

# THOMAS MERTON IN BELGIUM:

## A Report to the *ITMS*

by **Robert E. Daggy**

The “Merton Vrienden” — Merton Friends. So the vital and active group in Belgium call themselves. Centered primarily in Flanders, the group was formed before *The International Thomas Merton Society*. They held their first meeting — they call them “Merton Weekends” — in the fall of 1986, over six months before the *ITMS* was founded at the Thomas Merton Studies Center in May, 1987.

The guiding force — I do not hesitate to say the leader — who instigated the group is Constant Broos, or “Stan” as he and his friends call him. A longtime reader of Merton, he came into contact with a number of other Flemish-speaking Belgians interested in Merton. The first weekend was planned and since then the group has been most active, holding two weekends a year at different abbeys and monasteries in Belgium. The meetings are conducted in Flemish and, though they hastened to tell me that Flemish is *not* Dutch exactly, they draw participants from their neighbor, The Netherlands.

In 1987 Stan Broos and his friend, Peter Doll who lives in Ghent, spent three weeks in study at the Thomas Merton Studies Center and on retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani. Soon after this visit they began to edit and publish a small review which follows, more or less, the format of *The Merton Seasonal*. It is called *Contactblad Merton-Vrienden* and carries short articles, reports on weekends, translations of Merton excerpts and poems, and visuals from the *Seasonal*. They now have a mailing list of over 350. We list in our recent publications section the contents of the last two issues.

One of my first actions on becoming president of the *ITMS* in May 1989 was to appoint Stan Broos an “International Adviser.” I have been concerned to increase contact and exchange with the Merton Vrienden. I felt that attending one of the Merton Weekends would be a start, not to direct affiliation with the *ITMS*, but to communication. So I went to Belgium for the most recent “Merton Weekend.”

It was held at Oude Abdij (Old Abbey) in Drongen outside Ghent. It was once the Jesuit seminary in Belgium. Some fifty people attended. The schedule included plenty of time for informal discussion and social gatherings, both considered most important to the convivial Belgian Friends (and Merton himself would no doubt have been happy with the amount of beer consumed in the moments of sociability!).



**PHIL BOSMANS**

Foto Bartok L.

The “meat” of the weekend came in the concurrent sessions which were held three times on Saturday. The participants were divided into three groups and thus had opportunity to hear each of the three speakers. Paulette Boeykens is confined to a wheelchair as the result of a disabling illness and her presentation, a deeply personal and emotional one, dealt with Merton’s response to human suffering in his writings. Franklin De Vrieze discussed nonviolence in Merton’s thinking, bringing into his discussion current applications in what was then called “The Gulf Crisis.” Peter Doll dealt with the theme of “illusion” in Merton’s *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (one of the dozen or so Merton books which have been translated into Dutch). I was most grateful to Maud Franken, a Merton Friend from The Netherlands, who translated for me during the talks and who did, I thought, an amazingly good job of it. At 8.00 o’clock on Saturday evening I spoke to the entire group. The talk was something of a mixed bag, covering Merton’s life, the Thomas Merton Studies Center and its work, and *The International Thomas Merton Society* and its goals. Maud’s husband, Guus Franken, translated for me though many were able to understand English. I said two or three sentences and then paused while Guus translated into Flemish. I was careful to time my remarks since I had been asked to stop precisely at 9.00 o’clock so that the evening social hour could begin.

On Sunday the group gathered for the Eucharist. Mass was said and the homily given by the popular Phil Bosmans, long a Merton friend. Bosmans is head of the Belgian organization *Bond Zonder Naam* (literally, *Organization without a Name*) and personally counsels and comforts the bereaved, the lonely, people desperate about their relationships and worried parents. His book, *Give Happiness a Chance* (originally *Menslief ik hou van je*), has been translated into several languages including English and has made Bosmans, in his native Belgium, the biggest selling author of all time. I was later to notice posters and banners with Bosmans quotes in homes that I visited. The weekend officially ended with Sunday dinner.

I was most hospitably and graciously entertained during the rest of my stay in Belgium — by Lief De Prins and her husband in Antwerp, by Bob Kerhofs and his wife Rosa Rose in Grimbergen (outside Brussels), and by Peter Doll and his family in Ghent. On Tuesday, 27 November, Stan Broos, Bob Kerhofs, and I visited the Trappist Abbey of Scourmont at Chimay. The monks brew the celebrated Chimay beer (a bit dark and strangely sweet for me). Fr. Bert Baert, who attended the Merton Weekend, proudly took me on a tour of the brewery. It was a pleasure to meet and talk with Fr. Charles Dumont, friend and correspondent of Merton’s and longtime editor of *Collectanea Cisterciensia*. In the evening I addressed the community briefly, Fr. Charles translating.

On my last night, Wednesday the 28th, eleven Merton friends gathered for a send off dinner in Ghent. All have written for *Contactblad Merton-Vrienden* and all had attended the weekend — Paulette and Eric Boeykens, Mia and Stan Broos, Lief De Prins, Franklin De Vrieze, Peter Doll and his sister Veerle, Maggy Dubocage, Bob Kerhofs, and Stefaan Sercu (who said on meeting me, “Call me Steve!”). The evening was highlighted by several gifts to the Thomas Merton Studies Center including Edward Buysse’s translation of *New Seeds of Contemplation*; Stan Broos’s *Flemish Merton Reader*; and Franklin De Vrieze’s and Peter Doll’s theses completed at Louvain University in 1990. A third thesis — by Myriam Kaerts — was also presented.

The trip was well worth it. The Merton Vrienden are most interested in Merton and many were quite curious about the *ITMS* and its activities. The group meets to discuss Merton and his concerns (many of which are their concerns), but, like Merton himself, they remember the “stuff of life” and combine serious moments with times of enjoyment. It was most gratifying and a great privilege to be with these happy, gentle people who approach Merton with great respect but who never seem to turn him into a cult figure or into something he was not.