

# GIFT OF RARE VALUE

Review of

*MERTON: A FILM BIOGRAPHY*

A Television Documentary

Produced by Paul Wilkes and Audrey L. Glynn

Written and Directed by Paul Wilkes

---Reviewed by **M. Basil Pennington, O.C.S.O.**

Thomas Merton stipulated in his legacy that no “autobiographical materials of mine or materials of mine about the Abbey of Gethsemani” would ever be “filmed, or dramatized on radio or television”. But the American hierarchy were convinced that God did not light this brilliant lamp in the midst of the Church to have it confined to libraries and study centers. This life was meant to shine forth to illumine all in the household of God and beyond. The accomplished producer, Paul Wilkes, undertook the challenging task which involved both respecting Merton’s very legitimate desire that the essential message of his monastic life with its all important contemplative dimension be not trivialized nor the privacy of his monastic brothers be violated and at the same time bringing forth the monk’s powerful witness in a way that was consonant with and worthy of what Merton himself had already accomplished through his own writings, photography, and spoken words. To say that Wilkes has succeeded in his task is a feeble understatement. *Merton* is a brilliant and creative masterpiece.

Not for a moment is the viewer’s attention tempted to lapse as the eye of the camera sweeps around the world from the romantic, Romanesque Pyrenees, where Merton first saw the light of day, to the drab outskirts of Bangkok where the camera intrudes even into the very room where the liveliest of monks suddenly entered into the sleep of death. It traces Merton’s footsteps through England and Rome, to New York and Gethsemani, to Sri Lanka and Dharamsala. Photos are shared — a family album experience of bright young Tom, gawky school boy, cocky collegiate, gaunt young monk, benign spiritual father, and finally the repose of death where a serenity that is almost whimsical speaks of on-going life. We are enabled even as it were to enter inside Merton and look out of his eyes as we see some of his own photos. We see and feel the man and the very varied context of his life — rich, truly cosmic, a son of the earth, claiming an affinity of presence and love with all its people.

There is no dramatization (as Merton asked). At times a beautifully modulated voice (Gregory Abels, a seminarian who has long studied Merton) gently reads well chosen texts that convey Merton’s own sense of the scene we are viewing. And other times Alexander Scourby, the noted narrator, guides us along. But most interesting are the candid sharings of women and men who touched Merton’s life at different moments. The extraordinary catholicity of this man is powerfully brought home just in a listing of those who speak in the

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course of the documentary: there are a couple of archbishops, a couple of abbots, and some monks and nuns, and there are publishers, writers, and literary agents, but there are also a Buddhist lama, a revolutionary priest, a Catholic activist, and a popular singer. To list them: Joan Baez, singer; Abbot John Eudes Bamberger; Abbot Flavian Burns; Father Ernest Cardenal, Nicaraguan Minister of Culture, a novice under Merton; His Holiness The Dalai Lama; Lawrence Ferlinghetti, poet; Wilbur H. Ferry, friend and confidante; Brother Maurice Flood; James Forest, International Fellowship of Reconciliation; Robert Giroux, editor of *The Seven Storey Mountain*; Thich Nhat Hahn, Vietnamese monk; Archbishop Jean Jadot, Vatican Secretariat for World Religions; James Laughlin, New Directions Publisher and literary executor for Merton; Robert Lax, poet and long time friend; Father Jean Leclercq, monastic scholar and writer; Naomi Burton Stone, Merton's literary agent and friend; Sister Mary Luke Tobin, peace activist and neighbor; and Archbishop Rembert G. Weakland, former Primate of the Benedictine Order, who was with Merton when he died. A companion volume, *Merton By Those Who Knew Him Best*, edited by Paul Wilkes will be published by Harper and row in the Fall. It will share more fully the interviews that are skillfully excerpted in this television presentation and woven into the moving photographic panorama.

*Merton* is rich, it is fascinating, and it is deep. It does not trivialize the life or message of one of the greatest spiritual masters of our times. It does not stop short at presenting his very interesting human journey. Just as the camera brings us into the intimacy of his hermitage on the hill overlooking Gethsemani Abbey — his kitchen, his worktable, his bedroom and his chapel — so, too, the scenes, the texts, and the recollections of his friends who shared his deepest longings, his stirring concerns, his wildest hopes invite us to share intimately the inner spaces of his mind and heart.

I doubt one could find a more profitable hour on television with equal beauty, interest, and inspiration. Wilkes, and his co-producer, Audrey Glynn, and all their collaborators have done a magnificent job. With the backing of the American Bishops' Conference and other generous supporters they offer us on PBS a gift of rare value and intensely enjoyable beauty. *Merton* is a masterpiece.



Merton Project members & crew  
with Brother Patrick Hart  
on the porch of Merton's Hermitage  
(l to r) Kristina Borjesson, production manager;  
Audrey L. Glynn, producer;  
Barbara Zahm, sound;  
Brother Patrick Hart;  
Thomas Hurwitz, cameraman;  
Paul Wilkes, producer, director and writer.  
(Photo by Paul Wilkes)