

# THOMAS MERTON:

BRIDGE FOR EAST AND WEST

A CELEBRATION OF THE FIFTEENTH ANNIVERSARY OF

## *Nostra Aetate*

On November 6, 1980, in the Lotus Chapel of Nishi Hongwanjii Buddhist Temple in Los Angeles, a program observing the fifteenth anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* was held. The program was co-sponsored by the Commission on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles and the Los Angeles Buddhist Church Federation. The Second Vatican Council issued the document *Nostra Aetate* ("Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions") on October 28, 1965. Buddhism, in which Thomas Merton was of course deeply interested, is one of the four major world religions mentioned by name in the document.

The Los Angeles Buddhist Church Federation of Japanese Buddhist Churches in Los Angeles County. It is made up of seven Japanese Buddhist Temples, composed of six major Japanese Buddhist sects or denominations and one nonsectarian Japanese Buddhist Temple. It promotes better relationships and fellowship among the Buddhists of the Japanese-American community in Los Angeles County. The temples celebrate jointly the Birthday of the Buddha in April and the Enlightenment Day of the Buddha in December plus sponsoring special programs such as this one.

Mrs. Heidi Singh, member of the Planning Committee, wrote to Dr. Robert Daggy giving the following report of this unique and interesting Merton program. Mrs. Singh's letter follows:

Dear Dr. Daggy:

Enclosed you will find a copy of the program for the *Nostra Aetate* event about which I had written to you earlier. I regret that I was unable to write to you sooner to give you the full particulars about the program. I was also waiting to see if the event received any press coverage, which apparently it did not.

In any case, herewith I will outline the highlights of the program for your information:

The event was held in Nishi Hongwanji Buddhist Temple, a temple of the Jodo Shinshu sect of Japanese Buddhism. Reverend Myojo Yokota, minister of Koyasan Buddhist Temple of the Shingon sect, acted as a gracious Mistress of Ceremonies in the absence of Rev. Kokuzo. Father David Doerner, S.A., gave a 15-minute talk in Japanese on *Nostra Aetate*. Next, Rev. Tetsuo Unno made a response in English, in which he described what he felt the Eastern religions could learn from Christianity: namely, to let one's light shine in the world. Rev. Unno stated that this aspect of Christianity has always been meaningful to him — that Christians manifest their religious values in social action and concern for others and do not merely internalize religion.

Father Dan O'Hanlon, S.J., in his talk, on the other hand, said that he felt that Christians in general had lost the ability to simply be quiet and listen to the Spirit within. Fr. O'Hanlon stressed that an emphasis on contemplation and the teaching of systematized methods of meditation are two important areas in which Christians could learn from the rich tradition of Buddhism.

In his presentation, Fr. O'Hanlon gave an account of his spiritual journey to the East and how his quest — both interior and exterior in the sense of actual travel — paralleled that journey of Merton's just before his untimely death. In a very moving and personal account, the Jesuit teacher and theologian noted how he discovered Merton and the affect Merton's thought has had on his life and his relationship with the Eastern religions, particularly Buddhism.

The general theme expressed by all the speakers seemed to be that Thomas Merton has indeed acted as a bridge between East and West, in that his writings have helped reawaken Christianity's call to contemplation and nonviolence while at the same time opening up new avenues for meaningful dialogue among religious people from all traditions.

Before the close of the program, there was a brief question and answer period, in which several individuals posed philosophical questions to the speakers.

Finally, an explanation of the cosmic significance of the elaborate altar and the beautiful panel depicting the life of the Buddha (in the temple) was made very graciously by one of the Japanese ministers.

About one hundred people attended the event, including the following: members of the Archdiocesan Commission on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs; several teachers of World Religions classes from high schools in the Archdiocese and their students; several Theravada Buddhist monks from the Sri Lankan Dharma Vijaya Buddhist Vihara (Sri Lankan Temple in Los Angeles) including Most Venerable Pannatissa, President of the Maha-Bodhi Society of Sri Lanka; several Vietnamese monks from the Vietnamese Buddhist Temple in Los Angeles; Venerable Tepsophon, Abbot, and Venerable Thong Bandha from the Wat Thai Temple in North Hollywood.

In all, the program was a very exciting one. I must mention also that Fr. O'Hanlon directed the assembly to sit in silent meditation for several minutes at the beginning and again at the end of his presentation. This was a very nice feature of the program. I must say that this type of celebration was a first of its kind and I am very pleased to have been a part of it as a member of the planning committee and as a participant.

With all best wishes,

Heidi Singh

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