

Books * Music * Videos

Diocesan duo remain dedicated to the 'word'

Years of study bears harvest

By Lee Strong
Associate editor

Ask Father Albert Shamon how many books and booklets he's published, and he has to pause and count — and is still uncertain.

Beginning with *Behind the Mass* in 1950, Father Shamon has tallied approximately 25 titles to his credit — on top of countless articles for periodicals, including his weekly column in the *Catholic Courier*, regular speaking appearances at conferences and retreats, and producing a videotape series on the Mass.

In addition, for the last 12 years, he has served as administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

His two most recent works, both published this year, are *The Bishop Sheen We Knew*, a collection of reminiscences about Bishop Sheen's years as Rochester's bishop (1966-69) released by CMJ Associates, Inc., and *Genesis: The Book of Origins*, published by The Riehle Foundation.

The 82-year-old priest's works cover such topics as the Bible, the reported pronouncements of Our Lady of Medjugorje, the rosary, sacraments, sacramentals and even Christopher Columbus.

In explaining his impulse to write, Father Shamon simply said, "I was a teacher. I thought it would help in teaching the faith."

His "teaching" has apparently found some willing students.

The Riehle Foundation reports it has distributed more than one million copies of the 16 Father Shamon works it has published. The most popular are: *Our Lady Teaches About Prayer at Medjugorje* (313,706); *Our Lady Says: Let Holy Mass Be Your Life* (209,413); and *The Power of the Rosary* (151,650).

And those figures are just for the English editions. A number of Father Shamon's works have been released in such languages as French, Spanish and Korean through other publishers.

Father Shamon estimated that total distribution in various languages of *The Power of the Rosary*, for example, has actually exceeded a half-million copies.

With distribution figures in those amounts, one would expect Father Shamon to be living quite comfortably. But he pointed out that except for *Genesis*, he has arranged with Riehle not to accept money.

"I told Riehle I would not take royalties if you keep the price down," the priest noted, explaining he wanted to keep the books affordable.

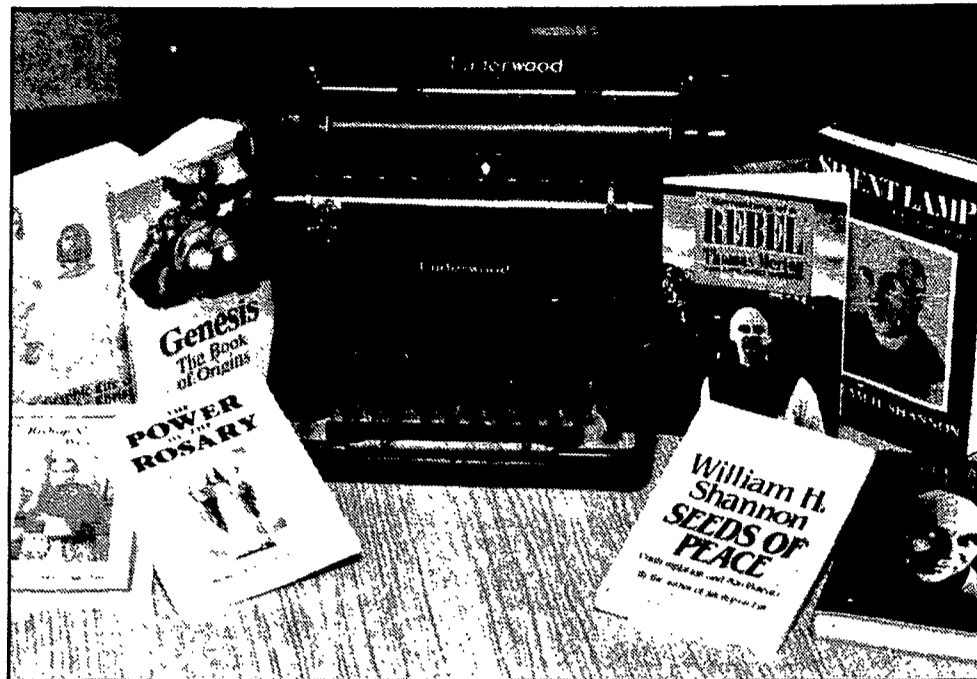
Thus prices for the books range from \$1 to \$9. He said that he decided to accept royalties for *Genesis* to help support the independent high school he established in Auburn, Tyburn Academy.

"People love the dollar ones, because they buy them in quantities and use them for RCIA and evangelization," Father Shamon noted.

The desire to obtain as wide a distribution as possible has also affected how he has written the books, he observed.

"I purposely simplified them," he said. "I purposely put them within the reading range of the people."

Indeed, regular readers of his column will recognize the same colloquial style in the books, complete with anecdotes and



Greg Francis/Staff Photographer

quotations from a wide range of sources.

The books published through Riehle are actually part of a renaissance of sorts for Father Shamon.

During his years as a teacher at Aquinas Institute (1946-50) and St. Andrew's Seminary (1950-61), he published several books beginning with *Behind the Mass*, followed by *Riches of Poverty* (1954), *Treasure Untold: Reflections on the Apostles' Creed* (1955), *First Steps to Sanctity* (1958) and *The Only Life* (1961).

At that point, he slowed down due to the Second Vatican Council.

"I wanted to see what the shift in theological focus would be," he explained.

But he didn't completely stop. He coauthored with Father Benedict Ehmann a religious education book *Come to Me* (1965), produced the syllabus for the diocese's religious education program while serving as vicar of education (1967-71), and published *Catching up on Catechetics* (1972).

Father Shamon then became involved in parish ministry as pastor of St. Mary's, Waterloo, from 1971 until his retirement in 1985, and no new title appeared. But then he went to Medjugorje, site of reported apparitions of Mary.

"Apparitions, I think, are homilies from heaven," he said. "They are a recall of a forgotten truth."

After that visit, he saw that many people had apparently "forgotten" many spiritual truths.

"I think there is so much confusion, and so much incorrect presentation of faith," he said.

Still, he was unsure how to respond to what he felt was a prompting from Mary to act. But one day he found direction.

"I was sitting at the Blessed Sacrament," he recalled. "I said, 'Lord, why did you fill my head with so much? Is that it?' Bang, then it happened."

The books began to pour forth. Initially, he produced a series of "Our Lady" booklets explaining Mary's reported messages at Medjugorje. Then he began to deal with such topics as the Ten Commandments, the life of Jesus and preparing for the third millennium.

He was able to write the books so quickly and easily, he said, because of the years of teaching, lecturing and writing articles. He notes that he has piles of lecture notes still available — and he fully expects to continue writing as long as he can.

"I'm 82 years old. I've studied all my life," he declared. "All the spade work is done. I've done all the research."

Priest plumbs monk's legacy

By Lee Strong
Associate editor

In his 1996 book, *Seeds of Peace: Contemplation and Non-Violence*, Msgr. William Shannon noted that he had yet another book in mind, "an easy book to write." He wrote, perhaps with a twinkle in his eye:

"I have thought seriously about writing a somewhat unique book which I would expect to become a best-seller. It would have one sentence on the first page. The sentence would be: 'God is everywhere.' This would be followed by two hundred blank pages. The readers would be advised to go through those pages slowly and carefully to allow the great truth on page 1 to sink deeply into their consciousness."

Reminded of the passage, Msgr. Shannon laughed, "I haven't done it because I haven't found a publisher."

The "failure" to find a publisher for that particular book has apparently not dampened his desire to write. The retired Nazareth College professor and chaplain this fall released through St. Anthony Messenger Press, *Something of a Rebel: Thomas Merton, His Life and Works*, a basic introduction to the life and works of Merton, who died in 1968.

The book is the latest in a series Msgr. Shannon has written or edited about the late Trappist. The founding president of the International Thomas Merton Society, he has published such books as *Thomas Merton's Dark Path* (1981) and *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story* (1992), served as the executive editor of the five-volume collection of Merton's letters (himself editing the first and fifth volumes), and edited *Passion for Peace: the Social Essays of Thomas Merton* (1995).

He has also written a Merton-influenced trilogy dealing with spirituality and contemplation: *Seeking the Face of God* (1988), *Silence on Fire: The Prayer of Awareness* (1991) and *Seeds of Peace*, a work for which he won third place in the spirituality category from the Catholic Press Association.

In addition, he has written *Exploring the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1995), and *The Church of Christ* (1958).

The latter book — his first — is one he prefers to forget.

"I usually tell people if they have a copy of it, burn it," he remarked.

The book, he explained, was a traditional apologetic text for the Catholic Church, written at a time when he himself was undergoing a change in his way of look-

ing at theology.

"It was Scripture studies that really changed my life," he said. "Getting to understand how to read Scriptures and not just use Scriptures as proof text, changed my whole approach to theology."

His third book, *Thomas Merton's Dark Path*, grew out of an essay — and an interest that has affected the last 20 years of his life.

It all began during a summer course in the 1970s, Msgr. Shannon recalled.

"At one point in the course, I quoted something from Merton, and, offhand, I said someday I'd like to do a course on Thomas Merton," he said.

Some students came up to him after class and asked him to teach such a course. He told them, "If you get a dozen people, next summer we'll do a course. So they did."

He taught the course, and a year later happened to be near the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky, where Merton spent his life as a Trappist. Visiting the abbey, he discovered the manuscript of an unpublished Merton book on contemplation. He returned to the abbey repeatedly, intending just to write an essay about the manuscript: Instead, he produced the book-length study of Merton's ideas.

He acknowledged that Merton's ideas deeply influenced him.

"I think that just as Scripture studies changed my whole outlook on the way to teach theology, Merton changed my ideas about the meaning of spirituality," he explained. "Contemplation was not something that took you away from the world. It gave you a perspective on how to do what needs to be done."

"One of the short phrases I use is, 'Merton made contemplation a household word,'" he added.

Beyond spirituality, Msgr. Shannon said what attracted him to Merton was the late monk's "humanness."

"He is very much like us all, yet he has an uncanny ability for articulating the human situation in a way that almost anyone can resonate with," the monsignor said.

The human side of Merton that so attracted him actually led him to write his biography of the monk, *Silent Lamp*. He described the book as the one in which "I found my own voice."

"It kind of flowed out of me because I had been doing Merton studies for a number of years," he said. "I personally consider it the best book I have written."

Something of a Rebel is not as comprehensive as some of his other works, and was not intended to be, Msgr. Shannon noted. He had been contacted by St. Anthony Messenger Press to write a book "for people who don't know anything about Merton."

The book presents a brief biography of Merton, looks at some of the common themes in his works and suggests which of Merton's books new readers of the monk might want to try.

"The readers I hope to reach," he notes in the book's introduction, "are intelligent and inquiring women and men who want to be challenged by one of the great thinkers and spiritual writers of the twentieth century."

As for Msgr. Shannon, who will turn 80 on Dec. 6, he is currently delving into another century, writing a book about St. Anselm of Canterbury, a doctor of the church who died in 1109.

"I've always been attracted to St. Anselm," he enthused. "Without a doubt, he's the greatest intellectual figure in the church between Augustine and Aquinas. But he's not really well-known."

If Msgr. Shannon's literary record is any indication, the long-dead saint will soon be better known.

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