

Bangkok Diary – December 1968

By Sr. Teresita D'Silva, O.S.B.

Sr. Teresita D'Silva is presently abbess of the Shanti Nilayam Monastery in Bangalore, India. She was born in India and received her monastic formation at the Benedictine Abbey of St. Cecilia at Ryde on the Isle of Wight from 1963 to 1968. In December 1968 she accompanied the abbess of St. Cecilia's, Mother Bernadette, to the conference of eastern and western monastics in Thailand. After the conference, she remained in India at the newly founded convent in Bangalore, Shanti Nilayam, which became a priory in 1982 and an abbey in 1993. Her diary of this journey was written for the nuns at Ryde and sent back with the abbess. What follows is Sr. Teresita's account of the Bangkok conference, her encounters with Thomas Merton, and the events surrounding his death, which she has graciously allowed to appear in The Merton Seasonal to commemorate this thirtieth anniversary. The early part of the diary, recounting the stages of the trip to the east, is not included, and a few slight omissions have been made of comments directed specifically to the sisters. Looking back on the events of thirty years ago, Sr. Teresita writes, "Thomas Merton's death made a deep impression on me. While I was praying the psalms that night, especially the penitential psalms 6 and 101, I experienced the presence of Brother Merton as if he was praying with me – especially the verses, 'For my days are vanishing like smoke, / My bones burn away like a fire . . .' (Ps. 101) and 'But you, O Lord, How long? / Return, Lord, rescue my soul . . .' (Ps. 6). I couldn't sleep that night and so I continued to pray the six penitential psalms and other psalms – all the time feeling I was not praying alone, but his spirit was united with mine in praying these words. . . . May he rest in peace. His quest is over."

Thursday 5th December

Today is the King's birthday; there are flags up all over. The colours are the same as the Union Jack but a different arrangement.

At 9:30 a.m. we set off for the Red Cross. On the way, far outside the town, we saw a stream with palms on its banks. Notre Mère [Mother Bernadette] said: "With this scene I ought to be on an elephant rather than in a taxi. Kerala must be like this." At 11:30 a.m. we arrived at the Red Cross. The real name is Swanganivas. It was built by a Chinese, Mr. U Chu Liang. It cost him 10 million baht. He meant it to be a convalescent home. It has well-equipped medical examination offices, one large building with comfortable airy rooms with private shower baths, a lounge and recreation hall on the ground floor with a canteen, and a

television set that goes on all day long. There is a roof garden and an automatic passenger lift. There are eight bungalows for family accommodation, beautiful gardens with small lakes and canals for canoeing and fishing, and picturesque white painted bridges with pagoda roofs; two swimming pools, an aquarium, and two large conference halls fitted with earphones for simultaneous translations. The whole property covers 100 acres. Soon after we arrived, the lady in charge took us all around the place in her car.

Most of us stayed in the main building. . . . Abbot Primate [Rembert Weakland, O.S.B.] had a little bungalow all to himself on a little island connected to the main grounds by little white bridges. Thomas Merton and three other brothers shared bungalow No. 11. Conferences were held in the turtle-shaped Conference Hall about ten minutes walk away from the main building where we stayed.

This Mr. U Chu Liang later handed the whole property, and all it contained, as a gift to the Red Cross Society, as he was growing old. That was in 1962.

Friday 6th December

Today was a nice quiet day. We said most of Office out in the garden and we read the answers to the questionnaire to prepare for the meeting. We received a lovely budget of letters from Home-Sweet-Home [Ryde Abbey]. Mass was at 5:30 p.m. in a little room. The intention of the Mass was for all the participants of the Congress.

At supper we welcomed two Cistercians from Japan. Mother Christina – Abbess and Japanese, and Sr. Marie de la Croix, French. The Abbess only spoke Japanese and her companion translated everything to her all the time. Fr. Abbot de Floris managed to wish her goodnight as he knew some of the Cistercian sign-language. These signs are a good thing at international meetings; they seem to overcome all language barriers!

Saturday 7th December

We said the Office of St. Ambrose and thought of Mère Ambrosia. At 4 p.m., Fr. Prior de Meester and Fr. Mayeul arrived. Poor Fr. Prior wasn't looking too well as he had been involved in a car accident. Their brand new van, just fifteen days old, had crashed, and Fr. Prior was wounded around the right eye and had to have several stitches. He looked ever so tired and care-worn.

Mass in the evening was concelebrated by five monks. Fr. Odo Hass from Korea was principal celebrant. We received Communion under both kinds. Today and throughout the Congress we received the Sacred Bread in our hands. We were only seven besides the five concelebrating in a semicircle around the altar. And we all held hosts when we said: "Domine non sum dignus . . ." It was all so beautiful and dignified. I thought of St. Peter's Epistle: "You are a holy people, a royal priesthood . . ."

Two Filipino nuns arrived at suppertime. They were happy to know we were from Ryde as their foundress had received help from Ryde. Mère Maitresse will remember. They have 100 nuns in their monastery. Half the number are engaged in the active apostolate,

and the other half are contemplatives. Their old foundress, Mother Waldetrudis, is now 80 years old and has returned to Germany. They speak English in their monastery as there are many dialects in the Philippines and English is spoken by all.

Sunday 8th December – Feast of the Immaculate Conception

Mass was concelebrated at 12 noon with Fr. de Meester as principal celebrant. It was held in the Conference Hall with the speakers' desk acting as altar. We all put our chairs around the altar in a semi-circle. All day long there were new arrivals! We were expecting Bishop Lourdasamy, but were told he was to come only on Friday 13th December.

In the evening at 6 p.m., we had the joy of having another Mass for the benefit of the new arrivals. At 5:30 p.m. Fr. Abbot de Floris called me and asked me to prepare the altar, vestments and books for one concelebration during the Congress. I wished I had Sr. Benedicta's experience as sacristan. Thank God Mère Thérèse had shown me how to place vestments the day before I left. I said three "Hail Mary's" to do the right thing and set about it.

Fr. Verdière of the Paris Foreign Missions, who is Superior in Thailand, had provided us with a big tin with all that was necessary for Mass. There were three chalices and patens in black boxes, two candlesticks, cruets, and relics sewn into a thick square material which was placed under the altarcloth. I prepared the Missals in Latin and brought along our Missal for the English-speaking priests.

Throughout the Congress the Kyriale was in Latin, and the Collects and Readings were in English or French. We used one bottle of wine each day for 60 people, and ten large hosts which were broken up into four pieces each, and 20 small ones. I used to break the big hosts and pour in the wine and drops of water into the chalice before the Mass to save time. Besides, it is safer to break the hosts before the Consecration than after.

The chalices were the ordinary size, not the large ones specially made for concelebrations, with the result they had to be filled almost to the top. It was a sheer miracle that not a single drop fell throughout the Congress, especially as the chalices were circulated. We did not move from our places. Thank God all went well.

After the first day I felt quite confident. Besides, with the simplification of the ceremonies, you just do what is absolutely necessary and it turns out to be the right thing.

As the Congress was to begin next day, by suppertime practically the whole crowd had turned up. Fr. Abbot Primate met Notre Mère and me before supper and stopped for a long chat. He is ever so friendly and simple. He spoke of his visit to the pioneers and Anne, and said they were a jolly group. He said he had come to Quarr Abbey, England, on 1st June 1951 when he was just ordained priest, to visit Dom Desrocquettes who used to be his choir master at San Anselmo and was his great friend.

As we were speaking to him, some of the Korean Nuns who had joined us produced some photographs of Abbot Primate's visit to their monastery. In one of them he had on a

big hat and pipe, just like Charlie Chaplin. How we laughed! He said he enjoyed his visit to Korea because all the nuns danced for him. That is a good tip for Sr. Anne-Marie when he visits Ryde.

Supper was announced, so we all went to the tables. We sat eight to a table, and at each meal we sat at different tables to become acquainted with all. Everyone was nice and friendly and began chatting at once. There was a French journalist opposite me, and I asked him: "When is Thomas Merton coming?" He said: "You have just been speaking to him a minute ago," and he pointed to the gentleman at the end of the table. I was so embarrassed. None of the priests wore their cassocks so that you could tell them apart from the others. It was only the next day, when at the concelebration, that we saw them all in glory.

Thomas Merton was middle-aged, average height, quiet spoken and very simple. He was such a great help at translating all that Abbot Floris said in French. The staff of the A.I.M. [*Aide à l'Implantation Monastique* – the organizing group for the conference] only spoke French and most of the participants were English-speaking – actually, all except the monasteries from Vietnam. Due to English and American influence, India, Ceylon, Cambodia, Indonesia, Korea, Formosa, the Philippines, Australia, New Zealand and Japan are English-speaking. Thomas Merton was fluent in both languages and was at home at the mike, so without the slightest fuss he translated everything that Abbot Floris, or Abbot Tholens from Holland, or Mère Pia, the Secretary, wanted to get across. Notre Mère, too, was a great help at the discussion groups as translator.

After supper we all went to the turtle-shaped Conference Hall for a little meeting before the opening the next day. Fr. Abbot Primate welcomed everyone. Then Dom de Floris asked each one to go to the mike and introduce herself. There were two microphones, so those from the same house went together. When our turn came, Notre Mère began by saying who we were, and I concluded by telling them about Shanti Nilayam.

An American nun, Sister Shaun, who came from Japan, had the new look: a plain black dress, short, up to the knees, and a black veil. Sr. Marie Pierre's and Sr. Benedicta's sadhu was there, and so was Père Acharya. He is really Fr. Francis Mahieu who changed his name after becoming an Indian citizen. When he first came to India he spent fourteen months with Fr. Jules Monchanin. Fr. Bede Griffiths had not yet arrived as he had some trouble about his passport. The new monastery Kurisumala – has started at Tiruchinopoli. It is not really new. It is a revival of Monchanin's ashram. Fr. Mahieu is Prior at Kurisumala, and Fr. Bede is Prior at Shantivanam.

After the introduction we were given instructions about the reception for His Holiness, the Buddhist Patriarch.

Monday 9th December

We all gathered in the meeting hall at 9 a.m. and waited for the arrival of the Buddhist Patriarch. The car arrived and he stepped out. The VIPs stood at the main entrance and welcomed him. He was a small man dressed in saffron like a Buddhist monk, bald and

barefooted. Notre Mère has some photographs. Abbot Primate made a nice welcome address, and then he replied. He said he appreciated the work done in Thailand by the Christian missionaries and he was very happy to be in our midst and he wished us every success. He spoke in Thai, but Abbot Tholens read a translation. After the presenting of the address and some presents, he left. On his way out he spoke to a few participants. He asked me where I came from, and I answered, "India." Then he got into his car and drove off – and our Congress began.

Abbot Primate Rembert Weakland gave the introductory speech. As an American, he said he grew up with different concepts of East and West. To him, New York, England and Europe were East, and California, Japan and China were West. Many ropes tied America to Europe – ties they could not break – and so America has always been considered West. America is really in the centre of both worlds and, even though it has the same culture as Europe, there are so many difficulties. How much more must the difficulties be in planting ideas among peoples of different cultures. There is in the Church now a deeper awareness of these problems, a greater simplicity in the heart we are transplanting. (I did not quite catch the last sentences, but that was what I thought he said.)

At 10:45 was Dom Jean Leclercq's paper on "Present Day Problems in Monasticism." As he was to speak in French I decided to use the earphone for the simultaneous translation. I did not know how to use them, so I asked Fr. Thomas Merton. He said he would arrange a pair for me. During the interval I was having some refreshments and making friends with an Australian Cistercian monk when Thomas Merton came up to me and said he had reserved a pair of earphones at one of the side tables. So I went with him and he showed me how to use them. They are like small plugs you slip into your ear. Just one is enough. I tried it and he went up to the translator's mike and said: "Can you hear me?" I raised up my hand to indicate I was all right. And then he went away. Wasn't that kind of him? May God bless with eternal life those who do us good.

Notre Mère has the text of Dom Leclercq's talk. She has all the texts with her. Each of us was presented with a large folder with the texts of all the talks. Notre Mère has hers in French, and I have all ours in English. Someone will have to be kind enough to translate the French for those who can't understand. I wish I could have sent our set, but I'm afraid I owe it to Shanti Nilayam. All the work of translating the texts was done by Mère Marie-Bernard. She also did the simultaneous translations. . . .

At midday, thirty priests concelebrated at the Missa Normativa. . . . At Vespers there were extracts from the *Bhagavad Gita*, Master Eckhart, St. John of the Cross, the *Upanishads*, Ruysbroeck, St. Bernard, Walter Hilton, Julian of Norwich, Tagore and Teilhard de Chardin. At the Evening Service we sang the psalms in Latin in two choirs. A Chinese monk sang the "Pater" in Chinese. Every day it was a different language. The recital of this Office, which lasted for half an hour, satisfied the obligation of the recital of Divine Office.

After supper we watched on TV the morning's ceremony of the reception of the

Buddhist patriarch. After that, we went to the conference room for reports of the discussion work groups. Our work group that had met at 4:30 p.m. was most interesting, but there was one disadvantage: the language problem. As long as it was English it was fine, but then one or two began in French and went so quickly that I got quite lost. The next day I decided to join an all-English group. The papers with the group leaders were put up each morning, and we had to put our names in any list. Each group had an animator and translator. Notre Mère was translator for one of the groups.

Tuesday 10th December

Before breakfast, as I was going down, I saw an Indian sari. It was Sr. Praxedes, the German Benedictine who came three years ago to India to join a Hindu Ashram. She had been a Benedictine for 16 years in Germany. Her name is now Sr. Sraddhananda. She had only arrived at 11 o'clock the previous night as she had a lot of trouble with her papers at the airport. She was dressed in a saffron sari and blouse – the same colour as Dom Acharya's and Dom Bede's habits. It is not exactly saffron, but ochre, and she was bare-footed. . . . Her English is not so good, but she manages to make herself understood. You will remember the pioneers wrote that she went to visit them at Museum Road a couple of years ago to tell them that she was the first Benedictine in India. She had read in some paper – possibly the *Examiner* – about the first Benedictines in India, and she wanted to correct the mistake. She is very happy at her ashram, she says, and is at present making experiments in Indianizing the Liturgy. She has her bishop's permission to live the way she does. She seems very sincere about what she is doing. . . .

I went downstairs to breakfast but, before I sat down to it, I made sure to put my name down in Fr. Thomas Merton's discussion group. At breakfast I was seated next to him. I told him I first knew of Benedictine life from Fr. Raymond's book, *The Family that Overtook Christ*. He said Fr. Raymond was still at Gethsemani and that he was getting old – about 65 he said. Many boys from India write to Gethsemani after reading about Trappists, but up to now no one has entered. "Perhaps," he said, "it is too far."

Fr. Amyot, SJ, Professor at Bangkok, gave us tons of information on Buddhism. He spoke English so distinctly. Everyone enjoyed his conference immensely. The next talk was on Marxism and monastic perspectives, by the famous Thomas Merton. The TV cameras were all around him the whole time. There was a large audience as many nuns and laypeople from Thailand attended. He was the great attraction at the Congress. Someone wanted him to sign one of his books, and he said: "Don't worry . . . we have time till Sunday." After Mass, Notre Mère had a photograph taken of him with some Cistercians. I was looking forward to the discussion group meeting at 4:30.

After my siesta I dressed and was going to the lounge on the third floor where our group was to meet. It was just 4:30, so I was hurrying up the steps when one of the Filipino nuns on the first floor landing called out to me and said what I thought was: "Where are you going? Thomas Merton is there." "Oh . . . he is already there? I must hurry!" "Not *there*,"

she said, “*dead* – I said Thomas Merton is dead.” I was so stunned I just stood and looked at her stupidly. “He can’t be dead; he must be at the meeting.” “No,” she said, “he is dead. Quite dead. He died two hours ago. The fan fell on him.” I went downstairs, and one look at all the stricken faces told me it was true.

Sr. Beda Kim, a Korean nun, took my arm and said, “Come, let us go and see him. I can’t wait.” So we walked towards Bungalow 11. All the while I was thinking, “He can’t be dead. . . . There must be a mistake. . . . He must have fainted and they will revive him.” Sr. Beda said that her Prioress, Mother Edeltrud, was a doctor and she was with him. Then near the pavilion we saw a group standing and we joined them. The Father who shared the bungalow with Fr. Merton was telling them all about it. He said that after dinner Thomas Merton asked for the keys of the house as he was tired and wanted a siesta. The Father went to the house a little later and was going for a shower when Dom de Grunne came to his room and said, “Are you all right? I thought I heard a shout.” “Oh, I am all right,” he said, “I am just going to the shower.” “I wonder if it was Merton,” Father de Grunne said, “but his door is locked.” After two hours he came to him and said, “I feel uneasy, let us try Merton’s room again.” The door was locked, so they tried the window. They looked in and saw Merton on the floor with the electric fan over him. It was the large pedestal electric fan. They jumped in through the window and they saw that the fan had burnt the side of his body and the sparks were still alive. He was dead. The officials of the A.I.M. were informed and they called up the Police. Abbot Primate contacted the American Embassy and Gethsemani Abbey. The body was not touched until the police arrived. Then they dressed him. Either he had tried to put the fan on and he had got a shock and fallen with the fan on him, or he had a heart failure and had caught the fan to support him, and it had fallen on him. We will only know in Heaven what really happened.

At 5:30 we had a prayer service for the repose of his soul. Fr. Abbot de Floris said a few words. He was too choked to speak, but he said the congress would have to go on as there was still much to be done, and the work that was begun must continue. Though we were all brokenhearted we went to the meeting after supper. Fr. Amyot came to it as he promised, and we asked him several questions on Buddhism and its effects on the life of the common people.

After the meeting we went to Bungalow 11 to see the mortal remains of Thomas Merton. He was lying on the bed covered with a white sheet, except for his face, which had become very dark – almost black – but his features were not changed. We could recognize the same Thomas Merton. There were monks of every nationality around him saying the psalter. Each monk said one psalm and then passed the breviary to the next one. It was 10:30 and the American Embassy were to come some time in the night for his body. Notre Mère and I stayed praying beside him until 11 o’clock. It was hot in the room and the electric fan stood in the corner, circulating hot air. I asked Fr. de Floris about putting some ice under the bed because I know that a corpse cannot stand the ravages of death for more than 24 hours in a hot climate. He said the Embassy was expected any moment and then the

body would be embalmed – or cremated.

Twelve hours ago he was the centre of all attraction and the whole world wanted him. Twelve hours from now, even those who loved him dearly could not go near him. Death teaches so many lessons. I went to bed but I could not sleep, so I prayed for his soul.

The next morning we heard that he was taken to the Embassy at 1:30 a.m., that Gethsemani had been informed and they wanted the body to be buried in America, so it had been embalmed and was to have been flown on Saturday to America by one of the army planes from Vietnam. That was the last we heard about it. Abbot Primate and the Americans went to town for a Service of the Dead for the benefit of Americans in Thailand.

Wednesday 11th December

At 10 a.m. was the Eucharistic Celebration for the soul of Father Thomas Merton. At the Gospel, Abbot Primate read St. John, Ch.6:22-70. He then gave a short discourse. He said: “St. Benedict in his Rule asks that the sign of a true vocation be the seeking of God. All his life, Thomas Merton searched for God, and he shared his experiences with others through the books he wrote. His life in *Seven Storey Mountain* shows how much he struggled in his search for God. We must humbly admit that we can only find God in death. Thomas Merton is now a true monk. He has found God and will possess Him for all eternity. His search for God took him to India, which he visited just before the Congress, and it brought him to Thailand where he, at last, found Him. He loved silence and he sought it in strange ways. To be alone with God was what he wanted. Christ has said: ‘I am the living bread.’ The Jews found His words hard, but we must take Him at His Word, no matter how hard it is. We must be humble like Peter, and say: ‘Lord, You have the words of life; to whom shall we go?’ God can only be truly found in death. Let us rejoice that our brother has found God and strive to seek Him until we reach Him.”