

for our good. He is in fact always with us and indeed in us . . .” One cannot but believe that Aunt Kit remembered this when, four years later, in a tragic ferry accident, she set her own death after being “a tower of courage” to others on board the sinking ship.

There is much more in *The Road to Joy*, like letters to Dan Walsh and John Howard Griffin and other people special to Merton. There is a whole chapter of “Circular Letters to Friends,” a form Merton adopted out of sheer necessity in order to communicate with the growing number of persons who found in his words and understanding a source of strength and clarity in their struggles. It was not simply courtesy or interest or even kindness that motivated these letters. It was a conviction that this was part of his vocation, as he himself states in the first circular letter. There are, finally, letters “to and about young people,” in which we see once again Merton’s exceptional ability to accommodate himself to others, whatever their age or experience, background or concerns. He could and did attract younger readers, dialoguing with these “new friends” and taking seriously their questions and values. Each of them must have been grateful that Merton never did speak down to them.

Early on, Merton had expressed a desire that his writing be “frank without being boring.” Small chance. One has only to read a little of these letters to see how powerfully his prayer was answered. His enormous talent for straightforward and engaging speech blesses us all. Still, I was struck by how much Merton owed to these people — and many others — and by how much he needed them to become and to be all that he was. Never one to point to himself (not seriously, anyway), Merton implicitly invites and even challenges us in these letters to examine our own friendships, our own relationships to God, to others and to ourselves. After spending time with him, one is never left in total comfort, but paradoxically, one never feels more alive. This is the way Merton gifts his true friends, never failing to open up for them new pathways to joy.

#### IV. Bernard Van Waes, MAILBOX NUMBER 5

The perdurance of Thomas Merton’s influence and importance to contemporary spirituality twenty-one years after his death is, from time to time, the subject of debate. Much of his work has been explained, explored, expanded, exegeted, theologized, etc. Yet the essential elements in his message have not been so changed that they lose their primary value in coming to grips with modern secularity while, at the same time, preserving the ancient Christian tradition. It appears a thoroughly respectable endeavor therefore to look beyond the “Glittering Image” (see Susan Howatch’s thesis in her novel of the same name) to the human image in Thomas Merton — the “bluejeans” Merton to which I have referred on a previous occasion.

Matthew Kelty, O.C.S.O., in an edited interview conducted by Victor Kramer, was asked what he thought was the most important thing to be remembered about Merton and he replied:

I would always think of him not as being brilliant and an intellectual and all that, I think of him as being poor, and simple, and little and fragile and dearly loved . . . his lesson was how good God is, how sweet God is and how loving God is, even for the littlest and the most fragile of us.

(*Merton Annual 1*, pp. 75-76)

Good fortune has preserved Merton’s correspondence. At Bellarmine some 3,500 letters are in the archives and, no doubt, a considerable number as yet unaccounted for that are in private hands and/or collections. Merton scholars and buffs have had the good fortune of sound intellectual and scholarly editing by Robert E. Daggy, Director of the Thomas Merton Studies

Center and President of the International Thomas Merton Society. His scholarship over the years has enriched the entire corpus of Mertoniana. In this second volume of a projected five volume series, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New & Old Friends*, Daggy refers to the letters as an alternate form of journal keeping, or another facet in the autobiographical exercise in which Fr. Louis was continually engaged most of his lifetime. What demands recognition is the editor's well-researched devotion, insights and discipline and with the connoisseur's appreciation of the truths contained in the letters by making them intelligible to expert and layperson alike. The sensitive reader will take pains to appreciate Merton's celebration of friendship and recognize that, far from depicting a world-hating ascetic, the letters reveal — sometimes rather painfully — a man who superabounds in the love and joy which he shares with his correspondents. Daggy allows Merton to speak for himself, editing only when needed to make clear the writer's meaning or the textual reference.

Merton's distinctive voice sounds at the *point vierge* of the human spirit. And, because they could meet him on a common ground, his correspondents were capable of sharing more fully with the fruits of the spirit enabling them to be called in an even stricter sense his "friends" — new as well as old and some who had been his intimates in the world.

His letters allow us to remove the trappings of the saint and to see as well as reverence, in St. Irenaeus of Lyons' phrase, "The human person fully alive, which is the glory of God." So natural, practical and intimate are these letters and yet so deeply spiritual that we hardly expect the mystical element his "Aunt Kit" had reference to in one of her letters, still less the rather gilded posthumous figure some would even suspect of walking on water! Here is a man of amazing common sense with a considerable gift of quiet humor — notably in the Robert Lax correspondence to which Brother Patrick Hart refers as "Joycean, anti-letters." There is a wide variety of felt experience and "earthiness" in some of Merton's advice:

Things aren't as hopeless as you might think. There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in any of the philosophies currently in use. *Nil Illegitime carborundum*, which is hot dog Latin for Don't let the bastards grind you down. (p. 101)

This is toned down in the Advent-Christmas 1967 Circular Letter to: "Don't let the *system* grind you down."

Merton relied on friendly and informal contact with his correspondents which would permit them to absorb, unconsciously and without effort, the tranquility and peace and calm which he himself possessed. This is not to deny his sometimes impetuous, enthusiastic, or impatient mind, always ready to overtax words with a burden of meaning that words could not seem to convey. He could be critical on issues which touched him deeply such as racial tension:

A great deal of noise is made about issues that are peripheral, while some issues are so serious as to be really critical: the chief of these is the racial tension in this country . . . [The Vietnam War] is one of the greatest and most stupid blunders in American history, and the results are a disgrace. (p. 107)

One of his bitterest invectives is in his letter to Sister Therese Lentfoehr on November 20, 1959, which sounds, even after thirty years, so contemporary and speaks of matters that are overwhelming us today:

This whole business of political injustice and inhumanity is a tremendous problem and one to which we cannot blind ourselves. We are all getting more and more deeply involved in collective patterns of injustice without having the faintest realization of it . . . The problem gets so vast and so intricate that no one can keep track of them, but still even a contemplative — rather most of all a contemplative — has no right whatever to ignore the issues. It is vitally necessary to find out where we stand and definitely come out against evil wherever it may appear. (p. 234)

Merton had acute literary judgments. I don't know a more just evaluation of the contemporary "institutional" Church — Roman or Anglican — than:

The present institutional structure of the Church is entirely antiquated, too baroque, and is so often in practice unjust, inhuman, arbitrary and even absurd in its functioning. It sometimes imposes useless and intolerable burdens on the human person and demands outrageous sacrifices, often with no better result than to maintain a rigid system in its rigidity, and to keep the same abuses established, one might think, until kingdom come. (p. 95)

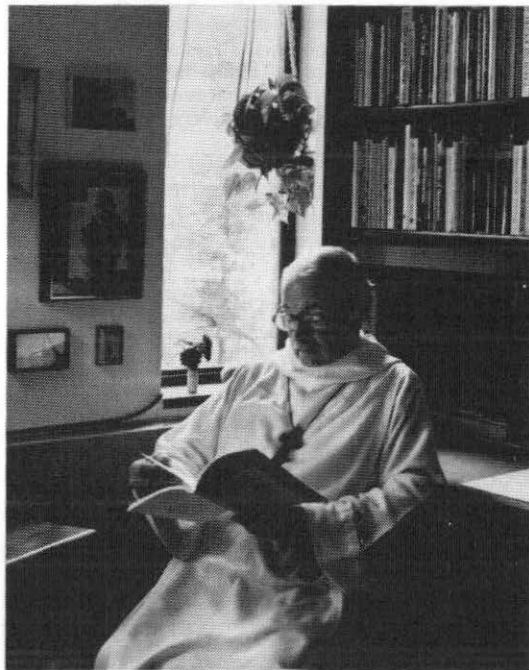
In other words, religion, institutional and otherwise has lost its simplicity, for

... religion is not a matter of extraordinary experiences and that rot. The most important thing is a really simple and solid living faith. I think the thing that matters for people is simply to live in an atmosphere of reasonable and alert faith and love for God and for other people, and in that way everything gets quite soon to have a simple meaning. (p. 62)

I believe Merton, in this instance, was opting for something that leaves room for a more charismatic religion.

Merton once remarked to Sister Therese that "... for me writing is less a talent than an addiction," and much of his correspondence deals with the lament that answering letters gets to be more and more of a problem. Yet, to me at least, it is nothing short of amazing that there is actually SO MUCH! This speaks volumes about the paradoxical nature of his so-called *self-contradictory temperament*, "... of which I could tell you much because it is a perfect description of me" (*Alaskan Journal*, p. 150). His *apologia* to his correspondents for inability to answer their letters is a masterpiece of artifice and is much too good not to quote in its entirety:

Besides my ordinary work I now have on my desk the following: one complete manuscript of a novel on which I am asked to comment by a publisher. A set of galleys for a book on Zen, ditto. Several chapters of a book on mysticism to read and criticize. A long statement on the Vietnam War I am supposed to sign (generally I don't sign any of these statements, because I can't read the papers or watch TV to keep up as others do). A list of twenty-four magazine articles which I must either read and report on myself or get others to summarize, for the magazine of the Order. A book review article of six or seven books on Camus, in state of outline, to be written somehow in the next week or so. At least two books to review for the magazine of the Order. (I mention only the two that happen to be directly visible at the moment. There are probably others on the shelf behind me or buried under the mass of other material that confronts me.) Finally, on top of that I have an urgent report to write on an official matter, and am requested to give this top priority. And so on. The life of a writing hermit is certainly not one of lying around in the sun or of pious navel gazing. Nevertheless there is the question of meditation which, to me, is always the first thing of all because without it the rest becomes meaningless. In such circumstances writing letters, receiving visits and so on would simply complicate matters beyond reasonable measure. ... Carrying on an ordinary friendly correspondence is normally just out of the question. (pp. 100-101)



**BERNARD VAN WAES**

Photo by Brother Michael, O.H.C.

Perhaps this is what T. S. Eliot meant when he so acidly commented that Merton wrote too much and revised too little (See Mott, p. 242). It is, however, in this reviewer's view to be celebrated that Merton, despite his defense for not answering his correspondence, did well to write at all — while reserving for these special friends, new and old, the letters in which he permitted himself to be himself and, in his own words: "I am less and less inclined to sell anybody a line, even in writing. I am closer to people working in the woods than I would be writing them letters" (p. 24). In this respect he parallels St. Augustine who, in his *Confessions* (III, xxi), comments: "For it is one thing to see the land of peace from a wooded ridge . . . and another to tread the road that leads to it." Merton cannot be faulted in that respect for the blend of the mystical with social concern which is always present.

Though his ability to answer all of his steadily increasing mail became burdensome, as he outlines in the previously cited paragraph (pp. 100-101), he was always happy to receive mail and to read it! "I do not hesitate to confess that letters from my many friends have always and will always mean a great deal to me." One very poignant comment in his New Year 1968 Circular Letter hit a responsive chord as I remembered that during World War II, when naval operations in the Pacific precluded mail, daily, weekly or even monthly "mail call" was suspended. Merton wrote: "News from everyone from Argentina to Pakistan and from Brooklyn to India and Japan. But nothing from my family."

Much has been written concerning the "Louisville Epiphany" — some good, some poor, some much exaggerated. In a letter to Robert Lax (November 24, 1948), there is, in my opinion, a more balanced evaluation:

Going to Louisville was a nuisance but not as bad as I thought it might be. It was nice saying the office riding fast through the cornfields and the tobacco, and the city looked stupid but the people all looked very interesting, that is to say I felt a whole lot of sympathy for them although they seemed to be pretty balled up, still Louisville is less balled up than most places, because they don't run as fast there and I got the feeling that everybody was of terrific value, immensely precious and bought with a great price and all their souls were like jewels, very rich and ought to be pretty as anything . . . (p. 171)

It should also be noted that many of Merton's "epiphanies" came to him not in the monastery church but alone in the solitude he so desperately wanted, needed, and I believe finally found, not in a Christian setting, but at Polonnaruwa in Ceylon! In that sense there is an echo of St. John (15: 11): "I have spoken thus to YOU, so that my JOY may be in you, and YOUR JOY complete." (Italics mine.)

In all of these letters a human being is present; but not simply his beliefs, his hurts when he felt misunderstood or his work censored, his physical aches and pains, his loyalty to his friends — old and new — but something containing all of these: a man of prayer and deep spiritual insight, another precursor committed to giving his life day by day to his monastic vocation — fully conscious of his shortcomings as well as his God-given talents, which were many. What emerges from these letters is an enfleshed image of a true self — the Spirit having breathed into that image and brought it fully alive in the contemporary world. They tell a poignant story of one man's continuing journey to God in a spirituality in tradition and transition.

So the *Cosmic Dance* we learned about in May of this year continues. It is, I feel, appropriate that this review end with several of Fr. Louis' own words, a word from his Alma Mater, Columbia, and a line from his poem that prompted the drawing which led to the letter that gave the title to this volume of his correspondence:

"It is time for the midnight to get very quiet" so that my house may be at rest and the soul talk in peace and listen to peace and learn from peace. (Merton, p. 163)

I have already said more than I intended. God bless you — I appreciate your friendship and communications. Keep well. May your understanding of life deepen, may your freedom grow strong, may you be more independent of the forces that try to dominate and standardize our lives in massive futility. May you grow in love, may you have JOY! (Merton, p. 111)

You have reached out with winged words to the world you left.  
(Columbia, p. 41)

Finally: “And there: the world! Mailbox number 5 is full of Valentines for Grace **and for us!**”

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## THOMAS MERTON IN CUBA & CEYLON: In His End Is His Beginning

By **Gregory J. Ryan**

After twenty years of reading Thomas Merton's work, I still find that he is full of surprises. Much has been written, and will be written, on the style, the meaning, and the development of his work. This brief article attempts to point up just one instance where Merton's mature writing was foreshadowed, even strikingly so one might say, in his early writing.

Everyone by now is familiar with the much celebrated and oft-quoted entry in *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* concerning his very moving “aesthetic experience” as he stood before the exquisitely carved stone Buddhas at Polonnaruwa, Ceylon. It is a beautiful and evocative piece of writing. After declaring that he may have “spoiled it by trying to talk of it at a dinner party, or to casual acquaintances . . .,” he made an attempt to capture the experience on paper. Since the publication of *The Asian Journal* in 1973, this passage (“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 . . . became evident and obvious”) has been frequently cited in Merton

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