

MUSINGS ON MYSTICAL, MUSICAL MERTON, MAKER OF WORLD COMMUNITY: After the First General Meeting

By **Beverly Anne LoGrasso**, O.S.U.

A once in a lifetime happening. The First General Meeting of *The International Thomas Merton Society* at Bellarmine College in Louisville, Kentucky in the Spring of 1989. Twenty-one years after the untimely death of Thomas Merton on December 10, 1968, I joined several other Merton disciples at the Meeting and had an experience akin to the first generation of Christians who struggled to understand the meaning of the life and death of their Teacher. Those Christian survivors sought out eyewitnesses as primary sources for clues to solve this mystery, a mystery which gripped them in the loneliness of their loss.

As I walked into the first general session, I surprised myself when I found that I was looking around the room for Merton! Where was he? Surely he belonged here. When I realized that this longing for Merton's presence was really an indication of how much I missed my teacher, I resolved to come close to him by finding eyewitnesses to his life. As my eyes eagerly surveyed the crowd for them, I was not disappointed. In attendance at the Meeting were long-lasting friends of Merton's, such as Mary Luke Tobin and W. H. "Ping" Ferry; Bob Giroux, editor of *The Seven Storey Mountain*; and Paul Quenon and Patrick Hart, his fellow Trappists.

The variegated mixture of presentations by these eyewitnesses and others reflected the broad span and rich variety



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in the sumptuous banquet of diverse interests that invaded Merton's quiet life in the Kentucky cloister. The list of presentations included: The Cosmic Dance, Sufism, the Shakers, World Ecumenism, Paul Tillich, Ernesto Cardenal, Contemplative Peacemaking, Poetry, Hannah Arendt, Sexuality, and Polonaruwa. If there is a clue to the meaning of Merton's life in this seeming jumble of subjects, perhaps it is in the extremely wide difference in people who were attracted to Merton. His friends included poets, philosophers, Buddhists, "peaceniks," and civil rights activists — a mixed "bag" of people with whom he was very comfortable. This "bag" included those who represented every religious tradition in the East and West. The variety of participants at the Meeting demonstrated Merton's ability, even at a distance of over two decades, to nourish a new community of multi-faceted companions. Interestingly enough, their particular religious persuasions or cultural backgrounds did not cause divisiveness in the gathering. On the contrary, I sensed a deep unity, harmony, and mutual respect for one another inspired by heartfelt appreciation for one man — Thomas Merton. His inspiration was most dramatically experienced when two Chinese scholars spontaneously addressed the general assembly in an emotional appeal "in the name of Thomas Merton" for support of a resolution for nonviolent response to the student demonstration in China. The spirit of Merton empowered two men from the East to make a plea for peace and know with assurance that they would receive support.

Merton understood this power of unity at the heart level which overcomes all religious and cultural barriers and he valued it profoundly. He wrote and spoke about it frequently, especially toward the end of his life when he continually reminded us that we are all one and that, for our part, all we have to do is make this discovery. His life, then, becomes a window on this type of discovery where we are able to watch him "teasing" out the connections he found with others as he interrelated with each one.

Merton's ability to find unifying links with other people might also be compared to the jazz improvisation "Tribute to Thomas Merton" to which we listened one evening during the Meeting. As each melody line wandered playfully in a carefree, musical conversation, I imagined these notes as symbols of the various melodies in Merton's life which shockingly and miraculously return to a beautifully harmonious blend in the final chord. Just as jazz improvisation fascinates as it blends extreme variety in expression, so, too, the appeal of Merton's life fascinated me as I observed the wondrously different collection of people gathered in the name of one man.

One might measure Merton's greatness by his ability to touch these extremely different people at one and the same time. Merton was not naive about the difficulties involved in balancing extremes. He recognized the deeper complexities of reality and did not limit reality to conceptualizing around issues. Rather, he made his intellectual positions clear on certain issues (e.g., peacemaking, civil rights, etc.), but continually challenged himself to return to the grounding in the unity of his heart as the central reality.

Undaunted in his own inner search, Merton confronted the violence of his own enthusiasm at the extremes of issues and the resultant violence in his own heart, and in reaction, in the hearts of others. Merton's spirituality familiarized him with the causes of alienation in his own depths of spirit. Thus, he was led to discern whether or not the integrity of his own heart and will was consonant with the position he had taken with his intellect. Merton was faithful to the desert spirituality of ruthless honesty with self. His spiritual questing was never complete until he found that unifying love, source of the identity he believed he shared with all of humanity where each person is a redeemed sinner loved by God. When this identity, based on a shared humanity, is acknowledged, even one as extremely different as the "enemy" can be approached from the nonviolent ground of love.

Merton appreciated the danger of “either/ or” thinking and acting because he had first confronted it in himself. He knew from his own experience that issues of justice and peace often hold a tangled snare of contradictions whose possible implications might easily become a trap of inconsistencies, both intellectually and spiritually. Merton recognized in his true identity that the only way out of this maze was to contact the deepest reality present in his heart. This reality opened him to a love that was the grounding force of unity with all which undergirded all differences. In my view, Merton challenges us today to integrate this type of spirituality because it is so needed in the ministry of witness and works for peace and justice, where it is very easy to take a position “against” or “for” and lose a sense of connection with other persons involved who may disagree or simply not understand. Merton knew that for such crucial challenges as peace and justice, a more authentic spirituality was demanded, one which sought a “both/ and” inclusive attitude of mind and heart without which we may find ourselves on the alienated, self-righteous extremes, both in our own hearts and in relation to others.

Merton’s openness to diversity in people and their heartfelt response to him exemplifies the truth that, on the level of the heart, we can become one. Therefore, any personal efforts that we make in attaining an attitude in our hearts which stretches to include a space for those with whom we differ in any way become means to attaining the marvelous communal unity which will occur under the Reign of God where we will all meet in heart, spirit, and mind. This Reign, that Merton so ardently desired and enjoyed in his own life, is a “tease” for the life which is to come.

The Meeting was a “tease” for me. I still miss my teacher. The early Christians found the challenge to live the message of their Teacher difficult because they were preoccupied with mourning someone who gave life meaning for them. I mourn the loss of Merton’s presence as a companion on this earth’s journey who gave meaning to the struggles for peace and justice. I mourn his loss also because his life was a sign of hope for me that persons of extremely diverse opinions on the most serious issues could be united through the power of love. It is my desire that, by the time I meet him at the banquet table of the Reign of God, my heart will be expansive enough to enjoy the widely divergent assortment of guests who are there!