

Be What You Are: Thomas Merton on Vocation

By **Albert Romkema**

Introduction

From his student days at Columbia University and his entrance into the Catholic Church in 1938, the insights of Thomas Merton expressed the unrest he experienced as he searched for, indeed yearned for, his own vocation. As the years passed, his desire to live out his vocation authentically remained central to his thoughts and actions. “Be who you are” became a common theme connecting much of his writing throughout his life. In our contemporary society, finding one’s vocation has remained a central question in the lives of many. This article endeavors to frame Merton’s experience from the perspective of *Merton the searcher*, whose central objective in life was to discover and live out the vocation to which he was called. Its twelve units were originally written to accompany twelve cases displaying selected works of Merton chosen from the *Romkema Collection* – to be presented as part of an exhibit of Merton’s writing on vocation. As such, emphasis is placed on the documents themselves in addition to the content. Combined as they are here, the individual units form a larger narrative of Merton’s thoughts on vocation.¹

College Years and Before – Vocation in the Making

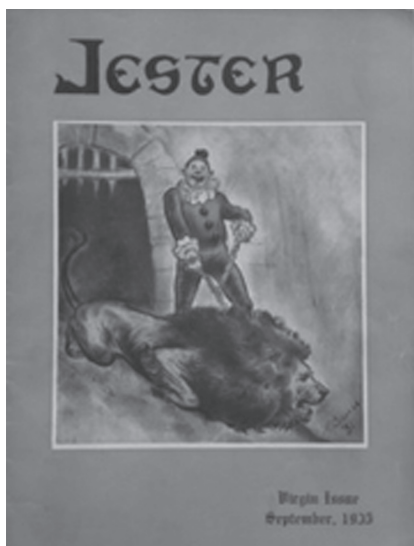
Merton’s academic life did not begin in glory. After graduating from Oakham, a British prep school, he went up to Cambridge where he found the fast crowd and fell in with them: “We were the ones who made all the noise when there was a ‘bump supper.’ We lived in the Lion Inn. We fought our way in and out of the ‘Red Cow.’”² In the winter term he began the study of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, later confessing that it was the one benefit he got out of Cambridge (see *SSM* 123). He still read greatly, especially mentioning Freud (see *SSM* 124), but that did not subdue the partying. Finally his guardian called him to account and he was confronted by the emptiness of his life – an unpleasant experience but with no lasting effect (see *SSM* 124-25). Soon he was on the boat for America to see his grandparents. He did not return, and the discovery of his true vocation was as yet a way in the distance.

He wound up at Columbia University in New York. There he felt immediately at home and soon found lifelong friends. He studied prodigiously, especially in the courses of the well-known English professor Mark Van Doren, who also became a friend. As his friend Ed Rice describes it: “He threw himself into campus life with a tremendous energy, joining a fraternity He was editor of *Columbian*, the college yearbook and art editor of *Jester*. He also wrote for the campus newspaper and the literary quarterly, and did reviews for *The New York Times*. In the middle



Albert Romkema

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**Figure 1 - September 1935
Columbia Jester magazine**

of the day and after classes he would come to the fourth floor of John Jay Hall, which was where campus activities were centered.”³

Rice gives us a picture of him to match a photograph in *The Columbian*: “He was always full of energy and seemed unchanged from day to day, cracking jokes, denouncing the Fascists, squares, being violently active, writing, drawing, involved in everything. He was invariably dressed like a businessman, in a neat suit and a double-breasted chesterfield topcoat, carrying a leather briefcase full of papers, articles, books and drawings. Noisy. Authoritative. Sure of himself. But behind it all was that relentless, restless search to find himself, to learn who he was” (Rice 25).

Rice quotes a paragraph from a novel Merton labored over for years, finally published in the year after his death: *My Argument with the Gestapo*.⁴ In it the thinly-disguised young hero is frequently pursued by the authorities, who ask him who he is: “if you want to identify me, ask me not where I live, or what I like to eat, or how I comb my hair, but ask me what I think I am living for, in detail, and ask

me what I think is keeping me from living fully for the thing I want to live for. Between these two answers you can determine the identity of any person. The better answer he has, the more of a person he is” (MAG 160-61). One can feel Merton’s ultimate life statement – be who you are – already reverberating early in his search for vocation. One day a fourth floor editor asked, ““Hey, Rice, aren’t you a Catholic?” I was, sort of. ‘Merton wants you to be his godfather’” (Rice 27). Merton’s friends Rice, Robert Lax, Bob Gerdy and Seymour Freedgood attended when on November 16, 1938 he was baptized, and later confirmed in the Catholic faith (see Rice 27). Merton had learned to listen for a call, but was not to discern the next clear answer until he had graduated from university. Even after that time, and for many years following, he wrestled with reconciling who he was to become.

Merton’s Family and Friends – A Journey Together

Thomas Merton’s family and friends were a major source of support on his journey, and were instrumental in his finding his true vocation. Indeed, Merton came to understand how we are all helping each other on our road to salvation. He writes: “No man lives for himself alone. To live for oneself alone is to die. We grow and flourish in our own lives in so far as we live for others and through others. What we ourselves lack, God has given them. They must complete us where we are deficient. Hence we must always remain open to one another so that we can always share with each other.”⁵

His close friend Robert Lax was instrumental in Merton’s developing sense of vocation. While in college, Merton recognized that Lax was “much wiser than I, and had clearer vision, and was, in fact, corresponding much more truly to the grace of God than I” (SSM 237). Lax became a well-

known poet and artist and, like Merton's, his correspondence was spread far and wide to those



Figure 2 - *Pax* by Robert Lax (1957)

Edward Rice was another of Merton's friends. He was a Catholic already when they were at Columbia together and proved a good sounding board for Merton on his journey toward becoming a Catholic himself. Later, Rice experienced real success during the 1950s and '60s in founding and acting as editor of the ground-breaking ecumenical magazine *Jubilee*. Rice writes to a friend referring to Merton as a "mystical iceberg; we only see the tip."⁶ Merton became one of *Jubilee*'s most prolific contributors over the years, and the magazine helped him become a household name in the Catholic community.

There were others too, who made an impression on Merton's journey. Respected abstract artist Ad Reinhardt was also part of the Columbia group. Reinhardt shared Merton's enjoyment of cartooning during their college years and they both contributed artwork as staff of *Jester*. Even then Merton saw a spiritual element in Reinhardt's work. In his journal of 1940 he writes: "Reinhardt's abstract art is pure and religious. It flies away from all naturalism, from all representation to pure formal and intellectual values."⁷

seeking spiritual guidance. Especially interesting is the periodical *Pax*, which Lax later founded and published. *Pax* was a "magazine" of poetry and art in which the work was the free contribution of the artists "as their way of working toward an appreciation of the ideal of an enduring peace: the work of justice, the fruit of love."

Merton recalls a conversation between himself and Lax as they walked down Sixth Avenue in New York. The stunningly direct words that follow helped Merton validate his developing search for vocation from that moment forward: "What do you want to be, anyway?" . . . 'I don't know; I guess what I want is to be a good Catholic.' 'What do you mean, you want to be a good Catholic?' The explanation I gave was lame enough, and expressed my confusion, and betrayed how little I had really thought about it at all. Lax did not accept it. . . . 'what you should say is that you want to be a saint.' A Saint! The thought struck me as a little weird. I said: 'How do you expect me to become a saint?' 'By wanting to,' said Lax, simply. . . . 'All that is necessary to be a saint is to want to be one. Don't you believe that God will make you what He created you to be, if you will consent to let Him do it? All you have to do is desire it'" (SSM 260-61).

Poetry Books – Merton’s First Book, *Thirty Poems*

In 1944 New Directions published Merton’s first book entitled *Thirty Poems*.⁸ It was met with extraordinarily favorable reviews with Merton being praised by Robert Lowell in *Commonweal* as “easily the most promising of our American Catholic Poets.”⁹ It was included in New Direction’s Poet of the Month Series (1941-1944) that ran for 42 issues. Each issue was printed by a different Free Press and was housed in a specially labeled slip case. The series is a now rare testament to Merton’s early development as writer, and his inclusion in the avant-garde.

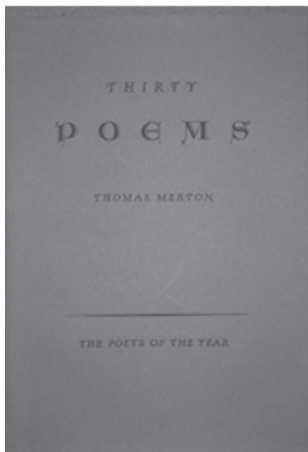


Figure 3 - *Thirty Poems* (1944)

Before being published however, Merton had entered the Abbey of Gethsemani in December of 1941 and given away or deposited with friends the writing he had done up to that time. He had become a monk, fully intending to cease writing as a vocation. Fortunately his superiors thought otherwise and encouraged him to continue writing, especially poetry.

One of Merton’s most famous and oft-quoted poems was written while he was in mourning. Tragic news had arrived at Easter in 1943 that Merton’s brother John Paul, who had joined the Canadian Air Force, was missing in action. Soon afterward the cable came, announcing his death and burial at sea. The poem is entitled, “For My Brother, Reported Missing in Action, 1943”:

Sweet brother, if I do not sleep
 My eyes are flowers for your tomb;
 And if I cannot eat my bread,
 My fasts shall live like willows where you died.
 If in the heat I find no water for my thirst,
 My thirst shall turn to springs for you, poor traveller.¹⁰

Merton had lost his last close family member. Perhaps to console his friend, Bob Lax made a surprise visit at Christmas, telling Merton, to his delight, that he had become a Catholic. Lax left bearing a little folder of poems, including “For My Brother,” to give to Mark Van Doren, who passed them on to James Laughlin of New Directions. The next spring Merton heard that Laughlin wanted to publish them.¹¹

Laughlin’s New Directions specialized in publishing experimental and avant-garde writers. Laughlin had immediately recognized Merton’s talent, and fueled his vocation as a writer over the years by sending him books by other ND writers, keeping him up to date in the world of poetry and providing a much-needed source of stimulus for someone living the austere life of a Trappist.



Figure 4 -
 The Poet of the Year 1944

Laughlin hoped to bid on *The Seven Storey Mountain* and Merton had promised him a chance, but it turned out that was not in his power. Merton apologized to him later, although knowing that the runaway best-seller was probably too big for the size of Laughlin's publishing house.¹²

Laughlin was repeatedly rewarded for his patience by the works Merton did send him, especially *Seeds of Contemplation*,¹³ second only to *Mountain* in its popularity. New Directions became Merton's publisher of poetry as well as some of his more unusual and durable works: *The Way of Chuang Tzu*,¹⁴ *Wisdom of the Desert*,¹⁵ *Raids on the Unspeakable*¹⁶ and *Gandhi on Nonviolence*.¹⁷

Seminal Text (*The Seven Storey Mountain*) – Merton as Writer and Monk

"On the last day of January 1915, under the sign of the Water Bearer, in a year of a great war, and down in the shadow of some French mountains on the borders of Spain, I came into the world" (SSM 3). So began the book that made Thomas Merton famous. It was an instant success. Robert

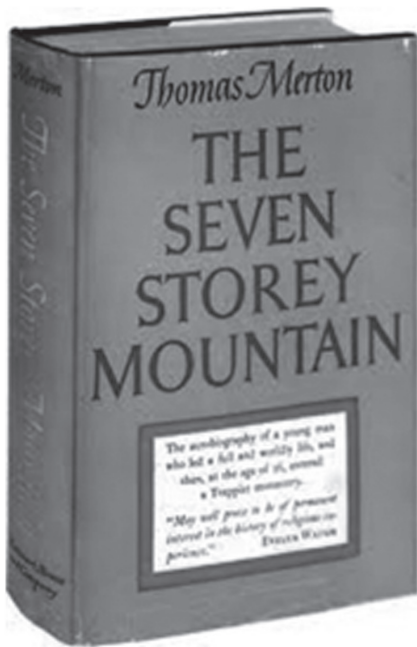


Figure 5 - *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948)

Giroux was another friend from the Columbia days, and an editor at Harcourt, Brace and Company. He told his boss at the time that he was sure it would find an audience, but even he could not have known just how large this audience would be. In the first month after its release it sold 12,951 hard-cover copies, then jumped to over 31,000 the next month and over 600,000 copies sold in the first year alone. It became the third bestselling non-fiction book of 1949 even though *The New York Times* refused at first to put it on their bestseller list because it was a religious book.¹⁸ By 2008 there were 70 editions in 16 languages,¹⁹ and it had been named by the *National Review* as one of the 100 best non-fiction books of the twentieth century.²⁰ It has become one of the most widely read spiritual autobiographies ever written – but it was almost never written, and as can be seen below, it was surely just the beginning of the Merton's journey toward a unified and integrated vocation.

The importance of Merton developing and accepting his vocation of writer cannot be overstated. Through it he would touch his own reality while sharing with others the human struggle at its most basic level. When Merton entered the monastery in 1941 he had great difficulty justifying having the vocation of both writer and monk. He had been clearly ready to stop writing altogether and become *just* a monk. As Merton biographer William Shannon notes, "If one remembers his decision to 'give up everything' when he chose Gethsemani over Harlem, he must have taken for granted that his writing would be part of that 'everything'" (Shannon 130). His abbot, Frederic Dunne, however, instructed Merton to continue to write poetry and soon directed him to pen his

autobiography as well. Initially Merton's vow of obedience helped resolve this dilemma, but only temporarily. He struggled with his desire to enter into himself in order to *create* (as a writer), while at the same time believing that a contemplative must leave himself and *be created* by God. In 1948 he laments, "But then there was this shadow, this double, this writer who had followed me into the cloister. He is still on my track. He rides my shoulders, sometimes, like the old man of the sea. I cannot lose him" (*SSM* 410).

After many years of struggle he eventually came to realize that assimilating his gifts into a unified vocation would help integrate the many aspects of his life. By 1963, five years before his death, Merton confirmed this development: "There are three gifts I have received, for which I can never be grateful enough: first, my Catholic faith; second, my monastic vocation; third, the calling to be a writer and share my beliefs with others."²¹

Mimeographs – A Writer by Vocation

The mimeographed essay became an important medium Merton used to disseminate his thoughts, initially on war and peace. Mimeograph machines were a relatively cheap and accessible means of producing multiple copies of a text long before the days of word processors and personal printers.²² Text was typed onto a special stencil and then hand-cranked through a mimeograph machine one page at a time by forcing a replenishable supply of ink through the stencil master. Usually a couple of hundred copies or more could be produced using a single stencil, depending on the quality of the stencil.

In 1962 Merton's abbot, Dom James Fox, forwarded instructions from Abbot General Gabriel Sortais that Merton cease all publications on war, specifically nuclear war. At the time of the ban, Merton was broadening the vision of his mission by not only responding to individuals about their issue, but responding to the issues themselves. He had struggled deeply over whether to enter into dialogue on the issue of war and peace for some time, but finally could be silent no longer. It is important to realize that at that time, there were few Catholic priests or other religious persons writing on the topic, so it represented for Merton a personal call to action. He writes to Dorothy Day in 1961: "why this awful silence and apathy on the part of Catholics, clergy, hierarchy, lay people on this terrible issue on which the very continued existence of the human race depends?"²³ It went to the very fabric of his vocation as he decided that he could no longer, in good conscience, be a monk and not be concerned for the welfare of those outside the monastery.

Thus, Merton did not stop writing about war; he merely stopped publishing these writings. Once essays were completed, instead of sending them for publication he mimeographed copies and sent them out to a long list of friends and acquaintances. The general attitude of the time was that mimeographing was not publication, so this would not contravene the Abbot General's edict (see *PPCE* xlviii). He also gave strict instructions for the mimeographs not to be published (see *HGL* 266). At times in the order of 100 or more copies were distributed. There were a couple of instances however, where his obedience to the Abbot General's decree was a little less apparent. At least twice he published articles on the war in Dorothy Day's *Catholic Worker* under pen names, Benedict Monk (a review of *The Christian Failure* by Ignace Lepp [January, 1963]) and Benedict Moore ("Danish Non-Violent Resistance to Hitler" [July-August 1963]).

By distributing these mimeographs perhaps Merton's hope was that the publication ban might someday be lifted and that these writings could eventually reach a wider audience. Although many of the mimeographs have indeed been published over the years, significant works such as *Peace in the Post-Christian Era and Cold War Letters*²⁴ were not published until 2004 and 2006 respectively. Others, such as *Art and Worship*, have yet to be published, although in this case it has been deemed by some as not suitable for publication.

Extraordinary Publications

Merton's Limited Apostolate

In 1958 Merton wrote to Pope John XXIII describing apostolic opportunities which had “produced striking effects among artists, writers, publishers, poets, etc., who have become my friends without my having to leave the cloister” (*HGL* 482). Merton envisioned this dialogue through letters, conferences and other ecumenical meetings at the monastery – balanced against his monastic responsibilities.

In 1967 the Abbey obtained an offset printing press which allowed Merton to produce his own magazine, “devoted to poetry and to some unusual prose,”²⁵ and allowed for a furthering of this apostolate. The magazine, entitled *Monks Pond*, was eventually published in 1968 as a limited run of 4 issues. It presented over 170 poems and approximately 20 prose pieces. Originals are now rare, as no more than 150-200 copies of each were printed, but a facsimile edition edited by Robert Daggy appeared in 1989. Daggy notes that “*Monks Pond* reflected Merton's love of literature for its own sake” (*MP* x) – there was no money involved, either in paying contributors or in subscription charges. He quotes Merton's letter to Paul C. Metcalf: it was “largely a matter of people getting to know people” (*MP* x).

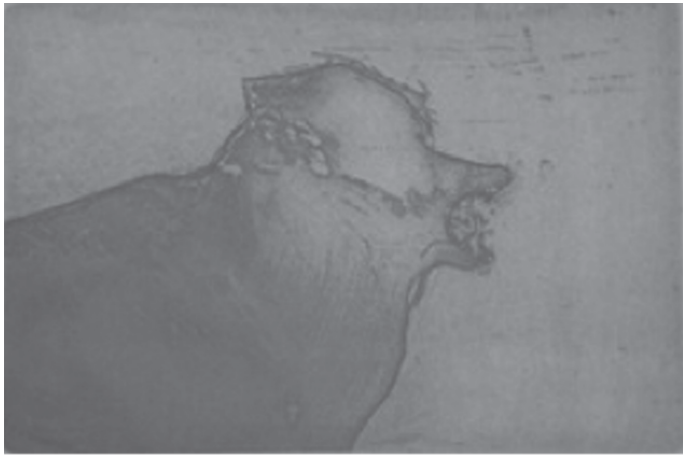


Figure 6 - *Landscape, Prophet and Wild-Dog* etching (1968)

Two Artists, One Exquisite Book

One of Merton's publication gems was released the year of his death. *Landscape, Prophet and Wild-Dog*,²⁶ illustrating one of Merton poems, is an unbound portfolio in a slipcase accompanied by six etchings by Don Cortese. It was hand-set and printed at Cortese's Black Bird Press and is the smallest limited edition of a work by Merton (a total edition of 25) – and therefore remains an item rarely enjoyed by admirers first-hand. Although Cortese never met Merton, he had hoped to have him sign the series, but Merton's death intervened. The sheer power of the etchings is testament to how one person's vocation can influence another's – in this case inspiring a piece of extraordinary artwork.

Merton's Visual Art

Merton sketched, cartooned and drew all his life, having perhaps picked up the habit (and the talent) from his artist father. He called his later abstract work done with a Japanese brush “calligraphies,” and created a gallery show of them in Louisville which also toured other cities. In his notes which accompanied the exhibition Merton writes: “If these drawings are able to persist in a certain autonomy and fidelity, they may continue to awaken possibilities . . . they may quietly and independently continue to invent themselves” (RU 182).

A ground-breaking book by Roger Lipsey describes Merton’s art, beginning with his work on Columbia’s humor magazine, *Jester*, and extending to his exploration of American abstract expressionism and Zen calligraphy, which had “so impressed him with its expressive potential, its possible value as part of his religious search.”²⁷



**Figure 7 - Hagia Sophia
Crowning the Young Christ**

Stamperia del Santuccio and Thomas Merton – A Collaboration of Genius

The collaboration between Thomas Merton and Victor Hammer was unique and extraordinary. Hammer, an artist and printer born in Vienna in 1882, moved to the United States in 1939. He and his wife Carolyn became Merton’s most frequent visitors to the monastery, discussing projects and collaborating soon after first meeting in 1955. Direct contact with a practicing artist must have been a source of creative nourishment for Merton, but it was more than that – there was a kinship between them that gave strength to both men. Merton writes: “Victor is more of a monk than anybody I know, because he is rooted in his own solitude, his integrity and his work which receives no publicity. . . . There’s therefore in him a humility and honor together, a kind of monastic silence.”²⁸



**Figure 8 -
Two-color initial from
What Ought I to Do? (1959)**

On one of his visits to Hammer’s home, Merton asked Hammer to discuss a painting he had rendered of a woman with a young boy, on whom she was placing a crown. Hammer revealed that he had intended a Madonna and the Christ child, but that he no longer knew who the woman was. Merton identified her as *Hagia Sophia* (Holy Wisdom), represented by Mary, conferring the crown of human nature on the child Christ.²⁹ Merton drew on this inspiration to create the prose-poem *Hagia Sophia*, which Hammer published first in 1962 (an edition of 69 copies),³⁰ republished in 1978 (an edition of 50 copies).³¹ In all, Hammer would publish five titles for Merton, all limited editions, using a hand-press brought from Italy which became King Library Press, and using its Italian imprint, Stamperia del Santuccio (Press of the Little Saint). Three of these formed a portion of Hammer’s Opus Series including *What Ought I to Do? Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Opus XV),³² *The Solitary Life* (Opus XVI),³³ and *Hagia Sophia* (Opus XVII), all created to honor Merton’s monastic spirituality. They would “reflect the same understated elegance and impeccable workmanship that had brought Victor Hammer a reputation as a preeminent fine

printer.³⁴ Hammer used the medieval illuminated manuscript as template in the design of the ornate two-colour initials of the dust jackets and American Uncial letter forms to promote a sense of the sacred, so central to Hammer's work, and Merton's. Both Hammer and Merton were supreme artists. When they collaborated, the results were elegant masterworks.

Original Correspondence and Signed/Presentation Copies – Living a Vocation

The further Merton journeyed into monastic solitude the more he found himself drawn toward others. He writes, “Even though he may be physically alone the solitary remains united to others



Figure 9 - TLS on Abbey of Gethsemani Letterhead

and lives in profound solidarity with them.”³⁵ This awareness transformed Merton's life, creating apertures to unexpected experiences. While in Louisville on March 18, 1958 he was suddenly overcome by a glimpse of our shared vocation, *love*. He writes: “In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. . . . It is a glorious destiny to be a member of the human race There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.”³⁶

This experience, and others like it, helped draw Merton into monastic solitude. William Shannon notes that “his solitude had issued into what all true solitude must become: compassion” (Shannon 178). With compassion came a commitment to maintaining relationships with those outside the monastery. In a letter to Pope John XXIII dated November 10, 1958, Merton identified abundant apostolic opportunities that existed through his vast correspondence. He continues: “I am beginning to think seriously of the possibility of a monastic foundation, whose purpose would be to exercise a contemplative apostolate of this kind. This is to say, a foundation in which the members would be monks and contemplatives, but at the same time would receive special groups, such as writers, intellectuals, etc., into their house for retreats and discussion” (*HGL* 482-83). He would continue to develop this statement for the rest of his life. The hermitage, which Merton eventually called home in 1965, was constructed in 1960 for the purpose of hosting ecumenical meetings, as proposed in Merton's letter to the Pope (see Shannon 183).

Beginning with the publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton received thousands of letters from admirers; many were adulatory, allowing for form replies, but many more required considered responses. It is a marvel that he could respond to so many of them. The volume of correspondence is demonstrated by the number of original letters housed at the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University in Kentucky (a repository of Merton's work that he himself established) – over fifteen thousand pieces of correspondence to over twenty-one hundred correspondents. Five volumes documenting these letters have now been published,³⁷ and double-sided correspondences are still appearing.³⁸ By the mid-1960s Merton was unable to keep up with the enormous amounts of correspondence he was receiving. In order not disappoint his growing list of acquaintances, he

composed circular letters for mass distribution, his Advent–Christmas letters and Easter letters, for example (see *RJ* 88-121).

***Cistercian Life* and related books on Gethsemani and the Cistercian Order – A Vocation of Growth**

There have been at least ten English editions published of the pamphlet *Cistercian Life*, and six in other languages. It was introduced in 1964 as *Come to the Mountain* for St. Benedict’s Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado³⁹ and was most recently published in 2001 for Our Lady of Holy Spirit Abbey in Georgia.⁴⁰ In print for almost forty years, it is a vocational booklet which gives information on the contemporary contemplative life. Merton scholar John King has given a detailed account of its various editions and languages of publication.⁴¹ Merton first read an earlier version of the booklet during his 1941 retreat at Gethsemani. He could not have suspected at the time that within a few years he would re-write it and then author another eight books and pamphlets on Gethsemani and the Cistercian Order, beginning in 1946.

Merton bibliographer Patricia Burton has included a description of these books in her recent bibliography (Burton 85).

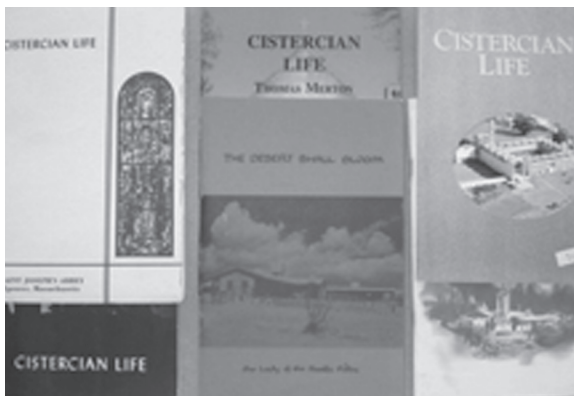


Figure 10 - A selection of editions of Merton’s *Cistercian Life*

Surprisingly, Merton had trouble writing the pamphlet, complaining in his journal: “I have not been able to finish the Snowmass pamphlet and am disgusted with it. It is the worst piece of writing I have done in years. . . . clearly I have no longer any business even thinking about writing such things.”³⁴² He did complete the project however, and it has enjoyed unusual staying power, considering Merton’s initial opinion of it. This is perhaps because of Merton’s refusal to focus solely on the rules of the life, but rather describing the living of it, and the life-defining spirituality involved. This emphasis on the experience of being a monk transformed another vector of Merton’s vocation, teaching.

Merton served as novice master at Gethsemani for ten years (1955-1965), during which he wrote his own textbooks to replace the rather dry, super-rational theology generally taught to aspiring monks. Approaching monasticism from an experiential viewpoint helped him instruct young monks not to *read the Bible* as something to be used, but to *be read by* the Bible as something experienced, listened to. These conference notes have now been published as a series of six volumes to date in the Monastic Wisdom Series, edited by Patrick F. O’Connell.⁴³

Periodicals and Publications – A Continuing Legacy

Despite being immersed in a strict monastic discipline of worship and prayer, Merton was a highly productive writer, and very popular. As his popularity grew, he became amazed and perplexed at the volume of requests he received for articles. He comments: “People are now convinced that I

secrete articles like perspiration. . . . And yet, if people were to really read me, they might not take it for granted that I could simply reach into the back of my mind for a dish of ready-to-serve Catholic answers about everything under the sun” (CGB 38).

Merton understood that he didn’t have all the answers, but he came to believe that a person is known better for his questions. Shannon surmised that Merton’s affinity for this inductive methodology, based on *the question*, helped him understand that the steps made in discovering an answer could provide a benefit equal to the answer itself (see Shannon 167). Employing this approach yielded inner growth, but his appreciation for the *fruit of unanswered questions* also shaped his writing, particularly in such books as *No Man Is an Island*⁴⁴ and *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*.

A sample of periodicals with Merton content – *Antigonish Review*, *Chimera*, *Cistercian Studies*, *Collectanea Cisterciensia*, *Continuum*, *El Corno Emplumado*, *Good Work*, *The Hudson Review*, *Jester*, *The Journal of Pastoral Counseling*, *Jubilee*, *Kayak*, *Kentucky Poetry Review*, *Latitudes*, *The Lugano Review*, *The Merton Seasonal*, *The Merton Annual*, *Monastic Studies*, *The Month*, *Motive*, *New Mexico*, *Perspectives USA*, *Poetry*, *The Sewanee Review*, *Spirit*, *Voyages* etc. – provides evidence of the depth of his interests and the breadth of his reach. Merton contributed articles and poetry to numerous periodicals; one in particular was *Jubilee* magazine. *Jubilee* represents the vision of Columbia friend Ed Rice and has long been considered among the most important Catholic lay periodicals ever produced. It ceased operation in 1967 after fourteen years of publication, something Merton viewed as a personal failure.⁴⁵ The March 1966 issue contains a cover photo and feature article on Merton. (To search for particular titles of Merton’s writing there is a comprehensive Title Search available, located in the recently published Merton bibliography *More Than Silence*).

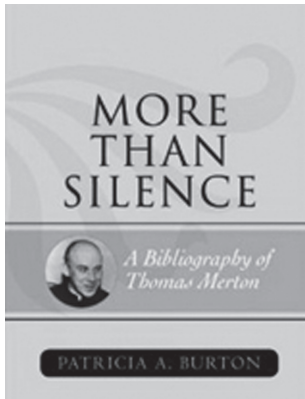


Figure 12 - *More than Silence*
Merton Bibliography (2008)

There are currently a number of journals being produced centered on Merton’s writing and thought. *The Merton Seasonal* has been in continuous publication since 1976; *The Merton Journal* of Great Britain and Ireland since 1994; and *The Merton Annual* since 1988.

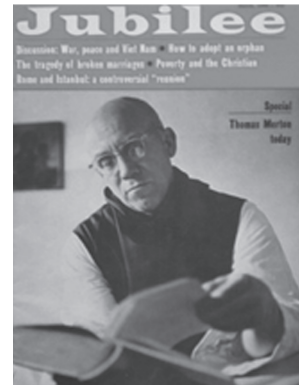


Figure 11 - March 1966
Jubilee magazine

Journals and First Editions – Merton’s Best Writing

There is no better way of getting to know Merton than through his journals.⁴⁶ They detail his day-to-day life, written with no thought of censorship. The most profound events of his life are represented in these volumes, from his vocational struggles, to his experience of love, to his mystical discovery of God. Even Merton admits “that my best writing has always been in Journals and such things – notebooks” (Mott 310). The first entries of the published journals are from 1939, just before Merton’s entrance into the monastery. Merton had occasionally kept a journal in his youth as well but these seem not to have survived (see *RM* xi). The complexity of his journal-making bears description as it demonstrates Merton’s commitment to his craft. He kept more than one journal

during his pre-monastic years. He maintained a hand-written legal-sized, bound ledger for his private journal which was shown to nobody, and which could not be published until 25 years after his death (as instructed in his will). By 1940 he also had begun a second journal, containing selected portions of the first, which was typed, edited and meant to be shared. A portion of these later was published as *The Secular Journal*⁴⁷ (a similar process later led to the publication of revised journals as *The Sign of Jonas*,⁴⁸ *Conjectures and A Vow of Conversation*⁴⁹), while a further portion was meant to remain semiprivate, intended for limited circulation only (see Mott 160). He also kept a succession of spiral-bound notebooks, used for taking notes on his readings.

The *first edition* of a book, unless qualified in some way, is considered to mean the *first impression* of the *first edition*, or the whole number of copies printed at its first run, without the type or plates being removed from the press.⁵⁰ Generally speaking, the first edition is the most valuable, and therefore most desirable. For *modern first editions* the presence and condition of a book's dust jacket can greatly affect the value of a book as collectors prefer books to be as near as possible to the first appearance of the book in every way.

Reviewing the list of Merton's first editions demonstrates his productivity. Despite his monastic responsibilities he found time to author over 70 books, keep multiple detailed journals as noted above, and pen thousands of letters of correspondence. One question often asked by the prospective Merton reader is which book to begin with. Besides *The Seven Storey Mountain*, which has become the primary entrance into the writing of Merton, another book often suggested is *No Man Is an Island*. Of vocation Merton succinctly writes there: "For each one of us, there is only one thing necessary: to fulfill our own destiny, according to God's will, to be what God wants us to be." (*NMI* 131)

Foreign Language Editions – An Ever Greater Deepening

There has been much commentary on Merton's gradual movement toward dialogue with other faith traditions. His ongoing discussions with friends from other Christian denominations and also with those from Jewish, Buddhist and Islamic traditions made some question his stability as a monk of Gethsemani. This could not be further from the truth. The further Merton advanced toward an integrated view of what it meant to be a cloistered monk, the less he felt threatened by the views and opinions of other traditions, and the more he was willing to learn from them. He asserts, "If I affirm myself as a Catholic merely by denying all that is Muslim, Jewish, Protestant, Hindu, Buddhist, etc., in the end I will find that there is not much left for me to affirm as a Catholic: and certainly no breath of the Spirit with which to affirm it" (*CGB* 129). Merton believed it more useful to share the experience of the divine light than to focus only on differences between beliefs. His respect for the experience of God made him cautious of words and ideas with "infinite complexities and subtleties which are beyond resolution" (*HGL* 54). To his Anglican friend Etta Gullick he proclaims: "To me



Figure 13 - *No Man is an Island* (1955)



Figure 14 -
Japanese translation of
The Seven Storey Mountain (1966)

it is enough to be united with people in love and in the Holy Spirit” (HGL 378).

Merton’s books have been translated into over thirty languages. For the Japanese edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain*⁵¹ he was asked to write a Preface. Doing so made it the only “special” Preface that Merton wrote for a later edition of this work.⁵² In it, he dispels notions that he was moving away from monasticism and then elaborates, “If I have ever had any desire for change, it has been for a more solitary, more ‘monastic’ way. But precisely because of this it can be said that I am in some sense everywhere. My monastery is not a home. . . . but rather a place in which I disappear from the world as an object of interest in order to be everywhere in it by hiddenness and compassion” (HR 65).

Merton’s journey was an interior one, “a matter of growth, deepening and an ever greater surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts.”⁵³ During the final trip of his life, while traveling to a conference on monasticism in Bangkok, Thailand, he experienced an epiphany, one which would convey to him an answer, of sorts, to a long-standing question, perhaps made possible after a lifetime of searching. While visiting the ancient ruined city of Polonnaruwa in Sri Lanka with its three enormous stone Buddhas, he was at once jolted into another reality: “Looking at these figures I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious. . . . I don’t know when in my life I have ever had such a sense of beauty and spiritual validity running together in one aesthetic illumination. . . . I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for. I don’t know what else remains but I have now seen and pierced through the surface and have got beyond the shadow and the disguise.”⁵⁴

1. Thanks must be given to renowned Merton bibliographer Patricia Burton for aiding in the editing of this writing, and for her tireless attempt to make me a better writer – not always an easy task.
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3. Edward Rice, *The Man in the Sycamore Tree: The Good Times and Hard Life of Thomas Merton* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970) 25; subsequent references will be cited as “Rice” parenthetically in the text.
4. Thomas Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo: A Macaronic Journal* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969); subsequent references will be cited as “MAG” parenthetically in the text.
5. Thomas Merton, *Seasons of Celebration* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1965) 229.
6. Private correspondence, Romkema Collection.
7. Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation. Journals, vol. 1: 1939-1941*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995) 128; subsequent references will be cited as “RM” parenthetically in the text.
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11. See William H. Shannon, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 120-21; subsequent references will be cited as “Shannon” parenthetically in the text.

12. Thomas Merton and James Laughlin, *Selected Letters*, ed. David D. Cooper (New York: Norton, 1997) 11-13.
13. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1949); see also Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961).
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18. See Robert Giroux, Introduction to Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain, 50th Anniversary Edition* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1998) xvi.
19. See Patricia A. Burton, with Albert Romkema, *More Than Silence: A Bibliography of Thomas Merton* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008) xiii; subsequent references will be cited as “Burton” parenthetically in the text.
20. See http://old.nationalreview.com/100best/100_books.html.
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23. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 139; subsequent references will be cited as “HGL” parenthetically in the text.
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29. See Patrick F. O’Connell, “Hagia Sophia,” in William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O’Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002) 191.
30. Thomas Merton, *Hagia Sophia* (Lexington, KY: Stamperia del Santuccio, 1962).
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34. David Cooper, “Victor Hammer and Thomas Merton: A Friendship *Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam*,” *The Kentucky Review* 7.2 (1987) 12.
35. Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960) 188.
36. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 140-41; subsequent references will be cited as “CGB” parenthetically in the text.
37. *Hidden Ground of Love; Road to Joy*; Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: Letters on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990); Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993); Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994)..
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