

In the Footsteps of Thomas Merton: Alaska

By Ron Dart

I

Alaska – the Convent of the Precious Blood – surrounded by woods, with a highway (too) near. The woods of Alaska – marvelous – deep in wet grass, fern, rotten fallen trees, big-leaved thorn scrub, yellowing birch, stunted fir, aspens. Thick. Humid. Lush. Smelling of life & of rot. Rich undergrowth, full of mosses, berries – & probably (in other seasons) flowers. The air is now here cool and sharp as late November in the “outside” (ie. “the States”) (“lower 48”).¹

Thomas Merton took the monastic vow of stability with great commitment and seriousness. He spent most of his years, often with many doubts and conflicts, at the Abbey of Gethsemani. He knew why many of the Desert Abbas/Ammas – Pachomius, Cassian and Benedict – warned against the tendency to flit, butterfly-like, from one spiritual director, community and conference to another with no substantive rooting or grounding. In short, the spiritual discipline of stability could do much to rightly form and transform the soul in opposition to the more transient and less committed peregrinations that many in the past and today tend to embark on.

During the final year of Merton’s life (1968), however, he was offered the opportunity by his abbot of exploring a variety of options for a hermitage. The hermitage at Gethsemani could become too busy, and the contemplative reality that Merton sought to probe and experience often became thwarted by its proximity to the active monastery. Merton did, in his final year of life, become a contemplative rover and gypsy of sorts. His search for a hermitage far from Gethsemani is well recounted in *Woods, Shore, Desert: A Notebook, May 1968*,² *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*³ and *Thomas Merton in Alaska: The Alaskan Conferences, Journals, and Letters*.

Merton died in 1968 in Asia, but before he traveled to Asia, he flew north to Anchorage and Eagle River in Alaska. It was when he was in Eagle River that he led a retreat for a small community of nuns. There has been much work and reflection done on many aspects of Merton’s life and thought, but few have been those that have pondered Merton’s Alaskan conferences, journals and letters, and fewer still that have trekked to Eagle River and Anchorage to check out the site where he gave the retreat.



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II

The convent chapel looks out through big windows at birch, a purple & green mountainside. Quiet (*TMA* 10).

Angus Stuart and I decided, since it was forty years this autumn (1968-2008) since Merton went to Alaska, to take the trip to Eagle River and Anchorage, to coincide with the year, month and days that Merton was in Alaska. Merton was in Eagle River from September 18-22, 1968, and used Anchorage as a base to check out other hermitage sites in Alaska from September 23 through October 2. Angus and I live in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia, and we are on the national board of the Thomas Merton Society of Canada (TMSC). We knew, in advance, it was going to be a long drive to Alaska, but we were not sure how many hours we would be on the road. We did, though, want to be in Eagle River forty years to the days Merton had been there. We were also interested to see and hear what had happened to the small convent since that time. We were in for some pleasant and delightful surprises.

We left the Lower Mainland to begin our pilgrimage to the far north early on the morning of September 15. It was still the dark before dawn when we packed into Angus's truck, and we knew we had many miles to go before we slept. I had arranged to stay with friends in Smithers, BC to wind up Day 1. We were on the road for thirteen hours, but when we reached Smithers, we were greeted and feasted well in an out-of-doors dinner with fresh food from Peter and Nelly's abundant and gracious table and garden.

Day 2 was another thirteen-hour day from Smithers to Whitehorse/Yukon. We were on the AlCan (Alaska-Canada) highway most of the long day, and we were fortunate that Archbishop Terry Buckle offered us a watering hole at the Anglican Cathedral in Whitehorse for the night. We had yet another thirteen-hour journey in the truck on Day 3, but we made it from Whitehorse in the Yukon to Eagle River in Alaska. We were eagerly welcomed by the Orthodox (Antiochene) community that now owns the land where the convent once was where Merton gave the retreat. It is a thriving Orthodox parish, and the Orthodox Cathedral (Saint John) sits, in all its beauty and splendor, beside St. James residence (which was the convent in 1968). There are many students that live in residence at St. James, and Angus and I were offered the honor of staying in the Thomas Merton room at St. James.

III

Sense of belonging here. The spirit of the community is good. They will move to a better site. This is a nice house but has "a water problem" (*TMA* 11).



Precious Blood Convent at Eagle River

The small Roman Catholic order of nuns that lived in a rather meager building in 1968 when Thomas Merton was in Eagle River (he stayed in a trailer beside the building)

left the place shortly thereafter. The nuns in their red and white habit were called Sister Adorers of the Precious Blood, and they had arrived in Eagle River in 1967. The bishop of the diocese had planned on starting a larger retreat center in Anchorage, and the Eagle River setting was meant to be but an interim convent for the contemplative order. The lack of water near the convent forced the nuns to leave the place in 1970 and move to Anchorage. The busy life the bishop placed on them, as contemplatives, nudged many of the nuns to return to their mother house in 1972. The place was sold, and in 1972 the evangelical group Campus Crusade for Christ bought the property and more land in the area. There was a significant number within Campus Crusade in the late 1960s and early 1970s that were questioning their limited and a-historical understanding of Christianity. Many came to see that the form of Christianity they were committed to was thin and missing in much. It was in the 1970s and 1980s that many leaders within Campus Crusade became Orthodox. This tale is well recounted in *Becoming Orthodox: A Journey to the Ancient Christian Faith* by Peter Gillquist.⁴ There was a thriving Campus Crusade group in Anchorage in the 1960s-early 1970s, and it was this group that became Orthodox and bought the property in 1972 where Merton had led the retreat in 1968.



Precious Blood Sisters, circa 1968

IV

I am now here on a bright cold morning & the first thin dust of snow is on the lower hills. Mt. McKinley is visible in the distance from the Precious Blood Convent. Next to which I live in a trailer (very comfortable) (*TMA* 14).

I mentioned above that we were welcomed with great kindness and tenderness when we arrived at what is now Saint John Orthodox Cathedral on the evening of September 17. A couple of students who lived in the Thomas Merton room left, and allowed Angus and me to stay in it while we were in Eagle River. The room is spacious, the window expansive, and on a clear day Mt. McKinley (Denali) can be clearly seen in all its white magnificence. The weather played cat and mouse with us, so the sights we had hoped to see were not always in abundance.

Angus and I woke September 18 in the Thomas Merton room on the exact day (40 years earlier) that he had arrived in Eagle River. Needless to say, much has happened in Eagle River and on the convent site since those simpler and more ascetic days. Merton mentioned in his Alaskan journals taking a hike on September 22 up the hill back of the convent (*TMA* 18, 26), so Angus and I decided to trudge the trail we thought Merton might have taken a few decades earlier. We hiked to the plateau roof of Flattop Mountain (Alaska's most frequently climbed mountain) that we thought Merton might have



Ron Dart and Angus Stuart in Alaska

rambled to, but we realized he probably meandered to a knob much lower down the mountainside. Blueberries were plump and thick on bushes on Flattop, and Angus and I, upon coming down, saw a grizzly and cub just above us that were gorging for winter hibernation. It was quite a sight to see (gratefully from a safer distance).

V

It is a nice house among the birches, at the foot of low mountains, looking out through the trees toward Cook Inlet & Mount McKinley – the nuns may move in a few months as the place is not quite suitable (*TMA* 16).

The Orthodox community had asked Angus and myself to speak about Merton and Orthodoxy in the evening, so the lecture room (where Merton would have led the retreat) was packed when Angus and I lectured for about an hour on Orthodoxy and Merton. There is suspicion amongst some within the Orthodox tradition about Merton, and we did what we could to allay such fears. Jim Forest was often mentioned,⁵ as was Kallistos Ware who contributed three articles to *Merton and Hesychasm: The Prayer of the Heart* (2003).⁶ The well known Anglican, A. M. Allchin, has also written a great deal about Merton, and Allchin has bridged the Orthodox chasm in such classics as *The Kingdom of Love and Knowledge: The Encounter between Orthodoxy and the West*.⁷ Merton was quite drawn by Vladimir Lossky and spoke of him in his Alaskan conferences, and Allchin in *The Kingdom of Love and Knowledge* did the same. There are those, therefore, like Kallistos Ware, Jim Forest and A. M. Allchin that have walked the extra mile to allay the frets and worries that some within the Orthodox tradition might have about Merton. The lecture segment of the evening was followed by a lively and animated question-and-answer session on Merton and Orthodoxy. The Orthodox community of St. John's, consciously so, think that the seed insights sown in Merton's Alaskan conferences have come to fruition in St. John's Cathedral in Eagle River.

We were invited, after the evening lecture and question-answer session, to join the rector of the parish, his family and a few others for a continuing discussion on Merton, Orthodoxy and many other pressing and not-to-be-ignored issues. Seraphim Rose has had quite an impact on many within the Orthodox tradition, and it is he (more than most) that has spread the negative attitude within the Orthodox community about Merton.⁸ We had a long and lengthy conversation about Seraphim Rose, his uncritical devotees, Orthodoxy and Merton.



**Merton with Fr. Thomas Connery and
Abp. Joseph Ryan in Anchorage**

Angus and I were fortunate to meet with Mary Alice Cook the evening of September 18. Mary Alice had contacted me a couple of weeks before Angus and I headed north, and she was keen to meet us. Mary Alice has published a couple of articles on Merton.⁹ She has done many interviews with those who met Merton in his 1968 visit. She also has photos of Merton that few have, and they should be in archives. Mary Alice gave us copies of her articles and interviews, and Angus and I met

with her for a lengthy breakfast at Jitters Deli in Eagle River on the morning of September 19. We spent the rest of the day in Anchorage.

VI

I would like now to talk a little bit about the theology of the Eastern Orthodox Church in which I am also interested and which I think is something that we might profitably explore in the present day (*TMA* 82).

Angus stayed in the Merton room at St. James' residence from September 17-21. There was much we learned about Merton and Orthodoxy while in Eagle River and Anchorage. In fact, there are substantive segments in Merton's conferences and retreat with the nuns that deal with the Orthodox line and lineage. This makes much sense, of course, given the fact that Alaska was once in Russian territory, and the Russian form and expression of Christianity is largely Orthodox. There are many Orthodox parishes still in Alaska. There are plenty of archives and photos that are still in St. John's Cathedral that go back to 1968. There is still more research being done on Merton and his Alaskan trip by those that live in Eagle River and Anchorage.

Most of Thomas Merton's articles, books, letters and journals have taken to the press, and yet an anomaly still remains. There are a variety of reasons for the fact that Merton's *Art and Worship*¹⁰ has not been published, but in this tract for the times there is no doubt that Merton pondered the relationship between art, worship and icons. It is in Merton's long-term and historic interest in icons that his bridging ability between the Roman Catholic tradition and the Orthodox tradition was decades ahead of his time. The sooner that *Art and Worship* is published the better. The Orthodox community will draw nearer to Merton and Merton's obvious interest in iconography will be fully revealed.

We realized we had a long three-day, thirteen-hour-a-day trip before us when we left Eagle River in the dark wet morning of September 21. We made it from Eagle River to Whitehorse to Smithers to the Lower Mainland in three days, and our pilgrimage north ended late in the evening of September 24.

The Thomas Merton Society of Canada (TMSC) does an annual Merton pilgrimage, and as a result of the autumn 2008 trek to Eagle River, the TMSC is planning their Summer 2009 pilgrimage to Eagle River, July 4-12. The week-long theme will be on Merton and Orthodoxy. Those who are on the pilgrimage could stay at St. James residence, and St. John's Cathedral will serve as an excellent sacred site from which to explore Orthodox themes such as hesychasm, iconography, liturgy, Orthodox theology and Orthodox public theology. Needless to say,



**Merton with Abp. Ryan and sisters
at Day of Recollection – Providence
Hospital, Anchorage**



**Icon brought by Merton
to Alaska and Asia**

Merton's *Thomas Merton in Alaska: The Alaskan Conferences, Journals, and Letters* will be primary material that we would dip our buckets in and draw water from.

There is much more that could be said about Merton and Alaska. His many trips from Anchorage to deserted places in Alaska (and his reflections on such places) are still awaiting some scribe to unfold the fuller tale. This will also be part of the next journey to the last frontier in the USA that Merton went to before his tragic and untimely death in 1968. Angus and I were, I think, the only ones to make the long trip to Eagle River in September 2008 to ponder Merton's visit to Anchorage-Eagle River in the early autumn of 1968. The trip was worth the trek, and there is a mother lode of research yet to be done on Merton and his Alaskan pilgrimage.

1. Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton in Alaska: The Alaskan Conferences, Journals, and Letters*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: New Directions, 1989) 10; subsequent references will be cited as "TMA" parenthetically in the text.
2. Thomas Merton, *Woods, Shore, Desert: A Notebook, May 1968*, ed. Joel Weishaus (Santa Fe, NM: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1982).
3. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973).
4. Peter E. Gillquist, *Becoming Orthodox: A Journey to the Ancient Christian Faith* (Ben Lomond, CA: Conciliar Press, 1992).
5. Jim Forest, friend and biographer of Thomas Merton, is a convert to Orthodoxy and currently the director of the Orthodox Peace Fellowship; see his website: <http://incommunion.org>.
6. Bernadette Dieker and Jonathan Montaldo, eds., *Merton and Hesychasm: The Prayer of the Heart* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2003).
7. A. M. Allchin, *The Kingdom of Love and Knowledge: The Encounter between Orthodoxy and the West* (New York: Seabury Press, 1982).
8. See Damascene Christensen, *Not of This World: The Life and Teaching of Fr. Seraphim Rose, Pathfinder to the Heart of Ancient Christianity* (Forestville, CA: Seraphim Rose Foundation, 1993), Part III, 31: "Thomas Merton, Chiliasm, and the New Christianity."
9. *Catholic Anchor*: September 22, 2006 and *Saint John Orthodox Cathedral Newsletter*: Summer 2006.
10. See Donna Kristoff, OSU, "'Light That Is Not Light': A Consideration of Thomas Merton and the Icon," *The Merton Annual* 2 (1989) 85-108.
11. For further information on the summer 2009 Alaska pilgrimage, see the TMS website: www.merton.ca.