

Elderhostel offers seniors education, interaction

By Mary E. McCrank

From Maine to Florida, and Illinois to Boston, Mass., 40 men and women converged on Nazareth College last month.

They had but two attributes in common: each person was interested in studying the writing and philosophy of a cloistered monk who was also a social activist; and each was at least 60 years of age.

Many of those attracted to this summer's third and final Elderhostel program at Nazareth College, July 17 through 23, first read Thomas Merton as young adults. Their continued interest demonstrates the lasting appeal of the Trappist monk's books, which in the 20 years since his death have attracted new readers while continuing to challenge those familiar with his philosophy of linking contemplative prayer with action on such social issues as nuclear weapons, disarmament, civil rights and East-West relations.

The response to Elderhostel, on the other hand, testifies to the conventional wisdom that learning is a lifelong process.

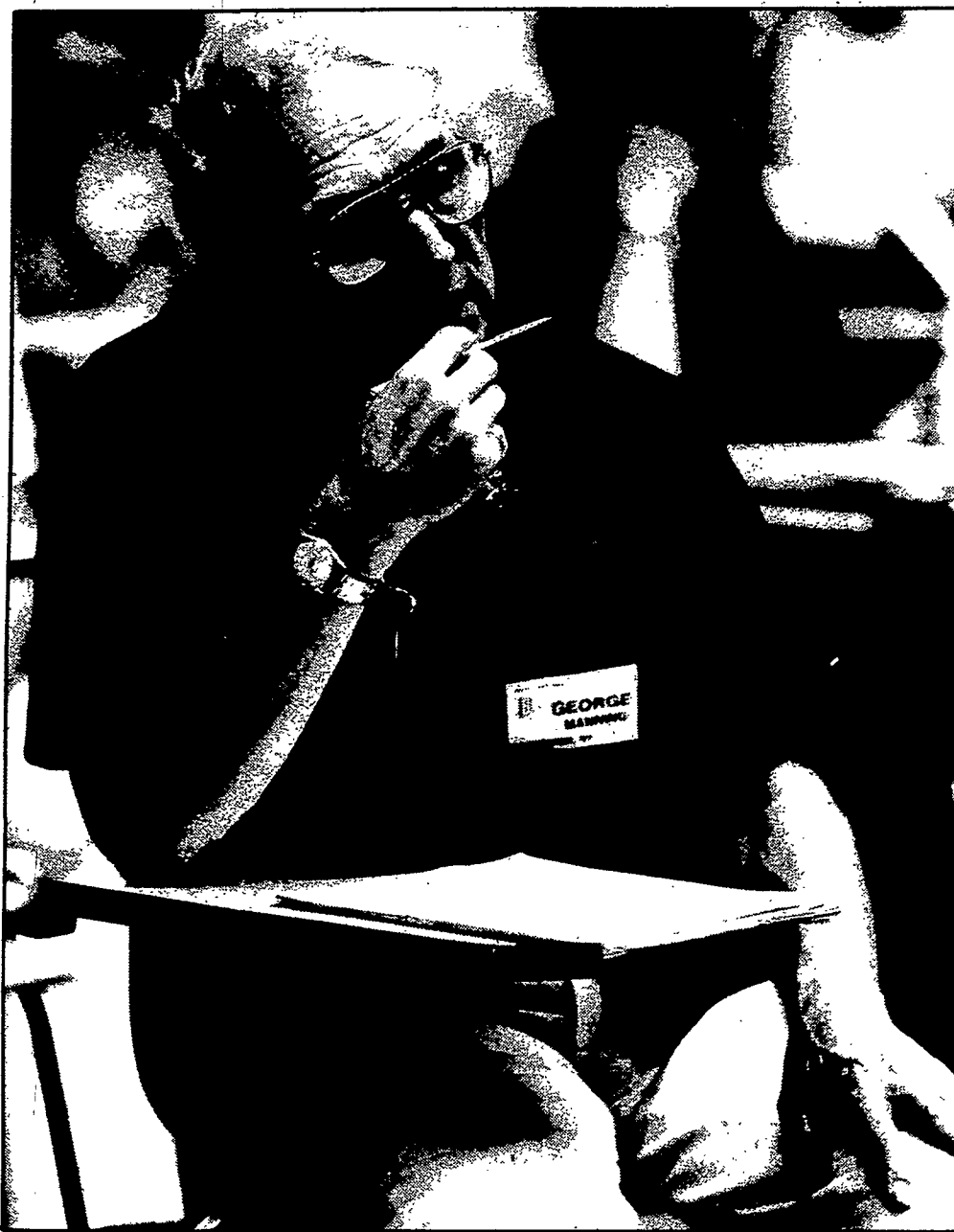
"The more you know, the more you absorb," explained Annette Donovan, a Quaker from Hamden, Ct., who attended the week-long program with her husband.

This summer marked the 10th year Nazareth College has served as a site for Elderhostel sessions, which bring men and women aged 60 or older together to colleges, universities and conference centers throughout the world for intensive study of specific topics.

Elderhostels began at the University of New Hampshire in the mid-1970s. Just a few years later, approximately seven New York colleges — including Nazareth — adopted the program. Today, in the United States, 1,000 colleges and conference centers welcome guests from among one of the fastest growing parts of the population — and what Elderhostel stands for — the elderly.

Nazareth offers Elderhostels during the summer, when the campus offers adequate room to house and feed participants. In addition to the most recent session on Merton, Nazareth offered two earlier sessions this summer: one on the operas of 19th century composer Giuseppe Verdi; and a second on Italian language and culture — taught in Italian, of course.

Several years ago, Monsignor William H. Shannon, a professor emeritus of theology at Nazareth, first proposed the idea of an Elderhostel focusing on Merton to Kathanne Mitchell, Elderhostel coordinator and director of the Center for Lifelong Learning at



Bonnie Traflet/Courier-Journal
George Manning of Rochester joined 39 other men and women aged 60 or older from across the country who attended an Elderhostel session at Nazareth College dedicated to the writing and philosophy of Trappist monk and author Thomas Merton.

Nazareth.

When the session on Merton was finally scheduled this summer, it drew mostly first-time, out-of-town participants. One exception was Jo Valentine, a Pennsylvania resident who has attended five Elderhostels in as many years, including one at St. Bonaventure University in

Olean, N.Y. She and a friend who also lives in Pennsylvania choose which programs to attend based on the location and subject matter.

Valentine said that what she learned during Nazareth's week-long focus on Thomas Merton mainly reinforced what she already knew. The highlight of her week at Elderhostel was a visit to the local Trappist monastery, the Abbey of Genesee, for Vespers — the evening prayer of the Divine Office.

Barbara LaCombe, of Sandusky, Ohio, chose the session at Nazareth for her first Elderhostel in part because she shared some history with Merton — both attended Columbia University during the same years, although they were not personally acquainted.

Merton's own autobiography indicates that the years at Columbia were an unsettled time, during which he indulged a penchant for liquor, women and jazz. However in 1938, this French-born son of a New Zealand Anglican father and an American Quaker mother, experienced a spiritual conversion and was baptized a Roman Catholic at the age of 23. In December of 1941, he entered the Abbey of Gethsemani, a monastery of the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance — also known as Trappists — near Bardstown, Ky. There, he took the name Father M. Louis.

In 1948, Merton catapulted into the international spotlight with publication of his bestselling autobiography, "The Seven Storey Mountain," which attracted a large following.

Annette Donovan — who shared with Merton a Quaker background — is still astonished by the life Merton led in the 1960s, especially his outspoken opposition to U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. Other contemporaries may still be intrigued by Merton's life at least in part because of his untimely death at age 53. During a visit to Bangkok, Thailand, in December, 1968, he was accidentally electrocuted.

In the years since Merton's death, his journals have been barred from publication by legal restrictions. In 1992, those restrictions will expire, possibly creating a new wave of interest in Merton's life and writing among Catholics and non-Catholics alike.

Meanwhile, to mark the 20th anniversary of Merton's death, Monsignor Shannon, one of the presenters of the Elderhostel session, has formed an organization aimed at broadening others' knowledge of Merton through "Celebrate Merton '88" lecture series and conferences.

Nazareth's Religious Studies Chairwoman Dr. Christine M. Bochen, another Elderhostel speaker, will also teach a course at the college this fall on Merton.

As a result of her experience at Nazareth, LaCombe hopes to attend more Elderhostels. Although she was initially attracted to the program for the intellectual stimulation of focusing on a single subject, she said she has also enjoyed meeting other people — which is also a primary aim of the Elderhostel movement.

A free catalogue providing information on upcoming programs may be obtained by writing: Elderhostel, 80 Boylston Street, Suite 400, Boston, Mass., 02116.

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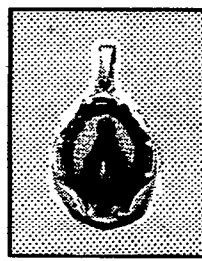
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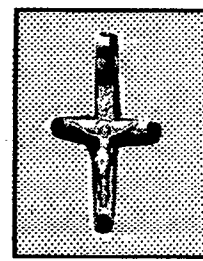
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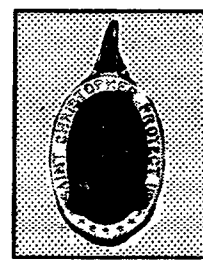
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