

OF GRACE, MYSTERY, & JOY:

The Second Volume of *The Merton Letters*

by **Robert E. Daggy**

The second volume of *The Merton Letters* — *The Road to Joy: Letters to New & Old Friends* — is, as one of the participants in the review-symposium in this issue puts it, “finally out.” As editor of the volume no one is happier or more relieved than I am. It wasn’t quite foreseen that four years would elapse between the publication of the first volume, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience & Social Concerns*, edited by William H. Shannon, and this second volume. The good news is that the third volume, *The School of Charity: Letters on Religious Life & Renewal*, edited by Brother Patrick Hart, may be published as soon as September 1990.

It is a bit disconcerting that, as editor of *The Merton Seasonal*, I am writing an introduction for a review symposium of a book that I also edited. But, in this case, I have attempted to wear the two editorial “hats” on my head with what I hope is balance. This issue is a celebration, not just of the publication of the second volume of the letters, but of the grace, mystery, and joy of friendship which I have intended the book to convey. With the permission of the Trustees of the Merton Legacy Trust, we present two letters written by Merton to his Columbia classmate and chum, Alfred B. Hailparn, which have come to light and which would have been included in *The Road to Joy* had they been available. The discovery of these two letters points up the fact that there are undoubtedly many Merton letters extant of which we have, at this point, no knowledge: hand-written letters for which no copy was kept; typewritten letters which Merton failed to carbon — whether by intent or because he didn’t take the time or because he had run out of carbon paper or because he simply misplaced or lost the copy; letters which he may have meant only the recipient to see and read.

The Road to Joy, as I originally conceived it, was a much longer volume with a significant picture section and a genealogical chart of the Merton and Jenkins families. Exigencies of space and cost caused the volume to be shortened and the “frills” of pictures and charts were eliminated. I have gathered in this issue a “Photo-Essay,” that I call “Images of Friendship,” which includes many of the photographs of Merton with friends represented in this volume. Most of the photographs in this group have not been published before, particularly those of Merton with Mark Van Doren, Elsie Jenkins and Nanny Hauck, “Aunt Kit” Merton, Sy Freedgood, Dan Walsh, and the rare shot of Merton in swim trunks at the O’Callaghan pool.

The participants in the “Review-Symposium” are Fr. Michael Casey, a Cistercian monk in Australia; Robert Grip, one of the coordinators of the Merton symposium held last fall in Mobile; Lorette sister Jane Marie Richardson who met and talked with Merton; and Anglican monk Fr. Bernard Van Waes. We also feature a short reflection by Gregory J. Ryan prompted by *The Road to Joy*; three poems by younger readers who now travel the road; and reviews of two other recent books: *Monks Pond: Thomas Merton’s “Little Magazine”* (in which Merton featured the work of his friends and of friends of friends) and David D. Cooper’s *Thomas Merton’s Art of Denial: The Evolution of a Radical Humanist*.

Almost from the beginning I knew that I wanted *The Road to Joy* to be the title of this second volume. The story is in the book but it bears repeating with some elaboration here.

In 1962, Merton's friend, Elbert R. Sisson, wrote to Merton enclosing drawings done by his young daughters, Grace and Clare. Merton responded:

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. And as for Clare, even more than Grace, she has just stolen my heart completely and I don't know what to do or say. What a blessing it is to be surrounded with so many images of God and to live in the midst of the loves and sorrows and complications and simplicities that God has given you in them. May He preserve our world a little longer for the likes of such beautiful beings, whom He so loves.

Merton eventually sent Grace's drawing to Sister Therese Lentfoehr and the original is now housed in the Lentfoehr "Merton Collection" at Columbia University. It was his poem, "Grace's House," published in *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (*Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 330-331) that made this drawing part of Merton lore.

Many critics, including Sister Therese herself and me, consider this elusively simple poem among Merton's best. After describing all the items in Grace's "busy" little drawing, Merton ended: "Alas, there is no road to Grace's house!"

Five years later, at her father's behest, Grace sent Merton a second drawing (featured on our cover) which she dubbed "The Road to Joy." On the back, along with another drawing of a horse, she wrote: "You mayn't remember me, but I'm the little kid who sent you the picture 'Grace's House.' I'm sending you 'The Road to Joy' under my father's request." Merton responded with a letter to Grace on May 13, 1967. In it he picked up her title to describe the "grace of friendship."

... I am glad you still draw things with love, and I hope you will never lose that. But I hope you and I together will secretly travel our own road to joy, which is mysteriously revealed to us without our exactly realizing. When I say that, I don't want you to start thinking about it. You already know it without thinking about it.

Grace's drawing is housed at the Thomas Merton Studies Center, a lasting reminder of the celebration of friendship which this second volume of letters attempts to illustrate. "The theme of joy (a word Merton uses frequently) runs through the letters — joy found in new and old friendships, the *enjoyment* of being in contact with one's friends, the *rejoicing* together when friendships are kept in repair" (*Introduction*, p. xiii). I hope that all my own Merton friends — new and old — will enjoy travelling the road to joy as much as I did.



"GRACE'S HOUSE"

Drawing by Grace Sisson (1962)