

Thomas Merton – A Man for All Times

By William Grimes

This reflection by former Gethsemani novice William Grimes (Brother Alcuin) was written at the time of Thomas Merton's death and has not been previously published.

I do not purport to be a qualified writer, nor do I think that I can attest sufficiently to the greatness which was Father Merton's. I do, however, feel that I have an obligation to reveal in whatever feeble way I can the greatness of the Father Louis that I knew. It is with this excuse in mind that I attempt to write a few lines about Thomas Merton – a man for all times.

Many fine articles have appeared in the last few weeks about Thomas Merton. Tributes are being paid to a man of greatness and integrity, tributes to which he is abundantly entitled. There are very few men alive who had the depth of understanding, the wisdom and grace or insights into the world today that Father Merton had. Everyone who ever had the great pleasure of knowing or meeting him can attest to this fact. Here was a man who was little with the little, great with the great, a child with the small, a genius with the erudite. Truly a man for all men, a Christ-bearer to the world.

When I last saw Father Louis, as he was known in religion, I jokingly told him that I was going to write an article about him and reveal the “true Thomas Merton.” He laughed and said that this might not be such a bad idea. He thought it would be good to let the world know that monks were real people, with humor and laughter. Unfortunately, I waited too long, and now I am writing “in memoriam.”

I first met Father Louis at the guest house at Gethsemani in June 1962. I had come to join the Trappists and was awaiting the novice master who was to come and interview me after lunch. I didn't know Thomas Merton was the novice master, nor did I know that Thomas Merton was Father Louis. I just knew that “the novice master” was coming and I was excited and just slightly nervous that he would find me not ready for monastic life.

At the appointed time he knocked at the door and I opened it to make an acquaintance which was to profoundly affect my life and make me a happier and better person for it. In he came, almost bouncing, showing an ebullience and cheerfulness one would hardly have expected from a Trappist monk.

Father Louis presented an almost aristocratic appearance. He was very obviously of European heritage! His tanned brow and balding head were accented and dignified by his monastic tonsure, which looked as natural to his appearance as if he were born with it. His nose was obviously French and brought a dignity to his appearance which was in perfect harmony with his deep shining eyes topped by the bushy eyebrows and creased forehead which marks an intellectual.

William Grimes, a native of Chicago, was known as Brother Alcuin while he was a novice at the Abbey of Gethsemani under Thomas Merton in the early 1960s. After leaving the monastery he became a nurse and a physician assistant and holds a master's degree in pastoral studies and a doctorate in health care ministry. He is a retired professor at the College of Health Sciences of the University of Kentucky. An ordained deacon, he is cofounder of the New Hope Free Clinic in Owingsville in eastern Kentucky, where he also serves as pastoral associate at St. Julie Catholic Church. He and his wife are parents of nine children and grandparents or great-grandparents of more than fifty.



William Grimes



Br. Alcuin (Bill Grimes)
Photo by Thomas Merton

I was instantly struck with his warmth and the friendliness of his smile, the depth and wisdom of his eyes, and the childlike, almost playful twinkle of his personality – which could never be hidden – even by his monastic cowl.

“Hi, Bill, I’m Father Louis. Welcome to Gethsemani.” Almost apologetically, he asked, “Why have you come here?” – trying to summon from me a sign that the spark of monastic vocation might be lingering within. I fumbled and twisted and tried to say what I felt but couldn’t quite express myself as I thought I should. “You’re seeking God. Is that what you’re trying to say, Bill?” He brought it from me in the simplest and most fundamental terms he could, yet I could tell by his eyes that he understood. He had been through it and he knew what was in a man’s heart, what throbbed in his soul for release, what constantly flared to the surface, begging for understanding.

From that day on there was established a very close and warm relationship – not one just of a master for his novice, or a teacher for his pupil; but one of a close understanding friendship – a warmth and friendship which a man only accomplishes rarely in life, but one which Father Louis quickly educes from a person and nourishes and builds on. No one can ever become a friend of Father Louis, either by close personal relationship or by reading his books, and not be brought from then on into his intimate personal life of prayers and constant offering.

Often I heard him express personally, or in his writings, the closeness he felt toward people whom God saw fit for him to affect or come in contact with in one way or another. He felt very obligated to these people and prayed for them always. He even expressed gratitude that he should have been an instrument of God to enlighten or be a means of grace to so many people. He welcomed their letters – and from all over the world they came – from well-known people, authors, writers, statesmen, saints, and from little people; from the slums, the prisons, underdeveloped countries, and people like you and me. Often, when I was in the novitiate, he would quote from these letters. He was more than once profoundly moved by a comment made by someone, someone who never knew how deeply he influenced Father Louis’ life. He always took great care to answer those letters, either personally or through his regularly mimeographed letters to his friends.

As novices, we were required to have spiritual direction with the novice master once or twice a week. Since there were only a few novices there then, we generally saw him in the evening for about an hour before bedtime and while the others attended Chapter and Compline. Once in the summertime when the weather was fair and all things were flowing toward happiness and spiritual calm, Father Louis and I just talked about all sorts of topics. He discussed Chicago, jazz, slums, people we’d known, things we’d done, etc. Finally, when all the others had left for Chapter, Father Louis very carefully closed all the windows which faced toward the church and chapter room and then returned, sparkling with eyes of mischief. Someone had smuggled in the latest Cannonball Adderly album (and he loved jazz) and he just had to share it with me. So we sat on into the quiet Trappist night listening to jazz. And yet this did not in any way seem inconsistent with the “quiet life” nor with Thomas Merton. He

was simply a man who loved life and everything lovable about it. “Jazz,” he told me, “is one of the few really great contributions that America has made to the cultural scene.” And there I sat enjoying the music and watching Father Louis tap out the beat on his desk top. He was happy and lovable just as if he were expounding a beautiful theological truth or giving a talk on fifteenth-century monasticism. This was the all-around man whom I had loved and known so well.

Again I recall an incident when Father Louis asked me to get the jeep and meet him during the afternoon work period at his hermitage in the woods. There was no road so I just drove in and around the trees to the top of the knob, which was Father Louis’ hermitage kingdom. He greeted me cheerfully at the top and with the enthusiasm of a boy hopped in and said, “Let’s go!” He just wanted to ride and ride recklessly, aimlessly through God’s beautiful woods. Nowhere in particular to go, just an ecstatic dash here and there through the Trappist hill country of Kentucky.

He had a camera and wanted to take some unusual nature pictures of things I could hardly have noticed – tree stumps, broken fences, buildings rotting and overrun by weeds, spider webs, dried creek beds, fallen trees. . . . On and on we went filled with a spirit of adventure and playfulness. I thought of all the beautiful intuitions which must be going through his mind and realized that because of his simplicity of spirit and oneness of life he must be seeing beautiful and creative things which I couldn’t even imagine. And I know he did – for his poetry reflects it.

As a novice it was a joy to work with Father Louis and the other novices. Often we would go off for work together with our rakes or shovels or axes slung over our shoulders, following Father Louis to his hermitage to help him keep it in trim and good condition. He, like the rest of us, would be clad in blue jeans, denim shirt and straw hat. As was the monastic custom, we would walk in single file behind our novice master, fingering our rosary beads, to prepare for a prayerful afternoon work period.

Father Louis was a dignified sight even in his blue jeans and straw hat. The hat was probably the oldest one in the monastery, all ragged and floppy, and it bounced as we walked along that familiar path to his hermitage. Father Louis loved nature and the woods around his hermitage were especially dear to his heart.

After two years and a half with Father Louis at Gethsemani, I left the monastery and took my place in the life of the lay church. I may have left the place behind, but the spirit of Gethsemani and especially of Father Louis remained near and dear to me always. I was privileged to return to see Father Louis three times since then. Once I returned alone and found Father Louis at his hermitage. He was overjoyed to see me and made me feel welcome and at home. I was a little afraid that seeing him in this way might disturb his tranquility and eremitic life, but on the contrary, Father Louis was still the same man, jovial “Uncle Louie” (as he often referred to himself when speaking to the novices).

Another time I returned to see him, I brought the superior of the Little Brothers of Notre Dame from Paris and one from Chicago. They sought enlightenment and direction from Father Louis, and he, like a true guru, gave them his time, his wisdom and his friendship. We bore gifts of beef burgundy, bordeaux and fruit and Father didn’t hesitate a moment to sit and share them with us, even though it was Lent. He practiced what he preached – that charity came before all things, even the strict Trappist fasts and abstinence.

The last time I saw Father Louis alive was in January, 1966. A priest from Chicago and myself went to see him at his hermitage for no particular reason, just to renew old friendships and share a warm fire and hearty conversation. We left feeling very, very warm indeed, for didn’t he enlighten



**Funeral of Thomas Merton
Abbey of Gethsemani
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our minds and fill our hearts? Wasn't this contact with him an experience of closeness to Christ and an awareness of our obligation to spread His love? I left with a feeling of great closeness to Father Louis, mingled with a dread that I might not see him again.

My next contact with Father Louis was under very different circumstances. It was December 17, 1968. We were all gathered for vespers and high mass and Father Louis was in our midst. A full week had elapsed since he entered the Kingdom and at last he was back amidst the community he so dearly loved. Twenty-seven years he had spent there, never leaving except for short excursions, and on his first long trip, he died mysteriously halfway around the world, a victim of the contrivances of the technological world he so often inveighed against.

Again we were all together. This time close friends, both from within and beyond the community, were sharing grief and sorrow, mingled with joy and happiness. The funeral mass was strangely similar to Father Louis – as it depicted his life and attitudes, his joys and ambitions.

The texts of the Mass were specially chosen and revolved around Jonas (Father Louis' favorite biblical character – the one he compared himself to and named his favorite book after). After mass as we waited for the funeral procession to begin, there was an organ interlude from one of Father Louis' favorite composers – Mozart. The whole thing was so different, so beautiful, so moving – so much like Father Louis himself.

At the final station in the church, we heard a reading from Father Louis' autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain*. The church was silent; tear-filled eyes strained as emotion-choked people heard the beautiful words from Father's own autobiography:

"I will give you what you desire. I will lead you into solitude. I will lead you by the way that you cannot possibly understand, because I want it to be the quickest way.

"Therefore all the things around you will be armed against you, to deny you, to hurt you, to give you pain, and therefore to reduce you to solitude.

"Because of their enmity, you will soon be left alone. They will cast you out and forsake you and reject you and you will be alone.

"Everything that touches you shall burn you, and you will draw your hand away in pain, until you have withdrawn yourself from all things. Then you will be all alone.

"Everything that can be desired will sear you, and brand you with a cautery, and you will fly from it in pain, to be alone. Every created joy will only come to you as pain, and you will die to all joy and be left alone. All the good things that

other people love and desire and seek will come to you, but only as murderers to cut you off from the world and its occupations.

“You will be praised, and it will be like burning at the stake. You will be loved, and it will murder your heart and drive you into the desert.

“You will have gifts, and they will break you with their burden. You will have pleasures of prayer, and they will sicken you and you will fly from them.

“And when you have been praised a little and loved a little I will take away all your gifts and all your love and all your praise and you will be utterly forgotten and abandoned and you will be nothing, a dead thing, a rejection. And in that day you shall begin to possess the solitude you have so long desired. And your solitude will bear immense fruit in the souls of men you will never see on earth.

“Do not ask when it will be or where it will be or how it will be: On a mountain or in a prison, in a desert or in a concentration camp or in a hospital or at Gethsemani. It does not matter. So do not ask me, because I am not going to tell you. You will not know until you are in it.

“But you shall taste the true solitude of my anguish and my poverty and I shall lead you into the high places of my joy and you shall die in Me and find all things in My mercy which has created you for this end and brought you from Prades to Bermuda to St. Antonin to Oakham to London to Cambridge to Rome to New York to Columbia to Corpus Christi to St. Bonaventure to the Cistercian Abbey of the poor men who labor in Gethsemani:

“That you may become the brother of God and learn to know the Christ of the burnt men.”¹

As we stood outside for the final farewell and Father Louis was lowered forever into his designated place, he was not gone to be forgotten. He had called us all together and on each one he had bestowed a special grace. At the silence of his lowering casket the hoar-frost fell and gently caressed the silent congregation. It reminded me of the love Father Louis had always had for the morning and evening frosts and dews and how he saw in them the diamonds of eternity.

I can't help but imagine Father Louis happily looking down at all of us then. Laughing, as only he could, to think of how he had brought us all together – monks and seculars, friends and brothers, as we shared fruitcake and coffee, sandwiches and cheese at the abbey guest house, after the funeral. So many barriers had he broken down and so much love had he brought.

Father Louis was no doubt one of the greatest men of our times. I believe he reached the goal he so often talked about – becoming a saint! For him this meant being a whole and complete man, one of wisdom and understanding, kindness and humor, compassion and love; one who could appreciate the beauty of a flower and be moved by the cry of a little baby. To love all men and have the heart of Christ. To understand the depths of the mysteries of God and yet be as simple and unwavering as a child. The very best tribute that can possibly be paid to the greatness of Father Louis is a living tribute – and it is being paid admirably by the community he left behind: the monks of Gethsemani.

1. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 422-23.