

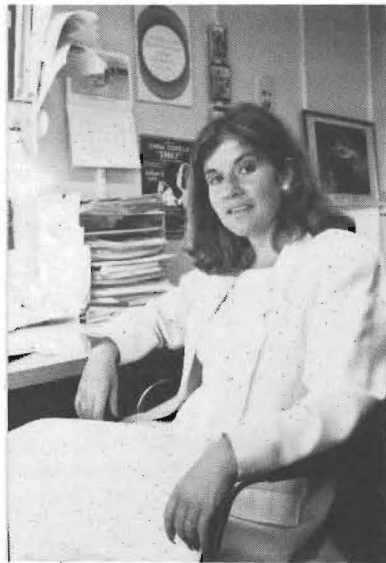
A MERTON JOURNEY

by **Maria S. Judge**

Even today I can't quite remember what it was about him that first caught my attention. I remember when it was, of course. It was an evening in February, a Friday, I think, and I was idly flipping channels, looking for something to watch on television that night. I stopped at Channel 2 and began to watch an interesting looking program that turned out to be a biography of Thomas Merton. I knew of him only as the author of a book called *The Seven Storey Mountain*, but didn't know what it was about or precisely who he was. So it didn't make sense that I would stop to watch this program in the first place, unless it was just out of curiosity — perhaps I wanted to attach a face and a background to a name that was vaguely familiar. I remembered being impressed by him and thinking at some point during the program that I would like to hear him speak sometime. I must have thought him pretty contemporary. But the odd thing was the shock I felt at the end of the program when I learned that this newly discovered and most interesting man had died seventeen years before. I became intensely curious about him and began to read everything I could find. Soon an entire shelf of my bookcase was filled with Merton. Michael Mott's biography had recently been published and I took that with me on vacation in April, although it was three times the size of my customary vacation reading and much more rigorous.

A few months later, in July, I was reading *Every Night at Five*, Susan Stamberg's book about "All Things Considered," and came across a piece that they'd done on Merton back in 1979, eleven years after his death. Noah Adams had gone to Kentucky to the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani to speak with the monks who had known Merton. Since I was going to be in Lexington, Kentucky myself the following week on business, I wondered if I might have the chance to go to the Abbey. Suddenly it seemed like an important thing for me to do, and I wondered at the urgency of this desire all the while I kept trying to figure out how to go about getting there. I realized I had no idea how to find the place, and knew only that it was somewhere south of

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Photo by Hilary J. L. Scott

Louisville. I called the Louisville Visitor Information Bureau, and a pleasant woman told me that she had no information, but they did get an occasional inquiry. She thought the abbey was somewhere near Barchtown, south of Louisville and she gave me the number for their Information Bureau. I called them and was given some general directions (from Barchtown, take Route 31E for sixteen miles to Kentucky 247, which would take me right to the abbey) and the Mass schedule (10.30 on Sunday morning). I looked in my atlas to locate Barchtown but it didn't appear anywhere, so I assumed it was too small to rate inclusion on the map. But since I had the directions, and I knew that I could get a road map once I got to Kentucky, I thought I would just drive out to Louisville and head south.

On the first leg of my journey, from Boston to Pittsburgh, I struck up a conversation with the woman sitting next to me on the plane. She appeared to be about my age and told me that she taught European history at a small college in southern California and knew of the Fletcher School where I work, so we had an interesting chat. She told me that she had lived in Olean, New York for a while, near St. Bonaventure, where Merton had spent the time just prior to going to Kentucky. I told her of my plans to drive out to the abbey, and she was intrigued. We had a wonderful conversation about him, sharing information that we knew and filling in gaps in each other's knowledge. I found it ironic that the first person I ran into on the trip was as interested in Merton as I was and thought this boded well for my trip. I also made an interesting, but ultimately time-saving discovery while reading *The Seven Storey Mountain*. I thought I would read about Merton's trip to Gethsemani in December of 1941 to try to get a sense of the emotion he must have felt at making this trip, knowing that he might never leave the abbey again. He wrote that he arrived in Bardstown very late at night and had to find someone to drive him out to the abbey. Not *Barchtown* at all, but *Bardstown*. This was only the first instance in which I misunderstood that gentle Kentucky twang.

Sunday morning I got up early and had breakfast in the hotel. The bell captain gave me directions to the Louisville road and told me that I could get a road map at any gas station along the way. I stopped at the first one I saw which was fortunate because when I told the man there that I wanted to get to Bardstown, he knew the way quite well. I should take the Bluegrass Parkway and that would bring me directly into Bardstown, about eighty-five miles away. And how did I get to the Bluegrass Parkway? Well, I should turn around and go back down the road apiece and take "Circle 4 South" until I came to the "For Sale" exit. "F-o-r S-a-l-e" I carefully wrote down, thinking it was a strange name for a road. He must have seen what I wrote because he said that wasn't the name of the exit, it was V-E-R-S-A-I-L-L-E-S. Giggling at myself and at my northern ear, I got back into the car, turned around, found Circle 4 South, stayed on it until I came to the Versailles exit, took that to the Bluegrass Parkway and aimed the car towards Bardstown.

It was a sunny day and there wasn't very much traffic, so it was a relaxing ride with the windows open and some classical music playing on the radio. A surprising number of dead animals along the side of the road provided the only jarring note. I arrived at Route 31E sooner than I expected and discovered that there was a 31E North and a 31E South. The woman in the Visitor Information office hadn't said anything about that. I pulled over to the side of the road and looked at my map. There was no Kentucky 247, but Bardstown itself was to the north of me, so I drove to the center of town to ask directions. It was still fairly early, and not many people were around, but I found an elderly fellow parked at the side of the road and asked him if he knew where Kentucky 247 was. There was no such road he told me and asked where I was going. "To the Abbey of Gethsemani." "You lookin' for them monks?" he asked. "Yes, I'm going to Mass at the abbey." Well, now he knew what I meant, and told me to drive down 31E South for about ten

miles and I would see a sign pointing to the left, and if I drove down that road for a while I would come to the abbey. I did just that, and about six miles later, after a small sign reading "Culver-town" I came around a bend and saw a few stores, including Culver's Used Cars, Culver's Kountry Kwik Mart, and Smith's Corner which advertised Cold Beer and a Game Room. Directly opposite Smith's there was a simple white sign that read "Trappist." I took the left as it directed, and drove down *Kentucky 247*, past Whiskey Run Road, looking to the right and the left for anything that looked vaguely monastery-like and initially seeing only an occasional madonna on a front lawn and a satellite dish or two. I was beginning to feel a sense of excitement, knowing that I was getting closer, but at the same time, there was an element of fear that the place may have changed, modernized somehow, and that the spirit may have been lost. I was reminded of the time I was in Germany many years before, traveling on a rainy January morning in Hamburg, and walking down Rathenaustrasse, also looking to the right and to the left, but that time I was looking for the house where I was born. There were many new developments being built on the street and I was so afraid that my house might have been torn down. But it was still there, and by visiting it I was able to recreate a little bit of my past that I only knew from stories I had been told. And now I felt I was trying to recreate part of Merton's past, from the story he had told.

Then there was a clearing in the trees and it was there on my left. Or at least I assumed it was the abbey. My first view was of a number of towers rising through the trees, all surrounded by a wall. I followed the wall and took the next left, passing a sign identifying the "Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani, founded in 1848 by the Cistercians, noted for Prayer, Labor and Silence." The Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance — so solemn a notion on such a bright Sunday morning in 1985. I took another left and drove up a tree lined driveway, noticing a number of the monks were sitting with visitors at small tables under the trees. I hadn't thought I would see anyone outside, and this was somehow reassuring even though it didn't quite jive with my idea of a cloistered order of monks. I parked beside a number of other cars, many with out-of-state license plates, and walked up to the main entrance to the enclosure, a large wooden, gate-like door. I remembered seeing a picture of it in one of the Merton books I had been reading. He had posed in front of it with friends on the day of his ordination, and since they blocked the entrance, he was written up in the Chapter of Faults. What a way to begin!

There was a visitor's office next to the enclosure and I went in to ask where the church was. I still was not sure how the monks communicated, so I didn't know how I would obtain this information. Fortunately, the man at the desk was on the phone, actually speaking when I came in, so I decided silence was not observed while dealing with the public. But even though he was talking, I felt that I shouldn't, and so I whispered my question softly. He was a solemn looking man in dungarees and a blue shirt and he told me to follow the path at the side of the building and I would come to the chapel. As I started down the path I noticed several graves ahead of me, and I left the path to go over and look at them. I had seen a picture of Merton's grave and, like all Trappist graves, there was no stone, just a cross with his name — Fr. Louis Merton, died Dec. 10, 1968. But these graves were more elaborate than the simple Trappist crosses in the picture, so I assumed he and his fellow monks were buried elsewhere. I turned back to the path and followed several people into a building which was to the left of and behind the visitor's office. The church was up two flights of stairs, and as I was climbing, I passed one of the monks coming down the stairs. His hands were folded inside his sleeves, and he bowed his head in acknowledgment of my murmured "Good morning, Father." He was big and tall and redheaded, and I wondered if I should have addressed him as "Brother," not "Father," since he may well have been younger than I. At the top of the stairs, there was a table with a basket of hosts and a chalice and the idea seemed to be that you would take a host from the basket and put it in the chalice and that way

they would only consecrate enough hosts for the people at the Mass. Nothing wasteful here. The hosts were whole wheat and thick and healthy and hearty and unlike any I had ever seen before. There was another basket on the table that contained instructions on how to receive communion.

The visitor's chapel, I discovered on entering, was high above and at the back of the church in which the monks gathered — a kind of choir loft. From this location and from the communion instructions, I gathered that while we were allowed to observe, we would not be involved in the service. I wanted to get a closer look at the church but it seemed irreverent and intrusive and oh, so touristy to go forward to look over the railing, but I did it anyway. The church was long and narrow, opening up into a broader altar area at the front. The midsection was filled with long wooden structures that I could not identify at first. There were six rows of them, three on each side of the aisle. Soon the monks began entering and I then realized that the wooden structures were some kind of prayer stalls. As the monks came into the church, they would walk to the middle, bow and go to their place in these stalls. I wondered how they chose the stalls in which they sat and then realized that each must have his own. Since they spent a great deal of time at prayer, they would be able to keep their books and other things in their own prayer stalls. They all wore off-white robes with black tunics over them, tied with belts — most seemed to wear thick sandals over socks, although I thought some wore shoes. They were an interesting contrast to their surroundings, the black of their tunics standing out against the white walls of the church.

I went back to my seat and continued to examine what I could see of the lower area of the church. The altar area had thirty or forty black chairs in a semi-circle in front of it. A row of chairs lined each side of the altar, which was itself simple, small and square and partly covered with an altar cloth. No one had yet taken a seat at the altar, but by now the prayer stalls were filling and then they began the hymns. One moment the monks were seated quietly, the next they rose as one and someone began to play the organ. The music was gorgeous, and their singing made me want to join in, except that I didn't know what to sing. The best I could do was to bow from the waist when they did, periodically during the singing — it made me feel more involved. After ten or fifteen minutes of hymns, a procession of monks entered from the doorways on each side of the altar, and sat in the black chairs. As each one came in, I wondered to myself: were you here when he was here? Did you know him? Surely some of them must have since it hadn't yet been twenty years since he died.

I had been wondering who would be at the Mass, and whether or not it would be the Abbot. I knew that Dom Flavian Burns had become abbot only a few months before Merton's death, so I thought it possible that he would still be there. When a man in a green stole appeared and took his place at the altar to begin the Mass, I realized that, though he was clearly the principal celebrant, I still had no way of knowing if he was the Abbot. There were about twelve celebrants, and since the altar was so far away from where I was seated, I had difficulty seeing who was doing what. Someone would begin one of the readings, and I would strain to see who had left his seat and where he had gone to read. There was so much to take in, and I wanted to remember it all, as well as experience the Mass, and it was hard to do both simultaneously. I continued to observe the monks in the prayer stalls. They were not all wearing robes — there was one tall young man with a full head of light hair wearing a light blue work shirt and dungarees with red suspenders. He and his colorful attire seemed incongruous in the midst of all the brown and white. He may have been a novice — I imagined him as a latter day Merton, newly arrived at the monastery, still getting a feel for his surroundings and his new life. I stopped these rambling thoughts with the more realistic one that he may just have been a retreatant. This, then, opened up an entirely new realm of possibility for me — perhaps I could come back sometime and make a retreat here. It

seemed like a wonderful opportunity, and I was amazed that I hadn't thought of it before this. I decided to explore the possibility after the Mass was ended.

Preparations began below for Communion, and I looked at the instructions on the small slip I had picked up on my way in. Very simply we were asked to begin with the left hand pews, to have no more than five or six people in line at a time to receive, and to step over to drink from the chalice if we so desired. The slap of sandals against the floor and the swish of robes announced the arrival of the monks serving Communion before we actually saw them. Their downcast eyes never met those of the congregation, and they did everything with an economy of motion, moving quickly but with a surprisingly heavy tread. I was seated in one of the left hand pews and I moved out quietly when my turn came, taking the host from one and the wine from the other, and returning to my seat to watch the other people receive theirs. There were only twenty or so people at Mass that morning, and I was surprised that more people didn't come, either visitors to the area (all those out-of-state license plates on the cars parked outside) or people who lived nearby. When all had received, the two monks left, with the same heavy tread and the same swishing of robes. It was warm and I wondered how much the heat bothered them under those heavy robes, or if they were no longer aware of it after so many years.

When the Mass ended, most people left immediately, although a few lingered and walked forward to the railing to look around the church. I watched below until all the monks had filed out the side doors. One came back and straightened a few things before he left again. When I finally decided there was nothing left for me to see, when I had examined every detail of the place, I reluctantly left, stopping at the ladies room that was on the same level. There were three women in there talking about the heat and a variety of other things, but not about the extraordinary Mass they had just sat through. "Wasn't it wonderful?" My thoughts tried to communicate my emotion to them, but they just fanned themselves and chatted idly, so I smiled in acknowledgement of their greetings and waited my turn. I finally left the area and went back to the visitor's office, all fired up about the idea of a retreat. A man and a woman were there already, and were speaking with the monk behind the desk who, unlike his predecessor from before the Mass, was wearing robes. I heard the man ask for information about retreats and as I moved closer to hear the information, the monk said that only men were allowed as guests. I was devastated. The thought of a retreat had been in my mind for perhaps an hour at the most, but I felt as though I had been deprived of something I'd wanted for a very long time.

The couple left and the monk looked inquiringly at me. I told him I too had been interested in making a retreat there and was very disappointed that this would not be possible. "Of course we don't allow ladies inside the enclosure," he said. "There are different points of view on this and I think perhaps that we ought to progress with the times . . ." * I wasn't sure about how soon they'd change, but I was quite certain that it would not be by August of 1987, which was the last year I'd be coming down to Kentucky for the College Business Management Institute. He suggested that I contact the Sisters of Loretto, who were located nearby, and who offered retreat facilities for women. There was a name and address there in the office and I jotted it down, thinking that it was something, but not quite what I wanted. I was so disappointed that I held little hope for my next request to be granted, but I asked where Father Louis' grave was and if I could see it. He smiled sweetly and told me that it was inside the enclosure, and he was sorry that I would not be able to go in. At this point the tears really wailed up, so I thanked him, picked up a few postcards and an order form for cheese and fruitcake, and walked back outside into the blazing hot Kentucky morning sun, where I thankfully put on my sunglasses and sniffled a bit.

* Editor's Note: Gethsemani now offers retreats for women and for men.

It was only a little after 11.30 at this point and I couldn't have left just yet, so I walked back up the driveway and climbed the hill that faced the abbey. There was a statue of St. Joseph at the top of it with a bench next to him, and I remembered seeing another picture of Merton standing on this hill pointing off into the hills beyond Gethsemani. The picture must have been taken in the winter because he was wearing a jacket and a wool cap and it looked like a very cold day. I sat on the bench for about fifteen minutes and watched what little activity went on below. From this slightly higher vantage point I had a good view of that part of the abbey that rose above the enclosure gates. I could also see the countryside, and tried to imagine where the hermitage had been, or perhaps still was. Hard to know if it would still be there after all this time. I felt for a moment that I was back up in the visitor's area of the church, waiting and watching for something to begin. But this was anticlimactic and I really didn't expect anything to happen. A few cars left the monastery, a few other cars drove down Route 247, and at one point a tractor drove out from behind the gate just beyond the bend in the driveway. A man got down, went back and closed the gate, and then drove off across the main road and disappeared through the fields. I realized there was another bench under a tree on top of a hill just across Route 247, so I climbed down the St. Joseph hill and climbed up the other one. There was no real path and the hay on the hills (I think it was hay) was high and rough so I tried to step carefully, no easy feat when you are wearing inadequate blue sandals with only a thin strap to keep them on. But I had not expected to do any hiking when I got dressed that morning.

I settled down on the new bench and as I stretched my legs out in front of me I noticed that I had blood on my foot. I didn't think I had scratched myself and as I looked closely and wiped it away, there was no scratch at all. No stigmata this, however — I had apparently stepped on some berries and the juice stained my foot and my shoe. The heat and the intensity of the place could have had me believing anything at that point. I sat there in the sun, just enjoying the Kentucky countryside, the peacefulness of the day, and the fact that I was there, alone with my thoughts. Merton had lived exactly twenty-seven years in this place, entering Gethsemani on December 10, 1941, and leaving it and the world on December 10, 1968, fifty-two days before his fifty-fourth birthday. His life was almost precisely divided in half, the first twenty-seven years (minus fifty-two days) in the outside world, and the second twenty-seven years in this world here below my feet. He observed and wrote about so much of the world from behind those walls. Somehow I felt there must be a lesson in there for me.

I lingered a while longer and then reluctantly got up to go, since I still wanted to buy some books at the Bardstown Art Gallery before I returned to Lexington. As I walked back to my car, my thoughts returned to the question of who had said the Mass, and I still wondered if it was the Abbot and if so, which Abbot it was. Since this was the only Mass that day, I thought it likely that he would be the one who would celebrate, and it became very important for me to know this. By the time I reached the visitor's office it had closed for an hour, and I didn't know if I would have time to come back out here after going into Bardstown. Then I noticed a monk still sitting at one of the tables under the trees along the driveway, and he and his visitor seemed to be getting ready to say goodbye. I waited until he walked back towards the enclosure, then stopped him to ask who had said the Mass. He told me it was indeed the Abbot, Dom Timothy Kelly from Canada, so my final question was answered.

I drove back into Bardstown and found the Art Gallery with its pleasant owners, Jim and Jeannette Cantrell, who were happy to chat. They were impressed that I had come all the way from Boston, and I explained that technically I could only get credit for traveling out from Lexington for this particular pilgrimage. They had a good selection of Merton's books, though hardly everything, and they also took requests for books that were out of print since they

periodically came across such works. They said that they went out to Gethsemani, but not often, and they told me that there had been a murder the night before just off Kentucky 247, beyond the abbey. It seemed too worldly an event for so unworldly a place and made me wonder how the monks would cope with the everyday life of the 1980s. It also made the walls of the enclosure seem very appealing.

I bought an armful of books, wondering how I would ever fit them into my suitcase, and went back to the center of town to have some lunch. I found a picturesque tavern where I order a sandwich and a cold drink. I wanted a beer, but Kentucky is dry on Sundays, so I settled for diet coke which seemed to be the only low calorie drink they served in the entire state. I recognized one of the women at the next table as someone who had sat in front of me at Mass and was very tempted to speak to her, to ask what she had thought of the abbey, if she had been there before, known of Merton, etc. But as I heard them talk, I was just as glad I hadn't asked because they were discussing their favorite flavor of ice cream, golfing in Scotland and headache remedies, and it seemed such an ordinary conversation that I couldn't understand how she could have come back to reality so soon. I was still in a kind of fog.

I bought a fruitcake in the lobby of the tavern while I was paying for my lunch, and then left Bardstown behind me. Just before I got back on the Bluegrass Parkway I thought I would get another cold drink for the road, so I pulled into a gas station/ foodmart store with a large sign advertising "Trappist Cheese" and "VCR Rentals." Sure enough, the Trappist cheese was in the refrigerator case next to the rack with the videos. If Merton could parody the making of cheese ("Poems are nought but warmed up breeze,/ Dollars are made by Trappist Cheese"), I wonder what he could have done with this marketing juxtaposition.

There was a sense of unreality in switching from monasticism to fund accounting and physical plant operations as I found out when I plunged into my week at CBMI. But I couldn't escape the memory of Merton even in downtown Lexington. There were some faded posters that I saw around town, advertising a visit that Ernesto Cardenal, the Nicaraguan Minister of Culture, had made to the University of Kentucky the previous April. Cardenal had been inspired to become a Trappist while reading Merton and had studied under him while Merton was novice master at Gethsemani. After returning to Nicaragua, he had founded the monastic community of Solentiname, something that Merton himself had envisioned doing, but was never to do before his untimely death. And there was Cardenal in Kentucky again in 1985. I wondered if he had gone out to Gethsemani during his trip. I was sure he had.

And as I thought of Cardenal at Gethsemani, I was back there myself, sitting on the bench up on the hill overlooking it all, just listening to the wind rustle the grass

— and watching

— and waiting.