

## 40 years later, Merton's legacy looms large

Judy Valente Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly | Dec. 1, 2008

TRAPPIST, Ky. -- Around the country for the next few weeks, many Roman Catholics will remember and honor the life of Trappist monk Thomas Merton, who died 40 years ago on Dec. 10, 1968, in a freak electrocution accident.

Merton, who influenced generations of believers with both his monastic lifestyle and his prodigious writings -- some 60 books were published during his lifetime, and about as many in the 40 years since his death-- is especially noted for bringing spirituality to the laity.

A documentary on Merton's life and legacy, "Soul Searching: The Journey of Thomas Merton," will air on PBS stations nationwide on Dec. 14.

"The essence of Merton's spirituality is, I think, the humanity of it, that he really speaks to ordinary people," said Paul Pearson, director and archivist of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University in Louisville, Ky.

"He knows so well the great classics of Christian spirituality, but he can interpret them in a way that people in our world today can understand and relate to."

At the time Merton rose to prominence, the church was still firmly hierarchical.

"Spirituality really belonged to the monks and nuns and bishops and what have you," Pearson said, "whereas your ordinary lay person went to Mass on Sundays, the Mass was in Latin, they said the rosary, and that was the extent of it. And Merton, I think really opened up the whole realm of contemplation and spirituality for people."

Merton's own spiritual journey was complex and ongoing.

He was an aspiring writer and had, by his own account, lived a rootless and hedonistic life. He converted to Catholicism in 1941 and shortly thereafter arrived at the Trappist Abbey of Gethsemani in the hills outside of Louisville. In 1948, when he was 33, he published his autobiography, "The Seven Storey Mountain," an overnight best-seller now considered a Christian classic.

Br. Paul Quenon, a monk at Gethsemani, received his spiritual direction from Merton and remembers his approach.

"He doesn't think of the whole world as, you know, monks," Quenon told the PBS program Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly. "But on the other hand, he can talk to the monk in each person. He sees it as a deep enough thing, that somehow everybody has the capacity to come to the same intensity and depth of experience of God."

Sr. Suzanne Zuercher, a Benedictine nun who has studied Merton's life, found her vocation in part through Merton's writings.

"I knew I needed to be in monastic life," Zuercher said. "I knew he was someone who spoke to me as no had ever spoken to me. He's funny, he's profound, he's human, he's down to earth, he's practical, he's concrete."

Merton's fame allowed him to correspond with presidents and popes and Nobel Prize winners but as his public reputation grew, he retreated further and further into solitude and silence. Later, his abbot gave Merton permission to live for lengths of time as a hermit in a small cottage about a half-mile from the monastery.

"For him," Quenon said, "praying was just to abide in the presence, in the presence of the Lord."

In the 1960s, Merton's spiritual journey found him taking on the issues of the day -- civil rights, materialism, the nuclear arms race and the Vietnam War. His superiors blocked the publication of some of his most strident anti-war writings.

"As he changed from the world-denying monk to the world-embracing monk of the '60s, people began to think, 'Why should he be writing on these issues? He's away in a monastery. What does he know about them?'" Pearson said.

In 1966, when he was 51, and while recovering from back surgery in a Louisville hospital, Merton met and fell in love with a young student nurse.

"It was very brief. It was very intense. It was very passionate," Zuercher said. "He sometimes felt he had abandoned his vows, and at other times he felt he was living the vows of growth and fulfillment."

The two would sometimes meet clandestinely in secluded parts of the monastery grounds but within a matter of weeks, the relationship was over. Still, Merton had been changed.

"From that time on he never thought of himself as being unloved or unlovable, and he himself learned to love in this relationship; it was the part of himself that he always felt had been underdeveloped," Zuercher said.

Merton rededicated himself to his monastic life but as he did so his spiritual journey took another turn as he became interested in Buddhism and Asian monasticism. In 1968, he received permission to attend a conference on monasticism in Bangkok, Thailand.

Merton was electrocuted in his Bangkok hotel room after touching a fan with faulty wiring. Since then, Merton's reputation and influence have continued to grow. Scholars have published some 60 more of his books, including seven volumes of his personal journals.

As a monk, Merton left behind just a few personal possessions -- his work shirt, a cup, boots, and his eyeglasses.

"With the death of Thomas Merton," Pearson said, "we lost one of the great Catholic voices, one of the great prophetic figures within the Catholic Church, and I think that's why his books are still selling, why they're still being translated, because that message is as relevant today as when he wrote it."

(A version of this story first appeared on the PBS program "Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly." Please use the Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly credit line.)

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