

TOO SERIOUS A BROTHER MONK: A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Editor's Note: *The Merton Seasonal* seeks to be a forum for those who wish to comment on Thomas Merton and the many publications by and about him. The articles, poems, and reviews in *The Merton Seasonal* do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the editor and the director of the Thomas Merton Studies Center or of the administration of Bellarmine College. Many letters of comment have been received in the past, but we had developed no policy toward publishing such comments. This letter was written and addressed specifically as a "Letter to the Editor" for publication in *The Merton Seasonal*. With it we begin a policy of accepting such letters which will be published as space permits. Naturally we reserve the right not to publish any letter received or to edit a letter where appropriate. In this case we are publishing the entire letter.

Dear Editor:

Thomas Merton, Brother Monk: The Quest for True Freedom by M. Basil Pennington, O.C.S.O., is valuable in that it presents an intimate, brother's view of Merton's life, particularly the monastic life. However, largely toward the end of the book Pennington tries to make a saint of Merton (something at which Merton would have laughed). This nearly invalidates Pennington's effort.

Merton made great efforts not to fulfill anyone's idea of a monk — much less a saint. What is a saint anyway? Pennington seems to think it is a perfect person — or at least a person whose desires are "perfect." Merton accepted the fact that this was impossible (perhaps he accepted it too often).

Poor Tom had an awful start in life and, like all of us, carried the burden of his early years — along with their benefits — all through his life. This does not in any way invalidate Merton's genius or make him any less a messenger of God. Like the Old Testament prophets, his humanity is very clear to see. Merton understood this far better than Pennington.

It is God we find through Merton's thoughts and work; it is God that Merton always sought — humanly — though not perfectly. Indeed, one gets the impression in Merton's writings that he refused to take himself too seriously — something Pennington may have missed.

Dorothy J. Barbehenn
Rochester, New York