

THE DALAI LAMA DESCENDS ON GETHSEMANI: IN MEMORY OF THOMAS MERTON

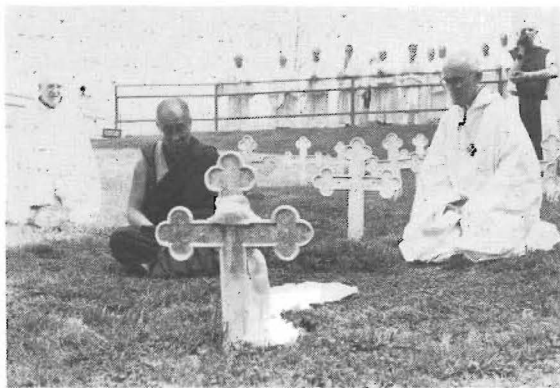
by **Patrick Hart, OCSO**

On Monday, April 25, His Holiness Tenzin Gyatso, the fourteenth Dalai Lama, descended upon Gethsemani by helicopter from Berea College in central Kentucky where a group of Tibetan students are enrolled. Several years ago he had planned the visit to Kentucky, but it was delayed due to health reasons. When he accepted the invitation to come to Berea College he told President John Stephenson that he also wanted to visit Thomas Merton's monastery and pay his respects at the grave of his spiritual friend and comrade. This wish, so long delayed, became a reality on a bright, sunny morning as his helicopter descended on the grounds directly in front of the monastery where once stood the old Gethsemani College until the great fire of 1912.

Abbot Timothy Kelly welcomed His Holiness along with his entourage at the helicopter. With the monks all present in cowl and with much incense, they proceeded to enter the Church, where a Liturgy of the Word was held. First, Abbot Timothy, after a moment of silence, greeted him in the following words: "In our common monastic tradition of hospitality, I welcome you to the Abbey of Gethsemani where we follow the way of the Lord Jesus endeavoring to live the Gospel that we might become men of compassion and instruments of peace in our one world."

He continued then to recall His Holiness's meeting with our Father Louis/Thomas Merton some twenty-five years previously at his monastic exile in northern India: "We welcome you in memory of our Brother Thomas Merton, Father Louis, whom you so graciously received in 1968 and encouraged in the way of universal compassion and peace. In his shared recollections of the teaching you gave him in your personal interviews, Thomas Merton was in profound agreement and most encouraged; your insistence that one cannot attain anything in the spiritual life without total dedication, continued effort, experienced guidance, real discipline and the combination of wisdom and method. These are teachings that monks need to hear frequently and your presence in our midst reminds us of their relevance and shows in your person the fruit of a life of unselfish dedication."

After a few more words of regret, that the shortness of time did not permit a more leisurely exchange, our Abbot invited him back to Gethsemani. It is planned to have a meeting of religious leaders from East and West at Gethsemani in the future. He assured the Dalai Lama of our prayers for the exiled people of Tibet: "We remember your people in our thoughts and prayers that the hearts of many will be filled with compassion to assist and



**BROTHER PATRICK HART, THE DALAI LAMA,
& ABBOT TIMOTHY KELLY AT
MERTON'S GRAVE**

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alleviate your people so that justice may be realized and something of the reign of God be experienced in our world.”

His Holiness, the Dalai Lama then responded to the welcome with a short prepared text in Tibetan, which was translated into perfect English by one of the Tibetan monks of his entourage. He expressed his pleasure, and at the same time sadness, in visiting his spiritual friend’s monastic home. He regretted the death of Thomas Merton since he felt Father Louis had much to contribute to a better understanding between East and West. This was followed by the Liturgy of the Word; first a reading from *the Heart Sutra*, which stresses so much emptiness: “O Sariputra, form is no other than emptiness, emptiness no other than form: Form is precisely emptiness, emptiness precisely form; Sensation, perception, reaction and consciousness are also like this. O Sariputra, all things are expressions of emptiness, not born, but destroyed.” This was followed by a reading from the Prologue of the Gospel of John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . .”

The monastic schola then chanted Psalm 41, with the antiphon: “My soul is yearning for You, my God” before and after. Abbot Timothy then gave the Final Prayer: “Your Holiness, dear brothers and sisters, at the close of the First Spiritual Summit in Calcutta, not long before his death, our Father Louis/Thomas Merton, whose presence we feel living and very much among us, was asked to offer a special closing prayer. He said that a new language of prayer has to come out of something which transcends all our traditions, and which comes out of the immediacy of love. He was silent for a moment, and then, from the depths of his heart he prayed:

Oh God, we are one with You.
 You have made us one with You.
 You have taught us that if we are open to one another,
 You dwell in is . . .
 Oh God, in accepting one another
 wholeheartedly, fully, completely, we accept You,
 and we thank You,
 and we love You with our whole being,
 because our being is in Your Being,
 our spirit is rooted in Your Spirit.
 Fill us then with love as we go our diverse ways,
 united in this one spirit which makes You present
 in the world,
 and which makes You witness to the ultimate reality
 that is love.
 Love has overcome.
 Love is victorious.
 Amen.”

(*The Asian Journal*, pp. 318-319.)

At the close of the Liturgy of the Word, the Abbot led His Holiness and entourage out the west transept of the Church to the graveyard, where the Dalai Lama draped a white silk scarf on the grave of Father Louis, and knelt in silent prayer in the Lotus posture for about five minutes. We then proceeded to the west entrance of the Guest House where tea was prepared. Due to his close schedule, he asked to be excused from the tea, but stopped at the Reception Area where the Abbot presented him with a number of books, including a first edition clothbound copy of *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*. I was carrying the books to be presented in a tote bag from the Third General Meeting of The International Thomas Merton Society in Colorado Springs last June. It is made of blue denim with a large Merton Zen calligraphy on the front in white. When the Dalai Lama saw the bag, he seemed fascinated by it. I asked him, “Would you like it, Your Holi-

ness?" He beamed and reached out both his hands for it and actually kissed it! He immediately began putting the books back in the tote bag with a great smile on his face. I took advantage of the opportunity to thank him for the two articles he allowed us to publish in *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* while I was editor.

Then, suddenly, he and his entourage were escorted out to their waiting vehicles which took him, almost an hour late, to the Kentucky Center for the Arts in Louisville, where a fund-raising luncheon was prepared. After the lunch he gave an address to a full house in the Whitney Theater. Again, in this talk he referred to Thomas Merton and what he had meant to him personally by introducing him to the beauties of Christianity, as he had already mentioned in his autobiography, *Freedom in Exile*: ". . . it was Merton who introduced me to the real meaning of the word 'Christian' This was the first time that I had been struck by such a feeling of spirituality in anyone who professed Christianity" (p. 189).

We look forward to the day when the Dalai Lama will be with us for a longer period and will be able to share with us more of his wisdom of the East. This is just one more indication of Thomas Merton's influence in our lives a quarter of a century after his death. Thanks be to God.