

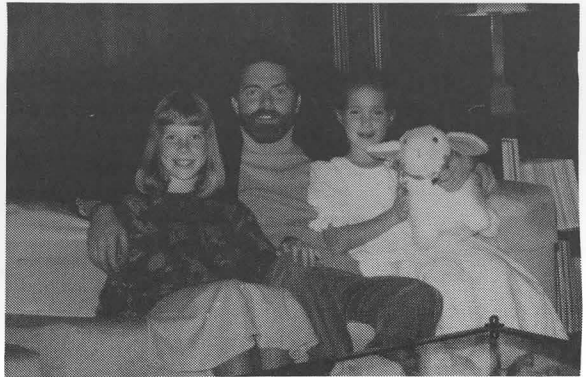
MERTON & INITIATION:

Being “Educated” & Educating

by **Robert E. Daggy**

Thomas Merton often described the process of his own initiation — through family, schooling, and the monastery — as a “journey.” We now know more about the earlier parts of that journey, the years before Gethsemani, more than he himself, in fact, chose to tell us. That knowledge continues to grow with information from several sources. And Merton, through most of his adult life, was directly involved in one way or another in the process of initiating others. This process we would call “education.” He taught at Columbia University and at St. Bonaventure University before December, 1941. At Gethsemani he served as Master of Scholastics (1951-1955) and Master of Novices (1955-1965), charged in the latter case with “initiating” new monks. This initiation was called “formation.” He retained, even at Gethsemani, an interest in children and young people as evidenced in letters to and about them included in *The Road to Joy: Letters to New & Old Friends*. He felt that we could learn from children. As I have pointed out elsewhere,¹ he came to feel that we could all find redemption in the recovery of the “child-ness” of our childhoods, could discover our true selves by allowing Jesus to teach us the meaning of “spiritual childhood.” This issue of *The Merton Seasonal* is devoted to “Merton and initiation,” to education in the broadest sense.

Merton gives us glimpses into some of his early “initiation” in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Our cover drawing, a family project, was done by Greg and Liz Ryan of Wall, New Jersey, with the help of their two daughters, Caitlin and Abigail. It developed, in part, from their as yet unpublished children’s book, *The ABC’s of Thomas Merton*. It depicts Merton in 1919 at the age of four. Greg Ryan writes: “Little Tom Merton’s grandmother Gertrude taught him to recite the “Our Father” by heart when he was just four years old. At about this time he also became fascinated by the anchors depicted in the stained glass windows of Zion Episcopal Church in Douglaston, Long Island. He is pictured here with his imaginary dog, Doolittle, and his mother’s keepsake, *Tom’s Book*.” By way of further explanation, let me add that Merton’s grandmother, Gertrude Hannah (Grierson) Merton (1855-1956), and his aunt “Kit,” Agnes Gertrude Stonehewer Merton (1889-1968), came from New Zealand to New York for a visit in 1919. His father, Owen



1. Robert E. Daggy, “Birthday Theology: A Reflection on Thomas Merton and the Bermuda Menage,” *The Kentucky Review* 7 (Summer 1987): no. 2, pp. 62-89.

CAITLIN, GREG & ABIGAIL RYAN

Photo by Elizabeth H. Ryan

Merton (1887-1931), played the organ at Zion Episcopal Church. *Tom's Book*, kept by Merton through the years and now housed at the Merton Center, was a kind of baby book in which his mother meticulously recorded data about her son, including his diet and vocabulary.

As often happens at the Merton Center, the idea for this issue developed from related items which crossed my desk from two separate sources: Ingrid Cohen of Great Neck, New York, and Robert Grip of Mobile, Alabama. Ms. Cohen, who lives on Long Island, became interested in locating and seeing the home of Merton's grandparents, Sam and Martha Jenkins. She did locate it in Douglaston on what is now Rushmore Avenue. It was originally "50 Virginia Road" and was one of Merton's "homes" before Gethsemani. He lived there for about a year after his mother's death in 1921, in the nearly two year period from September 1923 to August 1925 when he was between eight and ten years old, and during his first years at Columbia (1933 on) before he moved to Perry Street in New York City.

Michael Mott describes it as it was when Merton was a small child: "Virginia Road was unsurfaced. There were few houses in the immediate neighborhood, and great marshes with waving grasses began at the end of the road" (*The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, p. 14). It is different now — much more crowded in what Ms. Cohen describes as a basically Italian neighborhood. The sleeping porch which Merton described has been enclosed, but the small house in the back which contained the kiln for Martha Jenkins's china painting is still there. Ms. Cohen was allowed to photograph the house and we feature some of these photos along with her images of Zion Episcopal Church.

At about the same time, Bob Grip sent along an interview which he had conducted with Helen Kelly Phares, former employee at Grosset & Dunlap. Merton's grandfather worked at the publishing house. In a unique piece of oral history, Mrs. Phares reminisces about "Pop's Office." We also carry, from a photograph provided by Mrs. Phares, the first clear image of Sam Jenkins which I have seen. Two other reminiscences were supplied in letters. Merton's first cousin, the Reverend John J. Merton of Birkenhead, Auckland, New Zealand, discusses the cousin he never met. Andrew Winser of the Isle of Wight, schoolchum of Merton's at Oakham and Cambridge, provides an intriguing glimpse of the young Merton.

The theme of "initiation" continues with two accounts of a phenomenon which I have long considered inevitable, i.e., the naming of schools for Merton. It had seemed to me just a question of time before this happened and now it has. Bob Grip (again) and Gary Young contribute some facts about the first two schools in North America named for Merton, one in Canada and one in the United States. Whether in schools or elsewhere, the formal process of education is a part of initiation. Thomas Del Prete explores Merton's response to one of his teachers, Mark Van Doren. Del Prete is the author of the recent ground breaking book on Merton and education, *Thomas Merton and the Education of the Whole Person*. Daniel Rice reviews the book in this issue.

Two short essays on Merton's impact in countries other than the United States follow. Stefan Baciu of the University of Hawaii comments on a recent Merton publication in Panama. Baciu reminds us both of Merton's continuing appeal throughout the world and of Merton's own attempts to "initiate" U. S. Americans to the richness and variety of Latin American literature. Another country in which Merton has had impact is Belgium. I give a report to the ITMS on my recent trip to visit the "Merton Vrienden" there. The usual section on recent publications concludes this issue and includes several items in Flemish given to the Merton Center by the Belgian "Merton Friends." It is perhaps fitting to end by quoting from Merton's essay "Learning to Live" in which he states where he feels the process of "initiation" should lead. He said: "The graduate level of learning is when one learns to sit still and be what one has become."