

## Touched by Fire

*Homily of Fr. Matthew Kelty, OCSO  
for the Thomas Merton Memorial Mass  
at the Cathedral of the Assumption,  
Louisville, Kentucky  
Dec. 10, 1998*

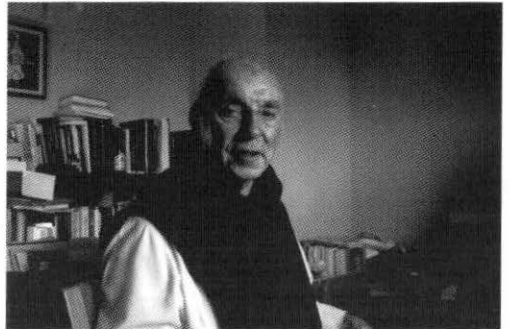
*"I am come to cast fire on the earth,  
and how I wish it were already  
kindled" (Luke 12:49).*

It was Tuesday, the second week of Advent, and we were at dinner, at noon, that is, eating our beans and rice, lettuce salad, preceded by pea soup and followed by an apple for desert. The reader that week was Father Timothy Kelly, and the book was the life of Teilhard de Chardin. It was the tenth of December. The abbot was Father Flavian Bums. At the end of the meal instead of ringing the bell – so we knew something was up – he went to the reader's desk, signed him to stop, picked up the microphone, and said: "Brothers, I have sad news for you. Fr. Louis died in Bangkok. That is all I know. I'll let you know more when I learn it."

He then said the closing meal prayers and life went on as usual. And forever different.

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As you may know, there is currently a phenomenal growth in church building, last year more than in any year in the last three decades – mostly in the south and southwest. One major project: a new cathedral in Los Angeles. Not all is happiness, however. One contractor, after handling a four-year parish renovation, vowed he'd never do a church again. The plans were changed more often than the wind, he said. His architects warned him: never again. Monks were like that. And they love to build. The library building, once the brothers' novitiate, began as a shops building. Plans were changed seven times, the brothers said. Even one novice, an architect, had a hand: he suggested the third-floor balcony with the ten arches. The retreat house fared no better. So when it came to the church, the brother in charge thought having an architect would avoid a disastrous committee production. And




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**Matthew Kelty, OCSO** entered Gethsemani as a Divine Word priest who had served as a missionary in Papua New Guinea. Thomas Merton was his novice master. Fr. Kelty is the author of *Flute Song*, *Sermons from a Monastery* and other works.

**Matthew Kelty, OCSO**

he so convinced the abbot.

The plans were submitted, lots of discussion, final agreement. Finished. No more input. But toward the end of the project, the monks did a monk thing, a human thing, suggested a change. An ugly scene resulted – at which point I happened to see Fr. Louis and mentioned to him: “Well, they’ve turned against Mr. Schickel.” At once he turned in his swivel chair, took a slip of paper, put it into his Underwood and wrote a note of thanks and commendation for his work. “Here,” he said, “Give this to him.” It was not that he liked the church – a matter of opinion – no. But he did not like dirty pool.

Instant assessment of a situation. Instant response. Total indifference to the consequences – what others might think.

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On a more serious level, Maximilian Kolbe in a concentration camp lined up with the others while the officer sent every tenth one to the starvation block in reprisal for escaped prisoners. As he came down the line the choice fell on one who screamed in panic that he had a wife and children. At once Maximilian Kolbe spoke up: “Kommandant! Lass mir seinen platz nehmen!” – “Wenn sie wünschen!” [“Let me take his place!” – “If you wish.”]

Had you been there, had I been there, we might have had a similar thought. “But I am a priest and they need me. Maybe I would break down and go to pieces. Anyway, I’m a monk and should ask the abbot first.” By then, of course, it is too late and the opportunity gone.

Instant grasp of the situation.

Instant response.

Total indifference to the consequences.

Kolbe was not canonized for that act. That’s what he did all the time. He lived that way. His last act was typical, not exceptional. It is sanctity of high order.

I dare say Merton lived the same way. As delicate as a wind chime to any breath of the Spirit.

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You can get burned that way, of course. It can be humbling, humiliating, difficult. And in serious matters submitted to an abbot who may or may not assent to what the Spirit seems to be telling you.

True love in depth means death to the ego, means the emergence of a person possessed by God, an instrument of God. Here we have the genesis of the saint. It is not easy.

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A man named Hal Edwards, a retired executive on the north shore of Chicago, fosters small prayer groups throughout the area. A Protestant, he was familiar with Merton’s work, but no great fan or disciple. Digging a posthole in his back yard with a rented power tool, he struck and broke a 7,000 volt cable that fed the whole of Northbrook. The strike caused a great noise and a cloud of smoke, in the midst of which he had a clear moment of vision of Thomas Merton dead of electrocution.

When the power people arrived they could not believe he was still alive. “You’re the third one this week: one is dead, one is dying in a hospital. You have no business being alive.” “You a Catholic?” “Yes.” “Well, I should tell you – I had a clear vision of Thomas Merton, the monk, when it happened.” “Well, you’d better get to your knees and thank

Thomas Merton that you're alive. And go see a doctor and get checked out." In Hal Edwards' eyes, we deal with a miracle. He later came for the first time to the abbey and thanked Fr. Louis.

So Merton is patron of all who work with dangerous power lines? Maybe. Better say, he is patron of all who would dearly love God, who would go deep to search for His light and beauty, who would do His Will, whatever and whenever. In such an enterprise Merton is our friend and advocate. And protector. And guide.

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For, getting close to God is to get close to fire. And fire can burn. It is not that only those who love God are touched by fire, for all are, sooner or later. But one who would love God deeply and be totally given to Him, in perfect response to His love, is called to recognize whence comes the fire that makes love "a harsh and bitter thing" (Dostoevsky).

It is not that Merton suffered more than most, so much as that he loved more, and more deeply. Therefore his engagement with God was more profound, his commitment more total, his abandonment more complete. In such a life the relation to God is superbly intimate, and no mortal living with such love can escape being burned. He was thus a perfect vehicle for God's work in the world: pure, empty, clean of self, and thus the medium of great good, then and still. The best way to honor him is to endeavor to follow him in love. He wrote well of himself in Robert Giroux's best seller:

But you shall taste the true solitude of My anguish and My poverty and I shall lead you into the high places of My joy and you shall die in Me and find all things in My mercy which has created you for this end, and brought you from Prades to Bermuda to St. Antonin to Oakham to London to Cambridge to Rome to New York to Columbia to Corpus Christi and St. Bonaventure to the Cistercian abbey of the poor men who labor in Gethsemani: that you may become the brother of God and learn to know the Christ of the burnt men. *Sit finis libri, non finis quaerendi* (*The Seven Storey Mountain*).

End of the book, and long later, end of the search. God bless him. Praise God. Amen.