

Dear Beneficiaries of Merton's Legacy
 Presidential Address – ITMS Fourteenth General Meeting
 Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY
 June 4, 2015

By **David Joseph Belcastro**

Dear beneficiaries of Merton's legacy, we gather this week as recipients of Thomas Merton's literary work. We are also beneficiaries of his friendship. This is a specific kind of friendship – one could say a sacramental friendship, a manifestation of God's love for humanity. This friendship flourishes with wisdom, thereby creating and sustaining faith, hope and love in the twenty-first century.

In his Preface to *A Silent Action: Engagements with Thomas Merton* by Rowan Williams, Jim Forest wrote:

It is a pity Thomas Merton and Rowan Williams never met. What a friendship it would have been. Their age difference was the obstacle – Rowan was only eighteen when Merton died. Yet there is another sense in which meetings occur and friendships spring to life despite the impossibility of correspondence or face-to-face encounter. Good writing always remains in the present tense; the attentive reader meets the author in the intimate space of the printed page. When that occurs, a relationship can take root that flourishes despite the problem of death. . . . For the Orthodox Christian, it is often noted, there are “at least” seven sacraments. On the long list that can be attached to the seven, surely one is the mystery of friendship: an enduring relationship held together not only by affinity, shared questions and common interests, but the awareness that each can help the other in a quest – a partnership in pilgrimage.¹

This friendship transcends time and space as also evidenced by all who have gathered here. As friends of Merton, we want to acknowledge: Joseph J. McGowan, President of Bellarmine University; Abbot Elias Dietz of the Abbey of Gethsemani and the monastic community; Peggy Fox, Anne McCormick and Mary Somerville, Trustees of the Merton Legacy; organizers for this conference – Paul Pearson, Site Coordinator, Kathleen Deignan, Program Chair and the committee; Christine Bochen, Centenary Committee Chair; Daggy Scholars, new and past; plenary speakers Christine Bochen, James Finley, Bryan Massingale and Rt. Rev. Rowan Williams; Interfaith Dialogue Panelists Sidney Griffith, Edward Kaplan and Bonnie Thurston; closing liturgy celebrant Archbishop Joseph Kurtz of Louisville; and exhibiting artist Charles MacCarthy.

David Joseph Belcastro is Professor of Religious Studies at Capital University, Bexley, Ohio and co-editor of *The Merton Annual*. He served as president of the International Thomas Merton Society for 2013-2015 and has presented and published papers on Merton for the past twenty-six years.



David Joseph Belcastro

For this celebration of Merton's one-hundredth, it is perhaps appropriate to begin with a few lines from one of his late poems wherein he reflects on the meaning of a birthday:

All theology is a kind of birthday
 Each one who is born
 Comes into the world as a question
 For which old answers
 Are not sufficient.

Birth is question and revelation.
 The ground of birth is paradise
 Yet we are born a thousand miles
 Away from our home.
 Paradise weeps in us
 And we wander further away.
 This is the theology
 Of our birthdays. . . .

Heaven weeps without cause
 Forever if I do not find
 The question that seeks me²

Merton's life was an engagement with questions that surfaced at every turn in the road of the journey from his birth in France to his resting place at Gethsemani. These questions always opened into new questions. They required more than a nod of the head. They had to be lived. The questions translated into a quest that always brought Merton to new horizons – new horizons from which he could glimpse a light that shines in the darkness. His writings are journals of this quest – words that give voice to the silence of his search: the solitary's journey to new horizons; light that shines in the darkness; words that give voice to silence.

With these three images in mind, my thoughts led to a poem by R. S. Thomas, a Welsh poet and Anglican priest introduced to Merton by Donald Allchin in a letter dated June 1967. While their paths never crossed they shared the same lonely journey along the *via negativa*. Thomas wrote:

Moving away is only to the boundaries
 of the self. Better to stay here,
 I said, leaving the horizons
 clear. The best journey to make
 is inward. It is the interior
 that calls. Eliot heard it.
 Wordsworth turned from the great hills
 of the north to the precipice
 of his own mind, and let himself
 down for the poetry stranded
 on the bare ledges.

For some
 it is all darkness; for me, too,
 it is dark. But there are hands
 there I can take, voices to hear
 solider than the echoes
 without. And sometimes a strange light
 shines, purer than the moon,
 casting no shadow, that is
 the halo upon the bones
 of the pioneers who died for truth.³

In an age of great wars, an age imprisoned in its own violence, darkened by desires and fears that eclipse the strange light of which Thomas speaks, Merton extends a hand to us and offers us volumes of letters, essays and poetry on peace – writings that have provided pastoral care and guidance to many here today who stand and others long past who stood with him in solidarity of resistance to crimes against humanity. He raises his voice and we hear it:

It is my intention to make my entire life a rejection of, a protest against the crimes and injustices of war and political tyranny which threaten to destroy the whole race of man and the world with him. By my monastic life and vows I am saying NO to all the concentration camps, the aerial bombardments, the staged political trials, the judicial murders, the economic tyrannies, and the whole socio-economic apparatus which seems geared for nothing but global destruction in spite of all its fair words in favor of peace. I make monastic silence a protest against the lies of politicians, propagandists and agitators, and when I speak it is to deny that my faith and my Church can ever seriously be aligned with these forces of injustice and destruction.⁴

In an age blinded by prejudices of every conceivable kind – prejudices that release the destructive forces of hatred and discrimination against even the most innocent – Merton takes our hands and leads us, many here today and others long past, to an intersection in Louisville at the corner of Fourth and Walnut: a lucid moment; a profound insight; a deep awakening to the Ground of Love wherein is found humanity's Hidden Wholeness that dispels the illusion of separateness and awakens us to our essential oneness. Merton raises his voice and we hear it:

At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of *absolute poverty* is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak His name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our sonship. It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely.⁵

In an age known for its narcissism and corresponding loneliness that torments the human soul with a sense of meaninglessness – a meaninglessness feebly challenged by the endless pursuit of wealth and fame – Merton waves his hand and raises his voice redirecting our attention:

A few years ago a man who was compiling a book entitled *Success* wrote and asked me to contribute a statement on how I got to be a success. I replied indignantly that I was not able to consider myself a success in any terms that had a meaning to me. I swore I had spent my life strenuously avoiding success. If it so happened that I had once written a best seller, this was a pure accident, due to inattention and naïveté, and I would take very good care never to do the same again. If I had a message to my contemporaries, I said, it was surely this: Be anything you like, be madmen, drunks, and bastards of every shape and form, but at all costs avoid one thing: success.⁶

In an age when land is for shopping malls, rain for golf courses and skies for drones – a commercial age which fails to raise even a faint note of praise in the human heart – Merton takes our hands and leads us to the porch of his hermitage to see the open fields that stretch out into the knobs, and raises his voice:

Wind and a bobwhite
And the afternoon sun

By ceasing to question the sun
I have become light,

Bird and wind.

My leaves sing.

I am earth, earth

All these lighted things
Grow from my heart.

A tall, spare pine
Stands like the initial of my first
Name when I had one.

When I had a spirit,
When I was on fire
When this valley was
Made out of fresh air
You spoke my name
In naming Your silence:
O sweet, irrational worship!

I am earth, earth

My heart's love
 Bursts with hay and flowers.
 I am a lake of blue air
 In which my own appointed place
 Field and valley
 Stand reflected.

I am earth, earth

Out of my grass heart
 Rises the bobwhite.

Out of my nameless weeds
 His foolish worship.⁷

In an age where human sexuality has been defined by puritans and pornographers as forbidden fruit, puritans condemning it and pornographers selling it, Merton emerged from the deep embrace of Eros having discovered the sacredness of the body and the sacramental nature of sexuality to raise his voice and hand us an essay on purity:

The act of sexual love should by its very nature be joyous, unconstrained, alive, leisurely, inventive, and full of a special delight which the lovers have learned by experience to create for one another. There is no more beautiful gift of God than the little secret world of creative love and expression in which two persons who have totally surrendered to each other manifest and celebrate their mutual gift. *It is precisely in this spirit of celebration, gratitude, and joy that true purity is found.* The pure heart is not one that is terrified of eros but one that, with the confidence and abandon of a child of God, accepts this gift as a sacred trust, for sex, too, is one of the talents which Christ has left us to trade with until He returns. Properly understood sexual union is an expression of deep personal love and a means to the deepening, perfecting, and sanctifying of that love. (LL 117-18)

In an age where death is denied and yet ever present as the defining mark of the modern world – death that bears the strange fruit of which Billy Holiday lamented – Merton bore witness to a death that bears good fruit in abundance, providing what is necessary for life to flourish: there is a “true, fruitful and sacrificial ‘death’ by which we enter into life. The death by which we enter into life is not an escape from reality but a complete gift of ourselves which involves a total commitment to reality.”⁸ Merton’s reassuring hand leads us to an acceptance of death. His calming voice calls us to a death that is not to be feared but embraced. Accepting the reality of our deaths allows the richness of God’s mercy and grace to flow freely into our lives so that we might bear good fruit in due season. This is as it was with Merton’s life – so it is with many long past and many here today.

Dear beneficiaries of Merton's legacy, we have not only inherited a literary trove of wisdom from Merton but are blessed by the *mystery of sacramental friendship* offered by him to us. May this conference return us to Fourth and Walnut where we are able to see one another as for the first time – within the soft glow of that strange light of which R. S. Thomas spoke – a light to which Merton's hand and voice witness, a light that shines in darkness full of grace and truth, a light that purifies our hearts, illuminates our minds, and guides our pilgrimage on this earth.

1. Jim Forest, Preface to Rowan Williams, *A Silent Action: Engagements with Thomas Merton* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2011) 11, 13.
2. "Untitled Poem," ll. 1-13, 24-26, in Thomas Merton, *Eighteen Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1985); Thomas Merton, *In the Dark before Dawn: New Selected Poems*, ed. Lynn R. Szabo (New York: New Directions, 2005) 191.
3. R. S. Thomas, "Groping," *Collected Poems, 1945-1990* (London: Phoenix, 1993) 328.
4. Thomas Merton, "*Honorable Reader*": *Reflections on My Work*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 65-66.
5. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 142.
6. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979) 11; subsequent references will be cited as "LL" parenthetically in the text.
7. Thomas Merton, "O Sweet Irrational Worship," *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 1963) 42-43; *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 344-45.
8. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1958) 17.