

The Art of Pilgrimage: Rome and Thomas Merton

By Sheilagh A. Ross

One bitterly cold day last February, an email crossed my desk with an enticing invitation: “Book today – one room still available! Rome and Thomas Merton.” From May 30 to June 8, the Thomas Merton Society of Canada was offering “Thomas Merton in Rome,” a study tour/pilgrimage to mark the seventy-fifth anniversary of Merton’s 1933 visit to Rome. I called Air Canada to inquire about a ticket to Rome, and as Providence would have it, there was one seat available on the dates I needed to travel!

The Yearning

Three decades earlier I’d read Merton while at university. My renewed interest in Merton came two years ago, when Donald Grayston, currently president of the International Thomas Merton Society, and Merton friend and biographer Jim Forest spoke at a symposium at the University of Alberta in Camrose, near where I live, cosponsored by the Thomas Merton Society of Canada. Both Don’s and Jim’s presentations drew me back to Merton.

As someone with four grown children and a granddaughter, the thought of packing a small bag and travelling to Rome for ten days was very compelling! My husband and I live on a farm in Alberta, in western Canada, and co-own an agricultural supply business. Operating business and trying to live my faith are often challenging. Our world is so fast-paced and technologically driven, with globalization pulling our economy in contradictory directions, that Merton’s call to be present, to see and hear God in the “interruptions,” has become a centering word for me.

The Call

Since the Rome dates appeared to work, and with an airline ticket in hand, I answered that winter email, and registered for the last available space – I felt called! I felt connected to Merton’s youthful trip to Rome, as he explored history and faith, looking for balance, a way to make his life meaningful. Many of those same questions and desires resonated in me. In March, three of the texts recommended by pilgrimage coordinator Judith Hardcastle arrived in my post box: Merton’s famous autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain*, which included details of his own “pilgrimage” to Rome as an eighteen-year-old in 1933, which eventually would have a profound effect on his life,¹ *The Art of Pilgrimage* by Phil Cousineau² and Jim Forest’s recent release, *The Road to Emmaus*.³

Pilgrimage, Jim Forest tells us, is sometimes a quest for what



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the Celts have described as thin places. “Thin places have a way of slowing us down, even stopping us in our tracks. . . . What marks any thin place is the time-stopping awareness of God’s presence” (Forest 70). One of the more famous such moments in Merton’s life took place in Louisville, Kentucky, the “Fourth and Walnut” experience.⁴ As Jim Forest says, “Any place where God meets you becomes at that moment a thin place, while whatever brought you to that spot turns out to have been not just a journey but a pilgrimage” (Forest 103-104).

The Departure

It was odd to be the traveler! I thought of the many, many trips we’d made, sending university-bound students off to study. Here, I was the student, walking to the gate! With hugs and good wishes, I was off. With only a small carry-on bag, my good walking shoes, and my passport, this pilgrim was ready. My flight to Rome was uneventful. However, just before landing, my first “thin-space” experience took place. The flight attendant passed me a stranger’s business card; and as I looked up, a warm, hearty face grinned from behind her. A hand popped out and Jocelyn said, “Let me introduce myself.” Jocelyn is a wonderful woman, a great-grandmother and a concert pianist, who this summer, looking to be in her mid-sixties, celebrated her eightieth birthday. She asked me if I’d like to train into Rome with her to find our lodgings at the Domus Nova Bethlem. We immediately clicked and agreed to meet in the luggage area after we deplaned.

After an easy train ride into Rome, we found our accommodation, a renovated section of an old convent, now a hotel on Via Cavour. It was perfect, with clean, simple rooms, and centrally located. The hotel has twenty-four rooms, which our group had completely booked. Half of the rooms overlooked a small courtyard facing the bell tower of the conventual church, and a small pre-school play area, while the others faced Via Cavour. Pigeons were everywhere and the noise of Rome never abated! Together with the familiar aspects of contemporary life and the never-ending sounds, the history and the holiness of Rome were quickly upon us.

Each morning the hotel provided a generous continental breakfast, with wonderful cappuccinos. The first day in the breakfast room, Jocelyn and I met fellow pilgrims Jim and Nancy Forest, as well as a teacher from the Marshall Islands and a scholar from Boston. Since we were all a day early, we accepted the Forests’ offer to guide us to the Palatine Hill, site of the imperial palaces and other ancient ruins, and Santa Sabina, the fifth-century basilica, considered one of the most striking examples of early Christian architecture in the eternal city, where Merton had knelt at the altar rail and prayed the Our Father “with all the belief that was in me” (*SSM* 113). Our Roman adventure, like that of Merton decades earlier, was underway.

Many readers will be familiar with the work of Jim Forest. An expert on iconography and on Merton, he guided us through various churches while Nancy read from her guidebook. Our first Roman lunch took place across the Tiber, in Trastevere, the heart of old



Jim and Nancy Forest

Rome's marketplace. With people, birds, flowers and cobblestone lanes everywhere, life cascaded over those ancient walls into the courtyards and alleys. It was amazing to feel so alive and be a part of the very fabric of historic Rome.

Two highlights of the whole trip occurred for me with the Forests that first day – visiting Santa Sabina (with its orange groves and an amazing view of the Vatican) as well as one of the earliest churches in Rome, Santa Maria in Trastevere, built in the fourth century. There the mosaics dedicated to Mary, high along the top of the walls, were breathtaking. To imagine

artists and craftsmen creating those evocative works of art hundreds of years ago, and having our hearts touched by them in this millennium, helped us understand why the art of early Christian Rome so deeply stirred Thomas Merton in 1933.

Companions on the Way

The whole group met for the first time on May 30, under stormy skies, twenty-six people from five countries. Each night, for the next ten days, our group of pilgrims met on the hotel's rooftop. The demographics of the group: two students, 19 and 21 years old, a mother-daughter team, a father-son team, several married couples, single people and scholars. Our group included a Princeton art historian, several published authors, and our beloved 89-year-old Eva, originally from Hungary, now living in Vancouver, who was hard to keep up with! Don Grayston and Michael Higgins, president of St. Thomas University, Fredericton, New Brunswick, made daily presentations at St. Paul's Within the Walls Episcopal Church in the mornings, and led discussions in the evenings. Michael spoke on the distinctive characteristics of Merton's Catholicism, basing his lectures on his book *Heretic Blood*,⁵ and in preparation for the group's visit to the Vatican, he also gave us extensive background on the history of the papacy and the role of the Vatican in the Roman Catholic Church. Don spoke on pilgrimage itself and on Merton as pilgrim, focusing on the significance of Merton as spiritual guide for the present era, what Joanna Macy and other writers are calling "The Time of the Great Turning." For ten days, we met most days for thought-provoking lectures from either Don or Michael, while Judith, ever attentive, saw to our needs, with juice, water and snacks provided,



Basilica of Sts. Cosmas and Damian, where Merton first saw the mosaic of Christ



Tre Fontane

and with all concerns addressed. Daily she lived out the hospitality and spontaneity Merton challenges all of us to practice. The lectures ended at noon and folks would break into smaller groups, to meet for lunch at restaurants or cafés around Rome. Some in the group skipped lunch, and kept up a wild pace visiting art galleries, churches, and museums, later sharing their passions or sightseeing adventures each night on the rooftop. Some kept a quieter pace, staying close to home, reading or writing.

Midweek, our group was bussed to the Trappist Monastery of Tre Fontane, the site of St Paul's execution, just south of the ancient city walls, where the idea of being a Trappist first occurred to Merton (*SSM* 113-14). Its one-time pastoral setting is now completely filled with apartment buildings. Long gone are the sheep and olive groves which once characterized the district.

We had expected to meet there with Dom Timothy Kelly, former abbot of Gethsemani. However, he had unexpectedly been required to travel to France, so had delegated the responsibility for welcoming us to Brother Daniel. We were all touched by this quiet, gentle brother who painfully read to us from his English notes. His earnest preparations were evident, as was his total discomfort, this cloistered monk, at having to host our international group on short notice. At Tre Fontane, we were joined by three Italian friends who shared their stories and passion for Merton; they too had been touched by him somewhere along their journeys, and I was moved by the depth of their commitment to Merton's work.

The next day, we visited Vatican City and participated in a general papal audience. To get there, our group split into two, one group sharing a walking tour with Michael, while others bussed in with Judith and Don. We all arrived at 8:30 a.m., and then waited for two hours in 30-degree heat (80 degrees Fahrenheit) for Pope Benedict to arrive. As the ceremony began, our long, hot wait suddenly became worth it. The ten-thousand-plus crowd roared a welcome as the Pope's car entered the piazza of St. Peter's. After he was seated, priests offered readings, each in his own language, followed by the Pontiff sharing his thoughts in the same language – Italian, German, English, French and Czech. Many delegations of visitors (including ours) were welcomed by name. It was an amazing morning. The remainder of the day was spent touring the Vatican, the Vatican Museum and the Sistine Chapel.

In Jim Forest's little treasure *The Road to Emmaus*, he says:

Again and again we meet strangers along the way who speak with unexpected clarity about things that really matter. In such encounters, we find our hearts aflame within us . . . At the heart of the Emmaus story is the stranger . . . Pil-

grimage is not possible if it excludes unexpected people found along the way. Perhaps it is only for an hour or a day. A hesitant conversation takes wing. A reluctant tongue becomes fluent. . . . We eat together. . . . Sooner or later we part . . . but we remember that encounter as a shining moment. We didn't literally meet Jesus risen from the dead, and yet, in this brief communion with a stranger, Jesus became present and traveled with us. A chance encounter became a Eucharistic event. Ideas about Jesus were replaced with an experience of Jesus (Forest 174).

The Arrival

In my reawakening to Thomas Merton and his prolific writing, I came to believe that he calls me to see Christ, see God, in each other, to be present to God in the other. It is there that we connect with, encounter, God's infinite love and energy. For me, this pilgrimage was a chance to journey with a group of strangers for ten days with Merton as our primary guide. We shared his writing, learned about his experience, visited some of the churches he visited and in so doing touched the divine.

Don Grayston set out in his first lecture Phil Cousineau's seven steps of pilgrimage: the yearning, the call, the departure, companions on the way, the labyrinth (the moment of testing – I don't think we had one, unless it was sitting in the sun in front of St. Peter's), the arrival, and finally, the bringing back of the boon. For each of us the boon was unique and individual. All of us, companions on the way, shared Merton's path for ten days, and were swept into the history and passion of Rome, resplendent with history, art and politics, and yes, so alive! You can feel its pulse at any corner or cross walk, at any hour of the day or night.

I am grateful to have journeyed with wonderful strangers, many of whom I will likely never meet again. We laughed, shared stories, food, wine and the sights of Rome. We became a family for ten days, before heading back to our families and communities, each of us, I believe, a little richer in spirit, warmed in our hearts.

Bringing Back the Boon

My boon? I experienced the holy in the ordinary. That was my Merton moment, which I will treasure as my pilgrimage continues.⁶



Front row: l.-r.: Sarah Higgins, Alexa Higgins, Judith Hardcastle, Sheilagh Ross, Michael Higgins; back row: Tom Penney, Douglas Throop

1. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 106-15; subsequent references will be cited as “SSM” parenthetically in the text.
2. Phil Cousineau, *The Art of Pilgrimage: The Seeker’s Guide to Making Travel Sacred* (Newburyport, MA: Conari Press, 2000).
3. Jim Forest, *The Road to Emmaus: Pilgrimage as a Way of Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2007); subsequent references will be cited as “Forest” parenthetically in the text.
4. See Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 140-42.
5. Michael W. Higgins, *Heretic Blood: The Spiritual Geography of Thomas Merton* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1998).
6. There are tentative plans for the “Thomas Merton in Rome” study tour/pilgrimage to be held again in 2010. Those interested can obtain further information from TMSM Program Director Judith Hardcastle at judithhardcastle@telus.net.