

MERTON AT BONAVENTURE: SOME STUDENT RECOLLECTIONS

by **Thomas Del Prete**

Thomas Merton began teaching at St. Bonaventure College (now St. Bonaventure University) as an assistant professor of English in the fall of 1940. As he relates in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, he sought a position from Fr. Thomas Plassman, president of the College at the time, after he was prevented from entering the Franciscan novitiate during the previous summer. The timing was fortuitous, inasmuch as there was a vacancy in the English Department created by a departing friar. Merton was twenty-five years old, and would remain at Bonaventure for over a year, leaving on the night of Tuesday, December 9, 1941 for Gethsemani.

Abundantly evident in the journal he kept while at Bonaventure, published in *Run to the Mountain*, and in his own account in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton established a discipline of prayer, reflection, reading, and writing while living on the campus in Devereux Hall with other single lay faculty members as well as students, including many of those he taught. Based on his journal account alone, it would be easy to conclude that he was wholly absorbed by this effort to order and orient his interior life and, as well, to discern his true vocation. Yet teaching drew a great deal of his attention, and the necessity of preparing courses, as he notes in his autobiography, added to the sense of health and well being that he gained while at the College.

Merton's primary teaching responsibility involved a two semester course in English Literature required of all sophomores. He apparently taught three sections of this course during the academic year 1940-1941. As described in the January 1941 edition of "The St. Bonaventure College Bulletin," English 201-202 was designed as "A survey course of the chief periods of English Literature to define the more important forms" and aimed "to give the student an intelligent appreciation of the best literature and at the same time to provide him with the general literary background pre-requisite to the special courses in literature." Merton's students represented the Bonaventure population as a whole. There were some Franciscan seminarians, the football players he celebrates in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, some future doctors and teachers, and at least one future judge. Many were young men from the Olean area and the Pennsylvania coal fields to the south, although there was also a small number of women, among the first to be admitted to the College. They were relegated during this period to the night classes, of which Merton had one. Most were eighteen and nineteen years old.

To add a different point of view to what can be gleaned about Merton's experience as a teacher from his own account, I have consulted some of these students, all members of the Bonaventure class of 1943 and of Merton's English Literature class during the academic year 1940-1941. Although more than fifty years have intervened since these men and women spent a year under the tutelage of a young professor fresh from a masters program in English Literature at Columbia, many have retained strong impressions and some gladly shared one or two vivid stories. Their memories lend perhaps some fresh perspective to the general image of Merton at Bonaventure that most of us have formed from reading his work. What follows are excerpts from some of the congenial conversations which I had with them.



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Dr. James D. Barnhurst

When we were at Bonaventure . . . one of the rules [was that] frosh couldn't walk on the center path — there was a lot of freshman hazing. In 1940 [some] sophomores spied [Merton] . . . on the center path [and] tried to kick him off. They decided he was a new young member of the faculty.

Everyone lived in the same dorm. Merton turned out not to be the best neighbor. He played bongo drums. Bill Glynn [would yell], “Cut out the bongo drums, Professor Merton, cut it out!”

We had him for sophomore lit. He was an inspired teacher. He really knew English literature and could get it across to us . . . some of the big husky football players of the Pennsylvania coal country were equally smitten . . . he got them interested in English literature . . . a tribute to his ability as a professor.

To us [he was] a new professor, a very interesting person, and a very good teacher. We did not know about his internal struggle. He really awed us because he was an erudite man [with] complete knowledge of his subject matter . . . We all appreciated him as someone different, maybe a cut above the other professors; he was good.

Dr. Robert Fenzl

Oh, God, he was great! . . . As sophomores we used to haze the freshman, and one Saturday night we were going downtown . . . this guy was thumbing [wearing] saddleback shoes . . . [we] gave him a hard time . . . Monday morning he was sitting on [the] desk with his legs crossed [wearing] a corduroy jacket with patches, chino pants, and saddleback shoes. [he said] “I'm your English literature teacher for the semester.”

He read *The Canterbury Tales* like they should have been read. I didn't always understand all of them . . . he explained it so thoroughly — made it seem easy — not so hard as I thought. He made you feel comfortable . . . gave you a lot of reading. He seemed to be able to explain it in class, but was a tough marker, a fair marker.

I had to take English and glad it was from him. We were anxious to get a good mark and get on with our lives.

Judge Edward M. Horey

[He was a] very quiet man . . . good lecturer, fair sense of humor. He used to walk around the campus; he always had a tweed jacket on that didn't fit . . . polite, congenial, kind of a loner, always off by himself, very pensive, a little introverted, pleasant. I thought he was a very good teacher; [he] always had material prepared.

[He was a] quiet, thinking man . . . always had the feeling he was thinking about something different than what he was talking about. The word among the students at that point was that he was contemplating [the] Franciscans.

Marion Alice Weis Horey

[He was] a man apart, a very gentle, pleasant person . . . in class kind of remote, almost in a world by himself [though] very friendly.

We'd read something and he would see so much more in it than I saw. I realized from his class that I had a lot to learn; I'm not sure I learned it all . . . I didn't give him too much thought; if anyone had told me what he was going to turn into I would have dropped over in astonishment.

[He was] just a young fellow . . . he just did operate on another plane. I never felt I could read poetry and get from it the thousand levels of meaning that he got.

[He was] not a teacher in the sense of [you] must take this note or that. My impression of him was . . . [he] went out of himself in these writings. [You were] watching a man take a piece of literature and eat it up. [He] let you enjoy the work with him; if you were up to it — good — he didn't show you how to do it. At that point — I was plain looking at words . . . a pleasant professor. I never felt concerned he was concerned about marks [but rather] grasping . . . what the author was saying.

Rita Ballard [a high school English teacher for three years]

[He was] casual, laid back. He had just come from living in New York [and was] very much of the city . . . he used to tell us stories about the city and abroad.

I remember enjoying [the class] very much. He made it very interesting, lively, not very formal. Some of the profs were not too happy about having women in the classes; he accepted us as part of the class.

As I remember . . . [he] made you want to . . . read ahead without being very demanding. [He had] an easygoing way but did expect you to do [the work] . . . never pressured you [or] embarrassed you if you didn't understand what he was trying to get to . . . I just remember the class as being very enjoyable.

Dr. Joseph Battaglia

He wore his sport coat — salt and pepper brown sport coat with a belt in the back . . . he was a good teacher but he seemed kind of a loner.

He worked hard because he had a “cross section” — he had a number of football players in there, he had some students in there, and some who were there because they had to be there. He was fair to everyone.

He walked alone on campus. He seemed to walk alone most of the time.

He was good because he had spent time in Europe . . . he was pretty good at describing these places (in English literature) because he'd been there. He made it as interesting as he possibly could.

Fr. Joseph A. Ciaiola

Thomas Merton roomed about three doors down from me at Devereux. He used to play bongo drums in his room once in a while; used to annoy those of us who were studying.

In our class we had a bunch of football players and they couldn't be less interested in English literature.

He knew his stuff, no question about that — like said he was trying to speak the Elizabethan tongue, the old English . . . it was comical really — can you imagine the football players?!

He was a very likable guy and we could talk to him . . . We used to have fun with him . . . [the bongo drums] would reverberate throughout the corridor . . . he had a good sense of humor but was very deep in his devotion.

Maurice Crisman

He always struck me as an excellent teacher . . . very conscientious. He was very patient and he certainly was well-respected by all of his students — his conscientiousness, his thoroughness as a teacher, and his thoughtfulness towards all of his students.

I do have a recollection of one of his comments to me . . . it was complimentary . . . of one of the essays I had written for him in which the subject matter was one word. The word I chose was “light” — a reference to the “Light of the world” — I referred to Christ. I've always remembered that — an indication of how thoughtful he was toward his students — he gave them pride in their work.

Cornelius Donovan

I remember one incident. He came out and hitchhiked with us . . . he had a coke . . . he was always saying, “What do you want to do with your life?” [He was] not dictatorial about it. We never gave very good answers because we all knew if we got through college then we'd go to the war.

He bought his journal in an office supply store in Olean, carried it around under his arm . . . [seeing him across campus] Jim Andre hollered, “What are you doing? and he said, “I'm writing a book!”

James M. Peters

He loved jazz . . . [played] “Bob Crosby and the Bobcats” [album] “Big Noise from Winetka.”

James Magill

He struck me as being a mild-mannered fellow, self effacing, a wry sense of humor. I said “shy” but “mild-mannered” is better.

His problem was to teach an English Lit. summary course to students who, except in the case of myself and a few others, had neither the background nor the interest to seriously pursue, say, Milton's *Paradise Lost*. But Merton handled us all quite well, both the football players and the scholars, and all thought him an OK guy.

The only assignment I remember is summarizing the sonnets of Shakespeare.

I got the feeling he was really interested in his subject.