

## Dis-covering a Merton Conference

By Michael Moran

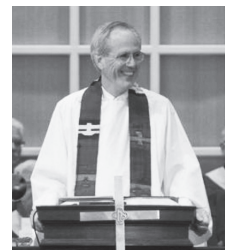
I remember clearly the day in mid-December 1968 when side-by-side, *The New York Times* carried the obituaries of Karl Barth and Thomas Merton. Barth was 82, Merton only 53. I was in my second year at New Brunswick Theological Seminary (Reformed Church in America) and certainly had heard of Karl Barth; Merton, on the other hand, was a mystery, although the headline read: “Monk Wrote of Search for God.” I was hooked – *The Seven Storey Mountain*<sup>1</sup> was my Christmas gift to myself.



Later, as I became involved with Roman Catholics in the peace and disarmament movement, I met people who knew Merton and I participated in groups that read his books and relied on his insights and guidance. Probably no book has given me more material for the Sunday sermon over the past forty years than *The New Man*.<sup>2</sup> No single observation has had a greater impact on my study than this from *Opening the Bible*: “In the progress toward religious understanding, one does not go from answer to answer but from question to question. One’s questions are answered, not by clear, definitive answers, but by more pertinent and more crucial questions.”<sup>3</sup>

Sometimes, perhaps to make up for the difficulty I have following his line of thought, I just enjoy the presence of the books – especially the older editions with their muted colored dust jackets – books like *The Sign of Jonas*<sup>4</sup> or *The Waters of Siloe*.<sup>5</sup> Over the years I was able to find a signed copy of *Original Child Bomb*<sup>6</sup> and a 1991 edition of *Father Louie: The Photographs of Thomas Merton* by Ralph Eugene Meatyard,<sup>7</sup> with a wonderful remembrance written (and signed) by Guy Davenport. When I saw and subsequently purchased a copy of *The Strange Islands*<sup>8</sup> inscribed by both Merton and Mark Van Doren (the monk’s friend and former teacher at Columbia to whom this fifth book of Merton’s poetry had been dedicated), and including notes from a Merton lecture on the inside of the dust jacket, it seemed like a book which had to have an interesting story to go with it.

The notes are dated December 3, 1961, and looking in Merton’s journals I found an entry for December 4, 1961: “Mark Van Doren was here yesterday, 1st Sunday of Advent. We had a good quiet talk walking up to the hermitage and back.”<sup>9</sup> According to the headnote in *The Road to Joy* prefacing Merton’s September 20, 1961 letter to Van Doren, confirming the date of his upcoming visit, Van Doren was coming to Louisville at the beginning of December, 1961 to participate “in a joint project of Louisville colleges called the ‘Book



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of the Semester' program. He actually spoke at the University of Louisville and Ursuline College, though Bellarmine College was his official host. On December 3, Van Doren paid his third visit to Merton at Gethsemani."<sup>10</sup> Merton had written to Van Doren:

It was good to get your letter and I am very happy that you can come. Sunday is not the best of days, but since this is exceptional we can certainly make the most of it. There will at least be a bit of time in the afternoon for you to see the hermitage: probably a little chilly, enough for a nice wood fire. So let us by all means plan on December 3rd. Probably the best thing would be for someone of the Bellarmine people to drive you out Saturday evening. Sunday morning there is Mass about 10. You would get a little time to think and breathe. We can get you back to Louisville whenever you need to get your plane, but I hope you don't have to leave us before 3 in the afternoon. (RJ 43)

So Merton and Van Doren were together on the day in question. But what would be the occasion of the note-taking and the book-signing? The headnote also quotes an excerpt from a Van Doren letter to Merton sent after returning to New York: "*I shall never forget that day, at the retreat, in your class, and on the Abbey walks . . . It was wonderful to have lunch with the Abbot [James Fox], whom I'm afraid I didn't thank eloquently enough . . . I'll be thinking of you in your little house – but not so little either. I was impressed*" (RJ 43).<sup>11</sup> So Van Doren attended a class taught by Merton. That would explain the notes, as well as the opportunity the book's owner took to have it autographed by both men at the same time. It is interesting that they signed the book upside down in the back, so whoever took the off the dust jacket to use it to take notes in the class evidently put it back on the book upside down before handing it over for their inscription – which I think is an indication that the book was signed at the class right after the notes were taken.

A further question occurs: would it be likely that Merton would be giving a lecture on John of the Cross in December of 1961? The answer is found in Patrick O'Connell's careful chronology of the development of a series of conferences in mystical theology that Merton gave to newly ordained monks at the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1961.<sup>12</sup> O'Connell notes that the course began March 1, 1961 and ran "through May 19, when Merton noted in his journal, 'Finished the official mystical theology course today. Some extra classes to be fitted in where I can.' In fact, however, these extra classes continued at least throughout the summer" (ICM xii). The notes in the dust jacket suggest that Merton continued or at least revisited the topic of mystical theology as late as December that year. In fact the notes correspond to material on the Dark Nights that comprises the very last section of Merton's text (ICM 320-32), so this may well have been the final conference of the course – it must have been at least very close to the concluding lecture.

One final question is: who might have taken the notes on the inside cover of *The Strange Islands*? It is highly unlikely that one of the monks would have asked for the autographs, or for that matter have had a personal copy of *The Strange Islands* to use as an impromptu notepad. But since these conferences were not ordinarily attended by anyone but monks, the circumstances had to be unique. A plausible answer is suggested in Merton's September letter to Van Doren, mentioning that "someone of the Bellarmine people" could drive him out to the monastery. Merton mentions

“Saturday evening,” but the journal entry of December 4 suggests only that Van Doren was there on Sunday, so it is likely that he stayed in Louisville Saturday night and came down to Gethsemani early on the following day, in which case his driver would most likely have remained at the abbey until Van Doren was ready to return to Louisville; if so, he (or she? – probably not, since the conference would likely have taken place inside the cloistered area) presumably would have been invited to attend the conference as well, bringing with him a (newly purchased?) copy of *The Strange Islands*.<sup>13</sup>

In any case, the notes, “hidden” away on the inside of the dust jacket, presumably the only available place for the listener to jot down the main points Merton was making, provide a rare and precious outline of Merton’s lecture on that Sunday. They read as follows:

“John of the Cross” – Thomas Merton Dec. 3, 1961

No contradiction between mystical knowledge and natural knowledge.

He says that if you concentrate only on natural knowledge you will never attain any other. Everything that is shot out from under you is recovered on a higher level. Two dark nights. Night of sense. Connected with our effective immersion in things. Sense is subject to spirit.

Some interpret this to mean that you go around with blindfolds over your eyes. This is not what he means at all

Night of Spirit – a kind of death

anything particular tends to be frustrating. God coming to us without any intermediacy of concepts. God comes to us without concepts. When you are ready to give up prayer, then you are ready to contemplate. God and the soul, two contraries, cannot exist in the same subject. Here you are led out of the realm

of order, but not into the realm of disorder. In the dark night of the soul there are no principles. You can’t

prove anything. Whether it is from God or the Devil

An inflowing of God into the soul. Herein God secretly teaches the soul.

Divine Wisdom is so far above the soul. It is like a light so bright it can’t be seen. We are as owls before the light of

God. It is necessary for the soul to fight with God and

vice-versa. When things are according to the set-up, it discourages Saint-hood.

Seven capital sins in the spiritual level.

We can all control on a certain level. There are other things beneath the level of choice. Pride is not deliberately chosen but it is there all the time.

Fervor can be an indication of spiritual pride. Some works are so much the result of pride that they are not good

but evil. It is necessary that men be virtuous. But

there comes a time that men must seem to be

unvirtuous. There comes a time when virtue is not enough.

S. Thomas says all of this without scandal. We should be

totally consumed by the fire of God. All human fervor is replaced by divine fervor. There is no “why.” It is because God wants it that way that it is. The divine light takes the place of the soul’s understanding. Relate to contemporary existentialism.

I suppose there is a bit of irony in finding pleasure in the physical objects that once were in the hands of spiritual teachers, but I know I will enjoy looking at the shelf in my study and thinking about the day that slim volume came to contain not only Merton’s poems but a record of his teaching about one of his own favorite and most highly regarded spiritual masters, along with not only his own signature but that of a beloved and highly regarded personal mentor.

1. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948).
2. Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1961).
3. Thomas Merton, *Opening the Bible* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1970) 19-20.
4. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953).
5. Thomas Merton, *The Waters of Siloe* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949).
6. Thomas Merton, *Original Child Bomb* (New York: New Directions, 1962).
7. Barry Magid, ed., *Father Louie: Photographs of Thomas Merton by Ralph Eugene Meatyard* (New York: Timken, 1991).
8. Thomas Merton, *The Strange Islands* (New York: New Directions, 1957).
9. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 184; subsequent references will be cited as “*TTW*” parenthetically in the text.
10. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 43; subsequent references will be cited as “*RJ*” parenthetically in the text.
11. The full text of the letter, dated December 7, 1961, is available in the archives of the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY. Thanks to Merton Center Director Paul M. Pearson for providing a copy. In it Van Doren expressed particular appreciation for “all your lovely deeds and words” during his visit.
12. See Thomas Merton, *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 3*, ed. Patrick F. O’Connell (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2008); subsequent references will be cited as “*ICW*” parenthetically in the text.
13. Thanks to Paul M. Pearson for this suggestion as to the identity of the note-taker.