

# TWO LETTERS ABOUT THOMAS MERTON

by **John J. Merton & Andrew Winser**

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*John J. Merton of Birkenhead, Auckland, New Zealand, is Thomas Merton's first cousin, son of his father's older brother, John Llewelyn Charles Merton (called "Uncle Lyn" by his nephew). His letter was written in response to an inquiry from the Rev. Dr. Frank A Peake of Nepean, Ontario, Canada. Andrew Winser was a classmate and chum of Merton's in England and Merton visited the Winser home in the Isle of Wight. His letter was written to Patricia K. Trunfull who lives in Newport, Isle of Wight.*

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## I

### JOHN J. MERTON

Information and impressions regarding Thomas Merton. Well, now.

I had only a limited correspondence with him personally. My Aunt Agnes [called "Kit" by Merton] was the one who had the most contact with him, but as I lived nearby in Christchurch I was always kept up to date and we sent occasional messages back and forth via my aunt. I remember that he wrote to me on the occasion of my own ordination to assure me of his support and to say "that all my masses on that day will be for you." Possibly that is the letter you refer to as included in *The Road to Joy* although I was not aware that it had been published.

Our common forebears were very traditional Anglican, which in New Zealand meant liberal theology, conventional, not "High Church" (which would probably be defined as "more than two candles on the altar"! ). However, there was never any real problem to us with Thomas's adoption of Roman Catholicism. I remember my aunt's saying that all his young life Tom had been dragged around the Continent by his widowed and artist father and the Catholic Church was probably the first really stable influence in his life.

Certainly your impression of a mellowing with age would be a possibility. I have the feeling, however, that it may have been even more a product of his spiritual development. It is of enormous significance to me that Tom was more involved in the issues of the day from within the monastery than many other social leaders and opinion makers who lived outside it. He had a perspective on life which seemed to give him a remarkably clear view of it.

He had a liberalism which derived from understanding rather than ignoring alternative ways of thinking. It was based on clear judgements rather than a woolly eclecticism and certainly included his own situation. I remember that in one of his unpublished papers, which my aunt passed on to me and which is now in the Canterbury Public Library, that he referred to "that old goat Pius," although I forget the context. His interest in Eastern monasticism was the other side of the same coin. He truly could understand and appreciate other disciplines with an insight and openness which accepted a challenge to his own framework of thinking as a stimulation and not as an occasion for competition.

These are very strictly only personal impressions and I am not sure that after forty years they would stand up to real scrutiny. Still, they are the lasting feelings I derived from our family interactions such as they were.

All of the family correspondence was sent to the Monastery in Tennessee<sup>e</sup> [sic] when Howard Griffin was working on the Biography, so I have little factual material I can add, but I trust this will be of interest to you.