

Editor's Note

When one of the contributors to this special anniversary issue of The Merton Seasonal sent along his reflection, he remarked: "I chose a topic that I thought others might not pick up on" and added facetiously: "You don't need 25 articles on the 'true self'!" He needn't have worried – the true self certainly makes its appearance in the 43 articles that follow, as well it should, but as only one of a rich variety of topics explaining why Thomas Merton still matters to so many of us personally and to our church and world one hundred years after "the last day of January 1915," when "under the sign of the Water Bearer, in a year of a great war, and down in the shadow of some French mountains on the borders of Spain," he "came into the world." Merton appears as sage, prophet, contemplative, poet, friend, thinker, writer, humanist, an attractive, fallible, imperfect, intriguing human being, a lover of God, nature, humanity, but also as mirror, kaleidoscope, iconic metaphor, foxy hedgehog and vice versa. His true catholicity – universality – is borne out by the scope, the breadth and depth, of these insightful commentaries on one or another facet of Merton's life and work. Coincidentally no less than 43 different Merton works are cited in these 43 brief essays, spanning the Merton canon from The Seven Storey Mountain to The Asian Journal. Perhaps most heartening are the pieces providing evidence of Merton's continued fascination for those coming to maturity in this anniversary year, as well as the numerous connections made with Pope Francis, clearly a kindred spirit and a leader after Merton's own heart. Perhaps Gosia Poks sums up best what all the essays are saying in one way or another: "Ultimately, Merton matters because he shows that the Sermon on the Mount still matters."

Particular thanks are due to Brother Patrick Hart, Merton's last secretary, a guide and friend to Merton readers and scholars for more than four decades, for providing the semi-official Merton biography that serves as a prefatory note to this issue; to the members of the Merton Legacy Trust, Anne McCormick, Peggy Fox and Mary Somerville, and to Paul M. Pearson, Director of the Thomas Merton Center of Bellarmine University, for making available the Merton photos and drawings included in this issue; to Donna Kristoff, OSU, for the lovely collage that graces its cover; and to the contributors who have shared their own insights on and appreciation of Thomas Merton with the readers of this commemorative issue of The Merton Seasonal. Happy birthday!

Pat O'Connell

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Thomas Merton, known in the monastery as Fr. Louis, was born on 31 January 1915 in Prades, southern France. The young Merton attended schools in France, England and the United States.



Patrick Hart and Thomas Merton

At Columbia University in New York City, he came under the influence of some remarkable teachers of literature, including Mark Van Doren, Daniel C. Walsh and Joseph Wood Krutch. Merton entered the Catholic Church in 1938 in the wake of a rather dramatic conversion experience. Shortly afterward, he completed his master's thesis, "On Nature and Art in William Blake." Following some teaching at Columbia University Extension and at St. Bonaventure's College, Olean, New York, Merton entered the monastic community of the Abbey of Gethsemani at Trappist, Kentucky, on 10 December 1941. He was received by Abbot Frederic Dunne who encouraged the young Frater Louis to translate works from the Cistercian tradition and to write historical biographies to make the

*Order better known. The abbot also urged the young monk to write his autobiography, which was published under the title *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948) and became a best-seller and a classic. During the next 20 years, Merton wrote prolifically on a vast range of topics, including the contemplative life, prayer and religious biographies. His writings would later take up controversial issues (e.g., social problems and Christian responsibility: race relations, violence, nuclear war and economic injustice) and a developing ecumenical concern. He was one of the first Catholics to commend the great religions of the East to Roman Catholic Christians in the West. Merton died by accidental electrocution in Bangkok, Thailand, while attending a meeting of religious leaders on 10 December 1968, just 27 years to the day after his entrance into the Abbey of Gethsemani. Many esteem Thomas Merton as a spiritual master, a brilliant writer and a man who embodied the quest for God and for human solidarity. Since his death, many volumes by him have been published, including five volumes of his letters and seven of his personal journals. According to present count, more than 60 titles of Merton's writings are in print in English, not including the numerous doctoral dissertations and books about the man, his life and his writings.*

Patrick Hart, OCSO

Silence, Holiness, Sanctity

By Lars Adolfsson

“‘What you should say’ – he told me – ‘what you should say is that you want to be a saint.’”¹ The words are not actually from the mouth of Thomas Merton, even though he put them in his autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain*. At the time they belonged to Bob Lax, a friend of his, a very good one. The question must have haunted Merton for many years, for his memory of the event seems vivid and struck a chord which later came to life in his writing. From his somewhat puzzled religious background he finally had a question that both challenged him and gave comfort at the same time. The aim for his life of faith was holiness.

This was of course not something unique in the life of the church that he discovered, but in his own life it opened up something new. Much of his later work, both his manual labor in the monastery, the liturgical prayers and his teaching and writing were part of his own answer to that question. In particular the small collection of reflections in *Life and Holiness*² captures some element of that answer. I find in that collection at least three valuable invitations of faith to help our understanding of what Christian holiness is. I call them invitations because I do not see them as forced upon the reader by Merton. Instead they are his reflections on his experience from a life lived in close relationship with God.

His first invitation is to accept that holiness and sainthood are part of our reality. Holiness has to be real and not just merely symbolic (see *LH* 17 ff.). If it is God's intention for us to become holy then it must surely be something

Lars Adolfsson, a founding member of the Swedish Thomas Merton Society, lectured in 2010-2011 at the Newman Institute (a Jesuit University College) on “Thomas Merton: Spiritual Guide and Transcender of Limits.” He wrote his Master's thesis in ecclesiology on Thomas Merton's novitiate conferences/sermons on Mary.



Lars Adolfsson