

MERTON: MONITORING SELF

Review of

THE HIDDEN GROUND OF LOVE:

The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience & Social Concerns
Selected & Edited by William H. Shannon

—Reviewed by **Matthew Kelty, O.C.S.O.**

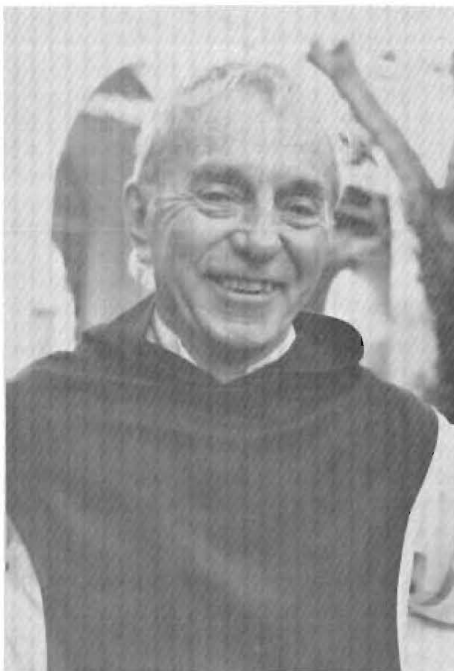
Some years ago a young man who had been a semi-professional dancer and actor entered the monastery at Gethsemani. He did not continue at the abbey and later he told me why. "I was always on stage," he said. "You know, since I was a small child I have always been called on to sing some song, to do a little dance, or some such thing, and that continued all my life. I developed early an awareness of people watching me, applauding me, making much of me. Now it seems part of me. And so here at the abbey. All the more with its liturgy, ritual, costume and other dramatic aspects. I could not shake myself of an audience, real or imagined. Try as I would, it stayed with me and ruined the place, the life, for me. And so I had to leave. Being a monk is a lot more than an act."

There is a photo of Thomas Merton as a pre-school child sitting at home at a little desk his mother had gotten him, a book in his hands, I think, and though not looking at the camera, very much saying with emphasis: "See me at my little desk and note that I can read and write already, so small a child". Merton had then, and had all through his life, an enormous self-awareness, an idea that what he said and what he thought and how he looked all mattered very much. And he pulled it off.

I think this is very much an achievement. Eminence in anything, from holiness to art, to learning, to dancing, requires an engagement which is all-consuming. It is taking one's self utterly seriously. And getting away with it; that is to say, so managing it that the self is lost in the self's assertion. Holiness, it seems to me, means a commitment that is so overpowering that it literally burns up everything in its being achieved. I think Thomas Merton had that sort of engagement in the search for the love of God and neighbor. And there is, to the average man, or to put it more modestly, to me, something shocking in it.

This volume of letters, first of a projected series of four, makes this clear I think. Each collection of letters covers a certain area: this one, religious experience and social concern. They are arranged chronologically under each correspondent. Thus one follows a certain series to the same person and in the same general interest. This makes for a certain see-sawing through Merton's life, but is in the end not confusing. The range of persons is extraordinary, so too the subjects.

Father Matthew Kelty of the Abbey of Gethsemani was trained as a novice in the monastic life by Thomas Merton. In the mid-1960s, he began to live as a part-time hermit and later spent some years as a hermit on the northern coast of Papua New Guinea. His writings on Merton include "Some Reminiscences of Thomas Merton" in *Cistercian Studies* (1969); "The Man" in *Thomas Merton/Monk: a Monastic Tribute* (1974); and "A Letter on the Death of Thomas Merton" in *Sermons in a Monastery* (1983).



Father MATTHEW KELTY, O.C.S.O.
Courtesy Gethsemani Archives

A monk reading this volume will not be very far along when he will find himself asking, "Where did the man get the time?" For a monk will know what a monk's life is, knows what it was like in Merton's time. Merton fitted letters into the day somehow or other, had the ability to seize a few moments and sit down and bat out a few words to a friend, words often enough running into an essay full of sound thought and comment. Another monk in the same time might be standing looking out the window a while before the next bell, checking the bulletin board. Merton had enormous energy, great discipline, and of course brilliance. Carried off, be it noted, with a certain cool style. He did not give the impression of being extraordinarily busy, rushing from this to that, harried and pursued. The opposite. He would look casual, but it was only a look. If there were others in the monastery who took pains to appear in work clothes as much as possible, it was he who perhaps did more real work than anyone else in the place. Used time well.

But the puzzling thing to me is what I mentioned: how was it possible for this man to sit down and share some thoughts with a friend, knowing the while that the carbon copy would be filed away (he kept orderly files, if sloppy in other ways), would some day, without much doubt, see itself in print. Just as when he made entries in his journals, the many of them, private and semi-private, he was able to write as if he did not know that every line would one day show up in a book, or at least be edited for a book. Apparently the self-awareness did not bother him. Or, to see it so, he was so totally given to his calling that everything entered into that with a purity of heart that dazzles one.

Put in worldly terms, he was very ambitious, very shrewd, quick to capitalize on anything, even anyone, that would further his cause. Not his own cause, of course, but what he stood for. For he took himself with a most amazing seriousness. And this is what makes the difference: his love for God. He was as determined to advance his career as any striving artist. But the determination was inspired.

I remember once going up to his hermitage with him and a group of guests to discuss some spiritual subject which I have quite forgotten. He wasted no time in getting up there - or perhaps he was already there waiting for us - but what struck me forcibly at the time was this: that once in the room and seated, he at once launched into a prepared lecture from notes. Not a minute spent in small talk, warming up, the exchanges that can make a gathering rather delightful. And I thought: how serious this man is. How important what he says seems to him. So I remain convinced that holiness involves some such driving passion.

Here is a brief sample of some of the people he writes to (only the correspondence from him is given, not the other party's): Thich Nhat Hanh, Erich Fromm, Dorothy Day, Paul Tillich, Jacqueline Kennedy, Pope Paul VI, Bernard Haring, John C.H. Wu, Cardinal Wright.

The man is fascinating, so are his letters. He can be wry, sarcastic, charming, impatient, frustrated, frustrating, impetuous, timid, determined. And lots else. And it is all there to see. The tone he took, for example, in writing to the Pope (or one of them) was so reverent, respectful, that I was amused since it seemed so out of character, yet I am sure it was all in childlike faith. When I was a novice in the early 60s, Pope John XXIII sent him a stole as a personal memento. Merton was almost in tears when he received it so great was his delight. He used to wear it on special days of prayer we had every month. Yet the stole was no work of art, rather garish, tasteless. That did not bother him at all, and he could be so cutting in comment on church art he did not like.

The letters are edited by Monsignor William Shannon, professor emeritus of theology at Nazareth College, Rochester, N.Y., author of THOMAS MERTON'S DARK PATH. He has done some "prudent editing of some of the letters" to keep them within length. I doubt if we have missed anything and one has no sense of being cheated.

Next time you write a letter, have in mind that it will be in print some day for the world to read.