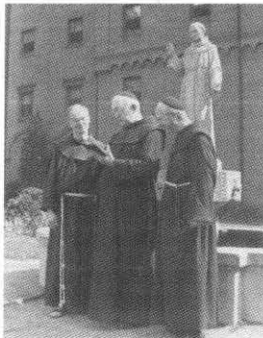


## **"Tom's Guardian Angels": Merton's Franciscan Mentors**

By **Thomas T. Spencer**

Thomas Merton's years at St. Bonaventure University (1940-1941) have been well documented by both Merton and his biographers.<sup>1</sup> Referring to the University cloistered in the Allegheny Mountains, Merton called his experience at St. Bonaventure "a providential step along the road of my vocation" and "one of the happiest periods of my life."<sup>2</sup> It was here as a young scholar and aspiring writer that Merton first established a contemplative lifestyle and deepened his commitment to pursue a religious vocation. The Bonaventure experience was critical in helping him formulate his decision to enter the Trappist Order at Gethsemani in December, 1941.

Merton came to St. Bonaventure to teach English, in the aftermath of the rejection of his application to join the Franciscan order. He was attracted to the Franciscans by their freedom from spiritual restraints and routines. He believed that the spirit and inspiration of St. Francis were still present in the Franciscan way of life and exhibited in the informal and happy atmosphere at St. Bonaventure. Merton was impressed by the true heart of the Franciscan vocation, which he described as "tremendous and heroic poverty, poverty of body and spirit" (*SSM* 255). Years later he noted, "I will always feel I am in some secret way a son of St. Francis." He considered St. Francis his favorite Saint, next to Our Lady (Merton to Bannon).

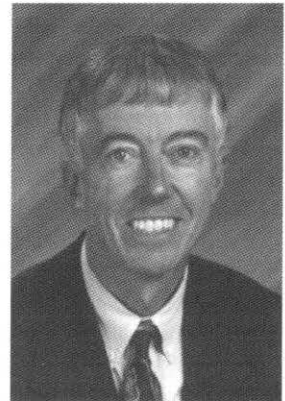


L.-r.: Frs. Irenaeus Herscher, OFM, Thomas Plassman, OFM, Philotheus Boehner, OFM.

Critical to Merton's journey to find his true vocation were three Franciscan priests, all members of the Order of Friars Minor, who became friends and mentors. Thomas Plassman, Philotheus Boehner, and Irenaeus Herscher were especially instrumental in providing the young Merton spiritual direction and support. Bob Lax, Merton's lifelong close friend, describes them as part of "Tom's guardian angels at Bona's."<sup>3</sup> Although there were many individuals who befriended Merton at St. Bonaventure, these three men helped shape his spiritual vocation in a special way. It is not difficult to understand Merton's admiration and affection for these men. All were scholars in their respective disciplines, and Plassman and Boehner especially renowned in their fields. Most importantly, all three exhibited a spiritual simplicity that he admired and aspired to achieve. Kind, charitable, and personable, they were ideal role models for the young Merton on his journey to Gethsemani.

Thomas Plassman was sixty years old and President of St. Bonaventure when Merton arrived to interview with him for a teaching position in the late summer of 1940. Born in Avenwedde, Westphalia,

Thomas Plassman was sixty years old and President of St. Bonaventure when Merton arrived to interview with him for a teaching position in the late summer of 1940. Born in Avenwedde, Westphalia,



**Thomas T. Spencer**

---

**Thomas T. Spencer** is a graduate of St. Bonaventure University and the University of Notre Dame. He is a teacher in the South Bend, IN Community School Corporation and an adjunct Assistant Professor of History at Indiana University, South Bend.

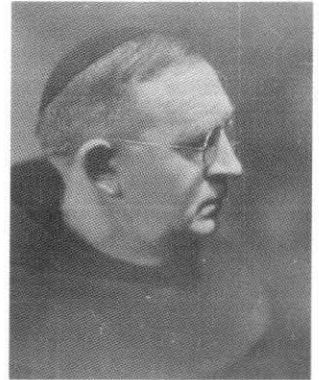
Germany, and ordained into the Order of Friars Minor in 1906, Plassman received his B.A. and M.A. from Quincy College and Ph.D. from Catholic University in 1913. His academic reputation as a Biblical scholar and an authority on Sacred Scripture and dogmatic theology was such that in 1931, the Franciscan Order conferred upon him the title of *Lector Generalis* of Sacred Scripture, and in 1953, he was named *Lector Jubilatus*. He founded the Franciscan Educational Conference in 1919, and he later initiated the founding of the Franciscan Institute at St. Bonaventure. In addition to teaching and scholarship, he had served as President of the college since 1920.<sup>4</sup>

Merton's relationship with Plassman bordered on "veneration" (Mott 158). Part of Merton's admiration for Father Thomas resulted from his stature as a scholar, something Merton appreciated given his own penchant for writing. Despite his many administrative duties, Plassman's scholarly publications were significant. He published his doctoral thesis *The Signification of "Beraka"*, in addition to other academic works on *The Study of the Root d-b-r*, *Baronius Anglicus* and numerous articles for scholarly journals in Biblical studies, theology, and related fields. He also served as president or officer of the Catholic Historical Association, the National Catholic Education Association, and the Catholic Biblical Association.

At one meeting Merton found Plassman pondering over galley revisions of his English translation of the Bible, causing Merton to reflect upon him as a man of "immense knowledge and immense memory" (RM 304, 481). But even more vital to Merton was his spirituality. Described by his colleagues and contemporaries as a "priest's priest," due to his piety, deep commitment to spiritual values and to his work with novices and young priests, Plassman exhibited a calmness which conveyed the sense of a man at peace with himself (see SSM 297, RM 481). Many of his publications later in his career, such as *The Book Called Holy*, *The Priest's Way to God*, and *From Sunday to Sunday*, were more of a spiritual nature and directed toward the education of priests. The last two years of his life were spent as rector of Christ the King Seminary at St. Bonaventure.

It was this quiet simplicity and sense of inner peace that Merton most admired, for it was essentially what he was hoping to find in himself. In one lengthy entry in his journal Merton described him as "a man of the most immense and unshakeable calm I ever saw." Beneath this is this "tremendous simplicity and pleasant humor," and a perfect "friendliness"; Merton added, "here is a man who loves all men as himself" (RM 304, 481). In his autobiography he further described Plassman, portraying his face as the "picture of benevolence," and "set for smiles paternal enough to embrace an archdiocese" (SSM 297).

Merton would remain forever grateful to Father Thomas and years later he would refer to him as "a great good friend" (Merton to Bannon). At a time when he was struggling to find his true vocation, Plassman provided the opportunity for Merton to come to St. Bonaventure, and in the words of Bob Lax, "let him know that he'd have a home at Bona's for as long as he liked" (Lax to Spencer). In the spring of 1941, Plassman also supported his application to become a conscientious objector, and when Merton left for Gethsemani in December of that year he took with him a strong letter of recommendation from Plassman to the Abbot. Merton would always be indebted to him, not just for the favors and assistance, but for the support he offered and the example he set. It is not surprising that Merton referred to the gentle college President as truly one person he could honestly "revere" (see

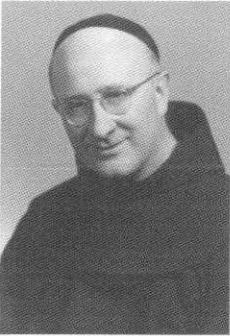


Fr. Thomas

RM 317, Mott 201).

While Plassman mentored by way of example and support, Philotheus Boehner served as a spiritual advisor and confidant. At 38, he was much younger than Plassman and it is evident from his many references to Father Philotheus in *The Seven Storey Mountain* and his journal that Merton related to him in a much less formal way than he did to the elderly college president. Moreover, his reputation as a scholar both in the fields of biology and philosophy made him somewhat of a “Renaissance man,” something Merton found admirable.

A native of Germany, Boehner was born in 1901 and ordained in the Franciscan Order in 1927. At the time of his ordination he was ill with tuberculosis, but he used his recovery period to delve into



Fr. Philotheus

medieval studies. While recuperating, he translated E. Gilson’s work on Saint Bonaventure and eventually published the translation under the title *Der heilige Bonaventura*.<sup>6</sup> Educated in German universities, Boehner received his Ph.D. in biology in 1933 from the University of Münster. Although philosophy would be his principal area of scholarship in years to come, he maintained a life-long interest in the sciences. While at St. Bonaventure he lectured in the field of Botany and pursued research in the field, becoming a well-known authority in bryology, the study of mosses. Merton described him as a “true scientist” and recounted how one day he was driving with him on a back road near the campus and Fr. Philotheus was able to spot a rare moss on a tree some distance away. On one of his moss-finding expeditions he got lost and ended up wandering all night alone in a cranberry bog!<sup>7</sup> Many of his research findings on mosses would later be

published in St. Bonaventure’s *Science Studies*.

As gifted as he was as a botanist, it was the field of philosophy in which he gained the most noted scholarly recognition. Following the completion of his doctorate he served as lector of Philosophy for the Holy Cross Province in Germany. He translated two additional works by Gilson, under the title of *Der heilige Augustin* and *Die Mystik des heiligen Bernhard von Clairvaux*. The translations established a friendship between Boehner and Gilson and resulted in the collaborative work, *Die geschichte der christlichen Philosophie*, published in 1937, with subsequent later editions. In 1939, at the invitation of Gilson, Boehner lectured in paleography at the Pontifical Institute in Toronto. The outbreak of war between Great Britain and Germany in that year made Boehner’s residence in Canada tenuous due to his German heritage. Advised by friends to leave Canada, he accepted an invitation from Fr. Plassman to come to St. Bonaventure to lecture in Franciscan philosophy. Boehner quickly established a reputation as a popular lecturer in logic, epistemology and the philosophies of St. Augustine, St. Bonaventure and William of Ockham.

Boehner’s most notable scholarly achievements are associated with Ockham, a fourteenth-century Franciscan philosopher, writer, and student of Duns Scotus. Ockham was a controversial figure in his time whose ideas and attitude of protest led him to be classified as a proto-Protestant by many of his critics. Ockham fell into disfavor with the Church for denying the temporal power of the papacy and promoting secular absolutism. At one point he received a citation before the Pontifical Court. His complex philosophical views tended toward nominalism and a reform of scholasticism.<sup>8</sup> Boehner soon became one of the leading authorities in America on Ockham. His translation and editing of Ockham’s philosophical writings remains a standard work in the field. Shortly before his death he collaborated with Ernest Moody on the publication of Ockham’s *Opera Omnia Philosophica et Theologica* (the non-political *Opera*).

Boehner introduced Merton to Ockham as well as the teachings of St. Bonaventure and Duns Scotus and helped provide an intellectual base for Merton's evolving spirituality. Merton noted he would always be thankful for the love for St. Bonaventure and Duns Scotus that "he communicated to me," but added somewhat humorously perhaps that "I cannot say that he made me love [Ockham] because he never made me understand him" (Merton to Plassman).

Merton did embrace the writing of Gabriel Marcel more enthusiastically. It was Philotheus who introduced him as well to the French philosopher, recommending one day that he read what Marcel had to say on communication (*RM* 277). In 1958, when facing a personal crisis at Gethsemani he turned to Marcel's essay on "Obedience and Fidelity" for spiritual direction.<sup>9</sup> He also used the philosopher's ideas on personalism for his collection of essays published as *Seasons of Celebration*.<sup>10</sup>

In 1940, Fr. Philotheus, with Plassman's assistance and support, initiated a series of courses that led to the official beginnings of the Franciscan Institute at the college. He became its first director and served in that capacity until his death in 1955. Under his direction the Institute developed a world-wide reputation for scholarship and education. Not surprisingly, Merton was one of the first students in the early years of the Institute.

Throughout the remainder of his academic career Boehner continued an impressive record of scholarship. He published *Medieval Logic: An Outline of Its Development, 1250-1400* in 1952, as well as numerous articles in respected journals such as the *Review of Metaphysics*, *Franciscan Studies*, and *Rivista Filosofia*, and foreign academic journals such as *Bonifatius-Korrespondenz*, *Wissenschaft und Weisheit*, and *Archiv für Philosophie*. He also translated and provided commentary for Bonaventure's *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum* (*The Mind's Journey into God*).<sup>11</sup> In addition he helped make *Franciscan Studies* a more scholarly journal, increasing its reputation and influence.

Merton found Philotheus's sense of simplicity, like that of Father Thomas, worthy of emulation. Writing to Fr. Thomas following Boehner's death in the spring of 1955, Merton noted that "his unassuming simplicity covered what was a real and deep holiness. I am sure, like a true Franciscan, he was one who dared to be perfectly himself with Our Lord" (Merton to Plassman).

Merton never forgot the biggest assistance Philotheus provided and that was offering advice one night in late November, 1941, on whether he should try to enter Gethsemani. His account in *The Seven Storey Mountain* of seeking out Philotheus for advice after visiting the shrine of St. Thérèse is a well-known story (see *SSM* 358). Merton noted to Fr. Plassman, "he helped me to make a crucial decision in my life." He responded to Plassman's request that he offer Mass for his deceased friend by stating, "I shall certainly not fail him, if he needs my prayers" (Merton to Plassman).

It was a love and appreciation of books which first attracted Merton to Fr. Irenaeus Herscher. Merton first met Irenaeus when he and Box Lax came to the college library to borrow books in the summers before Merton officially joined the faculty. Irenaeus, head of the college library, willingly opened the stacks to the two young men and provided them unlimited access. Merton was impressed by "this happy little Franciscan," who, like Boehner and Plassman, conveyed the simplicity of the Franciscan spirit (*SSM* 235).

Irenaeus was not as well known in academic circles as Philotheus Boehner or Thomas Plassman, but he was nonetheless well educated and scholarly. A native of Haute-Alsace, France, Herscher immigrated to the United States at the age of eleven and in 1924, he joined the Franciscan Order and was ordained in 1931. He received a Bachelor of Arts degree (1929) and an M.A. degree (1930) from St. Bonaventure, and following this earned a Master's in library science at Columbia University. After a short stint as Assistant Master of Clerics at St. Stephen's Friary in Croghan, he returned to St.

Bonaventure to work in the college's Friedsam Memorial Library where he served as head librarian from 1937-1970.<sup>12</sup>

During his more than thirty years as librarian, Herscher established a reputation as a leading authority on Franciscan bibliography and Franciscan history, and was often referred to as the "chronista" of the University. He published numerous articles on Franciscan figures in journals such as *Franciscan Studies*, *Historical Records and Studies*, *Catholic School Journal*, *Library Journal*, *The Cord*, and the *American Catholic Historical Society Records*. His most important contribution, however, was his compilations of Franciscan bibliography, many of which were published in *Franciscan Studies*, and which would prove beneficial to scholars for years to come.

Merton's relationship with Irenaeus was slightly different from those he established with Boehner and Plassman. Where Plassman was a figure to be revered for all he represented and Philotheus was a spiritual and intellectual advisor, Irenaeus was simply a good friend he could talk to freely and more informally about anything from books to prayer. Irenaeus noted that Merton would often return from his legendary walks in the woods around the campus and seek him out. He was full of questions about spiritual matters. On one such occasion he and Irenaeus discussed the idea of a hermitage inspired in part by articles Merton had read in the Franciscan publication *Antonianum*.<sup>13</sup> Merton never forgot their conversation or the article. On New Year's Day 1966, after receiving permission to establish a hermitage at Gethsemani, he wrote Irenaeus asking for a copy of the article which dealt with guidelines and rules for the solitary life.<sup>14</sup>

Irenaeus also familiarized Merton with the life of St. Thérèse who would later become his patron saint.<sup>15</sup> He writes in his autobiography of his numerous visits to the shrine of St. Thérèse, located on the campus. It was here that he prayed the night he made his decision to go to Gethsemani (*SSM* 356). Irenaeus also taught Merton how to say the breviary, something he continued to do the rest of his life (*SSM* 297). His breviary was with him the day he died in Thailand.<sup>16</sup>

Of his three Franciscan mentors Merton kept in closest contact with Irenaeus in his years after leaving St. Bonaventure. Herscher visited him at Gethsemani on at least one occasion and he remained guardian over many of Merton's journals and papers that eventually ended up at St. Bonaventure. In the years following his entry into Gethsemani he would often request needed materials from Irenaeus for his writing projects, or send him items to add to the extensive Thomas Merton collection. On one occasion he asked Herscher to please edit out some lines on one particular entry for January 3, 1941 from his yet unpublished journal. He noted that "things written so long ago, and when I had so little wisdom, often call out loudly for a change here and there." Believing the remarks uncharitable, he asked Irenaeus to delete them, which Herscher did.<sup>17</sup>

Merton's numerous Christmas greetings and letters to Herscher from Gethsemani, some handwritten and others typed, reflect a genuine affection and friendship. Merton shared news about his latest writings and publications, inquired about the campus, and kept Irenaeus updated on his activities. He related his recent hospitalization in the summer of 1965, but allayed Irenaeus's fears by telling him he was "in good Franciscan hands," at St. Anthony's in Louisville. He noted that many felt he was trying to do too much and told Irenaeus that he would be attempting to cut down on the work in the near future – "but not completely of course." Although not as explicitly stated as his documented reverence and admiration for Thomas Plassman and Philotheus Boehner, Merton's appreciation for Irenaeus Herscher and the simple charity he conveyed, is evident in the tone of his



Fr. Irenaeus

letters.<sup>18</sup>

There were many individuals who helped shape Thomas Merton's pre-Trappist life, but few would do more to promote his spiritual development than these three Franciscan priests who befriended him during his brief tenure at St. Bonaventure. Each mentored in his own unique way, but all three shared the common traits of unbounded charity and a spiritual simplicity, which proved inspirational to the young Merton. As Bob Lax so well stated, they acted as unofficial "guardian angels," providing the necessary support and friendship at a crucial time in Merton's life. It was this support and friendship that helped shape Merton's understanding of his eventual vocation and what it meant to be a priest.

<sup>1</sup> The best beginning for any consideration of Merton's years at St. Bonaventure are his own writings. His autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948), and his journal, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation – The Journals of Thomas Merton. Vol. 1: 1939-1941* edited by Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995) are essential to any study of Merton and his life; subsequent references will be cited respectively as "SSM" and "RM" parenthetically in the text. The most definitive biography to date, Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), provides analysis of Merton's career at St. Bonaventure; subsequent references will be cited as "Mott" parenthetically in the text. Also of significance are Monica Furlong, *Merton: A Biography* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980); Thomas McDonnell, "Thomas Merton and the Franciscans," *The Cord* 6 (January 1956) 9-13; Anthony L. Bannon, "Merton: A Growing Legend at St. Bonaventure," *Magnificat* (11 March 1966) 3-4; Tess O'Brien, "Thomas Merton at St. Bona's" (Scranton, PA: Marywood College, no date); and Thomas T. Spencer, "Thomas Merton and St. Bonaventure University," *The Cord* 27 (April 1977) 100-106.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Merton to Anthony Bannon, February 12, 1966 (Merton Collection, St. Bonaventure University [SBU] Archives, St. Bonaventure, NY); subsequent references will be cited as "Merton to Bannon" parenthetically in the text.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Lax to Thomas T. Spencer, May 26, 1976. Lax Letters, SBU Archives; subsequent references will be cited as "Lax to Spencer" parenthetically in the text.

<sup>4</sup> See "Plassman" from "A Biographical Register of the Franciscan Institute," *Franciscan Studies* 51 (1991) 155-56.

<sup>5</sup> "To the Very Reverend Thomas Plassman, O.F.M.," *Franciscan Studies* 14 (1954) 1-2.

<sup>6</sup> See "Bochner" from a "A Biographical Register of the Franciscan Institute," *Franciscan Studies* 51 (1991) 101-105; also "In Memoriam: Philotheus Bochner, O.F.M., 1901-1955," *Franciscan Studies* 15 (1955) 101-105.

<sup>7</sup> Merton to Father Thomas [Plassman], May 31, 1955 (Letters to Merton Other Than Lax, SBU Archives); subsequent references will be cited as "Merton to Plassman" parenthetically in the text.

<sup>8</sup> There are numerous works on Ockham in addition to those translated and edited by Philotheus Boehner. See, for example, Marilyn McCord Adams, *William Ockham*. 2 Vols. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), and Arthur S. McGrade, *The Political Thought of William of Ockham: Personal and Institutional Principles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974).

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Merton, *A Search For Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life – The Journals of Thomas Merton. Vol. 3: 1952-1960* edited by Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 179.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Merton, *Seasons of Celebration* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1965).

<sup>11</sup> *Saint Bonaventure's Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, with an Introduction, Translation and Commentary by Philotheus Boehner, O.F.M., *Works of Bonaventure*, vol. 2 (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 1956).

<sup>12</sup> "Fr. Irenaeus Herscher," *Provincial Annals*, 32 (1983) 237-39; Thomas T. Spencer, "Irenaeus Herscher, O.F.M.: An Appreciation," *The Cord* 33 (February 1983) 34-38.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Rev. Irenaeus Herscher, O.F.M., March 17, 1976, St. Bonaventure University Friary, St. Bonaventure, New York; the date of one of two articles from the *Antonianum* requested by Merton was Vol. 9 (1934).

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Merton to Irenaeus Herscher, January 1, 1966 (Merton Collection, SBU Archives); see Merton's article, "Franciscan Eremitism," which first appeared in *The Cord* (December 1966) and was reprinted in *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) 260-68.

<sup>15</sup> Irenaeus Herscher, O.F.M., "I Introduced Tom to St. Thérèse," *St. Anthony's Messenger*, December, 1978.

<sup>16</sup> Lawrence Cunningham in his biography, *Thomas Merton & the Monastic Vision* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 182, notes that Merton's breviary, with a card containing a favorite Greek passage, was one of the items returned to the monastery from Bangkok after his death.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Merton to Irenaeus Herscher, May 4, 1958 (Merton Collection, SBU Archives).

<sup>18</sup> In addition to the other Merton-Herscher letters previously cited, see Thomas Merton to Irenaeus Herscher, December 17, 1952, February 12, 1958, May 4, 1958, August 24, 1964, August 9, 1965, September 7, 1965 (Merton Collection, SBU Archives).