Introduction: No Unsacred Places

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The Kentucky poet Wendell Berry once wrote that "There are no unsacred places; there are only sacred places and desecrated places."[1] When the International Thomas Merton Society gathered in Denver, Colorado in June of 2025, the sacredness of place was the central topic. The official conference theme was "The Calligraphy of Snow and Rock and Sky: Thomas Merton and the Spirit of Place," and a number of speakers emphasized Merton's journeys to the western United States as sacred explorations of new places.

Thomas Merton and Wendell Berry met once, at the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1967,[2] and they are both important figures in Kentucky's literary legacy. Yet in certain ways they represent polar opposites in their experience of attachment to particular places. Wendell Berry has lived nearly all of his life – except for a handful of years of university study and teaching – in Henry Country, where he was born. In an essay published within months of Merton's death, Berry wrote that "since I did most of my growing up here, and have had most of my most meaningful experiences here, the place and the history, for me, have been inseparable, and there is a sense in which my own life is inseparable from the history and the place."[3] Wendell Berry has continued to live on and farm that same plot of land for nearly sixty years since he wrote those words.

Merton's life story was, famously, much less settled in place. As Merton wrote in the closing lines of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, God's mercy had "*brought* [*him*] *from Prades to Bermuda to St. Antonin to Oakham to London to Cambridge to Rome to New York to Columbia to Corpus Christi to St. Bonaventure to the Cistercian Abbey of the poor men who labor in Gethsemani*."[4] At the time of his death, Merton's journey had continued, as biographer Michael Mott wrote, "to Christ in the Desert to the Redwoods to Alaska to Calcutta to New Delhi to Dharamsala to Kanchenjunga to Mahabalipuram to Polonnaruwa to Bangkok" – and

1. Wendell Berry, "How to Be a Poet (to remind myself)," in *Given: New Poems* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2006) 18.

2. See Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey. Journals, vol. 7: 1967-1968*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998) 22 [12/10/1967].

3. Wendell Berry, "A Native Hill," *The Hudson Review* 4.21 (1968-1969) 601.

4. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 422-23.

finally back "to Gethsemani" in a casket.[5] Even during Merton's 27 years living his vow of stability at the Abbey of Gethsemani, he was restless and eager for opportunities to journey.

Merton's relationship to place, by consequence, was more ambivalent than Berry's. In his 1965 essay *Day of a Stranger*, Merton wrote: "I cannot tell you why, born in France, my journey ended here in Kentucky. I have considered going further, but it is not practical. It makes no difference."[6] Yet Merton's awareness of the contingency of his geographic situation did not imply indifference to the sacredness of place. In his contribution to this volume, **Daniel Horan** describes Merton's "embrace of this *providential* character of place" (emphasis added). Indeed, Merton's writing is replete with attention to the presence of the divine in the landscapes of his life. Elsewhere in *Day of a Stranger*, Merton wrote, cheekily, that "Up here in the woods is seen the New Testament: that is to say, the wind comes through the trees and you breathe it" (*DS* 41). The contemplative life, for Merton, is defined by openness to the "germs of spiritual vitality"[7] that we encounter in each time and place.

Among other topics, the materials, articles and reviews collected in this volume offer various explorations of Merton's own experience of place. Though these pages will reach readers across the globe, each reader exists in a concrete, particular spot on Earth. The insights explored here promise to make us more attentive to the sacredness of our own places.

The volume opens, as is customary, by showcasing unpublished or little-known material written by Thomas Merton himself. The first item, Merton's "The Council and Monasticism," is a talk that was first delivered to the Bellarmine College Faculty Forum in 1965 and subsequently published in the British journal *New Blackfriars* (under the title "The Council and Religious Life") and under its original title in 1966 collection of these Bellarmine talks on various aspects of Vatican II. In the context of the Council's ongoing work on *Perfectae Caritatis*, the Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of the Religious Life, Merton called for a monastic spirituality that attended to the speaking of the Holy Spirit "in the midst of the world and in the agony of man," necessitating that even vowed religious must acquire "a real understanding of the modern world." Almost exactly sixty years have passed since the conclusion of Vatican II, and this

5. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984) 570.

6. Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1981) 33 (subsequent references will be cited as "*DS*" parenthetically in the text).

7. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 14.

essay, accompanied by an introductory overview by **Patrick O'Connell**, situates Merton in conversation with the reforms being undertaken in the global church in his time.

There follows a selection of transcribed novitiate conferences offered by Merton to monks in formation at Gethsemani, transcribed and introduced by **David M. Odorisio**. The conferences draw on the desert tradition in Christian spirituality to elucidate the set of cognitive phenomena that has been referred to as "the thoughts." The conferences – which include some charmingly familiar exchanges with the novices – explore the relationship between passion, reason, memory and self-possession. As Odorisio points out, these transcriptions demonstrate Merton's skill as a "translator" of ancient spiritual wisdom, and highlight the influence of patristic thought for Merton's own mature spirituality.

The first original article of this volume highlights further Merton's engagement with the Second Vatican Council. **Patrick F. O'Connell** examines Merton's reflections on "Schema XIII," the draft document that would become The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World – *Gaudium et Spes*. Worried that the Council drafters were not planning a sufficiently serious response to the nuclear arms race, Merton drafted "An Open Letter to the American Hierarchy," urging the Council to address the morality of nuclear weapons, particularly the issue of deterrence. While the letter was published in mid-summer of 1965, Merton went on to revise the text as he learned more about the document the Council was contemplating. O'Connell details Merton's process of composing and disseminating the open letter, and then provides a transcription of the letter's final, previously unpublished text.

The next two articles were originally offered as plenary sessions at the 2025 ITMS gathering in Denver. **J. Matthew Ashley**'s address situates Merton in relationship to Ashley's mentor, the late theologian David Tracy, a Catholic thinker committed above all to the vocation of conversation and openness to "radical self-exposure to the other." Ashley focuses in particular on Tracy's emphasis, in his later work, on the notion of *fragments*: non-systematic bits of provocation and insight that problematize totalizing narratives. Merton was also, as Ashley shows, a crafter of fragments in the face of the uncanny. Ashley offers Tracy and Merton, together, as figures of hope and inspiration to surrender false, pat answers and to remain open to divine possibility.

The second plenary address is "Facing the Landscape of Cries: An Aesthetics of Resistance," by **Julia Prinz, VDMF** and **Kevin Burke, SJ**. Prinz and Burke explore the relationship of mysticism, aesthetics and political resistance in Merton's life and work by placing Merton in

dialogue with other artists who found aesthetic vocabularies for their political stances. From Wassily Kandinsky to Paul Klee to Käthe Kollwitz, the authors demonstrate the potency of art to speak to an audience and to draw its observers into truth-telling, lamentation and healing.

Daniel Horan's article "Seeing the World Anew: Thomas Merton, Contemplation and the Spirituality of Place," takes the volume's most direct approach to Merton's spirituality of place. Drawing on Douglas Christie's 2013 study *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind*, Horan associates Merton's experience of place with the monastic "art of attention," or attunement to the divine presence. Horan points to a medieval source in St. Bonaventure's characterization of contemplation as *speculatio*, or an activity of discernment and perception. In Merton's embrace of the place of the Abbey of Gethsemani, Horan identifies this monastic attentiveness to God's presence and a willingness to see the world anew. Bonaventure and Merton both point us, Horan suggests, to an understanding of contemplation that is essentially a matter of attention and vision, an openness to seeing God's presence around us in new ways.

An article by **Ethan Vander Leek** examines Merton's interest in the inner life in relationship to his attentiveness to place. Vander Leek frames the essay by contrasting Indigenous American spiritualities of place, which center the relationship of a people and their particular place, with the anti-materialist dualism of much Western Christianity. Merton, Vander Leek proposes, articulated a relationship between the inner self and the outer, material world that avoids a sharp dualism and should be counted as an "ally" to Indigenous perspectives. Central to Vander Leek's argument is Merton's writing on the ancient Mexican city of Monte Albán, which he admired for the union of interiority and social, material activity that was realized by the people there. Ultimately, Vander Leek shows Merton's conception of the self to embody what he calls a "non-dualistic interiority" that avoids the rejection of the outer world in favor of the inner life.

Daniel DeForest London's article "Rewilding Prayer" focuses on the concepts of wildness and wilderness in Merton's work, particularly the letters and conferences from his trip to the West at the end of his life. London casts Merton's interest in "inner wildness" as a spiritual response to the problem of theodicy. Weaving close reading of two Merton prayers of "lament and protest" with personal reflection on a visit to the ruins of the Cistercian abbey of Rievaulx, London points readers to means of "rewilding" their prayer lives in conversation with the radical freedom of God's response.

Maria Guadalupe Zorrilla examines Merton's relationship to the natural world through a comparison to the Argentinian writer Sergio Bon-

giovanni. Bongiovanni's work is exceptionally attuned to the particular landscapes of the province of Mendoza, a primarily desert region with both extreme weather and a thriving wine economy. Zorrilla finds that Bongiovanni's anecdotes of Mendozan folkways parallel Merton's writings on nature in treating the natural world not as an inert backdrop for human action but as "uniquely expressive of being" in its own right. Drawing on ecocritical theories of literary analysis, Zorrilla identifies themes that resonate across time and space in the work of Merton and Bongiovanni to urge connection to land and place.

Next, **Gordon Oyer** tackles the human relationship to place through the lens of ownership, employing Merton as a guide to understanding the moral valence of human claims to ownership of land and property. In his article entitled "Relating to Place as Property with Merton as Guide," Oyer reflects on his personal experience of attachment to his place of origin, a farm in central Illinois, and the transformation of attitude that occurs when a place comes to be viewed not merely as a locus of dwelling but also as a resource to be possessed and exploited. Merton did not write systematically about private property or economic theory more generally, but Oyer draws on related themes in Merton's work to provide support for a conception of private property as entailing mutual obligation, not merely unfettered dominion. In particular, Oyer highlights Merton's criticism of the distinctively American orientation toward acquisition and possession, suggesting deep challenges to prevailing attitudes toward property.

The final original article of this volume is composed in a conversational register. **Ed Murphy**, **Jung Eun Sophia Park, SNJM** and **Megan McDonald Way** offer an extended reflection on Merton's final talk, "Marxism and Monastic Perspectives," delivered hours before his death on December 10, 1968. The authors examine the parallels Merton drew between monks and student activists of the 1960s, and then show how Merton's conceptualization of monasticism has been reflected in forms of contemplative and consecrated life known collectively as "new monasticism." In particular, they propose that these innovative forms of monastic community represent a stand against exploitative forms of capitalism. Sprinkled throughout the article are personal reflections from Ed Murphy on his lifelong journey of activism, illuminating a compelling example of Merton's prophetic monastic spirituality in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The final section of this volume includes co-editor **Bernadette McNary-Zak**'s thoughtful and comprehensive bibliographic review of publications by and about Merton from 2024, followed by a slate of dedicated reviews of eight books.