

## Merton the Educator

By Marilyn Sunderman, RSM

One of the reasons that Thomas Merton continues to be attractive to so many people is that he is an educator *par excellence* who exemplifies what it means to be a life-long pursuer of truth. Merton loved to learn and to share with others the insights he gained from a dedicated life of personal and communal prayer, in-depth, multi-topical research interests, and personal life experiences. At the Abbey of Gethsemani, Merton engaged not only in numerous writing projects but also in teaching fellow monks. Merton was an instructor extraordinaire. Passion, joy, enthusiasm, clarity and humor characterized his teaching style. Merton's teaching was an out-flow of his love of God.

In a Socratic way, Merton the teacher invited his students to probe thought-provoking questions as a way of enabling them to develop and express personal insights and opinions. Merton the educator sought to expose Gethsemani's novices and scholastics to a wide range of topics, including the essentials of the monastic life and tradition, the thought of St. Bernard, the writings of the Desert Fathers, the rudiments of mystical theology, Buddhist thought, and the poetry of Rilke, Hopkins, Blake and Eliot. For Merton, communicating with students offered the opportunity to deepen the bond of charity through the shared pursuit of truth.

Merton was convinced that authentic education connects learning with life, knowledge with wisdom, insight with lived experience. Merton taught that true education seeks to develop the whole person; it leads to the discovery and cultivation of one's true self. Through learning, one is able to become a better person.

For Merton, real education enables a person to discover self and others in the hidden ground of God's love. Authentic education activates the *scintilla animae*, that is, the spark of the Absolute within the self. In essence, according to Merton, genuine education leads to a student's development of a richer, deeper love of God, others and the world.

Merton's voluminous writings and recorded lectures are a treasure trove for students of life today who wish to explore and benefit from the wisdom of this contemporary intellectual and spiritual giant. Merton's written and verbal legacy offers twenty-first-century students tremendous, endless opportunities to engage this outstanding teacher in an ongoing sojourn of learning to live more and more deeply in Love. In this way, Merton the educator, the seeker of Truth, the lover of God, lives on!

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**Marilyn Sunderman, RSM** is Associate Professor of Theology at Saint Joseph's College of Maine. She holds a doctorate in systematic theology from Fordham University. She has contributed articles and reviews on Merton's writings to *The MAST Journal*, *The Merton Seasonal*, *The Merton Annual*, *The Merton Journal*, *Seattle University Review* and *The International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*.



**Marilyn Sunderman**