

Thomas Merton's Italian Vision Revisited

By Mark Shaw

Standing in the lobby of the Hotel Barraco in the heart of Rome on March 14, 2008, my knees began to shake. "This is where Thomas Merton stood in 1933," I thought; "This is where Thomas Merton walked."

A research mission for a fresh Merton biography I was fast completing about his struggle to discover the true meaning of love and freedom had brought me to Italy along with my wife, Wen-ying Lu. Merton had appeared in my life three years earlier during a spiritual direction class at San Francisco Theological Seminary. *New Seeds of Contemplation* soon became a daily staple of inspiration and Lu and I visited Gethsemani during one of Jonathan Montaldo's superb "Bridges to Contemplative Living" retreats at nearby Bethany Springs. When people asked me what denomination I was, I simply answered, "a Mertonist."

To better understand the youthful Merton, the one who visited Rome when he was eighteen years old, Lu and I had flown into the ancient city, though side-trips elsewhere, including Venice, Florence and Assisi, preceded our attempts to trace Merton's footsteps there. As Lu and I meandered through the countryside, inside my satchel was a photocopy of page 118 of the fiftieth anniversary edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Here Merton presented a description of the location where he experienced the spiritual vision of his dead father: "I moved out of my hotel and found a *pensione* with windows that looked down on the sunny Triton fountain in the middle of the Piazza Barberini." Merton then includes the Bristol Hotel, the Barberini Cinema and the Barberini Palace as being in his line of sight, adding: "and the maid brought me some hot water for the boil on my arm. I went to bed and tried to read a novel by Maxim Gorki which very quickly put me to sleep."¹

As the clear blue skies over Rome began an afternoon bursting with sunshine on a cool, spring day, and citizens and tourists scurried along the sidewalks chasing buses to take them to work and play, Lu and I began our quest, using the clues Merton provided, to locate the *pensione*. En route, I considered the Rome



Barbarini Fountain



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Bristol Hotel Entrance

when he learned that Albert Einstein warned those at a mass meeting at the Albert Hall in London: “Discontent breeds hatred and hatred leads to acts of violence and revolution, and often war.”²²

Despite these ominous overtones, Merton’s visit to Rome was inspirational for the recent graduate of Oakham. Here he would discover the magnificence of the churches, recalling, “I never knew what relics and what wonderful and holy things were hidden in the churches whose doors and aisles and arches had become the refuge of my mind” (*SSM* 109). Further enamored, he added, “And now for the first time in my life I began to find out something of Who this Person was that men called Christ. It was obscure, but it was a true knowledge of Him, in some sense, truer than I knew and truer than I would admit. But it was in Rome that my conception of Christ was formed. It was there I first saw Him, Whom I now serve as my God and my King, and Who owns and rules my life” (*SSM* 109).

That Merton’s mindset was fermented with the essence of holiness in 1933 inspired me as Lu and I leaped from the crowded bus and walked into the Piazza Barberini. At once, my eyes were fixated on the “sunny” Triton Fountain Merton said he saw from his *pensione* room. Lingering in the background was a tall, thin, brick building. Glancing upward I saw the illuminated red sign, “Hotel Bristol.” Nearly giggling like a kid who finds a lucky penny, I slowly moved my eyes right and there they were: the Barberini Cinema, and in the background, the Barberini Palace, each perfectly preserved through decades of Roman civil strife.

With four reference points discovered, I now looked to the west for a hotel window that would have permitted Merton his view of the piazza in 1933. Immediately (the Holy Spirit directing the search) my eyes focused on a small “hotel” sign with a buzzer underneath. Ten seconds later, a bellhop named Ronald appeared and directed Lu and me to the Hotel Barocco around the corner. There the manager,

Merton had witnessed more than 75 years earlier. The 1930s were turbulent times, with the devastation of World War I still a recent memory and the calamities of World War II on the horizon. The U.S. stock market crash of 1929 had shaken the world’s economy with the Great Depression affecting millions. In 1933, Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany and would soon align himself with Benito Mussolini, Italy’s strongman dictator, as Josef Stalin, Russia’s ruthless leader, watched with interested eyes. How much Merton, and the Romans he encountered, were aware of these threatening skies is unknown, but one as curious as Merton must have been alarmed



Bernini Bristol Hotel

Fabio Natolli, greeted us with a smile and informed us that the hotel had indeed been a *pensione* in the 1930s. It was called Santa Centrale Pensione. The actual room where Merton probably stayed was occupied, but Fabio permitted Lu to photograph the Barberini piazza from an adjacent third-story room (#29). This permitted her to capture what Merton must have seen during his stay there, based on his view of the “sunny” fountain, the hotel, the cinema, and the palace.

Goose bumps prevailed as I realized that we were seeing what Merton saw during the days when he experienced a most important spiritual moment – some say a conversion of sorts – the vision of his dead father. Describing it in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, he recalled, “I was in my room. It was night. The light was on. Suddenly it seemed to me that Father, who had now been dead more than a year, was there with me. . . . The whole thing passed in a flash, but in that flash, instantly, I was overwhelmed with a sudden and profound insight into the misery and corruption of my own soul” (SSM 111). He then added, “And now I think for the first time in my whole life I really began to pray . . . praying to the God I had never known, to reach down towards me out of His darkness and to help me to get free of the thousand terrible things that held my will in their slavery” (SSM 111). No wonder Merton was moved to recall this experience as one that triggered his quest to learn more about Christianity.



Hotel Barocco/Santa Centrale Pensione

While discovering the *pensione* where Merton must have experienced the vision was a true blessing, I had also hoped to visit one of the many churches he visited during his stay in Rome permitting him to focus on “holy things.” None had appeared until Lu and I stumbled onto Santa Cecilia in Trastevere (see SSM 109, 114), dedicated to the third-century martyr and patron of musicians. Spiritual beauty abounded here as ninth-century mosaics and a memorable statue of St. Cecilia lying in rest under the altar captivated the eye. Standing where Merton must have stood in 1933 once again triggered emotions similar to those experienced at the Piazza Barberini. Perhaps it was the mesmerizing *Last Judgment* by Pietro Cavallini that inspired him as much as it did Lu and me.

Being immersed in a world Merton experienced as a seeking youth permits many reflections. I will



Barbarini Cinema – Barberini Palace in Background

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View of the Piazza from the Pensione

never forget the first steps into Barberini Piazza, the Barocco Hotel, and Santa Cecilia. But Merton expresses much better than I may the inspirational mood one feels while witnessing the spiritual essence of Rome. After meandering around the Dominican Church, Santa Sabina, he describes his inner thoughts: “I walked out into the open feeling as if I had been reborn, and crossed the street . . . I sat outside in the sun, on a wall and tasted the joy of my own inner peace” (*SSM* 113). Amen.

1. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 107; subsequent references will be cited as “*SSM*” parenthetically in the text.
2. Charles Freeman, *The 1930s* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1990) 24.



Author at the Barberini Fountain