

# SISTER THERESE LENTFOEHR, S.D.S.:

## Custodian of "Grace's House" and Other Mertoniana

A Memoir by Robert E. Daggy

On All Hallow's Eve, October 31, 1981, certainly a day to which she would have had no objection, Sister Therese Lentfoehr --- poet, teacher, nun, critic, lecturer, author, long-time friend and collector of Merton --- died in Wisconsin where she had lived for most of her seventy-nine years. Because of Sister Therese's enduring and unusual friendship with Thomas Merton and because of her many good services to the Thomas Merton Studies Center, The Thomas Merton Legacy Trust, and Merton scholars, we dedicate this issue of the MERTON SEASONAL to her memory.

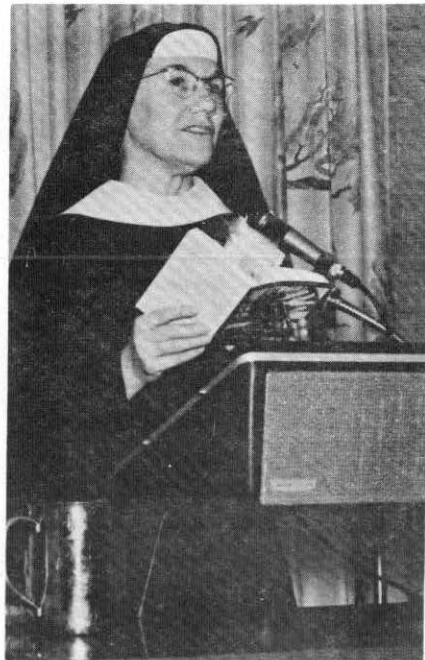
Though these roots meld in me, no charm of places  
can ever match what one brief day lets in  
of orchard, hilltop, inscape of light that laces  
the Wisconsin shimmering with foam and fin;  
and once when kneeling in the timbered breeze  
I heard God walking down this coast of trees.<sup>1</sup>

---Sr. Therese Lentfoehr,  
"North Woods Window"

Sister Therese, holder of the largest private collection of Merton's manuscripts, was one of his first "fans" and admirers, an admiration which continued through his lifetime and after his death. I met Sister on several occasions --in Racine (aping Merton she called her small apartment which housed her Merton collection her "hermitage"), in Louisville, in Vancouver, New York and Philadelphia. She was, on each meeting, even after we knew each other for several years, soft-spoken with eyes averted, reserved, even reticent, each word precise and carefully chosen. Yet she always came alive as she talked about Merton and, when she read his poetry and talked about it, her eyes flicked straight forward, the voice became firm, the figure, if possible, grew more erect and straighter, and a vibrancy came over her which captured attention.

Sister was formal in her relationships, keeping titles up front so that one always knew who one was and who she was. To me she was "Sister." To her I was invariably "Doctor," nothing more, just "Doctor" her identifying tag for me (only on two or three occasions when enthusiasm and good fellowship overtook her did she relax and call me "Bob"). I remember that she called Bill Shannon for whom she had the greatest admiration nothing but "Monsignor" in my hearing. Even Merton, after so many years of friendship, was seldom called "Tom" or "Merton;" usually he remained "Father Louis" or "Father Merton" in her discourse. To me Sister's formality was refreshing in our day of exaggerated informality and showed her reluctance to intrude unduly on the space of another person.

One Merton poem and anecdote was a standard part of Sister's repertoire. She included it no matter what other poems she might also read. I always think of it when I think of her. The poem was "Grace's House;" the



Sr. Therese  
reading "Grace's House"  
Bellarmine College  
November 1967

anecdote the story of the drawing done by little Grace Sisson and sent to Merton as a gift by her father, Elbert Sisson. Merton wrote to Sisson in 1962: "I was very happy with your letter and above all with the pictures, especially the drawings of the children. I was so moved by Grace (pun) and by her house and her lovely little self that I wrote a poem which I enclose."<sup>2</sup> Merton sent both Grace's drawing and the manuscript of the poem to Sr. Therese to whom he had begun sending materials in the late 1940's during the period when, among other things, she helped him with his typing.

Sister felt special fondness for this drawing and poem, delighting in her readings in first displaying the drawing and then reading the poem which it had inspired Merton to write. In her major study of Merton's poetry, *WORDS AND SILENCE: ON THE POETRY OF THOMAS MERTON*, published in 1979, she said: "One of the most interesting of Merton's poems on children is 'Grace's House,' written in 1962 and inspired by a four-year-old child's pencil drawing of a house on a hill. With meticulous exactitude Merton details each object of the sketch."<sup>3</sup> There can be no doubt that this poem was one of Sister's favorites, if not her favorite Merton poem. My lasting memory will be of her standing there, plainly dressed and humble, but transfixed by the words she was reading, almost as though she was reading the poem for the first time each time she read it, finding incredible wonder and surprise in its beauty and simplicity.

Her friendship for Merton was lasting, her admiration unbounded. In fact, her admiration was so great that it prevented her, as she sometimes expressed awareness, from ever being truly critical, ever really finding fault with anything that Merton wrote. Her many reviews of Merton's books, most of which appeared in *RENASCENCE*, were glowing and full of the adjectives of praise, accepting without question the worth of what he had written. She was always quick to point out the beauty of his poetry, but rarely saw or wished to see its flaws and shortcomings.

As I heard Sister speak, as I ate with her, walked with her, drank cocktails with her, the story of this "great friendship" unfolded. It is the stuff of which legends are made. It was basically a friendship through letters. As with other famous and lasting relationships, it began really with an incident which Sister Therese found annoying.

According to Sister, she first wrote to Merton before he entered the Abbey of Gethsemani. In 1939 she wrote to him to express her admiration for a poem he had written, but the correspondence developed no further at that time. Merton entered the Abbey of Gethsemani and

## Thomas Merton

### GRACE'S HOUSE

On the summit: it stands on a fair summit  
Prepared by winds: and solid smoke  
Rolls from the chimney like a snow cloud.  
Grace's house is secure.

No blade of grass is not counted,  
No blade of grass forgotten on this hill.  
Twelve flowers make a token garden.  
There is no path to the summit—  
No path drawn  
To Grace's house.

All the curtains are arranged  
Not for hiding but for seeing out.  
In one window someone looks out and winks.  
Two gnarled short  
Fortified trees have knotholes  
From which animals look out.  
From behind a corner of Grace's house  
Another creature peeks out.

Important: hidden in the foreground  
Most carefully drawn  
The dog smiles, his foreleg curled, his eye like an  
aster.

Nose and collar are made with great attention:  
This dog is loved by Grace!

And there: the world!  
Mailbox number 5

Is full of Valentines for Grace.  
 There is a name on the box, name of a family  
 Not yet ready to be written in language.

A spangled arrow there  
 Points from our Coney Island  
 To her green sun-hill.

Between our world and hers  
 Runs a sweet river:  
 (No, it is not the road,  
 It is the uncrossed crystal  
 Water between our ignorance and her truth.)

O paradise, O child's world!  
 Where all the grass lives  
 And all the animals are aware!  
 The huge sun, bigger than the house  
 Stands and streams with life in the east  
 While in the west a thunder cloud  
 Moves away forever.

No blade of grass is not blessed  
 On this archetypal, cosmic hill,  
 This womb of mysteries.

I must not omit to mention a rabbit  
 And two birds, bathing in the stream  
 Which is no road, because

Alas, there is no road to Grace's house!

she heard no more from him directly until he reviewed her collection of Marian poems, *I SING OF A MAIDEN*, in early 1948. Toward the end of the review Merton, who had disparaged modern poetry about Mary, remarked: "And one begins to wonder if the great amount of 'Mary poetry' written in our time is to be ascribed to faith or merely to the fact that there exist so many small colleges where English teachers find a moment here and there to write down an imitation of the models they have been displaying to the young."<sup>4</sup>

Sister Therese, a teacher of English in a college herself and, at the time, a more established "Catholic" poet than Merton was, took umbrage at this remark which she said later she found unnecessary and sophomoric. She wrote to him at the Abbey to tell him so. His reply was something of an apology for the tone of his review and with this answer a correspondence began which was to last for twenty years until his death in 1968.

Within two years Merton had become internationally known as the author of the best-selling *THE SEVEN STOREY MOUNTAIN*. He and Therese corresponded regularly and he had started to send her items (including the original draft of *THE SEVEN STOREY MOUNTAIN*) for what she came to call "my collection." The friendship, begun as an exchange between two poets, grew as they shared their affinity not only for poetry, but for nature, for books in general, for music, for Catholicism, and eventually for Eastern religions. Nearly every letter, no matter what other topics were touched upon, mentioned birds, flowers, trees, and animals.<sup>5</sup> Her poem, "In Memory of Thomas Merton," was inspired by his description of a meadowlark in a letter.<sup>6</sup> But what cemented the friendship was their interest in poetry and Sister's ever-increasing interest in and devotion to her "collection." Merton continually added to it (later he seems to have sent her mostly carbons of drafts and mimeographs rather than the original manuscripts themselves most of which came with his literary estate to the Thomas Merton Studies Center) and being the custodian of this collection became the all-consuming interest of her life.

They continued, of course, to correspond. Therese, with clockwork regularity, reviewed every book Merton wrote and she began to organize and catalogue her collection. Merton was cloistered; she was busy teaching at Marquette and Georgetown and they did not actually meet face to face until November 1967, just a year before Merton's death. Sister Therese was invited by Bellarmine College to speak on Merton and read his poetry at its Town-and Gown-Week.

Knowing that Sister would be in the area, Merton arranged with his friend, Mrs. Tommie O'Callaghan, later one of the Trustees of his literary estate, to bring Therese to Gethsemani for a picnic so that they might meet. Merton in fact not only wrote Therese but telephoned her in Milwaukee to make arrangements for the visit. The projected meeting excited her and his telephone call utterly flabbergasted her. She wrote to him on October 16:

I've been living on "cloud nine" since Thursday! Yes, it is *real!* Your letter just came and thank you for it... Indeed I shall be there; I only hope that I shall be able to give them a good talk --- with so inspiring a "subject", how could I fail? (I mean to read some of your poetry too --- my *forte* is reading poetry. I may even read them the two or three poems I wrote for you.) "Grace's House," of course, will be on the program --- and I'll bring the manuscript and the drawing that inspired it. Everybody "dies" over that poem --- so simple, so profound...

You were the last person on earth I could have thought might call me! And there you were --- your voice so warm and brotherly. But strange, the day before, I had played your tape...

Thank you again, Father, for everything! I had never imagined such a good would ever come my way --- to Kentucky, and to *you!* And I know I will love your friend "Tommie," as you must love her. Isn't the French saying "Vos amis sont mes amis"? I am thinking of you every moment. Say a prayer that all goes well. I am still quite distracted as you see from this letter. Forgive its haste.<sup>7</sup>

They did meet at a picnic with the O'Callaghans in the Gethsemani woods on November 5, 1967. Years later Therese recalled the picnic and the meeting with fondness, remembering his concern over whether she was warm enough, his giving her "a sheaf of papers" for her collection, his inscribing one of his books to her.<sup>8</sup> The meeting itself was not entirely felicitous: the head-on confrontation of Merton's exuberance and Therese's reticence (her letters lacked any hint of the reticence which was part of her person) left them both apparently a little bewildered. Yet this did not alter their friendship. They continued to correspond after the visit, even after Merton left on his Asian trip the next fall.

Though they did meet, theirs was a friendship rare in our times, an almost atavistic kind of relationship. It was a friendship based on mutual interest expressed through letters, a friendship which did not need and which did not flourish on the strokes and assurances of personal contact. It began with their interest in poetry and their letters, an unusual collection in themselves, nearly become poetry in prose at times. Since Merton first came to know Sister Therese through her poetry, it seems fitting to end this memoir and tribute with one of her poems, my personal favorite, one which demonstrates graphically her great love for God's good creation and her compassion for all living things.

#### ELEGY FOR THE WILD PLUM

Out my north-leaning window  
where the black squirrel plays  
a young plum tree swung in a circle  
of seasons having bore nothing  
but robins-- yet it stood full graced  
in being, branches upcurved lissomely  
as the arms of Kirov dancers.

Then (in no time of pruning)  
the engines came bent on dark  
plunder but before I could cry out--  
with knife-through-melon swiftness  
the wild disk sliced it through and it  
fell with the bird cries. For days I dared  
not look at sky through the un-boughed

spaces-- fearing the little  
dying we taste at each  
sharp loss, though the untethering be  
but from a tree. Only with Him  
who in Hosea came in the early  
and late rains to quick the dead  
dared I mourn openly for my

lost tree. Nor did he fault my tears.  
 But when he shook me like leaves  
 I knew that in some Sheol of trees  
 my wild plum still swings and in the  
 world's pleroma will come, arms  
 lifted, to harvest me a bough thick  
 with robins and the damson fruit.<sup>9</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Lentfoehr, Therese, "North woods window;" included in the unpublished collection *SPEAK TO ME, SPARROW* (1967): p. 52.
2. Merton, Thomas, "Letter # 94," *COLD WAR LETTERS*; unpublished collection: p. 154.
3. Lentfoehr, Therese, *WORDS AND SILENCE: ON THE POETRY OF THOMAS MERTON* (New York, New Directions, 1979): p. 86. "Grace's House" was published in *EMBLEMS OF A SEASON OF FURY* (New York, New Directions, 1963): pp. 28-29, and in *THE COLLECTED POEMS OF THOMAS MERTON* (New York, New Directions, 1977): pp. 330-331.
4. Merton, Thomas, "(Review of) *I sing of a maiden*, compiled by Sr. Therese Lentfoehr." *COMMONWEAL* 47 (February 20, 1948): no. 19, pp. 477-478.
5. Lentfoehr, Therese, "A model of delicate compassion." In "Thomas Merton --- his friends remember him;" edited by Jack Wintz, O.F.M. *ST. ANTHONY MESSENGER* 86 (December 1978): no. 7, p. 38.
6. Lentfoehr, Therese, "In memory of Thomas Merton." *CISTERCIAN STUDIES* 13 (1978): no. 4, pp. 287-288.
7. Lentfoehr, Therese. Typescript letter to Thomas Merton, October 16, 1967. Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine College, Louisville, Kentucky.
8. Lentfoehr, Therese, "A model of delicate compassion." In "Thomas Merton --- his friends remember him;" edited by Jack Wintz, O.F.M. *ST. ANTHONY MESSENGER* 86 (December 1978): no. 7, p. 38.
9. Lentfoehr, Therese, "Elegy for the wild plum;" included in the unpublished collection *SPEAK TO ME, SPARROW* (1967): p. 8.