THE MERTON TREE REVISITED

A Photo-Essay

by Paul Quenon, O.C.S.O.

In July of 1987 I visited Redwoods Monastery, a Trappistine foundation in Whitethorn, California, and was kindly driven to the coast nearby at Needle Rock. Some readers may be familiar with this tree which first appeared in *Monks Pond*.

It is still standing. A bit more spare, but just as dead as it was when Merton photographed it twenty years ago. The nuns call it *The Merton Tree*.

Miraculously, no initials have been carved on its surface, despite the nearby bathing site, and it remains untouched by anything other than breeze, light and shadow.

It seems, itself, to describe a strange alphabet of undeciphered meaning, spending on the wind.

coarse innuendoes and a snarled syntax,
an inner argument with itself by which it achieves the symmetry and balance that has kept it standing for decades.

while the tide ebbs and the moon swells

and the earth tilts before the face of the sun.

The tree that Merton's camera exposed rawboned under the overcast sky retains its own secret even in the sharp shadows of a Pacific sunset.

Paul Quenon, O.C.S.O. is a monk of the Abbey of Gethsemani. He has written several reviews of books by and about Merton and was a participant at the Merton Conference at Berea, Kentucky, in March 1988. His poem, "More Geography from Lograire: Written from Merton's Hermitage," appeared in the Spring 1985 Merton Seasonal. More recently, he reviewed Ron Seitz's Gethsemani Poems in the Spring 1986 issue and M. Basil Pennington's Thomas Merton, Brother Monk in the Summer 1987 issue.