

AFTER TWENTY-FIVE YEARS

by **Sister Henrilena van der Laar**

I entered the convent of the Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters in Baexem in the Netherlands when I was twenty years of age. That was in 1948, the year that *The Seven Storey Mountain* came out. I did not know anything about *The Seven Storey Mountain* nor had I ever heard the name of Thomas Merton. *The Seven Storey Mountain* was soon translated into Dutch and was called *Louteringsberg* (the Dutch word for Dante's "Mountain of Purification").

I remember very vividly that on a Sunday morning when we postulants should have been praying in the chapel we were looking at the book shelf in the refectory. By chance the first book I took in my hands was *Louteringsberg*. One of my fellow postulants said to me, "Don't take that book. It is boring." At that time I did not try it out for myself. I simply put it back on the shelf.

The second time in my life that I heard the name of Merton mentioned was twenty years later. That was in 1968 when he died. At that time I had already been working for a couple of years in Papua New Guinea. I lived in a very primitive place in a small community of Sisters. One evening one of my fellow sisters was reading the newspaper and said, "Imagine! A poor Trappist monk was electrocuted by an electric fan." At that time we in the convent hardly had electricity, let alone an electric fan. The monk who died was Thomas Merton, and this was the second time I heard his name.

Five years later, and twenty-five years since I first held *Louteringsberg* in my hands, I heard his name again. That was when a Trappist monk from Gethsemani, Father Matthew Kelty, began his hermit life here in Papua New Guinea. That was in December, 1973. I was wondering why a Trappist monk could go so far away from his homeland and community. That seemed very strange to me.

"Well," said one of my fellow sisters, "read Merton. Then you will find out what this monk is up to." Merton had been Father Kelty's novice master. So I started to read Merton and have never stopped reading him since then.

The first book I took was *The Waters of Siloe*. I enjoyed the book very much and liked the way that Merton wrote. Then I read *The Seven Storey Mountain*, the same book that I had put back on the shelf twenty-five years earlier. I was fascinated by the book and read it many more times after that. It was not boring after all! Then I read all the Merton books that I could get hold of.

I went many times to the hill where Father Kelty had his hermitage. I asked many questions and talked about Merton and got to know quite a lot about him. Father Kelty had first hand information of course. So, in no time I knew and loved Thomas Merton.



Sister Henrilena van der Laar lives at Holy Spirit Senta Par in Wabag, Enga Province in Papua New Guinea. She is the founder and coordinator of the New Guinea chapter of the International Thomas Merton Society.

SISTER HENRILENA

Why was I so carried away by Merton? I saw in him a saint who did not show off his holiness. He was very human and was not ashamed of his humanity. He was on our side and lived like one of us. He spoke his mind clearly. He could criticize his abbot and community while at the same time he loved them. Merton was true to himself. He did not hide anything about himself.

I never liked saints who seem to be holy already from birth. Merton had to struggle like the rest of us. I knew he was a man whose example I could follow in a human way. And the nicest part about him was the way that he put himself totally in God's mercy.

Of course, I liked his writings about the contemplative life and prayer very much. I also liked his many friends and the way he writes about them: Mark Van Doren, Bob Lax, Dan Walsh, Theresa Lentfoer, and so many others.

So, that is how I came to know and love Merton.

Later on I became a member of the International Thomas Merton Society (ITMS) and got the magazine *Merton Seasonal*. I do not know if the ITMS gets any profit from having me as a member. But I do know that I greatly profit from being a member of ITMS.

In 1991, that brought me to the United States, to Gethsemani, and to the ITMS meeting in Rochester, New York.

It was a very great privilege from my superiors to give me permission to go the U.S.A. and to attend the meeting. When I heard their, "Yes, you can go," I thought, "If only they had said, 'No!'" I was terribly scared of travelling. But everything went well. Port Moresby, Sydney, Los Angeles. I soon found travelling companions with whom I could talk.

When I arrived in Gethsemani I could hardly believe it. Here I was really in Merton Land. It seemed like a dream. It was wonderful to visit Merton's grave as often as I liked. And I smiled when I saw that Dom James Fox was buried next to him. It was a real feast to participate in the Divine Office day and night, thought I must admit that I slept several times through the Night Office. The nicest thing about the Office was the blessing after Compline. Abbot Timothy was very generous with holy water when he blessed each one who came to him.

But the best part of my stay was the offer from the Abbot to spend 24 hours in Merton's hermitage. That this should ever happen was beyond my wildest dreams. I slept in his room. I cooked in his little kitchen, read in his sitting room, walked in the woods, and had Mass in his small chapel. It was all too good to be true.

When I left Gethsemani I wrote in the Visitors Book:

Once in his life, a Muslim has to go to Mecca, a Christian has to go to Jerusalem. For me it was a must to visit Gethsemani.

Then I went to the second ITMS meeting in Rochester. Who was I that dared to go to something like that? I who had no degree from anything. I who never wrote a book and never will. I whose only work was to be a housekeeper at a pastoral centre hidden far away in the high mountains of Papua New Guinea. So I expected to be embarrassed by having to talk to highly studied people with all sorts of degrees. My only "degree" was that, of all the ITMS participants, I had come the longest distance!

But, what a surprise! We were all Merton friends and nobody talked about their degrees or anything like it! I felt at home there straight away. There was a real spirit of friendship. To meet many people face to face whom I had previously only known from books was one of my greatest experiences.

The meeting itself was wonderful, but the time was too short. And now that I have received the invitation to attend the third ITMS meeting in Colorado, I have a feeling of nostalgia. It is impossible for me to go this time, no matter how much I would like it. But I am happy that, although far away, I belong to the group of his friends. And I spread his ideas and his message as much as I can.

I am writing this story on January 31, 1993, which would have been Merton's 78th birthday.