

HOMILY FOR THE 25TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE DEATH OF FR. LOUIS MERTON

Abbey of Gethsemani, December 10, 1993

by **James Conner, OCSO**

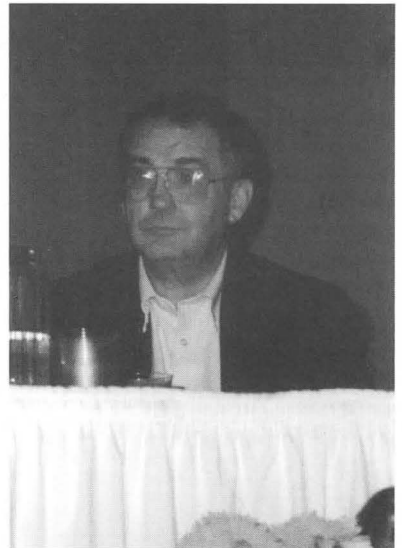
Today we commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the passing of our Fr. Louis Merton from this life to the Lord. Some may wonder why we have such a special memorial for him. Certainly we have never done anything like this for any other member of the community. Just last Sunday we remembered the twenty-fifth anniversary of the death of our Bro. Leo. But if we had tried to have a special celebration he would probably have raised from the grave to make his habitual comment by signs: "USELESS!" But we do experience the need to join our own celebration of Merton's anniversary with those celebrations being held by others throughout the country and even throughout the world. At this very time a celebration is being held in England.

Merton has been acclaimed by many as one of the greatest spiritual writers of this century. His works have been read and translated into many languages. His influence has been felt by many, including such influential leaders as John XXIII, Paul VI, Martin Luther King, and our own American bishops. One need only peruse the indexes of the volumes of his *Letters* to recognize this fact. Besides this, he was certainly one of the most prolific monastic writers of our time. And his writings had an effect at a particularly crucial time of monastic renewal. The reason that his writings still have such an impact on society, on religious and monastic life is the fact that he was a man ahead of his own time. The full impact of many of his writings are only now becoming clear.

But for us at Gethsemani, we commemorate him not just as a great writer, an influential person of our times. We commemorate him as a brother who had a profound influence on this community and on all who have lived here; one who touched our own lives in a special way. If Fr. Louis were still alive, he would be #6 in the list of seniority. Over fifty of the present community of about seventy lived with him and knew him as a brother. At least eighteen were formed by him either as Master of Students or as Novice Master. And six abbots and superiors of the Order at the present time received their formation from him. All of us experienced his formative presence not merely through his conference, classes or even his spiritual direction, but primarily through his living and animated presence among us.

Fr. Louis was certainly a very complex person. He was not the type of person that one reads about in stories of hagiography. He

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could be unedifying at time. But beyond all of that, he was a man who obviously had a deep and strong love for this place and for his brothers—for us. And also he could be humble and cheerful. Even Dom James Fox, who certainly bore the brunt of his difficult encounters with Merton, stated that in the final analysis, when the cards were down, Merton was ready and willing to lay down his own will and submit to authority with humility and a willingness to be led, like St. Peter, to go “where he would not have willed to go.”

He was a man who truly struggled with what he himself called “the Sign of Jonas.” The first reading today (Jonas, ch. 1) expressed that tendency to go his own way, even in the face of a different call from God. But, like Jonas, he struggled through this in a way that led to a new discovery of God and His workings. His “Prayer of Abandonment,” which is a favorite card for many, truly expresses something of his own inner life and his movement to a faith and abandonment which went beyond his own natural inclination.

But he was able to do this because he strove to follow the Christ who called him; the same Christ that we heard about in the second reading from Ephesians (ch. 1). He recognized our true selves as “chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world.” And it was his recognition of the oneness of our true selves that led to his zeal in writing about issues of race, peace, justice, and love. For this reason he now makes his own that prayer which Paul expressed: “I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and you love toward all the saints and I give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him.” Also with Christ in his high priestly prayer that we heard in the Gospel (Jo. 17), he prays for us now that we may be “with me where I am, to behold my glory which you have given me in your love for me before the foundation of the world.” That the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

And so today we give thanks to you, Heavenly Father, for having shared with us your son and our brother, Fr. Louis Merton. Help us, like him, to “die in You and find all things in Your mercy which had created us for this end and brought us to this Cisterican Abbey of the poor men who labor at Gethsemani: that we may become brothers of God and learn to know the Christ of the burnt men.”