

## **“Come, Little Children, Come to Zion”: A Merton Letter to a Rector’s Wife**

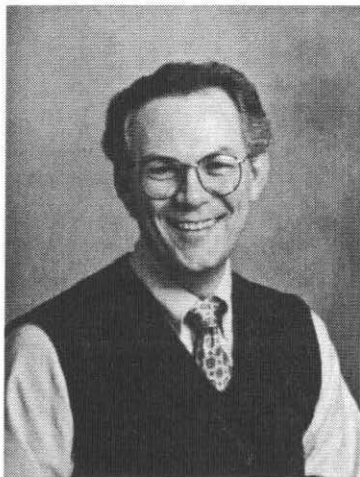
By **Walt Chura, SFO**

Young Tom Merton occasionally went to Zion – Zion Episcopal Church in Douglaston, Long Island. There his grandparents Pop and Bonnemamam pledged, though never attended, and his father Owen sometimes played the organ. As a youngster Tom wasn’t impressed with Zion. Nevertheless, as his conversion progressed, he developed a desire to go to church. The only church that came to mind was Zion. Merton muses in *The Seven Storey Mountain* that it must have been God’s providential plan that he “climb back the way I had fallen down. . . . He would not let me become a Catholic, having behind me a rejection of another church that was not the right kind of rejection, but one that was sinful in itself, rooted in pride, and expressed in contumely.”<sup>1</sup> He returned to Zion, he claimed, “not to judge it, not to condemn the poor minister, but to see if it could not do something to satisfy the obscure need for faith that was beginning to make itself felt in my soul” (*SSM* 176).

The next several paragraphs, however, Frater Louis spends precisely in accusing Rev. Lester Riley, by name in the first printing, of detesting Catholics and of not knowing his vocation. He charges Riley with trying to relate to people by discussing intellectual matters, especially literature, rather than religion. “When he did get around to preaching about some truth of the Christian religion, he practically admitted in the pulpit . . . that he did not believe most of these doctrines” (*SSM* 176-77). Merton admits that he did not go to Zion often, but that one could measure his zeal at the time by the fact that he once went in the middle of the week.

When *The Seven Storey Mountain* was published on October 4, 1948, one of the first people in line at the bookstore must have been Mrs. Lester Riley, by then the widow of Rev. Riley. She wasted no time before dashing off what must have been an irate note to Gethsemani’s new literary light. We do not have Mrs. Riley’s letter to Thomas Merton, but we do have his reply, dated October 25, 1948 and signed “Frater M. Louis Merton, O.C.R.”

When Loretta Carney and I went to Douglaston, Long Island to visit the Merton sites, including the Jenkins’ house, the railroad station and Zion Episcopal Church, our first stop was Zion, where we were warmly greeted by Father Patrick Holtkamp, current rector of the parish. He gave us a tour of the church and then shared with us more than we ever expected. I brought up the subject of the Merton study day, called “Thomas Merton and the Road to Zion: Then and Now,”



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which Zion Church had hosted under Fr. Patrick's leadership in October of 1999. I had stumbled across an old flyer for the event at Holy Cross (Episcopal) Benedictine Monastery near Poughkeepsie, NY, some time before our visit to Zion. Publicity for the event faced squarely Merton's antipathy in *The Seven Storey Mountain* toward Zion and the Reverend Lester Riley, rector from 1928 to 1942, suggesting as well that, "Fifty years later . . . Thomas Merton's spirituality and appeal far transcend" his early "cramped, parochial view." This conversation led to the current rector sharing with Loretta and me a photocopy of the letter from "Frater M. Louis Merton, O.C.R.," written to the widow of Rev. Riley, dated October 25, 1948, less than a month after the official publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

Fr. Holtkamp had come into possession of this heretofore unknown Merton letter when, in preparation for the study day at Zion, he had contacted Mrs. Elizabeth Sites, daughter of the late Rev. Riley, asking if she might attend. The handwritten response from Mrs. Sites, which Fr. Patrick also showed us, revealed that the wounds inflicted on Rev. Riley's family had not healed in fifty years. Mrs. Sites refused to attend the study day. She accused Merton not only of slandering Zion and her father but also of being no more than a hypocritical draft dodger. She expressed shock that Zion was hosting such a program. Finally she sent along the letter Merton had written in response to her mother's no longer extant letter to Merton expressing her own distress upon reading *The Seven Storey Mountain* hot off the press. Though Mrs. Sites asked that the Merton letter be returned to her, she allowed Fr. Holtkamp to photocopy it.

Frater M. Louis' attempts at ameliorating the harshness of his remarks in *The Seven Storey Mountain* about the Rev. Riley were obviously less than satisfying to the minister's family. Merton's apology is, in the end, ambiguous, tenuous, defensive, indeed "cramped and parochial." Given the natural/supernatural dualism which still gripped Merton at the time of the exchange of letters, his description of the Rev. Riley as having "natural goodness and humanistic interests and sympathies" can hardly have been comforting, any more than his acknowledging Mrs. Riley as "a naturally good and kind hearted and virtuous person" must have been. Lest Mrs. Riley miss the distinction, the young monk informs her that "Protestantism – embodied in the example [of Zion] – lacked a strong supernatural character." Opening his defense with the phrase "Doesn't it occur to you" had little chance of eliciting her assent to his objections to Mr. Riley's style. The blow can hardly have been softened by Merton's admission to Mrs. Riley that "our points of view are so different, by now, that this will only aggravate the pain I have caused you."

Frater Louis did put his finger on one of his problems in this letter, and for that matter in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. "Unfortunately it will be many years before I get around the obtuseness and ingrained 'toughness' that remains with me as the after-effect of a life that was not spectacularly worthless, but was nevertheless a life of sin." He confesses to a "sarcastic and critical and somewhat bitter character," admitting that Catholics "sometimes confuse loyalty to principles with critical intolerance of persons." He hopes her kindness is greater than his "stupidity," a favorite epithet Merton applied to himself – and others – throughout his writing, especially in the journals and correspondence. Grace, we may assert, eventually translated much of the "ingrained toughness" into the prophetic voice with which we are familiar.

Frater Louis makes one concrete gesture of repentance and reparation: he offers to suggest to his publisher that Mr. Riley's name be omitted from subsequent printings of his autobiography and to write a statement "as a qualification of some of my remarks," leaving it to Mrs. Riley to publish

the statement wherever she wished. Apparently, Mrs. Riley declined, wisely we might agree, to ask for the “qualification.” Merton did, however, proceed to have Mr. Riley’s name removed from the text and to redact some of his remarks about him.

The first printing of *The Seven Storey Mountain* contained the following paragraph:

The minister was called Mr. Riley. Pop had always called him “Dr. Riley” to his great embarrassment. Despite the Irish name, he detested Catholics, like most Protestant ministers. He was always very friendly to me and used to get into conversations about intellectual matters and modern literature, even men like D. H. Lawrence with whom he was thoroughly familiar (*SSM* 176).

Subsequent printings find the following emended paragraph:

The minister sometimes called at our house. Pop addressed him as “Doctor,” to his great embarrassment. He did not put himself forward, by any means, as a doctor of divinity. Nevertheless he had read a great deal and we used to get into conversations about intellectual matters and modern literary trends – even D. H. Lawrence, with whom he was thoroughly familiar (*SSM* 176).

Several subsequent paragraphs go unchanged in their unflattering portrayals of Zion and its rector. In the published text, the emended paragraph is of an equal number of lines as the original, a careful exchange required by the printing technology of the time, so that only that portion of the type need be reset, leaving the rest of the page plates as they were. Ironically, the fiftieth-anniversary edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain* restores the more offensive text of the first printing, as do a number of other recent editions.<sup>2</sup>

In his presentation to the gathering at the church in October 1999, Fr. Patrick Holtkamp pointed out the progress Merton made during his mature years in overcoming his “cramped, parochial” views. Neither Mr. Riley’s daughter nor a small number of disgruntled members of Fr. Holtkamp’s current parishioners were satisfied. Perhaps they had seen a copy of the fiftieth-anniversary edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain* where they were once again confronted with the youthful Thomas Merton still spouting his “wholesale and glib detraction of all the people with whom I did not agree or whose taste and ideas offended me” (*SSM* 79). For his part, Thomas Merton might repeat his complaint from “Is the World a Problem,” that “a lot of people have read” *The Seven Storey Mountain* but “apparently very few people” have read his “more recent essays and poems.”<sup>3</sup>

Yet, the prophetic and empowering work of Thomas Merton has helped transform Christians from many denominations and practitioners from many traditions. I have no doubt that his work has helped transform Zion Episcopal Church. In his notes for his own presentation at the 1999 “Thomas Merton and the Road to Zion: Then and Now,” which Fr. Patrick Holtkamp graciously shared with me, the current rector of Zion reflects on his “challenge as [a] pastor . . . to be [a] man of prayer, to insure liturgy does its work of putting us in touch with God, yet humble enough to admit I cannot reach everyone – trust God.” A Mertonian insight for sure. “Come little children! Come to Zion.”<sup>4</sup>

Thomas Merton to Mrs. Lester Riley<sup>5</sup>

October 25th 1948

Dear Mrs Riley:

Thank you for your letter, which is a beautiful one and fairer than my book. But, on the other hand, please do not think that I had 'singled out' Zion and Mr Riley for discredit: as if to say I wrote what I wrote out of some special malice or ingratitude. I do not offer this as a defence or an apology for having made you suffer, because it will not suffice: but you will permit me to say that I was engaged in setting down my own subjective reactions to the people and institutions of which I had some experience, and the book frankly admits that these reactions are subjective, and I also explicitly said that in the past my attitude towards Zion Church (the "terrible" Easter) was unfair and sinful on my own part. I admit that the way I then went on to say just why I could find no particular satisfaction or peace at Zion was written with too little consideration for the fact that living persons might feel them deeply. I was selfish in the sense that I was thinking primarily of my own experience and reactions, and for this I owe you an apology and give it gladly and as humbly as I can. However I cannot change the fact that I felt what I felt and that I still feel that the natural goodness and humanistic interests and sympathies of so many sincere and well-meaning ministers, of which Mr Riley was certainly an outstanding example, are terribly insufficient in our times. I cannot expect you to feel the way I feel about it because I know that for you, a naturally good and kind hearted and virtuous person, it would probably seem that all these things just come naturally in the nice, peaceful environment in which you have always lived. It is greatly to your credit that it should be so: and yet it is insufficient, and it is something that too easily caves in and disappears when the environment changes. And the environment, under the pressure of atom bombs and so on, tends to change quite a lot these days. In other words, what I was saying was that Protestantism – embodied in the example I best knew – lacked a strong supernatural character. It seemed to me to be good and helpful as far as it went but it scarcely seemed to go anywhere. Doesn't it occur to you, for instance, that the reading of D. H. Lawrence, especially by someone as completely immature as I then was, might be very harmful? In my case it was so. Now I gladly admit that if Mr Riley had told me not to read such books I would have paid no more attention to him than [sic] I paid to any of the other people who tried to tell me that: but surely it doesn't seem to me to be the business of someone who is devoted to the task of bringing men to God, to try to win favor for God's cause by showing so much interest in readings which of their nature tend to alienate a man from the fundamental moral values on which all friendship with God depends! Do you see what I mean? It is not just Mr Riley that I am picking on, it is a whole system, a whole secularized culture that takes all these things so blandly for granted. Still, perhaps our points of view are so different, by now, that this will only aggravate the pain I have caused you.

I freely admit that that "terrible" Easter any church would have got on my nerves and I will just as gladly admit that in those days I wouldn't have touched St Anastasia's with a twenty foot pole. And even today I will also gladly admit that, unless there has been some kind of a revolution, the music at Zion is probably far better than it is across Northern Blvd. Also, in what I wrote, I had no intention of slighting Mr Riley as a person: I was talking about his opinions and his beliefs and I admit that I did not know much about the kindnesses and the devotion of Mr Riley which you mention and which I am sure were very significant services both to my own family and to Douglaston.

I repeat, however, that my main desire in writing this letter is not to defend my own views but

to offer you the apology which I certainly owe you. The fact that I caused you pain was due to my own inconsiderateness, and it could have been avoided by the omission of Mr Riley's name – I mean it could have been avoided to some extent. If you like, I will ask the publisher to delete his name from the next edition, and if you want me to write out some statement that could be published as a qualification of some of my remarks I will gladly do it, and send it to you to insert in any publication you like. I admit that I had the greatest respect for Mr Riley as a person, as a friend and benefactor of my family, as a cultured and charming conversationalist. I also admit that I should have made some allowances for aspects of his career of which I had no personal experience. But nevertheless I stand by the substance of my page 176, and repeat that it seemed – and seems – to me that Mr Riley and Zion Church remain as instances of a humanistic and diluted religion which has practically no spiritual effect on souls and therefore does nothing worth mentioning to help them control their passions and lead lives of faith, lives centered on God.

I know you do not agree with me, and that it would be useless to try and persuade you of the truth of my side of the argument. I will not attempt any further steps along that line, because it does not affect the main purpose of this letter, the just apology which I owe you for having caused you pain by my clumsiness.

At least I can ask you to believe that I am sorry. I had no wish, in writing the book, to go around hurting people. I wrote it to help people. Unfortunately it will be many years before I get around the obtuseness and ingrained "toughness" that remains with me as the after-effect of a life that was not spectacularly worthless, but was nevertheless a life of sin. I trust that your kindness will be greater than my stupidity and that you will not only forgive me but also pray for me and ask God to help me along a little further on the ways of charity and teach me how to express my convictions in a way that will not injure other people. I am not just saying this to be nice: it is a real fault, and one that is deeply rooted in my sarcastic and critical and somewhat bitter character.

Let me close this letter by saying that I believe that it would really be a very good thing if people who really have some faith in God – even though they belong to different churches – could love one another with all the charity Christ demands of us. Catholics, including myself, sometimes confuse loyalty to principles with critical intolerance of persons, and we who have some sort of a vocation to talk about God on paper ought to be able to do it in a way that would make everybody love Him and hurt nobody. But you will admit that it is sometimes pretty difficult. In asking for your prayers, I hesitate to make any offer of my own in return, as if my prayers could count for anything, but trusting in God's help and in His mercy I will be so bold as to commend all your needs to Him, besides begging Him to heal any breach that my uncharitableness has caused between us.

Yours sincerely in Christ,  
(signed) Frater M. Louis Merton, O.C.R.

1. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 176; subsequent references will be cited as "SSM" parenthetically in the text.
2. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain: Fiftieth Anniversary Edition* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1998).
3. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) 144.
4. Title of a Shaker Spiritual.
5. The letter is published with the permission of the Merton Legacy Trust.