

MERTON: THE DESERT & THE TRAVELER

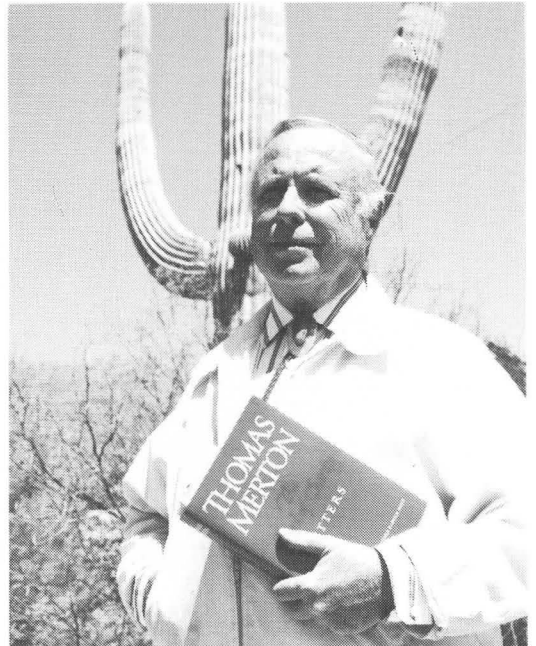
by **Robert E. Daggy**

Go, Child of God, upon the singing desert,
Where, with eyes of flame,
The roaming lion keeps thy road from harm.
Thomas Merton, "The Flight into Egypt"

I met a traveller from the holy desert.
Thomas Merton, "Prophet"

The desert — mysterious, deceptively barren, frequently foreboding — was a special and holy place for Thomas Merton. It is a theme which resonates through his life and work — from the images in his early poetry (quoted above) to his own trips to the desert in New Mexico in 1968. He edited himself the journal of the spring trip, finally published in 1983 as *Woods, Shore, Desert: A Notebook, May 1968*. And there was, of course, his earlier book, *The Wisdom of the Desert* (1960), in which he "rendered" several of the stories of the Desert Fathers of the fourth century. This project was important in his own "traveling" and had far reaching effects. During it, he came into contact and correspondence with Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, proponent of Zen Buddhism. The exchange with Suzuki about these "desert renderings" led him on to interest in similar sayings from other traditions besides Buddhism — Taoism, Confucianism, Islam, Tibetan Lamaism, and Javanese expressions. He continued to "render" sayings, often quoting Zen koans, interpreting Taoist proverbs in *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, and recasting Sufi stories in "Readings from Ibn Abbad." Michael Downey, in his review in this issue of *The School of Charity*, suggests that something of Merton's approach to spiritual direction sprang from the desert, from the study of the Desert Fathers.

But, in the final analysis, the desert was for Merton a symbol, a metaphor for traveling to a destination, a state of mind. He was never to live on any geographic desert. This issue of *The Merton Seasonal* is devoted to the idea of the desert and of the traveler. It was prompted by several factors, not the least of which was "Desert Storm." The desert might be a place of spiritual awakening, it might be holy, but Merton knew that it could also be harsh and cruel, even harsher and crueler when humans make it so.



FRANK X. TUOTI

Photo by Gail Tuoti

In November 1990 I went to the desert. I was privileged as President of *The International Thomas Merton Society* to visit the Arizona chapter in Tucson. My hosts were Frank X. Tuoti, president of the chapter, and his wife Gail. At their desert home I was able to experience something of the desert — its wildness, its alive-ness, its renewing sparseness, its incredible creatures. I addressed over 100 people at a special meeting of the chapter, remarkable to me for the mix of younger and older, lay and religious, Anglo and Hispanic. Later, during a visit to Father John Kane, C.Ss.R., at the Desert House of Prayer outside Tucson (where there is a Thomas Merton guest cottage), I noticed Milly Kaeser's stunning bronze bas relief of Merton hanging in the library near their "Merton Collection." I was impressed by it and expressed interest in it. A few weeks later, through the auspices of Fr. Kane, a newly cast bas relief arrived at the Thomas Merton Studies Center. Ms. Kaeser still had the original mold, cast a new sculpture, and donated it to the Merton Center. It is featured on the cover of this issue.

The Arizona desert inspired poems by Frank Tuoti and by another Tucson resident, my friend Will Inman. Tuoti's poem sounds the theme of the desert as a spot for answers. Inman's is a response to "Desert Storm," prompted by news of the uneasy denouement to the war. This war, to which Merton would most certainly have reacted, led Marianna Kane Neal to Gethsemani and to her reflection on Desert Storm which she calls "The Timelessness of Thomas Merton." And indeed much of what Merton wrote could be read in the context of this war, particularly his "Prayer for Peace," which reads as if it were a prayer about Desert Storm.

The theme of the "traveler" is carried out in three essays: Judith Anderholm examines the importance of Aldous Huxley's *Ends and Means* to Merton's journey; Devin Brown discusses Merton in relation to Joseph Campbell's study of the myth of the hero, particularly the idea of the hero's "departure;" and Bill Koch uses the image of "passage" in his comparison of Merton and Walt Whitman. Student Glenn Anthony Young gives a poetic account of his "First Encounter with Thomas Merton" — an encounter brought about by reading John Howard Griffin's *A Hidden Wholeness*. Mary Milligan and Michael Downey review the third volume of the Merton correspondence, Brother Patrick Hart's edition of *The School of Charity: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*. The issue concludes with our usual listing of publications by and about Merton.