

# Thomas Merton

(1915-1968)

## December 10—The Anniversary of the Death of Thomas Merton

*The Christian life – and especially the contemplative life – is a continual discovery of Christ in new and unexpected places.*

(Thomas Merton)

In 1949 a surprising title made its way onto the best-seller lists. *The Seven Storey Mountain* was not a mystery or a tale of alpine adventure. It was the autobiography of a clever young man named Thomas Merton who had turned his back on the modern world to adopt the austere, medieval regime of a Trappist monk. What made the book so fascinating was that Merton appeared to be, as he described himself, “the complete twentieth-century man.” He had enjoyed a life of freedom, excitement, and pleasure only, in the end, to reject it all as an illusion.

Merton told a story – by turns funny and sad – of the search for his true identity and home: of his orphaned childhood, his education in France, England, and Columbia University, of the pride and selfishness that brought nothing but unhappiness to himself and others. And he told of how his search had led him ultimately to the Catholic Church and finally, on the eve of World War II, to the Trappist Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. On viewing the silent monks, dressed in their white habits and kneeling in prayer in the chapel, Merton had exclaimed, “This is the true center of America.”

It was in some respects a classic tale of conversion. And yet for many readers, encountering Merton’s book in the postwar years, his story struck a very contemporary note. It fed a widespread hunger for spiritual values in a world poised between war and the empty promise of “happy days.” Suddenly Merton was the most famous monk in America. The irony was not lost on him. He had become a Trappist in part to escape the claims of ego, the anxious desire to “be somebody.” And yet his superiors felt his writing had something to offer the world and they ordered him to keep at it. And so he did. Yet for all the books he would go on to produce, he remained firmly identified with his autobiography. It became a painful burden, “*The Seven Storey Mountain* is the work of a man I never even heard of,” he would later protest.

One aspect of the book that he particularly came to regret was the attitude of pious scorn directed at “the world” and its citizens. He had seemed to regard the monastery as a haven set apart from the *massa damnata*. Only with time had he realized that “the monastery is not an ‘escape’ from the world. On the contrary, by being in the monastery I take my true part in all the struggles and sufferings of the world.”

In one of his journals he recorded a moment of mystical insight that marked a critical turning point in his life as a monk. It occurred during an errand in Louisville, “at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district.”

I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness.

Merton suddenly experienced a sense of solidarity with the human race – not simply in sin, but in grace. “There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun... There are no strangers!... The gate of heaven is everywhere.”

For years Merton had devoted creative thought to the meaning of monastic and contemplative life. But from this point on he became increasingly concerned with making connections between the monastery and the wider world. Scorn and sarcasm gave way to compassion and friendship. This was reflected in his writing. Along with the more traditional spiritual books there appeared articles on war, racism, and other issues of the day. Long before such positions were commonplace in the church he was a prophetic voice for peace and nonviolence. In fact, his writings were so controversial that for some years he was ordered to remain silent on “political” topics. Only after the Second Vatican Council was he freed from such censorship.

Ironically, this increasing engagement with the secular world and its problems was accompanied by an increasing attraction to an even more total life of contemplation. In 1961 he was given permission to move into a hermitage on the monastery grounds. There he continued to perfect the delicate balance between contemplative prayer and openness to the world that had become the distinctive feature of his spirituality.

Merton maintained a wide circle of friends. Many of them knew something of the tensions which at times characterized relations with his religious superiors. In the spirit of the 1960s some of them frankly questioned whether his vocation wasn't an anachronism and challenged him to “get with it.” In fact, Merton's personal temptations were all in the direction of even greater solitude among the Carthusians or in some other remote setting. But in the end he always returned to the conviction that his best service to the world lay in faithfulness to his monastic vocation, and that his spiritual home was at Gethsemani.

In his last years a more liberal abbot did encourage Merton to venture forth. In 1968 he accepted an invitation to address an international conference of Christian monks in Bangkok. Merton was particularly excited about the prospect of exploring his deep interest in Eastern spirituality. In this respect, as his journals show, the trip marked a new breakthrough, another encounter with the “gate of heaven” that is everywhere.

On December 10 he delivered his talk and afterward retired to his room for a shower and nap. There he was later found dead, apparently electrocuted by the faulty wiring of a fan. For all his restless searching he had ended exactly as he had foreseen in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. The book had concluded with a mysterious speech in the voice of God:

*I will give you what you desire. I will lead you into solitude... Everything that touches you shall burn you, and you will draw your hand away in pain, until you have withdrawn yourself from all things. Then you will be all alone... That you may become the brother of God and learn to know the Christ of the burnt men.*

#### **Source**

*All Saints – Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses for Our Time.* Robert Ellsberg. (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1997).