

The complex spirituality of Thomas Merton

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the birth of spiritual writer Thomas Merton (1915-68), a Trappist monk from the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. During his life, Father Merton produced a large volume of writings, among which is his 1948 autobiography [“The Seven Storey Mountain,”](#) which has sold millions of copies.

Interest in Father Merton’s work seems greater than ever, said Paul Pearson, director and archivist of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University in Louisville, Kentucky ([merton.org](#)). The center is home to more than 50,000 Merton items, including his correspondence, audiotapes of his conferences, books from his library, photographs and even watercolor paintings by his artist-father, Owen. More than 50 books related to Merton have been published in the past two years, Pearson noted, and a record 460 had planned to attend the biannual meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society in June.

“It shows he still speaks powerfully to people and that we’re still catching up with his thinking,” Pearson said. “He speaks about topics that are still relevant today, like war and racism, with prophetic insight.”

Many prominent Catholics, such as Father Robert Barron, rector of the Archdiocese of Chicago’s Mundelein Seminary, speak highly of Father Merton. In a recent reflection, Father Barron described Merton as “a master of the spiritual life,” and noted, “his life and work had a profound effect on me and an army of others around the world.”

Others, like Jesuit Father John Hardon (1914-2000), who authored “The Catholic Catechism” at the request of Blessed

Pope Paul VI in 1975, worry about Merton's orthodoxy. Father Hardon said Merton had a "negative effect on monastic living" and was "not fully converted intellectually to the Catholic Faith." Noting that he had personally known and worked with Father Merton, Father Hardon opined, "Merton had so deeply imbibed non-Christian, Oriental mysticism, that his concept of God was at best vague, and at worst pantheism. ... The New Age movement mainly owes its genesis and development to Thomas Merton."

Conversion

Father Merton was born to an American mother in France and lived in multiple homes in the United States and Europe. At age 6, he lost his mother to cancer; when he was 16, Father Merton's dad died, and he grew up not practicing any faith.

Merton on his writings
"Whatever I may have written, I think it all can be reduced in the end to this one root truth: that God calls human persons to union with himself and with one another in Christ, in the Church which is his Mystical Body. It is also a witness to the fact that there is and must be, in the Church, a con- templative life which has no other function than to realize these mysterious things, and return to God all the thanks and praise that human hearts can give him."

At age 18, Father Merton enjoyed the party lifestyle at Cambridge University and may have fathered a child. He transferred to Columbia University in Manhattan and was received into the Catholic Church. He went on retreat at Gethsemani and was accepted into the Trappist community in 1941. The Trappists were known for their austerity. Pearson believes he chose the community out of a desire to do penance for the sins of his youth and "have nothing further to do with the world."

Father Merton was ordained a priest in 1949. Merton's

superiors encouraged his writing, and after the success of "The Seven Storey Mountain," he became a celebrity.

In 1958, 17-year-old Paul Quenon was one of many young men who read "The Seven Storey Mountain" and was influenced to join Gethsemani. He was one of a group of 25 novices who studied under Father Merton during a two-year novitiate. Today, at age 74, Brother Paul Quenon remains at Gethsemani. He recalled, "Merton had a pleasant and witty personality. He was an interesting person, and he took an interest in you."

Brother Paul recalled that Father Merton first gave him a book on Benedictine spirituality, the central theme of which was docility. Father Merton also encouraged the novices to be of good cheer and keep a sense of humor. Brother Paul said, "Merton told us that Trappists aren't supposed to be sad."

Eastern religions

Father Merton developed an interest in Eastern religions in the later part of his life, which ultimately led him to Asia to speak with such religious figures as the Dalai Lama. At the abbey, it was reflected, Brother Paul noted, by Father Merton's presentations to the community on non-Christian religions and spirituality, including Sufism.

Some thought Father Merton would become a Buddhist, but that's not so, according to Brother Paul, who said, "Merton was well-grounded in his own Catholicism, and he felt he could share it without being endangered. He also thought Buddhism was ahead in the practice of meditation and that Catholics could learn something from that tradition."

Anthony Clark, an associate professor at Whitworth University in Spokane, Washington, who has studied Father Merton, is concerned about the priest's interest in Eastern religions. A fan of Father Merton's earlier works, Clark said it showed in his works that Father Merton began to drift from orthodoxy

around 1958, and by 1966, they “were in a different realm.” Clark said, “I think Merton’s toying with Asian thought and religion supplanted his Catholic orthodoxy.” Clark added that Father Merton was a complicated man, and at times he expressed disdain for monastic life. In a 1954 letter Father Merton wrote to his abbot, for example, Clark said Father Merton told him, “I resent and even hate Gethsemani.” Father Merton would later write that he and many of his fellow monks contemplated leaving.

“Merton was a man always in the Church, but one who wrote in his personal journals that he didn’t want to be,” Clark said. “He seemed to stay in monastic life by default, rather than by commitment.”

Desire for solitude

By the 1960s, Father Merton had a desire for greater solitude, and withdrew to a small house, or hermitage, on the abbey grounds, about a 15-minute walk away from the main buildings. Brother Paul recalls the day when Father Merton left. “He told us, ‘You guys are better community men than I am.’”

In 1966, a back injury sent the 51-year-old Father Merton to the hospital, where he met and fell in love with his 25-year-old nurse, Margie Smith. He referred to her as “M” in his writing. For a 10-week period, the pair met surreptitiously, in a relationship that largely was kept secret – difficult to do in a cloistered monastic community – and when someone finally told Father Merton’s confessor about it, Brother Paul said, “Father Matthew laughed, because he didn’t believe it.”

In 1968, a new abbot, Father Flavian Burns, allowed Father Merton to make three trips from the abbey, including one to Asia. Quenon speculated that Father Merton was seeking a more private location for his hermitage, as many people came to Gethsemani wanting to meet him. While in Bangkok, however, Father Merton was electrocuted in a freak accident. His death

stunned the abbey, Brother Paul recalled. "It was as if time stood still. It was a time of tremendous mourning."

Lasting legacy

Nearly 50 years later, Brother Paul is pleased that a steady stream of visitors still comes to Gethsemani to visit Father Merton's grave and see the hermitage in which he once lived. And he is pleased to share his memories of his former novice master: "Merton continues to be a mentor to me. And when I see others take an interest in his life and work, it stimulates my own interest."

Pearson recommended that those new to Father Merton begin with his "Essential Writings," and then move on to his other works. "There's a lot of material out there being published today on spirituality, but little of it has the depth of Merton's writing," Pearson said. "He has a knack for speaking to people and calling out the best in us."

Clark admires Father Merton but recommends that the works he produced in the final 10 years of his life be "read with caution," as they have ideas "harmful to our faith in Christ." He said, "Merton has a brilliant intellect and a deep spiritual insight. He wrote at a period of Western history, however, in which there has been a spiritual angst or doubt. Everyone's a spiritual seeker, and Merton is the quintessential spiritual seeker. He speaks to the dominant spirituality today, that of seeking. That's why he's an icon of modern spirituality."

Jim Graves writes from California.