

## Thomas Merton Comes to Prison

By **John P. Collins, Joe Labriola, Shawn Fisher, Timothy J. Muise**

### Introduction

By **John P. Collins**

It was a warm summer day in July, 2013 and I was heading north on Route 190. My destination was the Massachusetts Correctional Institution in Shirley, Massachusetts. Through a letter from inmate Shawn Fisher, I had been invited to speak about Thomas Merton to an assembled group at the prison chapel. Shawn had sent the letter addressed to St. Mary's Parish in Shrewsbury, Massachusetts and it eventually reached me at my home address. Shawn and his colleagues had been reading my monthly Thomas Merton columns in the *Catholic Free Press*, the diocesan newspaper in Worcester, Massachusetts, and they were interested in hearing more about him. In his correspondence Shawn writes: "I am secretary of Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic community here within the razor wire of the state prison in Shirley. Our Community is extremely interested in Thomas Merton and are hoping that you may be able to come and present a talk on his life and teachings. Our Community is truly blessed and we know that you would come away from any visit very uplifted. Jesus said, 'When I was in prison you visited me' and we can think of no better visit than to have you share the blessings of Thomas Merton with us." Shawn advised me to contact Chaplain Arthur Rogers if I was interested in coming to Shirley for a Merton talk and discussion. I called "Artie" to set a date for the visit and he requested that I send him the necessary personal information for clearance to enter the prison. After I arrived at Shirley on July 17, 2013, Artie guided me through prison security and introduced me to the inmates gathered at the chapel. I decided not to use the podium that was set up for me, but rather, I asked the men to move the chapel pews around me in a semi-circle. During the next 1½ hours, from 1:00 to 2:30 p.m., I spoke about Thomas Merton, his life and writings. The session was very "uplifting" as Shawn had suggested. We started and ended the session with a prayer and all of us held hands as one of the men implored the guidance of the Holy Spirit for a better understanding of Thomas Merton and his message. After our session, the Eucharistic minister, Mary Jean, administered communion to all of us. Mary Jean and her colleague Patty come to Shirley every week to lead the men in the rosary and other devotions. Before I departed, the group asked that I return and continue with my teachings of Thomas Merton. I agreed and subsequently we formed an ITMS Chapter and started discussing Merton's book *New Seeds of Contemplation*. I had previously led an ITMS Chapter at St. Mary's for eleven years and I welcomed yet another, but different, kind of experience. Artie Rogers was

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**John P. Collins**

very helpful in ordering twenty copies of the text and we began our journey. Through the ITMS membership the men had access to *The Merton Seasonal* which gives further impetus to our Merton discussions. At one session we viewed and discussed the film *Merton: A Film Biography*, produced by Paul Wilkes and Audrey L. Glynn. The film provided yet further insight into the life and times of Thomas Merton. Eventually, I asked the inmates to write short essays or commentaries which appeared in the Chapel Bulletin. Some months later, I spoke with Patrick O'Connell about the new chapter when we met at the 2013 College English Association conference in Baltimore, Maryland. After I shared one of the essays with him, Patrick asked me for other writings which he planned to publish in the *Seasonal*. Before publishing the essays and accompanying photos, I had to secure the permission of the inmates and prison officials. The following three essays are presented to the ITMS membership and I am sure you would agree that Thomas Merton has, indeed, made a difference in the lives of these men. Further, these essays give voice to the other members of our group who were not able to articulate their feelings through writing because of a lack of confidence and/or writing skill. Indeed, they have the same inner turmoil and pain but find some solace in Merton's work. As an aside, I would note that gaining access to a computer inside prison walls is not easy and therefore the essays speak not only to a dedication to Thomas Merton studies on the part of these inmates but to a determination to share their understanding of his message with the ITMS membership. My thanks to Shawn Fisher, Joe Labriola, Timothy J. Muise and other ITMS members of our group for their interest in Thomas Merton and their continued assistance in my own spiritual growth as we are all "prodigals in a distant country" trying to find our way home.

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In the fall of 2013 Shawn Fisher was reading an issue of the *Catholic Free Press* when he came across an article about a man named John Collins who happened to be giving a lecture on Thomas Merton at a parish here in Massachusetts. Using his legendary outreach skills he wrote to this parish seeking information on how to contact "Jack." He wanted him to know about Our Lady of Guadalupe here behind the razor-wire prison at Shirley, Massachusetts. He told him a little bit about who we were and asked him how he would like to come in and meet with us to perhaps give a talk



**Joe Labriola (seated); l. to r.: Shawn Fisher,  
John P. Collins, Timothy J. Muise.**

on Merton. Jack, being extraordinarily familiar with Matthew 25:36 ("I was in prison and you came to visit me") agreed to drive over here to see what we were all about. After he so graciously agreed to meet with us we were all excited for his arrival date. This certainly would be a first for all of us as only a few men in our parish community had ever heard of Thomas Merton. Initially on Jack's part, it was going to be a one-time visit. We pushed pews in a circular setting and had a chair set up for Jack with a small side-table for his books, water and a box of tissues. He gave us an introduction to his scholastic pedigree and told us enthusiastically of his passion for the works of Merton. He went around the circle and asked our names. He wanted to know how

many of us had read Merton before. Only four out of the approximately twenty men that showed up had even heard of him. The common thread however was our desire to learn. As it turned out, we had the right man in our midst who held the key to many doors once locked.

It is probably fitting that at this point I give some background information about myself as after all, I am the one writing this story: I came to prison in May of 1973. I was sentenced to first-degree murder for shooting a man. As one might imagine, prison was harsh and dehumanizing but I felt that I deserved whatever prison handed me. I immersed myself in the library with the purpose of reading every book in it to escape facing what I had done. Soon, I found myself being locked away in punitive segregation for being a dedicated recalcitrant. While in the “hole” the only book we were allowed to have in our cell was the Bible or Koran. Out of mind-numbing boredom I began to read the Bible. I read it cover to cover several times. Soon, I found myself not just reading but understanding and most importantly of all, believing. On one of what would become regular trips to the hole I found a book under my mattress, left there by the prisoner who was in the cell before me. The book was illegal. It was not the Bible so I could only read it when I was sure the guard was not making a round. The book was *Seeds of Contemplation*. I read it. I ate it. I wrote down lines page by page with a nub of a pencil. I shouted out passages to men in other cells through the barred window. Each Sunday the priest came to our cells to give us the gift of the Eucharist. It was delivered through the locked cell door via a food slot located near the bottom of the door. I asked the priest if he could serve me last so that I might have a few minutes of his time before he left. I struck up a friendship with this priest who later began smuggling books in to me. I read *Seven Storey Mountain* and other books by Merton. I read his poetry aloud to hear the words echo off the steel and cement enclosure.

Almost 41 years later I remain in prison. I am by no means the same person I was in that past life. Who among us is? I have spent many wonderful hours in contemplative prayer and finally accept that Jesus Christ has forgiven me. Now, as I sit in our chapel under the tutorship of Jack Collins reading *New Seeds of Contemplation*, I understand how greatly God has blessed me and our entire parish. There are no accidental meetings in life. Jack Collins was sent here by the Holy Spirit.

In this chapter there are so many life stories. Whatever the past may have been for some, the now is being spent productively as we come to find Christ in us all. It is fitting that I should paraphrase something from *New Seeds of Contemplation* that has touched me more profoundly than I could ever begin to put into my own words. “Justify my soul O God, but also from your fountains fill my will with fire. Shine in my mind, although perhaps this means ‘be darkness to my experience,’ but occupy my heart with Your tremendous life. Let my eyes see nothing in the world but Your glory, and let my hands touch nothing that is not for Your service.”

We thank the International Thomas Merton Society for welcoming Our Lady of Guadalupe as their forty-first chapter. We will strive with the guidance and blessings of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ to be worthy of this honor.

**Joe Labriola**

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“Every moment and every event of every man’s life on earth plants something in his soul,” reads the first sentence of Chapter Three in Thomas Merton’s book *New Seeds of Contemplation* – a simple statement on its face, but for those of us who bear the scars from roads less traveled it provides answers to long-sought-after questions. I was raised in an extremely abusive household that was physically, mentally, emotionally and sexually abusive. That abuse created what I can only describe as a cancer of the soul. I was detached from the world I knew, and from the ability to feel,

see or acknowledge the existence of God in those around me. I certainly don't blame others for my shortcomings, nor is this an attempt to rationalize irresponsible behavior. Rather, Thomas Merton has allowed me to understand how I could act the way I once did.

As I enter my twenty-second year in prison for a murder I committed back in high school, I can safely say I never would have thought that I would be learning about myself through contemplative prayer. As the newly established forty-first Chapter of the ITMS here behind the razor wire of MCI Shirley, I have enjoyed immensely the introduction to Merton through *New Seeds of Contemplation*. But as I stated earlier, I did not expect to experience life-altering occurrences. Chapter Three provided more than a few. On page 20, Merton writes, "Contemplative obedience and abandonment to the will of God can never mean a cultivated indifference to the natural values implanted by Him in human life and work." As someone who has struggled with indifference my whole life I found it hard to feel others' pain or suffering. Yet, in spite of this, those "natural values" Merton speaks of at times seemed silent indeed. For many years I wondered why God never came to my rescue. Why couldn't I grow up in a "normal" house? Why doesn't He save me? Those unanswered questions only further distanced my ability to hear God.

Every time I committed an act that was contrary to human nature I would ignore that voice in my head that told me, "Don't do it!" The more I did the voice became more and more silent. But it never became completely silent. Only through God and prayer was I able to listen more intently to that voice. What's more is that I became able to trust that voice and believe that He had my best interest at heart.

When Merton speaks of "detachment" and "insensible" it makes me wonder what scars he had to endure to understand the limits those cancerous tumors place on a man's soul. In the end, He did answer those questions – I just wasn't ready to understand.

**Shawn Fisher**

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When one comes across a vein of gold in the bedrock of hate's mountain range you should mine what you can out of it. This is how I view the International Thomas Merton Society chapter here behind the razor wire of the state prison in Shirley, Massachusetts. Prison is the bedrock of hate to which I refer and in the years I have spent in these mountains of despair I have learned one thing for certain; only God can rescue the prisoner from the certain death of the soul that is the penal colony. Death by a thousand cuts.



**MCI Shirley ITMS Chapter members**

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Merton speaks of contemplation being "his whole life," not just part of it. He had learned it was a mistake to make it only part of his life. He talks about how "few religions ever really penetrate to the inmost soul of the believer." Being a Catholic I always wanted to believe that our Mass, our sacred liturgy, made us somehow believers to the "inmost soul." My walk of faith taught me

that in the dry times, when I wandered from our Lord, that hope was barren from most of my daily thoughts. In prison this can be dangerous (as it can be anywhere else) as there are so many pitfalls one can stumble into. To be a contemplative is still beyond my full understanding but even with the small inroads I have made this “waiting for God” that I have found contemplation to be has assisted me in avoiding some of those pitfalls.

To try to understand that contemplation is “as pure in proportion as it is free from sensible and conceptual elements” was a very arduous task for me, but through willingness to learn and actual daily participations, I have become enlightened to the fact that God desires that I become closer to him, to embrace his design. The requirement that I let go and “wait” for God is difficult for someone so used to the instant gratification of worldly things, but through practice and through application I have discovered that the “waiting” can be a very pleasant and calming experience. This is not a definition I thought would lend itself to any type of waiting, but as with many things in God’s world it is a paradox. Good things come to those who wait.

The “Cloud of Unknowing” Merton refers to has at its core the question: “How shall I think about Him, and what is He?” This fourteenth-century quandary from an unknown source is at the heart of what a contemplative is attempting to discern, but it also goes much deeper. For me, the razor-wire contemplative, I must just trust that more will be revealed through this “waiting for God.” Even at this infancy in my Merton-inspired journey I have developed a great trust that indeed more will in fact be revealed, while also learning that I could never anticipate what those revelations may be. I trust that God is there, that he is in control, and that I must “wait” and see what his grace has in store for me, a sinner.

The mountains of hate are not nearly as steep these days, that bedrock of despair not nearly as solid, and the veins of gold seem larger as I grow spiritually. I am willing to wait. I am willing to be less as God becomes more. I am willing to be free from those spiritual shackles that have held me back, kept me small. His love and plan will be displayed in the waiting. I am now willing to work toward that “complete union with God” that is our ultimate destiny. No razor wire can keep him out.

**Timothy J. Muise**