

# WILLIAM SHANNON AND THE MERTON LETTERS:

## *The First Selection*

—by **Robert E. Daggy**

I was first exposed to (and at first overwhelmed by the bulk of) Thomas Merton's letters eleven years ago in the winter of 1974 when I was hired as a consultant to the Merton Legacy Trust. I was staggered, as others have been, by the vast number of letters written by a man who was a cloistered monk, a man I should have thought would have received many letters (possibly and probably), but who would have written few. But write them he did — and in numbers hard to calculate because we now suspect, and in many cases know, that there were more letters written than have survived at the Thomas Merton Studies Center and in other Merton collections.

We have files of correspondence, arranged by *correspondent*, with nearly 2,000 individuals. Some of these files contain well over 100 items. No exact count has been made — it never seemed necessary to do so — but Merton letters on file here run in the thousands. In addition there are letters in other collections — at St. Bonaventure University, Boston College, Columbia University, Syracuse University, the University of Kentucky and others. Some remain in private hands. The majority of Merton's letters in the Center are carbon copies, but it quickly became obvious that Merton had not saved or had not made carbons of all his letters. So, if we had an exact count of *all* the letters he wrote, the number would be even more staggering.

It is clear that Merton meant for his letters — or at least many of them — to have an audience beyond the recipient of the letter. (See Fr. Matthew Kelly's comments on pp.12-3.) He, in fact, gathered several of his letters into the well-known collection, *Cold War Letters*, in the early 1960s. He also drew the following clause in his Trust Agreement, signed in 1967: The Trustees shall "determine the appropriateness of publishing a selection or collection of my letters, after carefully editing same; and publish same, if in the best judgment of the Trustees these letters may be made public in keeping with the general spirit, objective and purpose of said Trust." In 1982, the Trustees of the Merton Legacy Trust appointed the noted Merton scholar, William H. Shannon, to be the *General Editor* of the Merton Letters and to prepare a selection for publication. That selection has now been published as the first of a projected four volumes of "selected" correspondence. It is *The Hidden Ground of Love: the Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience & Social Concerns*; selected & edited by William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985). This first volume contains 656 pages of letters and sells for \$27.95.

Fr. Shannon, who has spent more hours working in the Thomas Merton Studies Center in the letters and other sources than any other Merton scholar, was immediately confronted with the task of organizing this huge bulk of material in such a way that a “selection” would be a tenable form in which to present Merton’s letters. He decided to “select” the letters into four broad (and at times unavoidably overlapping) categories. As he says in his “Introduction”: “The present volume contains the letters on religious experience and social concerns. Subsequent volumes will present letters to relatives and special friends, letters to contemporary writers, letters on spiritual direction and monastic renewal. They will include only Merton’s letters.” Father Shannon also felt that “because the letters are so numerous as to make the editing of them by a single person an almost insuperable task, I have, with the approval of the Trustees, invited the collaboration of three well-known Merton scholars: Dr. Robert E. Daggy, curator of the Thomas Merton Studies Center in Louisville, who gives so generously of his time to those who come to work at the Center; Professor Michael Mott of Bowling Green University in Ohio, author of the authorized Merton biography; and Brother Patrick Hart, who so often and so unselfishly has placed his own extensive Merton scholarship at the service of other scholars.” The subsequent volumes will be edited by these three individuals under Father Shannon’s general editorship.

Fr. Shannon’s first volume of the Merton Letters is an extraordinary achievement and we dedicate this issue of the *Merton Seasonal* to him, a man whose long study, dedication, distinction and seniority entitle him to the sobriquet “Dean of Merton Studies.” He has himself provided the lead article for this issue. Because the publication of this first volume of letters is significant for scholars and for the future direction of Merton studies, we present reviews of *The Hidden Ground of Love* (the title, by the way, is taken from a letter to Amiya Chakravarty)—by Dr. David D. Cooper of the University of California-Santa Barbara; Fr. Matthew Kelty, O.C.S.O., of the Abbey of Gethsemani; Sr. Elena Malits, C.S.C., of Saint Mary’s College; and Dr. Raymond Nelson of the University of Virginia. We also include a brief excerpt from the already-popular letter to Abdul Aziz and a poetic fragment from a new collection of poems by Father Daniel Berrigan who figures prominently in the first volume and who is mentioned in nearly every review.

The last year has seen the publication of two monumental Merton works: the authorized biography, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* by Michael Mott and now *The Hidden Ground of Love*, edited by Father Shannon. As David Cooper puts it in his review: “With the publication of Merton’s letters — coupled with the invaluable resource of his official biography — Merton studies itself comes of age.”

