

THOMAS MERTON AND BANGKOK

a few reminiscences 8-15 December 1968

by **Sister Bernadette M. Smeyers**

In 1968, I received an invitation from A.I.M., Vanves, to attend the Asian Monastic Meeting in Bangkok, from 8-15 December. The reason for my participation in this Meeting was that our Abbey had recently started a benedictine foundation in Bangalore, South India. I took with me one of the seven Indian girls who had received their monastic formation in our novitiate and who was destined to become the Superior of "Shanti Nilayam."

The historic week of December 8th-15th has left indelible memories in my mind. The contact with so many (about 80) Cistercians and Benedictines from all parts of the world, with their specific culture and traditions—all wearing the religious habit—was indeed a very happy and most enriching experience. The presence of Thomas Merton obviously added to the general interest and attracted a considerable number of Bangkok photographers and television men to the Conference hall in the Sawang Kaniwat Park graciously put at our disposal by the Red Cross of Thailand. It was remarkably so on December 10th when Father Louis Merton delivered his one-hour paper on "Marxism and monastic perspective" under the searching flashes of the technicians. The conclusion of his brilliant talk had a prophetic resonance: after having spoken about the Christian liberty of the Gospel, he added: "I will conclude on this note. I believe the plan is to have all the questions for this morning's lectures this evening at the panel. So I WILL DISAPPEAR." Little did Father Louis or anyone present suspect that three hours later, at 2 p.m., he would indeed "disappear" from this earth and enter into the Eternal Kingdom.

The news of Thomas Merton's death, learned only a few hours afterwards, was a terrible and painful shock. We were all stunned and could hardly believe it. A young Japanese nun, Sr. B.K., was seen walking up and down the path outside trying to control her deep grief and get back her bearings.

The details concerning the sequence of events on that tragic day were abundantly reported in the press at the time; to repeat them here would be taking coals to Newcastle. All that had been scheduled for that sinister afternoon had to be cancelled. A German nun, Prioress of the Korean Benedictines and medical doctor, was called immediately to Father Louis' bedside and pronounced him dead. Two Thai doctors also came as well as the police who carried out the customary investigations. The austere duty of informing the Abbot of Gethsemani and also the American Embassy in Bangkok befell Abbot Rembert Weakland, Primate of the Benedictine Order.

As soon as Father Louis had been laid out on his bed in the small pavilion which he shared with two other monks, the door, kept locked until then, was opened wide so as to allow the delegates to pay their last respects to him.

A silent, uninterrupted vigil began around the body of Thomas Merton until the officials of the American Army arrived to remove the body. We succeeded one another in reciting psalms from the breviary and the rosary, much impressed and comforted by the serene expression of his partly-burnt face. It was at once a beautiful scene and a tangible proof of the love and esteem for the departed one.

Another impressive moment was the Solemn Requiem Mass on the following morning, Wednesday 11th, for the repose of the soul of Thomas Merton. Besides various personalities of the monastic world, there were

also present some ecclesiastical dignitaries: Msgr. Loftus Apostolic Delegate of Thailand, the Bishop of Bangkok, the Buddhist Patriarch of Thailand.

During the remaining days of the Meeting, feelings of mutual sympathy pervaded the atmosphere, extending to the Abbot and Community of Gethsemani; feelings of sincere joy also in the knowledge that our “brother,” as he was fondly named, had at last reached the final goal and found Him Whom “inter mundanas varietates” he had eagerly sought and was now contemplating forever “facie ad Faciem”.

The passage of time could not efface his memory in my mind. However, having known Father Louis only during the last three days of his earthly pilgrimage, and, with a full timetable, not having had the opportunity of a proper, personal contact with him—except at meals—I am unable to make adequate remarks on some one so highly qualified and of wideworld renown.

Let me just say that one of the traits which struck me most in Father Louis was the genuine simplicity and broad, welcoming smile which made him so approachable. He was most obliging with everyone and helpful in a friendly way. A small instance illustrated this: wishing to travel light, I had not taken a camera with me, only films, trusting that I would meet someone willing to lend me his. Providence put the right person on my path. A Cistercian monk, Father T.M., who was an amateur photographer, smiled when I made my request to him: “Oh,” he said, “I have a camera but not films!” So we shared our goods and Father T. M. volunteered to take any photos I wanted as well as his own. I did wish to have one of Thomas Merton, so, after his conference, I walked up to him and ventured to invite him, in spite of the surrounding crowd, to come and join a small group of delegates; “Yes, certainly,” he replied most amiably, “I will come in a minute.” This photo may possibly have been the last taken of Father Louis.

Born in France, Thomas Merton spoke French fluently and so was a perfect interpreter at the conferences. A keen sense of humor was also a pleasant feature of Father Louis who would no doubt have agreed with the saying: “Un saint triste est un triste Saint.”

The above reflections, do not do justice to such a remarkably rich character, but they have left lasting memories in my mind and I am grateful to God for this inspiring and grace-filled experience.

From the blissful Home where he now rests “in splendoribus sanctorum” may Father Louis obtain many favors and spiritual joys for his monastic family of Our Lady of Gethsemani and all those who knew and loved him!