

# Merton

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Catholic authors, noted that Merton "is also taken seriously in the academic community. Courses are offered at colleges and universities on his writings."

An International Thomas Merton Society formed in 1987 — with Monsignor Shannon serving as its founding president. A Thomas Merton Room was opened at the Nazareth College library in Rochester (see related story). The Thomas Merton Studies Center was created at Bellarmine College in Louisville, Ky., to house Merton's letters, manuscripts, unpublished works, and memorabilia and writings about the monk. Merton scholarship even has its own publication, *The Merton Annual*.

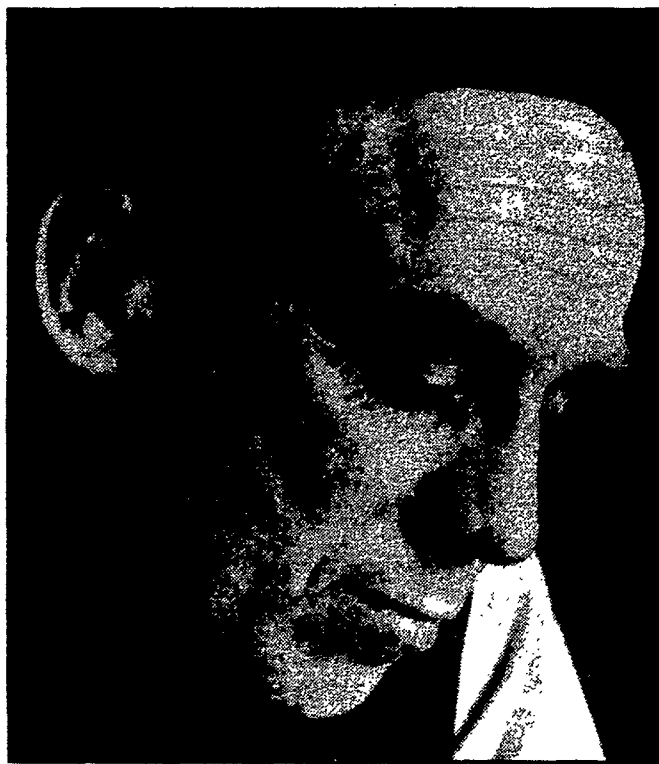
Indeed, Merton has become such a well-known figure in the U.S. Catholic Church that Eugene Kennedy, in his 1988 book, *Tomorrow's Catholics: Yesterday's Church*, even used Merton as a symbol of change in the church by naming one chapter, "Thomas Merton Died for Our Sins."

In the wake of such ongoing and sustained activity, questions arise about why Merton continues to attract such attention 25 years after his death at age 53.

"I think he is a spiritual master and spiritual guide for our times," observed Christine Bochen, chairwoman of the theology department at Nazareth College of Rochester, 4245 East Ave., Pittsford. Bochen is also editor of the most recent collection of Thomas Merton's letters, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers* (1993).

Monsignor Shannon echoed this sentiment in his biography of Merton, noting in his introduction: "But to understand the man and the amazing impact of his writings, there is need to emphasize the fact that for an enormous and ever-growing number of people, he has been their true — and in many cases, their only — spiritual mentor."

Bochen offered another reason why Merton still appeals to people. "Though he died 25 years ago, what he wrote sounds very contemporary. Merton was able to bring together a concern with the spiritual and social justice."



Thomas Merton produced more than 50 volumes of autobiography, essays, spiritual writings, poetry and a novel during his lifetime.

"Part of it is Merton just seemed prophetic in the issues which he engaged back in the 1960s are still the ones with which we are struggling," noted Robert Daggy, director of the Thomas Merton Studies Center, who cited such issues as the environment, ecumenism and finding one's identity in an industrial society.

"I think he remains popular because it's a sensible voice," Daggy speculated. "The comment I most often hear is it's almost seems like Merton is voicing their own thoughts."

"He reached deeply into human nature and somehow touched a nerve center in people and opened to them questions that were there, but had not become clear until Merton articulated them," Monsignor Shannon said in an interview with the *Catholic Courier*. "What meaning does religious life have here and now? What to we have to become so we can be what God wants us to be at this time?"

Not only is he voicing other people's thoughts, but he is doing so as a public

figure, noted David D. Cooper, professor of American studies at Michigan State University in Lansing, Mich., and author of the 1989 study, *Thomas Merton's Art of Denial: The Evolution of a Radical Humanist*.

Cooper speculated that Merton remains appealing, in part, because he displayed three qualities lacking in many of today's public figures: the courage to express his thoughts honestly; credibility achieved through his total commitment to his vocations as a monk and as a writer; and a sense of conviction when he takes a stand on issues.

"It's in the quiet, recesses of the heart where meaningful impact takes place," Cooper said. "Merton's success has been in those quiet, deeper recesses, touching hearts in a way that folds us into the quiet."

One of the ways in which Merton touched people's hearts was that he helped open the doors to contemplative prayer for people not living in monasteries, noted Monsignor Shannon, who in addition to his biography of the dead Trappist, served as senior editor of the five-volume collection of Merton's letters and wrote a 1981 study of Merton's spirituality, *Thomas Merton's Dark Path: The Inner Experience of a Contemplative*.

Monsignor Shannon began studying Merton in the mid-1970s when students prompted him to teach a course about the monk. The priest discovered that Merton spoke to him.

"I think what appealed to me about Merton was that he gave me a realization that the contemplative life was not restricted to the monastery, but was that it was open to everyone," Monsignor Shannon said. "I had struggled with the matter of prayer throughout my life, and I discovered from Merton that I was trying too hard. I had to let God act."

"To me, the enduring value of Merton," the priest continued, "is that he did what no other spiritual writer dared to do: namely, to make contemplation a household word."

This message touches a variety of people, Monsignor Shannon said. He reported, for example, that he received a

letter last February from a woman who had felt guilt much of her life because she had opted to remain a lay person rather than become a religious. Then she read Monsignor Shannon's biography of Merton — and discovered relief from that guilt.

In the letter, Monsignor Shannon said, she wrote that for the first time in her life, "I had permission — from my own spirit — to continue my journey to wholeness as a lay person."

Another part of Merton's appeal is that, as he was growing and developing in his own thinking and spirituality, he was paralleling what was happening and would happen in the church, Bochen suggested.

She pointed out that when he wrote his autobiography in the 1940s, his views mirrored the view of the church at the time. The world and the church were set in opposition — with the church regarded as superior.

Over the years, however, Merton came to view himself "as part of the world, as a monk in the world," Bochen said. This changing view predicted the change that would occur in the church during and after the Second Vatican Council.

But while Merton detailed for his readers his own struggle with his vocation, with the church and with the confines of the monastery, he also began to confront problems in the wider world — problems he learned about through an ever-widening circle of friends created through letters, Bochen said.

Indeed, at one point, his outspoken views on the issue of war led to his congregation ordering him to silence.

But even though his writings on these issues drew attention during his life, most Merton scholars agree that they are not the ones that seem likely continue to draw attention in the years ahead.

By general consensus, *The Seven Storey Mountain* is judged as likely to live on. Finley, for example, described it as "a classic of spiritual writing."

Monsignor Shannon noted, however, that because of the fact that it represents an old style of Catholicism — and even Merton himself later said, "It is a youthful book, too simple, in many ways, too crude." — a critical edition would be in order. Such an edition would be especially appropriate for a 50th-anniversary edition in 1998.

A second book generally agreed likely to survive is *New Seeds of Contemplation*, which details some of Merton's ideas concerning spirituality.

As for the rest, time will tell. But Finley, for one, is sure of Merton's place in the history of spiritual writing.

"I guess it boils down to every now and then there is a writer who comes along and says things that transcend his era," Finley said, "and Merton was one of those writers."

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