

THINKING OF LOUIE:

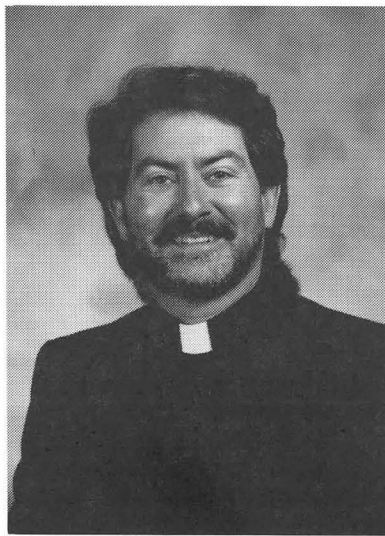
My Personal Reflections of Thomas Merton, A Man I Never Met

by **Gregory M. Corrigan**

In *Silent Lamp*, William Shannon's marvelous biography of Thomas Merton, the author comments: "Many people in different parts of the world look to [Merton's] story and his writing for the insight and wisdom that they believe will help them to move their own lives in the direction that love and grace are calling them to take" (p. 3). Shannon describes those who have fallen under the "Merton spell" and asks: "What can this monk possibly have to say to me, as I try, in circumstances so very different from his, to make sense out of my life and to find a reasonable direction in which I ought to be moving?"

What, indeed? As a self-proclaimed devotee, one who has certainly fallen under the "Merton spell," I have often asked myself why it is that this man and his writings have so profoundly affected me — in such a personal way! Yes, it is a personal affectation that is so often experienced by those who have come to know something of the man, and in a way, felt his pulse through his writings. Many times, I have met others who have a similar appreciation for Merton's writings, and always, I recognize a similar regard for the personal, a genuine loving feeling for Merton the man. A few years ago, in writing a biographical piece on Merton, I found that "places where I have met him" kept slipping into the article. Also, in leading retreats based on Merton's journey, I have always found retreatants hungry for anecdotes about the person Tom Merton.

So now I jot down the personal reflections, if you will, knowing in my gut that they are important. Perhaps they are only important to me. But maybe it is in these



GREGORY M. CORRIGAN

□ **Gregory M. Corrigan**, a priest of the Diocese of Wilmington, Delaware, is the Director of Pastoral Care at St. Mark's High School. He lives in a stone carriage house nestled in a wooded area in Claymont, Delaware. He writes: "It's not a hermitage — more like an anchorhold — but certainly a place of solitude." He likes to sit and pray under a great southern magnolia named "Maggie." His first book, *Disciples Story*, was published in 1989 by Ave Maria Press.

personal qualities, these experiences that connect us in intimate yet universal ways with people we may never have met, that each of us travels the road of spirituality.

I was in the eighth grade when Thomas Merton died. I had never heard of him, yet I can remember being greatly disturbed upon reading the account of his death in our diocesan newspaper, feeling hurt but with a sense of wanting to know more. Years later, I asked the archivist to dig up a copy of that 1968 account to see if I could figure out what it said that might have affected me so strongly. Reading it years later gave me a feeling of *deja vu*, but there was nothing in the wording that would explain why it so captivated a fourteen year old.

The Zen masters share great treasures. Thomas Merton knew this when he wrote: “The geographical pilgrimage is the symbolic acting out of an internal journey.” I did my studies for priesthood in southern Indiana at St. Meinrad Seminary, a place from which Merton often borrowed books through inter-library loan. Given the proximity, it was only a matter of time before I went to visit the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. When I made my first retreat there, I had read only *The Seven Storey Mountain*. That was enough. My experience at Gethsemani was deeply enriching.

There are three memories that are most outstanding from that visit. First, seeing the words “God alone” over the door at the Abbey and immediately thinking about how Merton himself described the first time he saw that same inscription. Second, walking with sacred and probably overly pious respect around the Abbey property. My posture may have been a bit too sanctimonious but I do recall the very profound prayer I had while walking through the cemetery grounds. At one point, I just stopped to say a prayer for all the monks who had been laid to rest in that place. Only after completing my prayer, in turning and looking down, did I realize that I had been standing at the foot of Merton’s grave. Third, I remember walking through the adjacent woods, having no idea which direction I was traveling, yet ending up at Merton’s hermitage. I sat on the porch for hours, with that wonderful view of Kentucky knobs as a *mantra*, and for the first time in my life had some understanding of what meditation is really about.

The geography of Thomas Merton has also brought me to Louisville, Kentucky. It is easy to understand why he would love that city, a place that is full of so many fine and gracious people. Many times I have stood on the corner at Fourth and Walnut (now of course Muhammad Ali), the place where he had a “vision,” a full and overwhelming sense of solidarity with all people. I have never experienced the *kairos* that Merton experienced at that place. But it has always been an occasion for me to stop and, in a personal way, offer a prayer for the “secret beauty” of all people.

In planning my personal retreat for 1988, I didn’t have to think long about it. I would go to Gethsemani and I would go in the week of December 10th, the twentieth anniversary of Merton’s death. What I remember best about that time was spending the afternoon of December 9th out at the hermitage. To my great surprise, the hermitage was unlocked on that day. I walked through it with much awe and respect. By this point I had read enough and, I think, knew enough of Merton to realize that Merton the man would strongly object to anyone’s treating the hermitage like a shrine. So I refused to “canonize” the moment. And yet, I knew that I was in a holy place. I stayed the longest in the small chapel at the hermitage. As the building is still regularly used for monastic retreats, the chapel was fully outfitted with prayer books and mass supplies. After a lengthy discernment, I decided to “say Mass” there. I had never before, nor have I since, said a private Mass. Yet being there on that sunny afternoon, standing in a place where God had bestowed so much grace and goodness, I indeed felt that was the prayer I was called to celebrate. And in that prayer, I did not feel alone.

The influence of Thomas Merton is a journey that continues long after his death. It impacts on individuals, and in a more personal and profound way, it brings people together. The story of

his life journey should show us how small the world really is, how connected we all really are. Still, it's a wonderful revelation when we grasp that insight for ourselves.

Catherine Boone Kieler and I were on our way to becoming "heart friends" before each of us realized our "Merton connections." Perhaps those connections became the glue to bind us uniquely. I had worked with Cathy at St. Mark's High School in Wilmington, Delaware, for two years before finding out that she grew up on a farm just a few miles from Gethsemani. She tells stories, with great southern charm, about the monks from Gethsemani who used to come and help her father harvest his crops. She also tells a wonderful story about the time she met Merton. She was twelve years old and had walked over to the Abbey's bookstore to buy a book by their celebrity monk/author. She recounts that she looked around the bookstore, unsure which way to go, when a nice man in "big overalls" asked if he could help her. When she explained that she wanted a book by "the famous Thomas Merton," Cathy says, the man rolled his head back and gently laughed "a big laugh." It was in the laugh that she recognized Thomas Merton.

Cathy and I have grown closer because of our ability to share "pieces of Merton." One of her most unique "Mertonisms" harkens back to geography and the irony of universal connections. Cathy and her husband, Dan, had been working through an international adoption agency in the hopes of adopting a child. Finally, a child became available, but it would require their willingness to travel very far to meet the child to make sure that the placement would be appropriate. Cathy and Dan were willing. So they traveled to Bangkok, Thailand, where they met their new son. That son, Kurt, is a beautiful and talented gift from the East. When I see him and his mother holding hands and walking together through the halls at St. Mark's, I can't help but see "Kentucky and Bangkok holding hands," and they seem perfect together. At moments like that, I have also imagined Thomas Merton looking down upon such a scene and smiling one of those "Fr. Louie" smiles.

I have been greatly influenced by the writings of Thomas Merton and by the man. And I value both the spiritual dimension of such an influence and the "personal touches." I believe Merton would approve. In *No Man is an Island*, Merton writes that the integrated life of the spirit "puts us in the fullest possible contact with reality." We know in a very basic and intuitive way that "reality" is much bigger than just that which we can see or only that which can be verified. Language creates reality. People of all times have found that in the telling of their stories they have come to know God. And so it is in sharing personal reflections about someone like Thomas Merton. Thanks for your goodness, Louie. It means a lot. I hope we meet again soon.