

TWO LETTERS OF THOMAS MERTON

by **Clifford Stevens**

In 1962, I was an Air Force chaplain in Alaska and had begun work on an historical novel based on the life of St. Stephen Harding, founder of the Cistercian Order. In preparation for writing the novel, I had written a lengthy sketch of the saint and was interested in knowing if my judgments and insights into his personality had any validity. Before flying off to the radar sights one month, I slipped a copy of the sketch into a large envelope and sent it to the best known authority on things Cistercian in the country, Thomas Merton. Later in the month, when I returned from my circuit of the radar sights, I found a letter from him.



CLIFFORD STEVENS
At Tintern Abbey

Photo by Penny Wolin

□ **Clifford Stevens** now lives at Tintern Abbey in Oakdale, Nebraska. His historical novel about the life of St. Stephen Harding, *Flame Out of Dorset*, was published in 1964. His writings on Merton include: "Thomas Merton: An Appraisal," *American Benedictine Review* (1967); "Thomas Merton 1968: A Profile In Memoriam," *American Benedictine Review* (1969); "Merton's Legacy of Prayer," *Way* (1974); "Thomas Merton: Prophet of Peace," *Way* (1975); "The Contemplative Witness of Thomas Merton," *American Benedictine Review* (1975); and "The Artistry of Thomas Merton," *Way* (1982).

At the time, he was novice master of Gethsemani Abbey, and was beginning that vast output of peace writings and social criticism revealing a different Thomas Merton from that of *The Seven Storey Mountain* and *Seeds of Contemplation*. At the time, and for a number of years afterwards, I was quite unaware of the significance of these writings that were coming from his pen. Only after his death did I fully realize how vast was the change that was taking place in him.

The letter reveals a gentle yet painful honesty which was beginning to be reflected in his writings. *Disputed Questions* had appeared in 1960 and *Seeds of Destruction* in 1961. These would be followed by *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, *Faith and Violence* and numerous articles in a wide variety of periodicals. The letter reflects this changing Merton and a new phase in his critical study of contemplative life itself. It also reflects his own estimate of his influence upon his Order, and some of the reasons which moved him to withdraw to a hermitage after much lengthy negotiating with his superiors. He had begun to live in the hermitage in 1961. The letter is dated 19 December 1962.

Dear Father Stevens:

Thank you for sending me your essay on St. Stephen Harding, and please forgive me for waiting so long to get an answer to you. I have been quite busy.

Of course you are perfectly right in saying that the Cistercian Order today is far from the Citeaux of St. Stephen Harding. I can see, too, that you have an intense interest in the question, almost to the point of being a crusader for what seems to you the twelfth century ideal. And I agree that you have intuitively grasped a great deal of its very special character and beauty. It is impossible not to be captivated by the simplicity and clear outline of the early Cistercian ideal.

How has it fallen? That is not an easy question to answer. I used to think these things much clearer and simpler to discuss than I do now. I have just spent several months with the novices (who have the misfortune to have me as their Fr. Master) discussing the development of the Order between 1153 and 1335. The decline of an Order is an extremely complex problem, and in our case it is related to the whole development of medieval society. Incidentally, in view of your moving finale on St. Thomas, which is perfectly right, it is nevertheless interesting to observe that one of the things that marked the evolution of the Cistercians was that, in contact with the Dominicans, they radically altered the structure of the Cistercian constitutions and it was the Dominican contact that had a part in destroying the work of Stephen. Only a small part, of course.

And then, the work of St. Stephen: with the three main versions of the *Carta*, with the various texts of the *Exordium* etc. one sees complexities in his figure. I would like to add that it seems to me that your presentation tends, in its wholehearted enthusiasm, to oversimplify the picture of Stephen at the expense of other great men. Robert of Molesme was a great man, you know. And it does seem that Citeaux, the foundation at any rate, was *his* idea.

Now the question arises: will this get published in the *Collectanea*? I am afraid, Father, that it is not their type of material. It is more a sermon or a panegyric, while they take only carefully documented and perhaps rather

plodding research articles. However, I presume you do not mind if your essay remains here for the novices to read. That would be at least a beginning of publication. If you want it back, please let me know.

I am sure your love for the Cistercian Order will prompt you to pray for them. They will not become twelfth century Cistercians ever again, Father. But perhaps in the twentieth century they can still, in different circumstances, be true to the ideal of their founders. As for me, I have abundant evidence that there is little or nothing to be done by me that will deeply affect the destinies of this Order. My job as I see it is to help a few novices to survive with at least sanity, and to live the life profitably and peacefully, instead of with the furious delusions that used to be more common twenty years ago and are now, thank heaven, somewhat rare. Pray for this work, Father, and I will remember your own labors for Christ. May God be with you always.

Cordially in Christ,
father M Louis

In June 1967, while assigned to Itazuke Air Base in Japan, I sent a short article to the *American Benedictine Review* entitled "Thomas Merton: An Appraisal." It was really an appraisal of the early Merton, since I was quite unfamiliar with the scope and impact of his later writings. After his death in 1969, the article would be expanded into a longer study which would appear in the same magazine ["Thomas Merton: A Portrait *In Memoriam*"].

Much of the appraisal was positive, but the portrait was obviously incomplete to anyone familiar with the later Merton. In August I received a second letter from Gethsemani. This one was marked by the gentle courtesy for which Thomas Merton was noted, together with a very mild rebuke. In the article, I had compared him to Newman and to St. Stephen Harding. His comments on both of these are revealing and the last paragraph of the letter contains his measured judgment of the monastic renewal taking place in the Order. The letter is dated 11 August 1967.

Dear Father Stevens:

Only the other day someone called my attention to the article by you in the *American Benedictine Review* for this June. I cannot let this go by without thanking you for your great charity. The appraisal was extremely generous, even to the point of making me feel somewhat abashed by it. I do think you have overestimated me. But I cannot say that I am not happy that one should have such thoughts about my work. It is rewarding to get such a response, even if in my heart I must discount it a bit. Anyway, I do want to thank you warmly.

Knowing your admiration for St. Stephen Harding, the fact that you were able to consider for a moment that I might be something like him (I am sure I am not) was an added compliment. And then Newman, whom I revere as a saint . . . You are too good.

I cannot say I entirely agree with your appraisal of the relative value of various books, and I wonder why my later work seems to mean practically nothing in comparison with the earlier books. It is true that the earlier ones had a spontaneity and vitality of their own, and I have sobered with age. But I wonder if that was not an improvement. I have never felt that the “theology” of *Ascent to Truth* was really the sort of thing I am called upon to do. I would be much more inclined to identify myself with the part of the later books, particularly, *Disputed Questions*, *the Silent Life*, *Seeds of Destruction*, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, *Conjectures*, and the new one [*Mystics and Zen Masters*]. However, it is good to have your opinion. I hope you are right in thinking that there is something better on the way.

I remember from your own book [*Flame Out of Dorset*], your great love of the Cistercian life. Pray for us. We have fallen upon difficult times and I am not absolutely certain that St. Stephen would have approved all that we have tried to do in the way of modernizing. But I do think that his kind of honesty is the only thing that can pull us through. Pray that we may measure up to the task. For my part I am living more as a hermit now and am rather out of the mainstream of change in community life.

With cordial regards,
Yours in Christ,
Thomas Merton

The letters are interesting in that they reflect Thomas Merton’s estimate of his influence on his own Order and also his evaluation of his own writings. They catch him at two moments in time: at the point when he was moving from the more purely monastic writings into his most mature work of social criticism, and at the point when he was reaching the apex of his writing career. Slightly over a year after the second letter, he would make his trip out of the monastery to his historic meeting with Eastern monks in Bangkok. In a day less than sixteen months, he would be dead. His comments in both letters show part of the private face of Thomas Merton, much of which has yet to be studied and revealed.