

# Pilgrimage to Prades

By Virginia Bear

Prades' first spring in the new millennium was well underway as thirty Merton pilgrims arrived at Thomas Merton's birthplace for a nine-day program. A little further up the slopes of Mt. Canigou, the flowers had already dropped from the peach trees on the mountain-side of the Abbey of St. Michel de Cuixa, and the iris garden on the town side was a mass of color. Down the hill, 6,000-inhabitant Prades retains its ancient charm. Although the twenty-first century has arrived (to the relief of those who patronized the convenient Internet access shop), the town itself remains the embodiment of a world that was civilized long before Europeans discovered the New World. I had researched the area in books and on the Internet in advance, but it was even more beautiful than promised.

Prades is located in the south of France, in a valley where several rivers meet on their way to the Mediterranean, in the Pyrénées-Orientales administrative department. It is also part of Catalonia, a Catalan-speaking region on both sides of the nearby Spanish border. Thomas Merton was born in Prades 85 years before our visit, on the second floor of an ordinary building, at an unpretentious intersection of Prades' narrow streets. Although his artist parents had hoped Prades would be a haven, the nearing of the conflicts of World War I as well as money problems led them to the United States a year later. Merton returned to southern France with his father from the ages of 10 to 13, and later, although he never returned again, kept alive his memories of France as well as his fluency in the language.



Pilgrimage faculty and staff, from left: Judith Hardcastle, Don Grayston, George Kilcourse

This lifelong attachment was all very obvious and reasonable to the members of the second "Thomas Merton in France" pilgrimage, from the moment we arrived. The majority of us were Canadian, the rest from the U.S. Drawn by the well-

known Cistercian (Trappist) spiritual teacher and prolific author, we gathered for a total experience of academic seminars, fellowship, travel, and French hospitality. Donald Grayston and Judith



Virginia Bear

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Virginia Bear, of Redmond WA, was a recipient of a 2000 ITMS Shannon Fellowship, which she used for research on "The Multiple Language Abilities of Thomas Merton." She served as a translator for the first Spanish-language presentation at the ITMS Seventh General Meeting at Bellarmine University in June 2001.

Hardcastle were our tour leaders, competently arranging the academic content as well as serving as regional experts, answering questions ranging from advising those who had hoped to scale Mt. Canigou (not this year - the snow line was still too low), to those who needed to know what kinds of medicine were available at the local pharmacy. Those questions they could not answer could be referred to another key person not listed on the brochure: Christine Hicks, of the Prades Tourist Office, English but long resident in Prades. I do not think anyone will soon forget the barbecue held at her home for the local and international Merton Society members, with an endless parade of meats from the grill, and remarkable demonstrations of agility in drinking from long-necked pitchers held high!

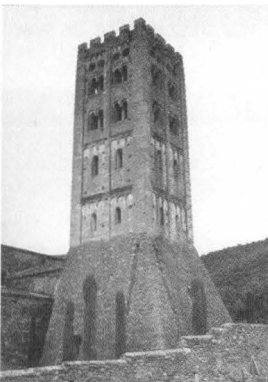


Tour of Prades. Pilgrimage faculty member Donna Kristoff looks on at left. The stone in the road bed is red marble

Three well-known Merton scholars were part of the pilgrimage: the already mentioned tour leader Fr. Donald Grayston (Anglican), author of several books and articles on Merton, Fr. George Kilcourse (Roman Catholic), recipient of the 1995 book award from the ITMS for *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ*, and Sr. Donna Kristoff, OSU (Roman Catholic), artist, ITMS board member, and Merton researcher and teacher. It was a unique opportunity to engage with them both formally and as fellow pilgrims. The rest of us ranged from the irrepressible Sr. Michelle, 50-years-professed pride of the Ursulines, to three articulate college students, with a good variety of people in between. The interchange

of views was sometimes bracing, but new friendships were made, and each participant had cause to be grateful to that "great and mischievous monk" who drew us all to Prades.

We stayed in two hotels in the center of town. We breakfasted in our hotels, speaking quietly with other participants about the days just past or the days to come. The program was a combination of lecture/discussion seminars, group travel, and free time. Classes were only a few blocks away, either in the old town hall off the town square, or in the Tourist Office. Seminar topics included: "Merton as Icon," "The Mertons - A Family of Artists," "Autobiographical Writings," "Contemplative Poet," "Merton in St. Antonin," "Zen Brushstrokes," "French Poems and the Frenchness of Merton," and "Contemplative Social Critic." Only those who were attending for academic credit had a final paper to write.



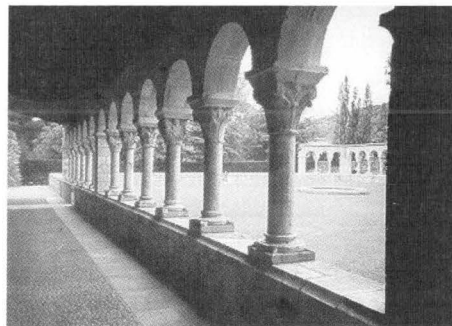
St. Michel de Cuixa. Its lower portion reinforced in the XIV century, only the south tower remains

Time passed at a different speed in Prades, and we tried to adjust. Lunch hour was longer than an hour, but that didn't mean we could wander aimlessly through Prades looking for lunch, since many of the shops closed at mid-day. It took a while to understand when we needed to hurry, and when we didn't. Group meals went on for hours sometimes, as we sampled the cuisine of the area and got to know each other better. Other times, meals were opportunities to go off individually or in small groups, providing occasions to try out high-school or more recently acquired French. Although some spoke English, any sincere effort to speak French seemed appreciated by the tolerant townspeople, already accustomed to tourists such as those who come to the annual Pablo Casals music festival.



Anne Leckie translates the Spanish of the former abbot of St. Michel de Cuixa

decades when the monastery was uninhabited. They maintain traditional Benedictine hospitality, as well as a well-stocked gift shop which proved very appealing to our group. Our tour guide was the former abbot, whose very congenial insider's introduction was capably translated from Spanish (although he spoke French and Catalan as well) by one of our group. St. Michel de Cuixa is the monastery whose cloister, during the quiet years after the French Revolution, was partially sold and moved to New York for the Cloisters Museum, only a few years before Merton's birth. The remaining cloister has been partially restored, and its beauty does not suffer by not being symmetrical and complete. We were surprised to find no resentment for the missing columns and capitals; instead, the monks have found that those



The other half of the Cloisters in New York remain at St. Michel de Cuixa

missing elements half a world away have served to draw the world to the monastery.



Don Grayston tells about the Doge of Venice's stone hermitage and stone bed

After the tour of the monastery buildings, Don Grayston led us to the remains of the hermitage of a Doge of Venice, who spent ten years as a hermit outside the monastery. Inside the outline of the walls of the hermitage, there still remains a rectangular rock, said to be his bed, and a source of healing for anyone who lies there. Those of our group who tried it out reported no immediate cures, but several commented that actually it was surprisingly comfortable!

The next day, we spent several hours in a bus traveling to picturesque St. Antonin, where we spent one night. St. Antonin, where the young Thomas Merton lived with his father, is located in a valley with steep cliffs, next to a river now promoted for kayaking and

canoeing. The town has not lost the medieval flavor it had in Merton's time. Many streets are too narrow for cars, with mysterious gates opening to the river, another street, or not opening at all. A large but architecturally unremarkable church remains at the very center. Like most of the churches



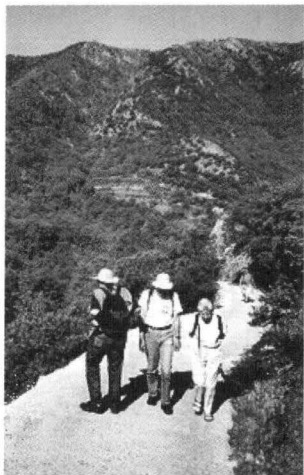
St. Antonin alley with irises

we visited, it was very quiet and not recently renovated, and I wondered how much more lively it would be for Sunday masses. We visited the stone house built in part by Merton's father, and met the friendly couple who live there now. The town seemed to draw us all into a meditative wandering of its streets, and we left reluctantly for the bus ride back to Prades.



St. Antonin, where Merton's father built a house

Midway through the course we had an entirely free day, suitably a Sunday. I was glad to join an ad hoc group who wanted to visit the monastery clinging to the side of the mountain - the Abbey of Saint Martin du Canigou. With Christine's help, we rented a jeep and held on for dear life as we sped through towns that we'd want to explore another time (like Villefranche de Conflent, a miniature and well-preserved walled city). We were deposited at the beginning of the road to the abbey, next to a simple little stone church that we didn't have time to investigate. The path was paved and just barely wide enough for one vehicle, which could be rented if necessary. We however, wanted to walk, and enjoyed the quiet as we headed up the many switchbacks. About a half an hour later, we arrived, ate our picnic lunch, and were guided into the monastery. This monastery was also built, and abandoned, at about the same time as St. Michel de Cuixa, but its location and current inhabitants are very different. Seemingly clinging precariously to a minor ridge halfway up a steep mountain, the current community is an unusual order of celibates, families, and single people. Most are young. We shared one of our French-language Thomas Merton cards with our guide, which he looked at with great interest, but no comment. The tour ended at the simple chapel, which we had carefully timed to be just before mass, which we joined.



Intrepid Merton pilgrims scale the road to St. Martin de Canigou

The pilgrimage closed with a last delicious dinner at the hotel, with a clown who did not need



Columns along a walkway at St. Martin. The monastery was new a thousand years ago

English to entertain, and with awards made appropriately and humorously to each person. I don't remember all of the awards, but mine was "Brave Vegetarian," and another participant was presented with and graciously wore an appropriately monogrammed papal miter! The following morning we dispersed in all directions of the compass, all grateful for nine precious days in Merton's French homeland.

More than a year later, I still savor the beauty of Prades and southern France, far from the rolling fields and knobs of Kentucky where Merton spent the second half of his life. But paradoxically, his entrance into the enclosed monastery only strengthened his French ties. Merton could not come to France, so France came to him. The Cistercian order originated in France centuries ago, and it was a matter of monastic obedience



Medieval Madonna and Child at St. Martin

for Merton to work with French-language materials as well as to serve as French interpreter for visitors. I suspect that this obedience must have also had an element of joy, judging by the relish with which he discusses all things French in his writings. We too, of the Merton Pilgrimage, gained a taste of that French part of Merton's joy.

Simon Fraser University will be offering another "Thomas Merton in France" pilgrimage May 13-23, 2002. Inquiries may be directed to Don Grayston, (604) 291-5516, donald\_grayston@sfu.ca, or to Judith Hardcastle, (604) 669-2546, hdcastle@intergate.ca. The web site is: [www.reg.sfu.ca/iess/merton/](http://www.reg.sfu.ca/iess/merton/).