

Thomas Merton devoted his life to a search for God's truth, which took him from a monastery and a hermitage to the streets where he finally embraced the humanity around him.

Mary Forster reflects on an extraordinary man who lived an extraordinary religious life

By Mary Forster

As he flew to Asia to attend a monastic conference on 15th October 1968, Thomas Merton wrote in his journal the prophetic words: "I am going home, to the home where I have never been in this body. May I not come back without having settled the great affair"

Less than two months later, on 10th December, this great spiritual writer, intellectual, poet and campaigner for numerous causes was dead – killed by a shock from a faulty electric fan. He died in his Bangkok room on the anniversary of the exact day that he had entered the Abbey of Gethsemani in rural Kentucky 27 years earlier, where he had lived as a monk in the order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance (Trappists) for exactly half of his life. It was the end of an intense spiritual journey, a life lived for many years for the highest of all ideals, the search for God.

Merton (he was baptised "Tom") was born 100 years ago, on 31st January 1915, in Prades, France. His extraordinary life and outstanding thinking resulted in over 60 books in addition to numerous poems, essays and spiritual journals. In his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, he describes how the growing awareness of a spiritual reality began to intrude upon an often troubled and traumatic early life, leading him from agnosticism and anti-Catholicism to a devout Catholic faith. Published in 1948, it became a huge success and inspired hundreds of vocations to the religious life.

For much of his life, and even as a monk, Tom suffered from angst, loneliness and feelings of unworthiness. In his early childhood at Long Island, New York, there was almost no religious instruction but he often found it hard to measure up to his mother's ideals of perfectionism. Years later he was to remark: "Perhaps solitaries are made by severe mothers."

When he was six years old he received a letter from his mother, telling him that she was dying of cancer and would never see him again. It is unlikely that he ever fully recovered from this trauma which was followed by several years of rootless wandering with his artist father and the misery of his hated boarding school in St Antonin in France. It was at this time, however, that he first encountered the Catholic faith, where among the holy shrines and churches of Languedoc, and in the deep faith of its ordinary people, the seeds of his vocation are likely to have been sown.

In his intermittent schooling, Tom was left mostly unmoved by prescribed Protestant religious education but in England, at Oakham School in Rutland, he was drawn to a lifelong devotion to William Blake whose deep mystical poetry deeply moved the 16-year-old boy. He wrote later: "Through Blake I would one day come... to the only true Church and to the One Living God..."

It was at that age that he was

Thomas Merton: a life less ordinary

orphaned by the death of his father from a brain tumour. Owen Merton was not overtly religious but had influenced his son by his deep spirituality and morality. Over a year later, Tom visited Rome and, moved by the sanctity of the Roman churches, began to feel an awareness of the grace of Christ's presence.

It was in Rome that, one night, he felt a strange mystical sense of the presence of his father in the room with him. He was unable to explain this amazing phenomenon but he knew that it was a great grace.

Tom began to pray and to read the gospels, but the following year, as an undergraduate at Clare College, Cambridge, he gave in to worldly influences which led to a dissolute lifestyle that he later bitterly regretted. However, his reading of Dante at that time introduced him to concepts of hell, purgatory and heaven that he felt shed some light into his soul.

He took a further major step towards faith at Columbia College New York with his reading of *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* by Etienne Gilson. It was Gilson's depiction of Aseitas, the power of a being to exist absolutely in virtue of itself, that gave Tom an entirely new concept of God.

He suddenly realised that God was not as he had always imagined him to be, the subject of human projections. This was a discovery

'I have pierced through the surface and have got beyond the shadow and the disguise...' Thomas Merton's journey on this Earth had reached its conclusion.



that was to revolutionise his whole life. He could now see that belief in God made intellectual sense and he became convinced of the need of a vital faith. Although he was somewhat wary of the Catholic religion, he felt instinctively that he would find this in the Catholic Church.

Further influenced by the life and writing of the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, Tom began to want to dedicate his life to God and, with the encouragement and support of his friends, he was baptised into the Catholic Church on 16th November, 1938. Even then, the desire to become a priest was forming in his mind. On 10th December, 1942, he entered the monastery of Gethsemani where he would spend the rest of his life, seeking God in prayer, penance, study, liturgy and manual labour.

He was given the name in religion of Fr Louis and was ordained a priest in May 1949.

There were still crosses to be borne: in particular, the loss of his younger brother, John Paul, who was killed in action in the Second World War in 1943. The success of his autobiography, which had been written under obedience, resulted in unwelcome notoriety and this was followed by a staggering output of spiritual writing, again at the request of his abbot, that together with the physical hardships and responsibilities of the monastic life, often left him emotionally exhausted and sometimes physically ill.

His longing for solitude finally resulted in his spending time in a nearby hermitage where, in his aloneness with God, he devoted himself to contemplation, striving to attain a realisation of the authentic self in Christ. He turned to

the wisdom of Taoism, Hindu Vedanta and particularly Zen Buddhism in order to deepen his Christian understanding.

In March 1958 he described how, on a visit to the nearby town of Louisville, as he stood at the corner of 4th and Walnut streets, he had had a sudden mystical experience of a deep love for all the people around him. Having chosen detachment from the world, he now began to embrace the humanity in which he saw that God Himself had become incarnate. His philosophy of solitude with its reflection and discernment had supremely placed him to reflect on the problems of the time and he wrote prodigiously from a Christian perspective, on issues such as race relations, the Cold War, nuclear weapons, civil rights, Communism and the war in Vietnam.

The example of his father, his early impressions of French Catholicism, his pilgrimage to Rome, wide reading and the encouragement of like-minded friends had all conspired to bring him to seek the truth for himself. This had taken place in a personality refined by suffering, a powerful intellect, vivid imagination and, most of all, a total receptiveness to the grace of God working in his soul. He was a man of true humility, with an uncompromising love of God and a deep devotion to the Virgin Mary, and he was greatly loved by his community and his multitude of friends.

A few days before his death, he received an experience akin to enlightenment upon encountering the huge carved Buddhas at Polonnaruwa in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). Somehow he felt that he knew and saw what he was obscurely seeking. He wrote: "I have pierced through the surface and have got beyond the shadow and the disguise." His journey on this Earth had reached its conclusion.

Witnesses related that Fr Louis's face in death wore an expression of great and deep peace. He had achieved what he had long desired: "to disappear into God, to be submerged in His peace, to be lost in the secret of His face."

The international Thomas Merton Society, which reflects on his writings, includes a branch inside the Massachusetts Correctional Institution in the United States. It is run by 83-year-old John Collins, who writes columns about the popular Trappist monk for his local Catholic diocesan newspaper

