

## Beyond Bangkok:

### A Pilgrimage to Rawasengeng

By **Tim McHargue**

*Journal Entry: December, 1995 – Santa Maria Monastery, Rawasengeng, Java. Javanese angels float in evening's golden light at the feet of Holy Mary, who extends her blessing to the chapel. The voices of the monks swirl in lilting harmony around the wooden chapel and drift towards the heavens. Their song is held on the breath, and their very breath becomes a soothing prayer which wraps us all in a warm blanket of love for the Creator.*

*The singing crosses back and forth between the cowled and robed monks, creating a sense of calm and quiet joy, a deep appreciation for the mystery of creation. The songlines of the hymns, sung in the lyrical language of Indonesian, weave this beautiful and comforting blanket. We are crosstread together.*

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The path that led me to Indonesia was unexpected and serendipitous, a sudden current shift in the river of life. My journey to the island of Java was not slated on a five-year plan, or an itinerary put together by a travel agent.

It was, however, part of the process of opening up my life to unexpected occurrences, and "the sense of the unfolding of mystery in time," in the words of Thomas Merton. Several months after my arrival in Java to assume a counseling position at an international school I again had such an experience. Reading a volume of




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**Tim McHargue with  
Sr. Margarethe and Fr. Albert Martomo,  
O.C.S.O.**

Rini. I immediately wrote to Santa Maria and requested permission to visit on December 17.

I waited two weeks and did not receive an answer. Knowing the infamous Indonesian mail system, I assumed my request might have been temporarily lost in Mail Limbo, or worse, perhaps permanently banished to Mail Hell. I decided not to be deterred, to head out anyway and take my chances. I visited Paulo again for specific directions.

“You can go by bus and train. Take the train from Jakarta to Yogya. Then catch a bus to Temanggung. Then you hire a motorcycle taxi to take you another 20 kilometers to Rawasengeng,” Paulo directed. Seemed easily enough accomplished and I began preparing for my excursion.

The train left Jakarta at 7:45 p.m. It would be a 10-hour trip to Yogya, in Central Java. As the train pulled away from Indonesia’s capital I watched the sprawling mass of the city of twelve million roll away for nearly one hour. Then the terrain became lush and green and we were in rice farming land and later, jungle.

I imagined Merton riding in a similar train, had fate permitted, enjoying the strange sights and sounds of Indonesia and making notations in his journal as inspiration struck. He would have been happy to see the rural landscape replace the chaos of Jakarta and the quiet train ride would have offered some serenity. When darkness enveloped the island, I fell asleep and then woke at the first light to the lovely verdant landscape of Central Java.

Yogyakarta is referred to as the cultural capital of Java. Dance, theater, art, crafts and universities ring this city, far from the commerce and politics of Jakarta. It is a place Merton would have had a kinship with, perhaps with the dissident poets and academics of Yogya who are continually at odds with the dictatorship, and often in prison. Merton may even have sought out these artists, marginal men and women in a culture which restricts expression.

Arriving at the Yogya train station, I debated the wisdom of a long bus and motorcycle ride to the monastery. Public transport would get me there, but it would most certainly take the better part of the day. Still deliberating, I exited the train station and was quickly approached by a man who asked where I was headed and if I needed a ride. I told him my destination and he consulted another man and then offered what he said would be two-hour ride to the monastery, by private vehicle.

“Berapanya (How much)?” I asked and he quoted me a price that sounded reasonable in lieu of a day’s trip otherwise. I accepted the offer of transport and relaxed knowing I had a guide.

The car ride to Temanggung was a gorgeous ascent from lowlands to highlands. Small villages lined the roadside, the symmetry of rice fields stretched out from the villages and the jungle became dense as it climbed the distant hillside. I eyed in awe and fear the majestic Mt. Merapi, a volcano which had been active enough to cause evacuations in the last year or two. A plume of black smoke escaped from the jagged summit and drifted towards the heavens.

Merton's letters, I discovered that a visit to Indonesia, and the island of Java in particular, had provided an initial impetus for Thomas Merton's Asian journey.

Santa Maria Monastery, a Trappist monastery in Rawasengeng village in Central Java, was Merton's original destination in Asia. He had agreed to give a retreat in Rawasengeng, and this served as one principal motivation for Merton's overseas travels in 1968, a trip unfortunately short-circuited by his untimely death in Thailand.

"I'm off to . . . Indonesia and strange dances," Merton quipped in a letter just prior to his accidental death in Bangkok. "A whole new journey begins there," Merton also wrote in his *Asian Journal*, and in letters spoke of both meeting new people in Indonesia and the silence and retreat he hoped to find at the monastery in Rawasengeng during the Christmas season of 1968.

I found this small revelation fascinating, as Merton had been an important and influential mentor of mine since my teen years in the mid-sixties. The realization that I had landed in a place Merton intended to visit, but was unable to do so due to his premature departure, cast a new light on my own decision to accept employment on the island of Java.

I had arrived in Indonesia by accident, as my own life unfolded in a shroud of unknowing, inadvertently following in Merton's spiritual footsteps of three decades earlier, and continuing where his travel itinerary left off, with a similar spirit of optimism in the face of uncertainty about the future. The thought crossed my mind that perhaps I was led there to complete his journey. Whether this was divine guidance or not, I decided that a visit to Santa Maria Monastery at Rawasengeng was in order, and I began my quest to follow in Merton's spiritual footsteps. A trip to the Trappist monastery would also be a long overdue opportunity for reflection and renewal before moving back to the States, after three busy years in Jakarta.

Locating the whereabouts of the monastery at Rawasengeng was the first task. I asked several expatriate educators with whom I worked about the monastery's whereabouts. None had ever heard of such a place. Next I turned to the Indonesian school secretaries, always an excellent source of information when I was confused or clueless, as I often was. I first asked Fardia, a devout Moslem (as is eighty per cent of Java). Fardia did not know of the Trappist monastery but suggested I ask Rini, the principal's secretary, reminding me that Rini was a Catholic.

"Oh yes, Rawasengeng. It's a famous place in Java, near Yogyakarta. You must talk to Paulo in the Business Office," Rini said. "Paulo will know about Rawasengeng." I hunted down Paulo, a polite and soft-spoken man in the school's Purchasing Department. Sure enough, Paulo knew of the monastery. Not only did he know of Rawasengeng, but he had been there several times.

"The Trappist monastery of Santa Maria is a special place in all of Indonesia," Paulo said. "It is peaceful and very beautiful." He added that he had stayed there last year during Christmas.

Paulo said he would get me the address, and it arrived at my desk the next day, via

I was nervous about visiting the monastery. Arriving without notice, I was American and I was invading a cloistered enclave unannounced. My anxious imagination invoked worst-case scenarios as the driver wined his way up increasingly narrow roads. He stopped several times to ask directions, and each time the villagers indicated still more distance to cover. We wound through Temanggung, a small town, and continued towards Rawasengeng.

The vehicle climbed higher and higher into the mountains, and the roads became narrower and the villages smaller and smaller. Eventually we entered the tiny town of Rawasengeng, and almost two hours out of Yogya I spied a sign that said "Pertapaan Santa Maria." I paid my driver and he asked if he could transport me back to Yogya. We made arrangements for him to return in two days, and parted company.

I walked slowly onto the monastery grounds. The first L-shaped building looked like a school, with a wing of rooms off to my right, an office wing to the left and a large plant-filled fish pond at the corner. The view of surrounding mountains was delightful and the cooler, fresh air was a welcomed relief from the hot and humid lowlands. I approached the office, and a monk at the desk surprised me when he said in English he was expecting me. He asked me to wait.

Soon another monk appeared and introduced himself to me as Fr. Albert Martomo, speaking in perfect English. "I received your letter and I'm delighted you were able to visit." My anxiety dropped several notches as I realized I was indeed expected and even welcome. I had arrived two days later than my initial request, and, as fate would have it, this was exactly the day suggested by Fr. Albert in a letter he sent but I had yet to receive.

Fr. Al, as he preferred to be called, showed me to my room, gave me a schedule of monastery meals and church services, and then left me to settle in. The small room, simple



Monastery Chapel

but comfortable, had a desk, good lighting and a window view of lush greenery with mountains in the distance; everything a writer might need. I showered, changed into clothes for the cooler climate, and then relaxed.

At mealtime I found the dining room and snacked with a few other retreatants on an ample Indonesian lunch of rice, soup, catfish, fried bananas and coffee, grown and roasted at the monastery. I attended several services that day in the simple but beautiful wooden monastery chapel and listened in awe as the monks sang the Gregorian Chants in exquisite Indonesian.

Later that day Fr. Al and I toured the monastery grounds, viewing the farming operations and extensive surrounding nature areas. I was astounded to discover that he had lived for two years in the Trappist monastery at Vina, two hours away from my hometown in northern California. I also found Fr. Al shared an interest in my line of work, counseling, and that he himself had been pursuing a vocation in healing and counseling.

Santa Maria, Fr. Al explained, was founded by Dutch Trappists in the mid-forties. The original Dutch fathers have all passed away, now buried in the monastery cemetery. There are currently forty Indonesian members of the community, including several who have gone off to open a community on a neighboring Indonesian island. Santa Maria has an impressive farming operation, producing milk, cheese, and coffee. Merton might have appreciated that the local economy allows the monastery to hire villagers to do most of the work around the farm, leaving the monks to pursue other interests.

At the evening meal I met another monk, Fr. Suitbertus, who had resided at Santa Maria for 40 years. I told him of my interest in Merton and he remarked that Merton's *Seven Storey Mountain* was one of three books which had influenced his decision to enter the monastery. The other authors were Leon Bloy and a European Trappist whose name I didn't recognize.

Also in temporary residence at Santa Maria was an older and lively Indonesian nun from Jakarta, Sr. Margarethe. She had visited Santa Maria many times, working on a Master's thesis about the environmental practices of the monks at the monastery. She too spoke fluent English, and took it upon herself to educate me as to the rituals and routines of the monastery, for which I was thankful.

Not quite sure what to do with my interest in Merton, I asked to borrow his books from the monastery library. The collection contained about thirty titles, some in foreign translations. I wondered as I read whether Merton might have sent copies and inscribed a message on any of the books, but that was not the case of the twelve or so I perused.

Several people mentioned to me that one monk had a special interest in Merton and his writing. He was the oldest member of the community, and had been ill. I saw him walk by on the path above me on my second day and we said hello.

"You're interested in Thomas Merton?" I asked.

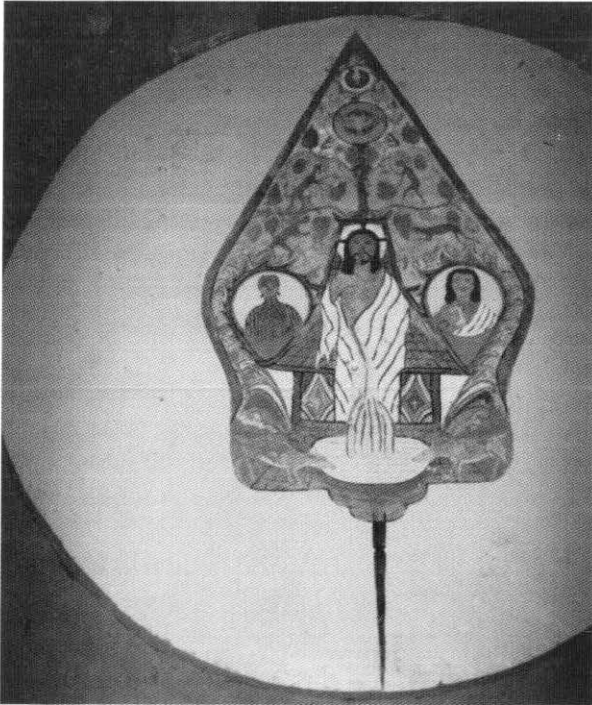
"Oh, Thomas Merton! Wonderful man, wonderful man," he said warmly, but kept walking. That was it. There is not much else to say, I suppose. I was not going to obtain

any morsels of information regarding Merton from this monk. This Zen-like encounter seemed appropriately Asian, and ended the fact-finding portion of my mission.

So be it. My purpose for being at Santa Maria, really, was to contemplate my own relationship with the divine, and reflect on the past and think about the future as I prepared for the next chapter in my own life. I read, I wrote, I reflected on the glory of the universe in chapel, celebrated in song with the monks, and I broke bread, or rice actually, in communion with my companions at meal time.

I realized that the mystery of Merton's journey was less an issue for me than my own, which is, in fact, the universal mystery of existence, the unraveling of which is our own reason for being.

Merton's words and deeds had drawn me, by chance and circumstance, to Rawasengeng, this remote spot in Central Java, to celebrate that mystery with the monks of Santa Maria, and for this inspiration I remain grateful.



Indonesian "Tree of Life" symbol  
from Monastery Chapel

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*Journal Entry: December, 1995 – Santa Maria Monastery, Rawasengeng, Java. A second day of peace and quiet here at Pertapaan Santa Maria. What a calming life: prayer, work, sleep and song. “A humble existence,” Sr. Margarethe termed it, and indeed it is. I just chatted with Fr. Suitbertus, who joined this monastery forty years ago. Imagine. I wanted to ask whether he ever has the desire to go on a “walk-about,” a spirit-quest away from Rawasengeng.*

*The obvious answer is that he has been on a quest the duration of his forty years here. I envision myself waking up one day and saying, “Okay, now for something completely different, I will just trash all my routines for the day and go hang out at the drug store and read comics, in Yogya.”*

*No, I don't suppose that would be any good. In fact, this puts to mind the Merton piece I perused this morning, from Disputed Questions, in which he laments the fact that many of us are driven to distractions endlessly. I certainly fit into this category, and I sense it is time to settle in, and settle down, and search for the center. Where this will be done, and with whom, remains a mystery to me. But, as Einstein hinted, the most beautiful things in life are such.*

*And so be it. No fear in the face of uncertainty. I will return to the U.S. with a sense of purpose, a deep well of experience, and the assurance that God's Will will be done. Selamat jalang, Rawasengeng.*