

## Holy Editorial Foibles!

Review of

*Holy Folly: Short and Tall Tales From the Abbey of Gethsemani*  
by Brother Paul Quenon, OCSO, Brother Gueric Plante, OCSO,  
and Abbot Timothy Kelly, OCSO  
Windsor, Ontario: Black Moss Press, 1998  
132 pages / \$17.95 [Canadian] paperback

Reviewed by **Philip Levering**

The major influence on my conversion to Catholicism in 1956 was *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Msgr. William Shannon wrote in the Fall 1998 issue of *The Merton Seasonal* “that in rereading *SSM* . . . I discovered two typographical errors . . . that continued to be handed on in the many editions published during the course of these fifty years! They are corrected in the anniversary edition!” (3). Soon after reading that, I happened upon *Holy Folly* and immediately discovered two typographical errors on the first page of its introduction! And there are many more errors that occur throughout this small book – indeed an unnecessary distraction. More about that later.

*Holy Folly* is a three-part book, consisting of stories about life at the Abbey told by Brothers Quenon and Plante, and excerpts from funeral homilies given by the Abbot. The content of this writing is always interesting and in many cases quite moving. Thomas Merton is mentioned throughout, and many of the references to him here have never before been published.

Part One, subtitled “Holy Folly,” consists of excerpts of journal entries by Brother Paul Quenon from 1983 through 1997. Some of these entries are hilarious, some implausible, some outright incredible. His portrait of Brother Ambrose, for example, is of a monk who steals from his fellow monks to give to the poor neighbors of the monastery. He takes their shoes, and once he even gives away one of the monastery toilets! His adventures with the Fagenbush boys, who seem to be some kind of oblates, were ill-starred indeed. We also read of an occasion where some monks set fire to the woods out of boredom; and of the day the police descended in a helicopter to confiscate marijuana plants that were growing in the monastery woods. One of the funniest entries concerns an occasion when a monk is reading on the microphone during mealtime, and his subject concerns the sexual temptations of St. Jerome. A description of a fantasy about being locked in a garden full of “courtesans” was read. But the word was pronounced “Cartesians.” After a pause, a yelp of laughter was heard coming from Father Louis (27). (I find it interesting that Merton himself is called an anti-Cartesian in a paper by John Wu, Jr. entitled “The Zen of Thomas Merton,” available on the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain website.)

Part Two, subtitled “Sign Language,” is by Brother Gueric Plante, who was known as a

natural storyteller. He had just begun to write the huge amount of Gethsemani lore he had stored in his head when he died. His story of his initial struggle to learn the sign language used by the monks in the early 1950s is a delightful one. This section of the book is only ten pages long, which is unfortunate.

Part Three, subtitled “Ordinary Icons,” consists of excerpts from twenty-seven funeral homilies given over a period of some twenty years by Abbot Timothy Kelly. With the exception of Father Raymond Flanagan, the monks eulogized were mostly unknown except to their fellow Cistercians. Father Timothy treats them all with a mix of compassion and honesty. For example, Father Raymond was known for his book *The Man Who Got Even with God*. The Abbot knew him as a penitent, and yet also as an “intellectual snob,” as well as a rather brash individual. The last words of Father Timothy’s homily are: “There was the priest ever faithful to the Church, always wanting to put on the identity of Christ, there was the penitent knowing that the mercy of God is without bounds, knowing that we do not get even, we only learn to have the freedom to receive” (110).

Brother Tobias’ story sounded vaguely familiar to me. He came to Gethsemani at the age of 48, after the death of his parents. He had worked in a Chrysler plant in Michigan for eighteen years. For over thirty years Tobias cared for the Guesthouse. I must have met him during my retreats there. And then I recalled reading about him in *The Merton Seasonal* – a charming portrait by Joseph Engleberg in the Spring 1989 issue entitled “The Old Monk” (12-13). Then there was Father Idesbald, who entertained his fellow monks at Christmas by dressing up like Santa Claus! (67). And Father Matthew McGunigle, who before coming to Gethsemani was a Hollywood photographer. He corresponded with several big stars of the 40s, and knew the Duke of Windsor. While in the Air Force he took photographs of the first atomic bomb blast, and was present at the fire bombing of Tokyo (79).

Brother Paul says “this collection only scratches the surface of what might be found in the monastic world,” and that his pithy stories (as well as Brother Guerric’s) focus on “unexemplary situations” (9). Certainly they show a side of Trappist life that few people know. Father Timothy’s homilies are biographical miniatures. Perhaps the book is at its best when we can compare the stories of the few monks who appear in both parts. For example, Br. Octavius appears in Part One as a man who pigs out on cookies; but at his funeral as a very holy man and one of the most exemplary monks in the community.

Thomas Merton would have loved all these stories. But as a person who valued well-printed books, he would have been very unhappy about the text itself, because it is riddled with typographical errors from the very first page to the very last. There is also a lack of basic editorial oversight that could have improved syntax along the way. There are two “typos” on the first page of the introduction, and more on pages 9, 39, 41, 45, 46, 47, 60, 64, 72, 90, 96, 101, 115, 116, 122, 123, 126, 130. Finally, on the last page, three errors: just simple things like “all” instead of “and,” “thrust” instead of “trust,” and “the” instead of “that.” An example of the need for an editor as well as a proofreader is also found on the last line of the last page. This is the date of the funeral oration for Brother Guerric, which is given as 10 December, 1996. But we have read (on page 41) from Brother Paul that Brother Guerric died on December 8, 1997. Father Timothy says on page 130 that Brother Guerric entered Gethsemani 46 years earlier, which would have been in 1950 (or 1951?). But Brother Guerric, by his own account (45), says that he entered in 1952! A trivial point, perhaps, but careful editorial attention could have made it consistent and correct!

As in the case of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, with its two typographical errors corrected fifty years later, we need a corrected edition of *Holy Folly* – preferably without the fifty-year delay.