A TRIBUTE TO THOMAS MERTON

by Edmund Brand, O.C.S.O.

The Seven Storey Mountain
Catapulted him to fame,
And inspired many people
To embrace the faith or focus
On a deeper life of prayer.
Sensitive, gifted, a holy man,
He longed to be alone with God
To ponder on The Wisdom
Of the Fathers of the Desert.
This prayerful, meditative monk
Gave birth to Thoughts in Solitude.

Entering Gethsemani at
The age of twenty-seven,
He spent his next and final
Twenty-seven years at work,
Praying, writing, serving God
And his community. At length
He built a rustic hermitage
Where he could live apart,
To gain his true identity,
God’s image deep within his heart.

He loved the woods, the streams, the birds;
The seasons were his liturgy,
All nature sacramentals.
Intoxicated by The Waters of Siloe,
In a Climate of Monastic Prayer,
He planted fruits of fervor with
New Seeds of Contemplation.
The Psalms of David nourished him
Food for the hungry soul,
His Bread in the Wilderness.

The hermit's life befitted him,  
And yet he realized,  
That No Man is an Island to himself.  
For all his love of solitude  
He needed people too.  
Approachable, out-going, very human;  
Carefree, happy-go-lucky, free-wheeling;  
Mischievous, creative, passionate,  
Whenever opportunity  
Came near for socializing  
Uncle Louie was the center of the crowd.  
But when the fun was over he  
Withdrew thence to The Silent life . . .  
And there was Silence in Heaven!

By a sustained and serious effort  
He made The Ascent to Truth,  
To the cloud around the mountain top  
Where humans may hope to meet  
The Living God.

His influences extended far  
Beyond the cloister walls  
He promoted Contemplation  
In a World of Action.  
The basic principles, he said,  
Of Life and Holiness  
Are not for monks and nuns alone.  
Interior freedom is for all  
Who have the courage to behold  
The Infinite.

Reaching out to all in need,  
The friendless and afflicted,  
The poor, oppressed humanity,  
These were his deep concern.  
An advocate of civil rights,  
True love for one another;  
And peace, not nuclear annihilation,  
Not sowing Seeds of Destruction.  
Be armed with faith and fortitude,  
"The root of war is fear."

Aware of his own dire need  
For God and for His mercy,  
He reached out to all sinners, for  
He hurt as they were hurting.
Fraudulence and cruelty
Infest the modern world,
He described with poetic irony
In Cables to the Ace.
But Man is in a Divided Sea,
Praising God in spite of all.

The Orient attracted him,
Zen and the Birds of Appetite;
The Way of Chuang Tzu,
And dialogue with Suzuki; that
East and West might meet together
To know each other better.
Faithful to his monastic call
Amid distress and suffering,
His search for God continued
With unabated zeal.

After many years of longing
For a mystical encounter,
A grace which was not given him . . .
Until at Mahabalipuram!
Came that one illumination,
Brief and sudden though it was,
But fierce, piercing through the surface —
His desire was fulfilled.

His Asian Journey, life itself,
By now were nearly over.
Looking pale and very tired,
He gave his talk at Bangkok,
Then ended quite prophetically:
“Now I will disappear.”
He then retired to his room
Where an accident, or heart attack,
Would strike a fatal blow.
Found with bleeding gash and bruises,
He lay lifeless on the floor.
Now he could ask with Blessed Lutgarde:
Lord, “What Are These Wounds?”

Epilogue. His body now
Lies buried at Gethsemani,
While his rich and varied works continue
To illuminate the world.
Hailed now among the greats
In the realm of spirituality,
His Exile Ends in Glory!