

# MERTON'S BELL RINGS OUT IN THAILAND

by **M. Basil Pennington, O.C.S.O.**

We were walking along the dirt road in the valley behind the monastery. As we looked up at the imposing enclosure walls atop the escarpment, Father Louis (Thomas Merton) related how in the course of his first visit to Gethsemani in 1941 he had stood in this same place and wondered if he could live the rest of his life within the confines of those walls. He added that, as usual, he was looking in the wrong direction and asking the wrong question, making unreal problems for himself (as we all do) for right behind him was the road that led up Mount Calvary where twenty years later they would be building his hermitage.

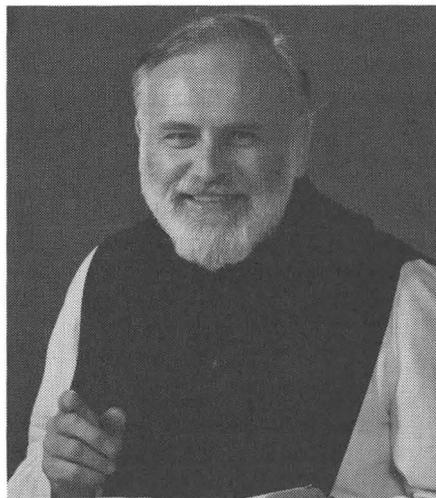
When Merton first came to Gethsemani the monks were, in fact, restricted to the rather limited space within the walls except when they had to go out to the fields or forest for work. The hundreds of acres of virgin forest covering the surrounding Kentucky knobs beckoned to the young monk, offering far greater silence and solitude than the crowded enclosure. He grabbed every opportunity he could find to go out there to work.

Finally, in 1952, Father Louis was named master of the young professed or students. Using his new authority he set his youngsters — and himself — free, at least on Sunday afternoons. For the few hours after the office of none until vespers, they could roam as much as they wished among the trees and lakes. But to be sure they all got home in time for vespers (lest the hard-won permission be lost) Merton resurrected an ancient bell of unknown origin and set it up to ring out an early warning for vespers. The bell was an old one, cast in Ohio, perhaps first brought to the site by the sisters who were there before the monks.

In 1955, Merton became novice master. In time greater freedom came to all the monks to enjoy the Gethsemani acreage and a particular bell was no longer needed for the students. At the same time Merton's horizons were expanding, reaching out to

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other spiritual traditions. The spirit of Zen especially had attracted him and he read more and more about it and enjoyed corresponding with various knowledgeable masters such as Daisetz T. Suzuki. In his enthusiasm he set about constructing a Zen garden next to the novitiate. It took many a muscled novice to get the land cleared and level and bring in the right boulders. It was here that Merton again set up his bell. It would be a rare occasion now when it would be rung but the classical Zen garden always had its bell.

And there the bell stood, while its master went off to other Eastern gardens and then to the garden of paradise. It stood there until the march of progress decreed that the old novitiate building with its neighboring garden should give way to a new novitiate and infirmary building. The crated bell stood about for a while then went for a time to a neighboring community. They had thought to use it in their new church but it proved too large for their delicate tower and so it was left standing in its crate.

In 1986, Merton's abbot, who was also his disciple and friend, Father Flavian Burns, was called out of his hermitage to serve as superior of the monastery in Missouri, Assumption Abbey, near Ava. This small monastery had only one bell in its little brick tower, instead of the two which Cistercian tradition and the old usages called for. So on one of his trips from Gethsemani, Father Flavian brought Merton's idle bell to Ava. Unfortunately, the belltower at Ava could not support a second bell, and again the bell stood about idle.

In 1988, I had the privilege of visiting the Church of Thailand in the company of Cardinal Arinze, Prefect of the Pontifical Secretariat for Dialogue with World Religions. In the course of the dialogues, as the Buddhists shared their methods of meditation with us, we in turn shared centering prayer with them. The response was very positive and would have delighted Father Louis. We also visited the site of his tragic death in the Red Cross compound outside Bangkok.

In the course of our travels, we met a wonderful old Italian Salesian, Bishop Carretto. Through sixty-five years of apostolic labor, he had brought two dioceses into existence and firmly established the Roman Catholic church in south Thailand. The bishop took us to the beautiful island of Samui where the Salesians had just built a church in honor of Saint Anne. He asked me if we could get him a bell for the new church.

Knowing Merton's special devotion to Saint Anne (he had dedicated his first hermitage to her and she also featured in his account — written to Pasternak — of his transforming experience in 1958), I thought how pleased he would be if his bell could find its final home in her church, ringing out daily in the hearing of the surrounding Buddhist temples in the land where he completed his earthly journey. The monks of Gethsemani and Ava both entered into the plan and we offered the bell to Bishop Carretto. In the meantime the good bishop had consecrated his successor and retired. As his final pastoral gift to the diocese he served for so many years, he founded one more contemplative monastery, for the Capuchin nuns at Phanom. It was for this monastery the bishop now claimed the bell, feeling it was more needed in the monastery and would be more "at home" there.

And so Merton's bell still rings out, calling contemplatives to the daily round of liturgical hours and proclaiming within the earshot of thousands of Buddhists the goodness of the Incarnation through the thrice daily *Angelus*. In this way his dear old bell carries on the dialogue that he began in Thailand on the eve of his death, a dialogue he began years before when he set up this same old bell in a Zen garden beside the novitiate at Gethsemani. As Bishop Carretto wrote: "It is a long story but I am sure it has brought joy to our dear beloved Thomas Merton in heaven."