

Society aims to promote scholarship on Thomas Merton

By Karen M. Franz

Just less than two years prior to the 20th anniversary of Thomas Merton's death, a group of 14 Merton scholars — led by Rochester's Monsignor William H. Shannon — came together in Louisville, Kentucky, this May to plan events to commemorate the world-famous monk's passing.

By the time the meeting ended, however, the scholars had laid the groundwork for more than a series of "Celebrate Merton '88" lectures and conferences. They also had set the foundation for the International Thomas Merton Society, an organization formed to promote an understanding and appreciation of Merton, and to encourage study of his many writings.

Merton, author of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, *The Sign of Jonas*, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* and many other books, was accidentally electrocuted in a Bangkok, Thailand, bungalow on December 10, 1968. His Asian voyage — undertaken to speak at a conference of Eastern and Western religious leaders — represented the monk's first trip in 27 years beyond the confines of the Abbey of Gethsemani in Bardonia, Ky.

Merton had come to international prominence through his outspoken involvement in the civil rights movement and his opposition to the Vietnam War. Two major themes in his writing are spiritual fulfillment and social action. "You could basically construct the U.S. bishops war and peace pastoral letter from Merton's writing," remarks Monsignor Shannon, emeritus professor of theology at Nazareth College and president of the newly



Thomas Merton

formed Merton organization.

In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, the best-selling 1948 autobiography that first caused the international spotlight to fall upon him, Merton the monk — known as Father M. Louis within the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance (Trappists) — reflected on the worldly lifestyle of Merton the young man. Born in France in 1915 to a New Zealand Anglican father and an American Quaker mother, he had devoted his early adulthood perhaps as

much to the pursuit of women and liquor as to his literary endeavors.

Yet, while he was working toward a master's degree at Columbia University, several profoundly spiritual experiences caused Merton to take up an otherworldly quest, one that radically changed his life. He was baptized into the Roman Catholic Church in 1938 and entered the Cistercian monastery on December 10, 1941.

In 1965 he ventured yet further on his spiritual journey, withdrawing even from the strictly cloistered Trappist community to live as a hermit in a cottage on the abbey grounds. There, as Israel Shenker wrote following the monk's untimely death, Merton "found himself all but condemned by his abbot to sit at the typewriter and produce the wisdom of the ages. It was a sign of his two minds about his role that he was ironically resigned and yet enthusiastically committed to it."

Some of the wisdom thus produced, Monsignor Shannon asserts, will eventually be counted among the significant contributions to American literature of the 20th century. Nevertheless, the prolific monk/author is not well-known outside Roman Catholic circles.

The monsignor observes, for example, that Merton's poetry — which exceeds 1,000 pages — has received little attention. "Some of his later poems, because they're difficult, have been neglected. This is one of the areas where he will be recognized." Another area open to scholarship is Merton's journals, which can-

not be published until 1993 because of a legal restriction imposing a 25-year wait following the monk's death.

"One of the facets of Merton that remains unexplored is the place he has in American letters," says Monsignor Shannon, who served as general editor of the recently published first volume of Merton letters. "He has been held captive by the religious community, and the literary people have not really taken him seriously," he remarks. Yet, as the monsignor proudly notes, the years of critical neglect may be drawing to a close; one critic reviewing the first volume of Merton letters called it the most important publication of letters since those of Flannery O'Connor.

Acknowledging that as their editor, he is perhaps prejudiced in favor of the letters, the monsignor observes that "Merton comes through best in his letters, in his sensitivity to the people he was writing to . . . I guess it's his humanity that comes through so very, very clearly."

"Merton is a very simple person in many ways, but very complex in many others," Monsignor Shannon says. One example of this complexity is the dual levels of operation contained in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. On one level, he says, the book is simply an autobiographical account of Merton's life; on the second level, however, the book is a contemplative view of a misspent youth. "Much is missed if (the book) is read simply as an autobiography."

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