My Summer with Thomas Merton

By **Philip M. Stark**

How can anyone say anything new about Thomas Merton? More than a half-century after his death, what has been left unsaid? Everyone has his own "take" on the great man, so everybody has his own say – drawing on the monk's own words, and some treatises are pretty formidable. In this, my own modest contribution to the cauldron of Merton studies, I add a personal note, explaining how I came to work with him: to help with an anthology of contemporary writing (*Monks Pond*[1]) – in the last year of his life. It's the one thing that I alone have done, however unimportant it may seem to others, and I hereby tell the tale.[2]

It all started many years ago, in the mid-1950s; the place, a Greyhound bus station in Pennsylvania, where I was waiting, not for a bus, but for a friend to give me a ride (after a blind date in an unfamiliar area) back to the boarding school where I was teaching. With a few minutes to spare, I looked around and saw a display of paperbacks: crossword puzzles, cookbooks, murder mysteries. But a bright green cover, with a literary title – *No Man Is an Island*[3] – looked interesting, so I slipped the coins of the purchase price into the slot and took the little volume along with me. Back in my room at the school – late as it was – I opened the book and was struck by the eloquence, the insightfulness, the spiritual depth of this Thomas Merton. In my (non-Catholic) education I had not come across his name. I read bits of it when I had a free moment; it gave me courage to carry on with difficulties, and I resolved to look further into this Merton guy; he seemed to be right on the ball.

After a couple of years, I moved on to another teaching job and started searching for Merton's works. Finding some, I also found myself drifting toward the Catholic faith, and the day came when I became a full-fledged Catholic. Only then, however, did I read *The Seven Storey Mountain*[4] and was swept away by the story of this convert's search for God and finding his vocation in a Trappist monastery.

Fast forward a few more years, and I too entered a religious order (but not a monastery). The novitiate was good orientation, but then things started going downhill. This was in the '60s, a time of upheaval in the Church, and the disorder was painfully evident in my house of studies. There were no regular confessors, no spiritual directors, no one I could call a friend. I got very downhearted. Just then – it was 1966 – Merton's *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*[5] had appeared. I rushed out, bought a copy and shut myself up as privately as possible to read it as rapidly as possible. When finished, I dashed off a review and sent it to a periodical run by my religious Order.[6] To my delight, they accepted it and published it.

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Very gratifying, but it did little to relieve the problems in this time of my studying philosophy. Things continued to go downhill. Finally, at a kind of nadir, the idea came to me to write to Father Louis himself (maybe

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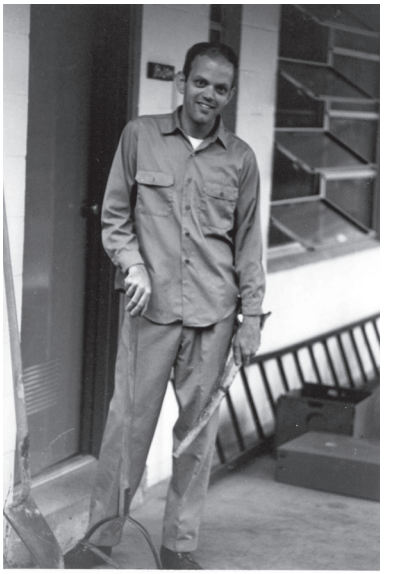
he had seen my review). He would understand, even if he never answered. To my astonishment, he did answer, saying he had seen and appreciated my review and offering words of consolation and advice. I felt reassured that, if a man of Merton's fame could write to a stranger a kind letter of understanding and spiritual direction, God was clearly looking out for me.

In fact, I was so carried away by this contact with the illustrious Thomas Merton that I wrote again, offering to help in any way I could – maybe some typing chores. Well, as they say, this was asking for it. He sent a huge batch of manuscript/typescript sheets of an exchange of letters with an old friend (Robert Lax).[7] He hoped to see the thing published but wanted the whole of it reproduced in exactly in its original format (e.g., scribbling that curved around the corner of a typewritten page). "Good grief," I said to myself (or something unprintable), how in heaven's name am I going to manage this? I could hardly envision returning the stuff and claiming it was beyond my ability to handle the request.



Philip Stark at Merton's hermitage, summer 1968

In near-despair, I took the problem to my Rector. He turned out to be a dedicated Merton fan and was thrilled to learn that I was in touch with the great man himself – so much so that he authorized the expense of a well-trained secretary with specialized equipment. I put the great pile of papers in Father Rector's hands and left his office with a huge sigh of relief. In a very short time, the finished product came back. I bundled it up and sent it off (well-insured) to Father Louis at Gethsemani, and with another sigh of relief turned my attention to other things.

And here came the first of those events of almost miraculous timing. Father Louis wrote to assure me that the package has arrived safely (and he was very grateful), ending, "It all came today, on my birthday." Well now, that was one great unintended birthday present! I had failed to take notice of that famous January 31 birthday and had no thought of the thing landing on his doorstep at any particular time. This was in 1968; it was the last birthday he celebrated on this earth.

Time went on, and the end of the spring semester drew near – and the end of my philosophy studies and prospective move to theology. (I had been approved to go directly from the one to the other without the usual intervening practice teaching.) In those liberalizing days, one in my position could ask to go to a theologate of his choice. Being then of a very liberal turn of mind myself, I asked to go to the Netherlands – where heresy and internal disorder were rampant (the "Dutch Catechism," etc.). I informed Merton that that is what I planned to do, and he wished "blessings on your trip to Holland." But it never happened. My prefect of studies denied the request, not because the country was so liberal but because I had been out of my province since novitiate and he decided I should "come home" and do theology there. I bowed to the decision

Br. Patrick Hart and Philip Stark, summer 1968

willingly enough, so I guess I still had the spirit of religious obedience.

It left me, however, with a free summer, since I would not need that time to learn a new language. So the inspiration hit me: I would write to Father Louis, yet again, and ask if I could come to Gethsemani and help out around the monastery in any way (like the "family brothers" as they were called). Here again occurred one of "those" events. Father Louis replied that he was editing an anthology of contemporary writing to be put out in four installments. The first two were now complete, but his helper was then called away to another assignment, and there was no replacement in sight. Could I possibly step into the gap? (Father Louis wanted to wind up this project before his long-awaited trip to Asia.)

Now we must back up a little. Early that year a new abbot (Flavian Burns) had been elected – a man who had been a novice under Merton's direction and was well attuned (and sympathetic) to Merton's likes and dislikes. He had granted leave for Merton to attend a conference of monks and nuns of East Asia, to be held in Thailand in December. So Merton went to ask permission for this outsider (myself) to come to Gethsemani and finish the layout and typing of master sheets for *Monks Pond*. Dom James Fox, the former abbot, was of sterner stuff and would very likely have quashed Merton's desire to attend the conference – his vow of stability and all that – much less have allowed an outsider to come and help with this frivolous literary fling. The new abbot said I would be welcome at the monastery, and my own superior also approved. (How could he refuse permission for me to work with the world-famous Thomas Merton?)

A friend drove me to Gethsemani, where we were welcomed and shown to my room in the guest house. As we stood there, wondering what to do next, a knock sounded on the door, and in walked, in secular clothes, a middle-aged man of medium height and looking undistinguished

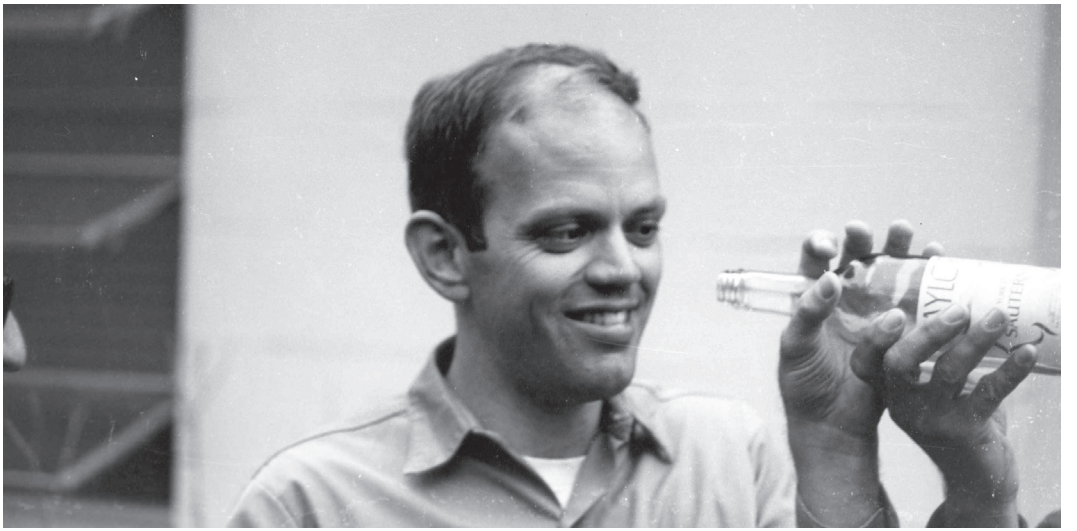
in any way. This was the one and only Thomas Merton – and the beginning of my summer of working with him – and a new level in my relationship with Merton. I was now in personal contact, working on a project dear to his heart. I saw him every few days, and when I needed to ask an important question, I went out to the hermitage, staying only as long as necessary, to give the least possible distraction from his meditation, his reading, his writing to friends, publishers, etc. I often wondered how he found the time for such a vast amount of work: personal journals, poems, essays, articles and reviews that editors were always demanding, mountains of letters, not to mention the full-length books – all in addition to his purely monastic duties.

The summer ended with a Mass at the hermitage. Brother Patrick (Merton's permanent secretary), Brother Maurice Flood, who would be taking care of the hermitage in Merton's absence, and I were the only ones present. The next day "Louie" was off on the first leg of his trip to the Far East, stopping at various places en route. The last issue of *Monks Pond* was rushed to him by air mail, and he responded with warm words of thanks to all who had helped with this one project in his career for which he had served as editor. He even sent me a postcard from Alaska. A telephone call from Merton's Louisville friend Tommie O'Callaghan in December gave me a profound shock. Those four words – "Tom Merton is dead" – have echoed in my heart ever since. He was fifty-three years old.

But the truth is, of course, that Thomas Merton is not dead; he is more alive than ever. More than fifty years after his tragic death, his books are still circulating, the Thomas Merton Societies meet regularly, books and articles inspired by him pour forth without end. I continue to read, but the question persists. What is the secret of this man's perennial popularity? What makes readers admire, even identify with him and find him endlessly fascinating? How does all this apply to myself?

In 2015, the centenary year of Merton's birth, one hundred of his admirers were asked to write an essay explaining what Thomas Merton meant to them. Dr. Paul Pearson, in his Foreword to the book – called *We Are Already One*,[8] a Merton saying[9] – mentions his "apostolate of friendship" (18).[10] Tom was a friend to all – to anyone and everyone. Jonathan Montaldo contributes an Introduction to this volume, in which he refers to a private letter in which Merton says "a church of his friends" is the incarnation of the "Spirit of God's" merciful presence in his life (20).[11] At one point in his journals, Merton reflects, "The great thing in my life is . . . love of truth. I know there is nothing more precious than the bond of charity created by communicating and sharing the truth. This is really my whole life."[12]

That was it. Charity is truth, and truth charity – and charity, in plain English, is love. The same Jonathan Montaldo edited a selection from the Journals and says, in his Introduction, "Thomas Merton learned that Love is everyone's language. Love's grammar binds us to everyone," always and everywhere.[13] The picture is now clear. Thomas Merton has led me – through all the vicissitudes of my life – to the realm of love. In that world, I am happier, more alive, more ready to forgive the many – even close relatives – who have "done me down," and to rejoice in becoming my True Self. I fit better in the scheme of things and am more able to take part in what is going on around me. A Merton quotation adorns my ordination card (vintage 1971).



Philip Stark, bottle and extra hand, summer 1968

I am reminded of this by Deborah Kehoe, one of the contributors to *We Are Already One*. She says, "the pull of that voice will never lessen as long as people ache for unity, and as long as such people, out of such loneliness, continue to open books" (269). Hasty intervention: I opened *No Man Is an Island* many years ago, and have opened countless Merton-related volumes since then, and as a result, I am less lonely, less fearful, more self-assured – and grateful to Almighty God for leading me from that Greyhound bus station in Pennsylvania to the green hills of Kentucky and beyond. But the last word belongs to St. Paul: "So there abide faith, hope and love, these three; but the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor. 13:13).

1. Thomas Merton, *Monks Pond: Thomas Merton's Little Magazine*, with an Introduction by Robert E. Daggy and an Afterword by Patrick Hart, OCSO (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1989).
2. An earlier effort to reflect on this experience is Philip M. Stark, "A Summer at Gethsemani," *Continuum* 7 (Summer 1969) 306-12.
3. Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955).
4. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948).
5. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966).
6. Philip M. Stark, Review of *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, *America* 115 (10 December 1966) 781-82.
7. See Thomas Merton and Robert Lax, *A Catch of Anti-Letters* (Kansas City: Sheed, Andrews and McMeel, 1978).
8. See Gray Henry and Jonathan Montaldo, eds., *We Are Already One: Thomas Merton's Message of Hope* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2014).
9. See Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 308.
10. The phrase comes from a November 10, 1958 letter to Pope John XXIII: see Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 482.

11. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993) 85-86 [March 15, 1968 letter to Czeslaw Milosz].
12. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 264.
13. Thomas Merton, *A Year with Thomas Merton: Daily Meditations from His Journals*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2004) xv.

Br. Patrick Hart, Thomas Merton and Philip Stark, summer 1968