

MERTON: CHRIST & THE DESERT

by **Robert E. Daggy**

William O. Paulsell of Lexington Theological Seminary says of Thomas Merton in his forthcoming book, *Rules for Prayer*: “However, he said, the usual road to contemplation is through the desert, a barren land with no trees, beauty or water. This prospect is so frightening that we are afraid to enter. In that desert God is nowhere to be found. Yet some people sense that peace is to be found in the heart of darkness, so they keep still, they stop trying to force prayer and meditation and other spiritual exercises, and they patiently trust in God. In the midst of darkness and emptiness, God leads them to the promised land.”

The desert motif pervades Merton’s writings, and he often compared our going into the “desert” to Christ’s temptations in the wilderness. Twenty-five years ago, Thomas Merton went to the desert: to the Monastery of Christ in the Desert at Abiquiu, New Mexico. This trip to the physical desert was, for him, a scouting one, looking for a possible spot for a more isolated hermitage. He visited New Mexico from May 16 to May 20, and he returned in September before he left for Asia. His account of the first visit is given in *Woods, Shore, Desert: A Notebook, May 1965* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1982). He died in Bangkok, Thailand, on December 10, 1968.

In the autumn of 1992, I was approached by a representative of the Monastery of Christ in the Desert about the possibility of commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversaries of Merton’s visit there and of his death. Brother Christian Leisy, OSB, proposed the mounting of an exhibit of Merton’s New Mexico photographs as the focus for such a commemoration. Brother Christian and Lewis Thompson of Santa Fe came to Louisville and, with Robert Kelly (also of Santa Fe) and me, selected a number of photos for the exhibition. The Trustees of the Merton Legacy Trust gave permission for the exhibit. They also gave permission for new prints to be made and for these prints to be sold as part of the first general sale of any of Merton’s photographs.

On May 14, 1993, the Monastery of Christ in the Desert in cooperation with the Thomas Merton Center of Bellarmine College presented the kick-off event in this twenty-fifth anniversary year. It was called “A 25th Anniversary Memorial” and took place in three events: the Opening of the Exhibit at the Linda Durham Gallery in Santa Fe; a Monk’s Supper (attended by Prior Philip Lawrence and the other monks of Christ in the Desert) at the Inn at Loretto (a somewhat upscale hotel sitting on the site of the school once run by the Sisters of Loretto); and a Lecture by me in the Loretto Chapel (the original chapel now incorporated into the hotel). The evening was a great success and I can say that I found little in Santa Fe and New Mexico which didn’t strike me as upscale. Later, I was privileged to visit the Monastery of Christ in the Desert, marvelously isolated in a spectacular canyon and accessible by a thirteen-mile long dirt road. I was told that the road becomes impassable when it rains, the dirt turning almost instantly, they say, to thick, slippery, viscous mud. I nervously watched for rain clouds on the way in *and* on the way out. It was a pleasure to visit one of the few monasteries where Merton himself had actually visited. The text of my lecture is included in this issue.

William H. Shannon discovered, as he prepared for his Springboard Address at the Third General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society (ITMS) that Merton’s essay, “Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude,” had gone through several redactions. The earliest seems to have been a short essay, originally published in French as “Dans le desert de Dieu.” This issue leads off with Shannon’s translation of that essay, “In God’s Desert.” Continuing with the themes of Christ and the desert, we have a study by Brother John Albert, OCSO, of the Monastery at Conyers, Georgia, in which he highlights some of the texts in which Merton specifically mentioned Christ: “Merton and Christ: Discovering the Medieval Speculum.”

Seven poems are featured in this issue, four written by Brother John Albert during his own monastic journey. Two are by writers living in New Mexico, both in Albuquerque: Alden McInvale and Linell Roccaforte. The last poem, "Son of David," is a reflection by Christine Jensen Hogan on Christ. Fr. M. John-Baptist Porter, OCSO, of the Abbey of New Clairvaux at Vina, California, reviews George Kilcourse's book, *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ*. The dust jacket states: "In *Ace of Freedoms*, George Kilcourse explores the entire range of Thomas Merton's writings as embodying a Christ-centered spirituality."

We conclude with our listing of recent publications by and about Thomas Merton. Information about Merton events in this twenty-fifth anniversary year will be given in the Summer and Autumn issues.



CHRIST IN THE DESERT

Photo by Joseph Pounder