

# The world is richer for Thomas Merton

by Sr Janet Fearn

UNIQUE among history's great spiritual writers, Thomas Merton is also the only one whose death certificate reads that an electric fan killed him as he stepped out of the bath. His death also appears to be shrouded in a degree of mystery. Some claim that he was assassinated for his controversial writings and associations, whereas others suggest suicide after a life dogged by many challenges. Most would say that he simply needed to be more careful in bringing together water and electricity. Perhaps Merton's end merely raises as many questions as did his life.

One hundred years ago, on 31<sup>st</sup> January 1915, Thomas Merton was born in France to two artists, Owen Merton and Ruth Jenkins, one a New Zealander and the other, an American Quaker. Ruth died when Thomas was six years old and his brother, John Paul, was only three. Owen travelled a great deal so that Thomas had an unsettled childhood, frequently living with relatives in different countries whilst his father was elsewhere. By the time he was 11, he found himself, lonely and depressed, in a boarding school in France, although he eventually settled and made friends.

Even in his early teens, Thomas showed his gift for asking challenging questions. He also had little or no understanding of other peoples religious belief. As he himself remarked in his autobiography, friends realised that his attitude "implied a fundamental and utter lack of faith, a dependence on my own lights and attachment to my own opinion"; furthermore, since "I did not believe in anything . . . anything I might say I believed would be only empty talk". He added that even when he was critically ill, "the thought of God, the thought of prayer, did not even enter my mind". At this time, he also declared that "I believe in nothing".

Merton later attributed his becoming a Catholic to a Hindu monk, the *Confessions of St Augustine* and the *Imitation of Christ* by Thomas a Kempis. Perhaps Augustine's stark honesty in describing his pre-conversion life struck a chord in Thomas' heart, although, unlike Augustine, his mother could not accompany his every move, praying that her son would change his behaviour. Perhaps the great saints prayer, "Lord, give me chastity – but not yet" also held a certain appeal for Merton?

Merton's early years as a Catholic were also a search for direction and meaning. In the midst of his university studies in Cambridge and New York, he felt that God was calling him to religious life – but how, when and where? Both he and the Franciscans in Cambridge quickly decided that they were not suited to each other.

It was in April 1941 that Thomas discovered his future home, the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani, near Bardstown, Kentucky. In December of that year, he was formally accepted as a postulant and then, in March 1942, as a novice. Given the name Br Louis, Merton's unique writing talents were quickly recognised, so that, very early in his religious life, he had time and space for writing. Even whilst in the contemplative environment of the abbey, his spiritual writings began to make a mark in the wider world.

Life began to change during the turbulent years of the 1960s. The Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War led to massive upheavals in American society. At

the same time, Vatican II challenged the Church to become a more outward-looking, evangelising, pilgrim People of God, attuned to rapidly-changing needs, people, beliefs and technology. Many priests and religious experienced considerable inner turmoil as earlier rigid rules and timetables made way for “the Church in the modern world”. Because of the Council, they experienced a renewed call to listen and respond to their conscience and to become “the voice of the voiceless” poor and marginalised peoples.

Merton discovered that meeting the challenges of Vatican II meant opening the windows and doors of his heart in many unexpected ways. Earlier securities vanished and life suddenly turned upside-down in the process. A member of the Gethsemani community remarked: “We all found the years following Vatican II very difficult, so Merton was definitely not unique. The problem was that he could write and could write well, which meant that the whole world knew about his challenges whilst the rest of us simply got on with the job.”

Merton’s life as a Cistercian carried with it a deep search for what God was truly calling him to do. His autobiography reveals his growing desire to be a hermit within his Cistercian way of life. Eventually the abbot gave him a small hermitage on the property where he could continue to pray, write and receive his directees. Yet it would seem that in allowing Thomas to live as a hermit, the abbot was also trying to make the best of a difficult situation: the headstrong and gifted Merton was not necessarily the easiest person to have in community. As one of his confreres remarked: “He was impossible! He wanted the community to run according to his own ideas and when this did not happen, he became very angry. Did he have a vocation to be a hermit? I really do not know. The problem was that when he became a hermit, he had so many visitors that this interfered with the lives of everybody else in Gethsemani. We then found it increasingly difficult to find the prayerful solitude to which we were also called.”

In the midst of his writing and his work as a priest and as novice master in Gethsemani, Thomas was a gifted speaker and spiritual director. He was also intensely concerned with social justice issues, including the Civil Rights movement, liberation theology and the nuclear arms race.

Throughout his life, Merton cherished a tremendous interest in Eastern spirituality, especially in Buddhism. He believed that Western Christians had become over-concerned with rational explanations and needed to embrace the more spiritual approach of the East, with its greater emphasis on mysticism.

In 1968, Merton received permission to visit Asia where he met the Dalai Lama on three occasions as well as other prominent Buddhists. It was on 10th December 1968, after speaking at an interfaith conference between Catholic and non-Christian monks in Bangkok, Thailand, that he decided to have a bath and died as a consequence.

In his lifetime, Thomas Merton wrote more than 70 books and is proclaimed as one of the greatest spiritual writers of the 20th century. As with many great people, he was also a complex personality and sometimes not the easiest person with whom to live. Merton’s childhood and self-sufficiency inevitably made him “a square peg in a round hole” as far as community life is concerned, but neither did he fit the typical image of a hermit. Yet even those who found him difficult acknowledge his outstanding spiritual contribution to countless thousands of others.

At the end of the day, Thomas Merton was a human being who shared the same ups and downs, joys and sorrows, successes and failures as the rest of us. Through his unparalleled outreach of the written word, he also touched the hearts of countless thousands. A century later, the world is richer for having been his home.