

The Last Days of Thomas Merton

By Mère Marie de la Croix, OCSO

This memoir of encountering Thomas Merton at the Bangkok conference where he died on December 10, 1968 was written before the end of that month by one of the participants at the conference, Mère Marie de la Croix, who entered the Cistercian Order at Laval, France, and later became prioress at the monastery of Lourdes (Nishinomiya) in Japan. She is currently living in retirement in Japan. She accompanied her superior, Mother Christiana, to the conference, where they were the only Trappistines present. While some of its details are not completely accurate (there was never an autopsy performed on Merton's body, for example, and one of the "priests" in his bungalow was in fact a layman, John Moffitt), this previously unpublished account provides another precious witness to Merton's final days. The original French text was made available through the good offices of Sr. Jean Holman, OCSO, of the monastery of Ubexy, France, and of Br. Patrick Hart, OCSO, and was translated by the editor. It is published with the permission of Mère Marie and the Cistercian authorities.

Thomas Merton arrived in Bangkok on Thursday, December 5. He was in town with friends and came out in the evening, rather late, to the Red Cross Center, a large property where the conference was being held, located about thirty kilometers outside Bangkok, facing the edge of the sea. There was a large building, a sort of hotel, where most of the conference participants were lodged, and where meals were served. About a ten-minute walk away was the large conference hall, and here and there among the coconut trees were bungalows. Thomas Merton was staying in one of the bungalows, on the ground floor, along with three other priests.

Sunday evening, there was a decided stir in the immense hall. A group dressed in white robes with black scapulars, along with a very congenial man in secular clothes, greeted us with open arms. It was Dom Simeon, the prior of Lantao, whom we knew well; a very large Irishman, Dom Joachim, the abbot from New Zealand; Father Parker, the prior at Tarrawarra, Australia; Father Francis, the novice master in Java, and three or four Vietnamese Cistercians; the person in lay clothes, momentarily forgotten, introduced himself with a smile: "I'm a Trappist too." "It's Thomas Merton," Dom Simeon whispered to us. Soon there was a lively conversation about Japan. Father had just come from India and wanted to get to Japan and stay there . . . as long as possible. My Reverend Mother offered him hospitality, which he accepted joyfully. He later said jokingly, "In my former life I was Japanese." From this first contact, we were taken with affection for him. In this sophisticated milieu, with its abundance of experts filled with their own self-sufficiency, not to mention the "super-originals," he was completely down-to-earth, smiling, showing the same friendly welcome to everyone, without the least pretentiousness, a genuine person. He was dressed in a shirt of dark grey silk, which he had me touch: "It's very practical, light and at the same time appropriate"; black pants, a bit too long so that they fell in folds over his large shoes of chestnut-colored suede. On the follow-

ing days, except at meals, he wore the Cistercian habit.

At the gathering on Sunday evening, although he was by far the most famous person at the conference, he didn't stay among the officials or the experts. I never saw him in either of these groups, but almost always with Asians. In the hall, he was seated in front of us and from time to time would turn around to give us an eloquent wink. Behind me, I heard a Benedictine murmur, "Thomas Merton, he's always like that."

Monday morning before breakfast, I noticed him approaching the main building with a lively pace and a long stride. At nine o'clock, the starting time of the conference, there was a reception for his Holiness the Patriarch of the monks of Thailand. It would later be reported that all those present were moved, but this is an exaggeration, to say the least. Many seemed to find the scene humorous. The patriarch, who was patriarchal in name only, was dressed in a yellow-orange robe. He was an elderly man, short in height. He walked with bare feet, had a shaved head, and carried a sort of large sack hung on his arm, a woman's carry-all, sea-blue and white. Behind him were the minister of religious affairs and a swarm of monks, all in orange robes. There were greetings, speeches, etc. Thomas Merton was always in front of us, motionless, hands folded. The Dutch television crew which was looking for him did not succeed in locating him. At 10:45 was Father Jean Leclercq's conference, "Problems of Contemporary Monasticism." He did not follow his text but contented himself with some reflections on his topic.

The celebration of the Eucharist was according to the standard rite. All the participants stood around the altar, in no particular order. There was a feeling of truly participating in the mass . . . but at the same time, a sense of dissatisfaction, a certain lack of the sense of the sacred. At lunch, we were at table not far from Thomas Merton. An hour later, checking the lists of the different working groups, I made sure, following the request of my Reverend Mother, that we were signed up for the group directed, or rather facilitated, by Thomas Merton. Actually, everyone wanted to go with him, but evidently the secretariat of the A.I.M. could not refuse the request of the only Trappistines at the conference. At four o'clock, we appeared at the appointed place. We were to discuss "the possibilities of an Asian monasticism." In general, what were the local customs and institutions to be integrated into the life of the community? The topic was quite broad. In fact, it was my Reverend Mother who spoke the most, because it seemed that it was in Japan that these customs still remained most vital. In Hong Kong, there was a cosmopolitan atmosphere, while in Korea nothing had yet been done in this regard since monasticism was still new there; in Java, efforts were being made but they seemed to be more of a moderate or even a somewhat progressive nature, in a community founded by the Dutch. Thomas Merton truly directed the discussion, with firmness, not hesitating to bring back to the point those who were wandering from the topic or even putting forth ideas which lacked logic or accuracy. The question of Cistercian silence was raised. Someone claimed that this silence interfered with fraternal relationships. I couldn't help saying to him that this was an exaggeration, and that on the contrary there was a sort of intuitive affinity that quickly recognized the feelings, the needs or even the thoughts of one's companions. I was surprised to hear Thomas Merton agree with me: "It's true, and it is one of the things that I regret about the disappearance of sign language – we are going to lose a silent way of fraternal communication." He listened to

everything that was said with particular attention, never trying to impose his own ideas. So for the second question, "Should we be envisaging possibilities of eremitic life in some manner within the context of community life?" Thomas Merton limited himself to raising this question to the group: "Do you have genuine eremitic vocations?" When all answered in the negative, he added, "In that case, it's very simple: let's go on to the next point."

The third question was taken care of in the same way: "Is there a place for imagining the creation of small monastic groups supported by a community of the traditional type?" We then went on to the final question, which was considered very seriously: "Is it opportune to foster a certain connection between monasteries, and if so under what forms?" There again, he showed that he was very interested in what my Reverend Mother had to say and at the end of the session, he came over to tell me, "In Japan, things are excellent. It's essential to continue along that same line."

Obviously all this does not mean that he was for or against hermits, for or against the creation of small monastic communities. Quite simply, it's just that it seemed to me that he was paying attention to what those from the East were saying to him, and did not want to influence them one way or the other; perhaps he also did not want to go beyond the limits appropriate for a gathering of this type, limits that rather few of the experts would subsequently observe.

At the next meal, the conversation was lively; the Trappists spoke of the heroic days, of penances, vigils, etc. Thomas Merton told us of the departure and the voyage of the monks sent for the initial foundation of Gethsemani, who did not leave their coach for two days. A non-Trappist complained that all these hair-raising stories spoiled his appetite. Amid the laughter, Thomas Merton became serious: "And yet, we were happy, weren't we?"

The next day, Monday morning, there were two conferences: the first by Father Amyot, SJ, on "Monasticism in the Human and Social Context." As it was largely focused on Thailand, we decided to take a break. The second was that of Thomas Merton, "Marxism and Monastic Perspectives." Curiosity overcame laziness and shortly before 10:30 I headed out alone toward the conference hall, after promising my Reverend Mother to take careful notes. Outside, off by himself, Father Louis was walking, his notes in his hand. He actually gave a very fine, very interesting presentation, in which he said among other things:

"What is essential in monastic life is the transformation of the Christian person and of the Christian community, by a complete consecration to listening to the Word and to incorporating this Word into our life and experience. In St. Bernard's terms, it's not a matter of putting the bread of the Word in a box where it will become stale, but of eating it and so assimilating it into our life, making it one body with ourselves.

"Hence the importance of *transformation*, which is much more than *formation*. Often monastic formation teaches us to *conform*, rather than bringing about an interior transformation. All that it does is to show us how to play a role.

"Monastic authenticity should lead us to do more than play a role – even an Asiatic role. It's not enough to change certain external elements of monasticism – that can have some significance – but the goal is a profound and radical change of the monk and of the monastic community."

Yet behind me, the same Benedictines were saying, "We were expecting something else from

him! We're a bit disappointed." Evidently – but not everyone felt that way! After mass it happened that Father Merton was walking to the dining hall with a religious who asked him, "Father, do you think, then, that even America will be completely taken over by Communism?" He answered, "That has no importance for me. I am a monk and I will remain one until death and nothing will keep me from being one. Under what form? I can't tell. That's not important." (These words were the final testimony of Father Louis.)

At the meal, he was seated opposite me. A little farther on, Father Oshida, a harebrained Dominican, was in a lengthy discussion with my Reverend Mother about "zazen." The interchange, in Japanese, was intense, and Thomas Merton gave me a questioning look. I set about translating the conversation for him. Father Oshida was unsuccessfully trying to convince my Reverend Mother to do zazen at Seiboen. She replied that zen is more than zazen, which is just one means among others, and that one could certainly have the spirit of zen without doing zazen, and conversely, one could practice zazen without having the spirit of zen. "She is right. It is always a question of the spirit." And he encouraged my Reverend Mother by nodding his head not to let herself be overcome by her opponent. Then afterwards, he proposed to take the two of us, the next morning, with Mr. Vogel, the secretary of the I.C.I., to have us see the mendicant monks at their daily meal. "But," he added, "go all the same with the arranged group tour to visit the royal pagoda this afternoon. We may not have time to do it tomorrow morning." Then he got up, said grace, and left.

When we came back at 4 o'clock from the visit to Bangkok, we were told, "Thomas Merton is dead." The details are easily told. He had taken a shower before having a nap and then had turned on his fan, a large standing fan that was in poor condition. He was immediately electrocuted. On the floor above him, a Benedictine priest whose name I don't know, Father de Grunne, I think, heard a loud cry, then the noise of a fall. He didn't investigate. Only two hours later, when the same priest needed some document or other, did he go to knock on the door of Father Louis Merton. Getting no response, he became uneasy, went out, and through the large open window he saw Father lying on the ground with the fan on top of him. But it was too late to do anything. Later on they tried to say that he had had a heart attack, even though a Korean sister who was a doctor had examined him and concluded that it was death by electrocution, pure and simple; all this was to avoid the serious consequences that this would have entailed for the Thai Red Cross as well as for others. This also explains why the I.C.I. would also give this explanation even though no one believed it.

The Father Primate of the Benedictines gathered the Trappists together to ask us whether, in spite of Trappist custom, the body could be embalmed to return it to America, or if it would be better to leave it as it was and bury it in Thailand, at least for the time being. He was trying to get in touch with Gethsemani but hadn't yet managed to do so. All of us said that the body should definitely be embalmed and returned to America, whatever the cost. In the meantime, the police had made a short visit, then the American army, which had been notified, said that it would take care of returning the body by plane, and the ambassador had come. It was only afterwards that we were able to come where the body was laid out. All the Trappists were there by ourselves, and we had a vigil with Father for three hours, reciting the rosary and the psalms. At 10 o'clock our Fathers told us to go rest, and we said our goodbyes to Thomas Merton. He seemed to sleep, very calm, almost smiling. My

Reverend Mother rearranged him a little. His nostrils were distended with wadding so that his face was somewhat distorted. After some effort, with his clothes straightened out, his hands almost joined, the wadding removed, his appearance returned to normal. The next day, our Fathers told us that the army had come to take the body at 1:30 in the morning. At the same time, the Abbot of Gethsemani, finally contacted, refused to believe it was a heart problem and asked for an autopsy by doctors of the American army; this was done. But the conference was over before we could learn the results, if in fact it turned out that they could reach any definitive conclusion.

After the departure of Thomas, the conference had lost its attraction for many, and certainly if he had been there up until the end it would have been a quite different case. I don't know why Father had undertaken this trip to the East, why he was at this conference. I never had a conversation with him, strictly speaking, but what I saw and heard was more than enough for me to be able to say that he was a true monk, a true, simple human being. He accomplished his task in this place. My Reverend Mother and myself were happy to have had the grace to get to know him, and sad as well to have seen so little of him. Father Parker wept continuously while praying near him; Dom Simeon recovered his smile only in his dear Lantao.

We have felt, nonetheless, that it meant something to belong to the same family.