

THOMAS MERTON - STAR AND HERO!

by Robert E. Daggy

One of the questions I am most frequently asked as Curator of the Thomas Merton Studies Center is, with variations, "How do you account for Merton's continuing and increasing popularity?" That Merton's popularity has not waned in the twelve years since his death, that it is in fact increasing, is obvious. I have only to look around my office in Bonaventure Hall on the Bellarmine campus to know that. The walls are filled with photographs and drawings of Merton, most of the drawings made since his death. Rows of black-bound theses on Merton, the majority completed during my tenure, fill several shelves. Translations of Merton into languages other than English fill other shelves and translation continues. Since 1974, most of his major writings have gone into new American editions, a score of books and hundreds of articles have been written about him. Monica Furlong's recent book, *Merton: a biography*, the first in-depth biographical study, has already gone into its third printing. These are facts, but how does one explain them? And do we need to explain them?

Probably so --- since the question is asked and since several writers have recently tried to explain the Merton phenomenon. Tony Padovano, for instance, calls Merton a "symbol" in his forthcoming book *The human journey: Thomas Merton, symbol of a century*. *The New York Times Book Review* on September 7, 1980 called Merton "a philosopher whose influence is now in the ascendant." It is not going too far to say that Merton has emerged in the last five or so years as one of the signal figures of our time.

A partial explanation of Merton's popularity may be in his ability to translate his own life into terms meaningful for others. In discussing the "Uses of the Hero" in his book *Collective search for identity*, sociologist Orrin Klapp states:

The function of the hero is to supply a vicarious voyage through what he does himself. This need not be an important deed nor the doer a great man... The essential quality for a vicarious voyage, however, is not merely an adventure but an exciting movement or change of status: finding oneself in a new situation revealing unexpected resources --- perhaps some variation of the ugly duckling theme." (pp.213-214)

In this way perhaps Merton's search for God becomes everyman's search for God. By aiding us in our search by telling of his own search, Merton becomes a "hero." This is precisely the line taken by Sr. Marie-Bernard Said, O.S.B., in her essay "A twentieth-century monk," published in *Cistercian Studies*. According to Sr. Said, what is important is not that Merton was a monk, but that he was a twentieth-century monk with an important message for those who live in the twentieth-century.

How was it possible for Thomas Merton to become such a meaningful monastic figure for the times in which we live? But perhaps I should first ask yet another question: why was Thomas Merton --- known in religion as Father Louis O.C.S.O. --- such a success with the young and the not so young in search of God? Would it be right to say that there is a kind of Merton craze, on the lines of those for Zen, Yoga, T.M. (Transcendental Meditation), gurus, and other *orientalia*? We have, without doubt, witnessed a certain amount of exaggeration, an almost fanatical adulation, a type of hero worship; but this, after all, is normal enough, part and parcel of human nature. Israel had its idols, Greco-Roman antiquity its gods, and the Christian Middle Ages their *saints* whose 'Lives' were a source of spiritual edification. Today more than ever do we need men of prowess, *stars*, somewhat idealised leaders to urge us on our way and give us a sense of achievement. Could it then be said that it fell to Thomas Merton to help satisfy this need of humanity? Maybe for many among us he is the shining star in a spiritual and cultural night without stars. There is an element of truth in all this, but there is much more to it, and much that is far more serious. Louis Merton is the first, perhaps the only, American who has succeeded in making intelligible for his contemporaries and spiritual themes of the past, that heritage the

first Christian centuries had passed on to us in, it is true, the most beautiful of terms, but terms which for many had become quite meaningless. Thomas Merton's genius, and hence his success, lay in his ability to put what had been bequeathed to us within our grasp. This he did through his writings, but also in the way he lived his life. He was to the very end a twentieth-century man and a twentieth-century monk.

Merton's close friend and correspondent, Colman McCarthy, concludes in his essay "Rediscovering Thomas Merton" that Merton did supply a "vicarious voyage" by showing what he did himself. Readers find Merton struggling with the same problems, the same search for God, going on the same journey as they.

What the biographers are telling us is something that readers of Merton will understand for themselves soon after they get into his work: however creative and compassionate he was, he was still struggling to make sense out of the same problems that hound the rest of us... Merton overflowed with soft empathy for others who found the going rough.

Fr. James B. Simpson, executive director of *The Anglican Digest* in reviewing Monica Furlong's biography, comes finally to the question: "How does the world regard Merton these dozen years after his death?" He answers, in terms close to those of Sr. Said and Colman McCarthy:

With considerable interest --- and with gratefulness --- many would agree for the shining light he shared in recording his spiritual journey from campus to cloister and for the faithfulness with which he continued to record, poetically but objectively, his spiritual temperature... The world is the richer for it, and for Furlong's insightful interpretation.

This then would seem to be the answer for the moment to the reasons for Merton's continuing popularity a decade and more after his death. His journey becomes in a sense all our journeys. Like any "star" or "hero" his journey transcends his own experience and becomes part of the universal experience of humankind.

From l. to r.
Adolpho Perez
Esquivel, 1980
Nobel Peace
Prize Winner;
James H. Forrest;
Pope John Paul II.
His Holiness
holds a copy of
Forest's book,
*Thomas Merton a
pictorial biogra-
phy*.

