



FR. LOUIS MERTON
DIED DEC. 10, 1968

A Week with Thomas Merton

Road Scholars discover the man behind the 'Mountain'

STORY AND PHOTO BY CARLA CARLTON

On a vibrant late October day last year, the kind of day where the sky is so blue it doesn't look real, a small group of men and women stood in the shadow of the Abbey of Gethsemani. Before them were several identical small white crosses. On one of the crosses was a simple plaque:

*Father Louis Merton
Died Dec. 10, 1968*

For a week, they had been learning about the writing, the poetry, the art and the international influence of this man, better known to the world as Thomas Merton. But here, in the cloistered place where he spent his last 27 years, they experienced a little of what daily life was like for Father Louis—working harmoniously with his brothers, singing together with one voice, neither expecting nor receiving special treatment.

Twice a year, in the fall and in the spring, Bellarmine University offers “A Week with Thomas Merton” as part of the Road Scholar program, an international not-for-profit educational travel organization created in 1975 by Elderhostel that offers 5,500 tours in all 50 states and 150 countries.

The 21 participants in October's Merton program arrived from California, Indiana, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Michigan, North Carolina, New Jersey, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Vermont and Washington state. Only two were from Kentucky. Some knew very little about Merton; others, like Tom McEnaney of New Jersey, had had nearly a lifetime relationship with his work. He read Merton's *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* in the late 1960s, he said, and the book accompanied him through 26 years in the Navy. “It was a comfort to have him with me.”

Mr. McEnaney had visited Gethsemani once before, but the Road Scholar program taught him things he hadn't known about Merton, such as his embrace of ecumenism and his commitment to social issues.

In a session called “Merton the Artist,” Dr. Paul Pearson, director of Bellarmine's Merton Center, described how Merton's art changed in the early 1960s to reflect his evolution

from a “world-denying monk” to the “world-embracing monk of his last decade,” the one who was compelled to address controversial issues such as racism and the war in Vietnam. His representational art “no longer represented the agony of the age,” Dr. Pearson said.

A journal entry from Oct. 28, 1960, marks Merton's precise point of departure to the abstracts he called “calligraphies,” he said. This dichotomy is reflected in the Merton Center, where Merton's early work is displayed on the right side of the main conference room and the abstracts on the left.

Just as Merton's “new” writing was disturbing to some readers, this new artwork was not initially popular. In 1964, 26 calligraphies in a traveling exhibition were available for purchase, with the proceeds intended to support a scholarship for an African-American student at Spalding College in Louisville. Merton wrote to a friend: “None were sold in Milwaukee where the price was a hundred and fifty dollars. Now we are down to a hundred. If you wait until we crawl out of Santa Barbara, Cal. in September they will be ten cents apiece with a sheaf of green coupons into the bargain.” (Now extremely rare, the calligraphies have sold for as much as \$5,000 each, Dr. Pearson said.)

The Road Scholars visited Merton Square in downtown Louisville, where on March 18, 1958, Merton had his “shining like the sun” epiphany; and they toured St. Joseph Proto-Cathedral in Bardstown, the first Catholic cathedral built west of the Allegheny Mountains. But the highlight of the week was the pilgrimage to Gethsemani, an unadorned white brick-and-limestone structure that rises from the rolling hills 15 miles southwest of Bardstown.

They listened as the monks' voices rose to the exposed beams of the chapel during the Office of Nones. They walked in contemplation in the gardens where Merton once walked. And they stood in silence at his grave, indistinguishable from those of the other monks.

Like Merton, it was simple, and it was profound. ■