

# A Pilgrimage In Bangkok

by **Tim McHargue, MSC**

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The Bangkok pilgrimage was unplanned. I had just returned from several weeks in Nepal and Thomas Merton's life, and death, was on my mind. I was infused with a sense of spiritual wonder in the birthplace of Buddha and the land of Hindus and the Himalayas, as Merton was on his Asian journey.

A feeling akin to Merton's sense of inspiration was in the thin air as I hiked and biked in Nepal, soaking up the atmosphere of an ancient religious civilization and gazing upon the highest places on the planet.

Back in Bangkok, I found myself at a tourist site, a snake farm run by the Red Cross of Thailand. The thought that Thomas Merton died at a Red Cross conference facility in Thailand crossed my mind, and, though I was certain he had not spoken to Asian monks at a snake farm, I began to wonder where the site of the conference and Merton's death might be.

A stilted conversation at the Red Cross information desk was unsuccessful in shedding any light on the conference locale. But the thought of exploring this idea lingered, and when my girlfriend phoned from Jakarta I asked her to peruse my *Merton Seasonal*, as I recalled a recent article by a conference attendee mentioning the name of the 1968 monastic conference site. She agreed to look.

I received a call the next morning. "I found the article," she said nonchalantly, and I was elated. "The name of the place is Sawangkani Wat." Ah ha, bingo.

That day I asked the whereabouts of the name I had copied. "Far away," the counter person at my hotel said. "Not in Bangkok," she said, although she couldn't tell me in which direction it might be. I was disappointed, as I had not planned to venture outside the city. But I decided to ask again as I purchased a plane ticket back to Singapore.

"A long ways away," the ticket agent said. I've been in Asia long enough to know to probe further. How far, I asked? "Maybe 30 kilometers," she said. 30 klicks, I thought! That's not far at all.

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I then asked her to show me on a map how I could get to Sawangkani Wat, and she disappeared and came back with a section map of the vicinity. "In this area," she said, handing me the map. I thanked her profusely and left.

I then met up with a friend I'd met in Nepal, and we mulled over what tourist sites to visit, somewhat unenthused. Suddenly it hit me: Let's hop in a taxi and find the site of Thomas Merton's death. "How about it? I'll pay for the taxi fare," I said, suddenly energetic.

My friend, by total coincidence, was from Kentucky, and his wife a native of Bardstown. I had mentioned Merton on several occasions in Nepal, and although he knew the name and had attended midnight Mass last Christmas at Gethsemani, he was unfamiliar with Merton's work. But slightly despondent, and wanting to talk, he agreed to accompany me on my mission.

I immediately flagged down a taxi, and after studying the map the driver quoted me a hefty price for the ride. But, by now I was unstoppable, and we jumped in the cab and weaved our way through Bangkok traffic towards the perimeter of the sprawling town.

Almost an hour later we reached a drab and nondescript area on the outskirts of Bangkok, and the driver slowed down. He turned off the highway and it looked as if we were in an industrial district with large modern storage facilities. I handed the driver the name of the Red Cross center and he pulled over and asked a succession of people for directions. No one had a clue.

I began to doubt whether I would find a building in this area that existed 27 years ago. Although I could not decipher a word of Thai script, every medical cross I spied gave me a slight boost of hope. Just then the cab driver was quizzing a motorcycle delivery man, and the man pointed as if he recognized the name of the Red Cross facility. The cab driver climbed back in the vehicle, turned the car around and headed 5 miles down the highway without saying a word. My mood brightened.

Soon he pulled off the road, and drove slowly along the side of the highway. Suddenly I recognized the Red Cross logo and saw the words in English on a white structure that had a weathered look about it.

"That's it," I yelled exuberantly. Sure enough, it was the Red Cross facility. The driver parked and we asked him to wait, for perhaps an hour. He agreed, for 200 extra baht.

I was not sure what to do next, or where to go. Then I saw a young woman in a nurse's uniform and I approached her and tried explaining my mission.

"Excuse me. I'm looking for information about a man who died here 20 years ago. Thomas Merton." Twenty sounded less obscure than the additional seven.

She spoke almost no English, and looked very puzzled. I understood her confusion, but asked again, slowly. She then signaled me to wait and she spoke to a man behind a check-in counter. He approached and she left. I repeated my request. His English was only slightly better, but he asked me for clarification.

“Thomas Merton. Died here, 20 years ago. A long time ago. Information?” A puzzled look appeared on his face.

He made a quick phone call, and then asked me to follow him to an office located behind the first building. We entered a large room with desks, and there were several conversations in Thai. I crossed my fingers.

Soon a large, older woman appeared, shook our hands and said “hello.” She introduced herself as Miss Anan Thongchareon, and I explained yet again, slowly, patiently, the purpose of our visit.

“Oh yes,” she said, nodding her head with a glimmer of recognition. “Thomas.”

Then she motioned us to come to her desk, from which she extracted a photo album from a drawer. She opened the book and pointed to a picture that was unmistakably Thomas Merton, looking perhaps a little more tired and thinner than I imagined.

I went to her side and examined the photos closely. They were dated “January 1969” on the side, and were snapshots of the 1968 conference participants. In limited English, Miss Anan explained that she had been employed at this facility for 30 years and that she remembered well the occasion of the monastic conference 27 years ago. After discussing the event, I decided I should continue my quest.

“Is it possible to visit the site of Thomas Merton’s death? Can we see the bungalow in which he died?” I asked, hesitantly. I felt awkward asking such a thing, and began to question just what my mission was, at this point.

“It is not possible. Some people live there now,” Miss Anan said.

Not to be deterred, I asked, “Well, could we just look, and not enter?” She thought a moment, and then motioned us to wait. Then a young man she introduced as her son joined us and we followed them to a car parked outside. We then drove about a half mile to another set of old white buildings.

“Conference here,” Miss Anan said, pointing to a large, run down but vaguely familiar-looking structure. It was in disrepair, surrounded by overgrown grass, and looked as if it had not been used since 1968. Then the car stopped near a modest bungalow, a small house on the edge of a canal. Miss Anan indicated that this was where Merton died, and repeated the fact that it was now occupied.

I got out of the car and walked slowly in the sunlight, shielding my eyes. I stared in awe and wonder. “This is it,” I said to myself. This is where Merton’s journey, on this planet, ended; seemingly an accidental occurrence.

I questioned my motivation, my reason for coming to this death site. But then I thought of all the sites one visits as a traveler, paying respect to the locale of tragedies and misfortunes in the lives of important persons that have gone before us. This site contained for me a certain power and significance because of my close association with Merton’s words and deeds.

I looked at the unremarkable wood bungalow and thought, What a humble place for a great man to go. Death indeed hath no vanity. I noticed electric wires leading into the house at the roof, and I felt an eerie feeling. *Cable to the Ace*, I thought wryly.

Then I peeked in the window and wondered whether I should force entry; assert myself to gain entrance. I saw a body stretched out on a bed, presumably sleeping, and considered knocking, but I stopped short. What did I desire, to see the charred spot on the floor? To place my fingers in the socket that supplied the electric fan?

Nope. Too much. Not necessary to disturb the inhabitants, I decided. I’ve accomplished my goal. It’s enough just to be here, and meditate on the fact that Merton’s travels brought him to such an obscure spot, and that fate and God’s will ended his life here. And that fate too brought me to Asia, and to Bangkok, and now to this remote place on a pilgrimage, to pay homage to the man, the “farmer from Nelson County” whose writings have guided me for three decades.

I contemplated the fact that, even as interest in Merton’s wisdom and writing increases, this place remains unacknowledged and anonymous. The site should be marked, or commemorated in some way, I thought. Perhaps just a simple plaque noting the passing of a great writer at this spot.

I then made a private prayer, took a last look around, and several photos, and climbed back in the waiting car. My friend and I rode back in silence. At the office I expressed my gratitude to Miss Anan for her hospitality, and for her life-long dedication to the infirmary.

That evening I wrote a page in my journal reflecting on the day’s adventure. When I finished I remembered to date the entry. It was November 1st. All Saints’ Day. Although coincidental, I was certain that my visit to Merton’s death site on that particular day was no accident.