

THOMAS MERTON AT BELLARMINA COLLEGE

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One of the questions that I am most frequently asked by visitors to the Thomas Merton Studies Center is why the Merton papers are at Bellarmine College. Though significant smaller Merton collections exist at St. Bonaventure University, the University of Kentucky, Syracuse University, Boston University, and Columbia University (the Sr. Therese Lentfoehr Collection of Mertoniana), the bulk of his literary estate was left by him to Bellarmine. The answer is manifold, but easily explained.

Merton had, first of all, long-standing ties with the College. He was friendly with several members of the faculty, particularly Fr. John T. Loftus, then Dean, who first conceived of the idea of a “Merton Room” or collection at the College; and Dan Walsh, his long-time friend and mentor, who had originally told him of Gethsemani and who taught philosophy at Bellarmine in the late 50s and 60s. He had often used the Bellarmine College Library, as he did other area libraries, to obtain books unavailable in the Gethsemani library (one of my favorite Merton anecdotes is of a visit to the “Merton Room” in the Bellarmine College Library. Though he did not attend the formal dedication of the Room in 1963, he did “stop by” some time later to drop off some materials and to see the Room. When a library staff member saw a rather undistinguished man in denim jacket and jeans heading for the “sacrosanct” Merton Room, she stopped him and told him “You can’t go in there!” Merton, without telling her who he was, acquiesced and left, running into Msgr. Alfred D. Horrigan, the President of the College, in the lobby. When told why Merton was wandering around, Msgr. Horrigan assured him that he could indeed go in and quickly ushered him back to the Room). Merton paid other visits to the College and, in fact, the last place he slept in Kentucky before leaving for his Asian trip was Room 14, Bonaventure Hall, upstairs from the present location of the Thomas Merton Studies Center.

The College itself was interested in the idea of a Merton Collection. Fr. Loftus proposed in 1963 that a Thomas Merton Collection be established as part of the college library. The proposal was approved by the College, by Dom James Fox, abbot of Gethsemani, and by Merton. The nucleus of what was to become the Merton Collection was contributed by Merton, Fr. Loftus, Dan Walsh, and Dr. James Wygal. The Collection was formally inaugurated on November 10, 1963 and the Merton Room was dedicated one year later, on November 8, 1964.

Interest in Merton was already growing in the 1960s and, in 1967, Merton decided to make Bellarmine College the “official repository” for his literary estate. Article I.c. of the Trust Agreement, signed November 11, 1967, states:

The Trustees shall deposit all my manuscripts, tapes, drawings, photographs and kindred items with Bellarmine College, or its successor in interest, to be kept in the Merton Room at said institution.

A collection already existed at Bellarmine; the college was in the same archdiocese as Gethsemani; Merton could have ready access to any materials deposited there in his lifetime; and circumstances seemed to indicate that the materials would best be housed away from the Abbey. Dom Flavian Burns, abbot of Gethsemani, wrote to Msgr. Horrigan in 1969:

When my predecessor, Abbot James Fox, was approached in October of 1963 in regard to the possibility of providing a home for the Merton Archives at Bellarmine College he was very happy to cooperate with the plan. He realized that in the coming years students and scholars would be interested in the writings, both published and unpublished, of Father Louis, and that as a cloistered contemplative community it would be difficult for students to have access to these materials if they remained at Gethsemani.

When Bellarmine was made repository for the Merton estate in November of 1967, no one could have guessed that Merton would die little more than a year later and that the estate would be transferred from the Abbey to Bellarmine. Since 1967 some seventy-five theses, over twenty-five books, and hundreds of articles have been produced on Merton through use of the facilities of the Thomas Merton Studies

Center. Part of this incredible publication has been done by Bellarmine faculty members themselves. Current faculty who have written on Merton include Ms. Marquita E. Breit, Rev. Clyde F. Crews, Dr. Robert E. Daggy, Dr. Wade Hall, Rev. George Kilcourse, and Mr. Ron Seitz. The reciprocal interest of Merton and Bellarmine College was expressed by Merton Himself in his essay "Concerning the Collection in the Bellarmine College Library: A Statement, November 10, 1963," read by Dan Walsh at the inauguration of the Merton Room. This statement has been published in THE THOMAS MERTON STUDIES CENTER (Santa Barbara, Unicorn Press, 1971).

If the word "celebration" may be used in a reverent sense, what we are celebrating is an aspect of the diocese of Louisville, or as the primitive Christians would have said, "the Church of Louisville." A "Church" or *ekklesia* is built up of the people who have been "called together" and have gathered in one place to hear the word of God, to praise Him, to offer the sacrifice of their worship and their love all their days. We have been called to this Church, this diocese, as others were called here long before us; like Bishop Flaget, Father Nerinx, and Father Badin, like the Founders of Gethsemani Abbey, the first Lorretines, and the Sisters of Charity, the first Dominicans at St. Rose, and so many others down the years. We should clearly recognize the fact that we, too, — priests laymen, faculty, students and friends of Bellarmine College — form part of one same building of living stones because we have responded to the same mysterious action of the Holy Spirit. . .

Naturally I feel that I have a very close bond with Bellarmine College. Archbishop Floersh, the founder of Bellarmine, ordained me to the holy priesthood just about the time he founded the College. At that same time my first book of prose appeared, the *Seven Storey Mountain*. Since then I have formed close friendships with many of the Bellarmine faculty members (above all, Monsignor Horrigan and Father John Loftus). There are, of course, many other Louisville friends here today to whom I am indebted for countless things. I want to thank all of you for your friendship and encouragement, which have meant so much to me in these recent years.

Here, then are some of the reasons why I believe that a collection like this can have a meaning for us all. For these reasons, whatever may be of interest to you in my work certainly belongs to you by right. I would not feel I were doing you justice in keeping it from you. If, on the other hand, there is much here that is trivial or useless, I trust your indulgence to overlook it and to pray for me. I will pray in a special way for all of you who are here today. May God bless us all, and give us the grace to finish the work which He is asking of us here in the "Church of Louisville."

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Thomas Merton.



Bellarmino-Ursuline College.
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