). Merton emphasizes both that hope has a transcendent dimension, pointing toward the ultimate fulfillment of the world to come (*Thoughts in Solitude*, 38), the eschatological kingdom (*Seasons of Celebration*, 60), and that it has profound effects on the way one’s life is lived here and now. The “problem of hope,” Merton writes, is “to establish a right relationship between the past and the future, which give spiritual solidity to the present” (*Search for Solitude*, 354).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O’Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 212.