

THOMAS MERTON'S EIGHTIETH BIRTHDAY IS CELEBRATED IN PRADES

by **Patrick Hart, OCSO**

It all began in mid-April when a letter arrived from Bruno Ronfard, a French biographer of Merton, now living in Cairo. He said the Mayor of Prades and a group of interested persons had formed a "Merton Association" and were planning a colloquium in late October to commemorate Thomas Merton's eightieth birthday at Prades, his birthplace in the foothills of the Pyrenees. I was asked if I could come to Prades and present a paper on some aspect of Merton's spirituality. After consulting my Abbot, who actually encouraged me to accept, I wrote back saying I would be happy to participate, but I would have to give my presentation in English. Ronfard wrote back at once saying that was OK, that I would deliver in English but have a French translation available for those who do not understand English.

The date was finally set for Saturday, October 28, at which time there would be a full day of presentations to be held at the Cinema de Lido, about a block from Merton's birthplace. The opening words of welcome were offered by Mayor Paul Blanc, who is also a Senator representing the Perpignan area. He introduced the Archbishop of Perpignan, Monseigneur Jean Chabbert (a Franciscan), who gave a brief biography of Thomas Merton. This was followed by a historian, Gerard Cholvy, professor at the University of Montpellier, who provided a context for the early twentieth century in France, pointing out influences of people like Jacques Maritain and Etienne Gilson on Catholic French culture. He reminded us that it was the French-born Bishop Benedict Joseph Flaget of Bardstown who had welcomed the Cistercians in 1848 when the monks of Melleray in Brittany made the foundation near Bardstown, Kentucky.

This was a good preparation for the paper I presented next. It dealt with "The Contemplative Vision of Thomas Merton," an article that had appeared in *Cistercian Studies*, was later translated into French by Charles Dumont, a monk of Scourmont in Belgium, and published in *Collectanea Cisterciensia*. So while I gave the paper in English, the French translation was simultaneously projected on the large screen behind the speaker's table on the stage. Oh, the wonders of modern technology!

After an ample "aperitif" at the Hotel Hostalrich, a short distance from the Cinema de Lido, we returned to the theater for three more presentations in the afternoon. The first was a paper on the significance of music in Thomas Merton's life by Jean-Marcel Molart of McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. For audio-visuals, we listened to Warren Parker, the baritone, who had recorded several poems of Merton set to music by John Jacob Niles, including "For My Brother Missing in Action." The Victor Hammer portraits of Merton and Niles were enlarged and projected on the screen. After this we heard a rare recording by Thomas Merton at the hermitage singing Gregorian chant shortly before his Asian trip.

The final presentation of the afternoon was a comparative study of Thomas Merton and Albert Camus by Bruno Ronfard, author of *Thomas*



THOMAS MERTON'S BIRTHPLACE
L. TO RIGHT: JEAN-LUC ANTONIAZZI,
BRUNO RONFARD, PATRICK HART & CHRISTINE HICKS

Merton: Moine et écrivain (Desclee de Brouwer, 1992). During this presentation photographs of Merton with such persons as Jacques Maritain, Jean Leclercq, Jean Danielou and others of French origin were flashed on the screen behind the speaker's table. Afterwards questions were entertained by the speakers.

Among the Benedictines and Cistercians in the audience were two Trappistines, originally from Laval but now part of the annex house at Meymac, Sister Colette Friedlander and her former Novice Mistress, Sister Monique. The latter is currently superior of a group of hermitesses located on the Spanish border about twenty miles south of Prades. Another Canadian Trappist from the monastery of Sainte-Marie du Desert, Toulouse, as well as several Benedictines from St. Michel de Cuxa (formerly from Montserrat), joined about 150 persons from Prades and its environs to commemorate Merton's eightieth birthday.

All the participants were then encouraged to proceed to Merton's birthplace, about a block from the theater, at 1 rue du 4 Septembre, where the Mayor and I unveiled the plaque of marble on the outside of the house, on which was inscribed in French that Thomas Merton, the American writer, was born here. Sister Monique suggested to the Mayor that more should be added, identifying Merton as a Cistercian monk and hermit as well as his birth and death dates.

After the unveiling of the plaque the participants proceeded to the Church of St. Pierre, another block away at the center of the town, where the Eucharist was offered to commemorate Merton's eightieth birthday. Despite the ornate baroque trappings depicting the life of St. Peter (in triple tiara) on the altar piece, the liturgy was done very well, thanks to Jean-Luc Antoniazzi, the Choir Master and organist for the Church. After Communion, one of the participants read Merton's well-known prayer in French: "My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone."

Until now Prades has been known mainly because of the world renowned cellist, Pablo Casals, who lived most of his adult life there. There is a museum dedicated to his memory at the Office of Tourism at 4 rue Victor Hugo. Each year musicians from all over the world gather to put on a music festival in memory of Casals. Now with the newly-formed Merton Association or "Friends of Merton in Prades" Casals must share the stage with an American monk-hermit and writer.

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NOTE: Since the above report was written, I am happy to add that the Prades Chapter of the International Thomas Merton Society has been established with Jean-Luc Antoniazzi as its first President and Christine Hicks as its Secretary.