

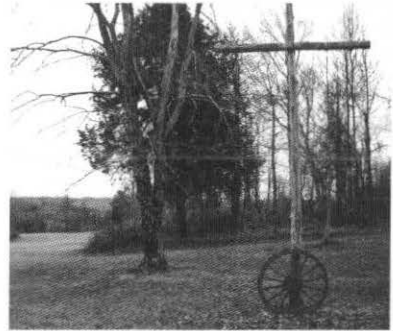
Reinventing the Wheel: Thomas Merton and the Christ of the Cross

By John Staggs

On February 24, 1965, Thomas Merton wrote in his journal that he was living in the shadow of a big cedar cross.¹ He was referring to his hermitage, where he had placed a tall cedar cross with a wagon wheel at its base. In a July 1993 interview with the late Dr. Robert Daggy, former Director of the Thomas Merton Center in Louisville, Kentucky, I asked him about the significance of the cross and wheel at the hermitage. He told me that Father Louis had placed the wagon wheel at the foot of the cross as a symbol of our finding union with God through the Christ of the cross. The wagon wheel itself is a symbol of this unity.

Thomas Merton had a remarkable ability to articulate something of his Christian contemplative vision in such a personal way as to allow the reader to identify easily with him and his search for meaning in life. Through his books, letters, journals, prayers, articles and lectures, Merton has led countless numbers of people to a saving knowledge and experience of the Christ of the cross. Like Merton, I too am on a quest for self-understanding. I agree with Merton that the key to self-understanding is discovered and experienced in spiritual union with the Christ of the cross through faith.

Through his monastic evangelism Merton has touched my life personally. When my daughter was eleven years old, she was diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor, medullablastoma. On four different occasions I signed for her to go into surgery. She did not speak for over a month as she thrashed in bed day and night. I had to ask her to stick out her tongue when she was in pain as this was the only form of communication she was able to use. During this same time period, the church I had been appointed to pastor had decided to relocate. I was confronting catastrophic childhood disease and a major relocation and building program. I knew that the energy level and fortitude that both these issues demanded was more than I had. My conversion to Christ was at age thirteen and my call into the ministry came when I was a senior in college. I had believed my entire adult life, but I needed more of Christ, so I began to seek a deeper spiritual formation. I sought the help of Thomas Merton, especially his understanding of the Christ of the cross. Assistance from the Mertonian corpus has been immensely helpful to me in my spiritual



Cross and Wheel at Merton's Hermitage



Rev. John Staggs

journey with the Christ of the cross and as a minister, husband and father.

I had first become interested in Thomas Merton while attending Asbury Theological Seminary in Lexington, Kentucky. A retreat led by Dr. Reginald Johnson was my first experience with the Abbey of Gethsemani. Brother Raphael Prendergast was the first to take me to Merton's hermitage. On the porch of the hermitage, Brother Raphael talked about a conversation he had with Father Louis in 1968. Brother Raphael asked Merton if he would meet with the brothers to talk about contemplative prayer. Merton told him that he had something he needed to do first but when he was done he would discuss contemplative prayer with the brothers. As it turned out the "something" Merton needed to do was his trip to Asia. As I stood there on the front porch of the hermitage, I was struck by the simple way Merton had described his monumental trip to Asia.

I now make an annual pilgrimage to Gethsemani to lead prayer retreats. Each year the group dynamics change, with a small group of regulars mixed with first-timers. Our group is a mixed lot, United Methodist, Baptist, Roman Catholic, clergy and lay people, young and old, male and female. Each year I am drawn like a cosmic magnet to Gethsemani, as I believe it is a fortress of prayer and the geographical center of peace upon planet Earth.

A couple of years ago, while making a private retreat at the hermitage, I noticed the wagon wheel was missing from the foot of the cross. I searched the surrounding area in and around the hermitage. Brother Raphael said he only goes up to the hermitage once or twice a year and he could not remember the last time he had seen it. Brother Patrick Hart had said the original cross had to be replaced a few years back when one of the brothers had backed into it with a tractor while cutting the grass. Perhaps the wheel had been removed at that time.

I believed that a very valuable symbol of Christian spirituality was missing at Merton's hermitage



Scott Edwards and John Staggs prepare the ground

by the absence of the wagon wheel at the cross. It was a very significant sign to me, as a minister proclaiming the Gospel, of our spirits being in spiritual union by faith in the Christ of the cross. I wrote Abbot Damien Thompson at the Abbey of Gethsemani to ask permission for the Mississippi Chapter of the International Thomas Merton Society (ITMS) to replace the wagon wheel. The abbot graciously agreed.

The Mississippi Chapter put out an all-points bulletin, searching for a suitable replacement. One of our ITMS members, Scott Edwards, found a wheel that had been used on

a food wagon at the turn of the century. During his lunch breaks, off and on for about two months, Scott would sand, repair, putty, water-seal and paint the wheel. He worked out of the back of his pickup truck because the authentic wheel weighed close to 100 pounds. The wheel became a topic of conversation at his job. It was surprising how many people would stop and inquire about what he was going to do with the old wheel. Many discussions ensued about Thomas Merton, the abbey, the cross and Christ. Rural Mississippi is not a hotbed of open-mindedness and the reactions spanned the entire emotional spectrum. Many were just curious, some were confused, and a few made profound

statements about their personal belief system. It surprised us to find out that some of the people had heard about and even read Merton. Indeed, I feel that Merton and his body of work is a monastic evangelism that spans denominational boundaries and touches people of all walks of life.

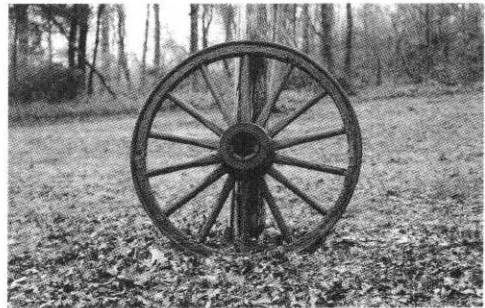


John Staggs, Scott Edwards and the new old wheel

Finally, in late November, 2001 Scott and I set off for Trappist, Kentucky, armed with a 100-year-old wagon wheel, a sack of concrete and three gallons of bottled water to mix with it, one cinder block, two metal straps to hold it in place, one shovel and two hearts full of joy. Friday morning at mass we found out that this day, November 30, was the Feast of St. Andrew. Scott is a member and I am pastor of St. Andrew's United Methodist Church. The dark clouds and rain that had held the Southeast in its grip for two

weeks stopped long enough for us to replace the wheel. Once again Merton's symbol is complete.

The cross and wagon wheel at Merton's hermitage have meant and continue to mean a great deal to me in my spiritual journey with Christ. The day we replaced the wagon wheel was one month after I had performed the wedding ceremony for my daughter, who is now twenty-five years old. She is a cancer survivor and there is no trace of the tumor. We are grateful beyond human expression. We built a new parsonage and relocated the church, with a 120-year plus history, to a new plot and building. Just as the wheel itself forms a perfect circle, our lives can come full circle under the sign of the cross. Because he articulated so well the union with God and one another that was made possible by the cross of Christ, I believe Thomas Merton will take the lead in the twenty-first century as the paradigmatic figure for contemporary Christian spirituality.



1. Thomas Merton, *A Vow of Conversation: Journals, 1964-1965* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1988) 152.