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PUBLISHER’S NOTE: Catholic journalist Gary MacEoin’s appreciation of Thomas Merton was originally published in the January 4, 1969, issue of the *Ave Maria*, less than a month after Merton’s tragic and untimely death in Bangkok, Thailand, on December 10, 1968. We are pleased to make it available again online. MacEoin’s first book, a biography of Father Basil Moreau, C.S.C., the founder of the Congregation of Holy Cross, appeared in 1962. In September 2007, Ave Maria Press will publish a new paperback edition of MacEoin’s biography in honor of the September 15th beatification of Father Moreau. For additional information about this book, please e-mail us at avemariapress.1@nd.edu. More information about Father Moreau’s beatification can be found [here](#).

Thomas Merton: The Usefulness of the Useless

BY GARY MACEOIN

“I think sometimes that I may soon die, though I am not yet old,” wrote poet, philosopher, historian and ascetic writer Thomas Merton, known to his Cistercian confreres as Father Louis, in a book published in 1966. “If this is God’s will, then I am glad.”

Death came without warning at Bangkok, Thailand, on Tuesday, December 10, when he electrocuted himself by accidentally touching the exposed wires of an electric fan. He was 53, at the peak of his physical and intellectual powers, and he had just begun what he considered the most exciting search of his life, an on-the-spot study of Buddhist monasticism in Thailand, India, and Indonesia. His interest in the subject had grown over the past several years, and he was convinced that the contemplatives of the East could help to restore Christian monastic life distorted by the materialism and bureaucracy of the West. He was in Bangkok to see the Dalai Lama, spiritual leader of Tibet, an exile since 1959.

Merton Resources from Ave Maria Press

In March, 2007, Sorin Books will publish a new collection of the writings of Thomas Merton. *A Book of Hours*, edited by Kathleen Deignan, arranges Merton’s words into a resource for daily prayer and contemplation. *National Catholic Reporter* has called the book “marvelous, inspiring, comforting, jolting, consoling” and Merton scholar Jonathan Montaldo writes that “*A Book of Hours* reveals in ways I have never experienced the hidden wellspring of Merton’s contemplative life and art.” Deignan has also edited a volume of Merton’s writings on nature, *When the Trees Say Nothing*, published by Sorin Books in 2003.

Also available from Ave Maria Press is a small group study resource called *Bridges to Contemplative Living with Thomas Merton*, edited by the [Merton Institute for Contemplative Living](#).

Merton rocketed to fame in 1948, seven years after he had buried himself for life in a monastery of the Cistercians of the Strict Observance, with the publication of his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. It sold 600,000 copies in hardcover, plus innumerable additional sales in paperback and translation, solving the monastery's economic problems and (with sales from the torrent of books that followed) enabling the Cistercians to found several new monasteries. His first book was *Thirty Poems*, written while he was a student at Columbia University and issued in 1944. Six novels from his student days remain unpublished, but one is scheduled to appear shortly.

"The sign of Paris is on me indelibly," he once wrote, explaining that his parents met there as art students. His father was English and an Anglican, his mother American and a Quaker. He was born on January 31, 1915, in the south of France at Prades, a town later famous for its music festival organized by Pablo Casals. His early education was in a French lycée. Next followed an English public (private) school, Cambridge University and Columbia University, New York. He acquired a knowledge of many languages. He also lived in many places, including the West Indies. It was the start of a love for peoples and cultures other than his own which would remain all his life.

The years 1937 to 1939 as a graduate student and briefly as an instructor in English at Columbia were decisive in his formation. He was deeply involved in a spiritual search, which led him to membership in a young Communist group. At this time, as he wrote later, he became "vain, self-centered, dissolute, weak, sensual, obscene and proud. I was a mess." But he continued to read and think, and in 1939 he became a Catholic. Two years later he astonished his friends, who had seen his work as editor of the Columbia college yearbook and his still unpublished poems as presaging a literary career, by

joining the Cistercians at Gethsemani, Kentucky.

Solitude had always fascinated him, and he reveled in his new life. His diary for March 16, 1950, would describe his emotional response to the spring awakening of the world as seen from the little broken window of the attic of the garden home at Gethsemani. "There in the silence I love the green grass. The tortured gestures of the apple trees have become part of my prayer. I look at the shining water under the willows and listen to the sweet songs of all the living things that are in our woods and fields. So much do I love this solitude that when I walk out along the road to the old barns that stand alone, far from the new buildings, delight begins to overpower me from head to foot and peace smiles even in the marrow of my bones."

Such contemplation might have exclusively occupied the rest of Merton's life were it not for the practical sense of a father abbot who believed that monks should do what they were best fitted for. In addition to naming the novice as librarian, he began to utilize his writing talents. The first tasks were dull. He answered letters, prepared vocational and fund-raising appeals, then graduated to a biography of an obscure Trappistine nun regarded by the abbot as a potential model for contemporary youth.

The quality of the results raised the abbot's horizons, leading to his decision that the young monk should publish his own life story. After the success of the *Seven Storey Mountain*, there was no turning back. Some 25 prose works and 10 in verse have followed, as well as an outpouring of magazine articles and correspondence. A list of the most successful would include *The Sign of Jonas*, *The Waters of Siloe*, *No Man Is an Island*, *Seeds of Destruction*, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, and *Mystics and Zen Masters*.

Fame involved some modification of the Cistercian life, but less than one might

imagine. Merton followed the basic routine of the monastery. He rose at 2 A.M. after seven hours of sleep, devoted an hour to the Office, said Mass, then spent the rest of his waking hours in study, writing, and correspondence. He was a man of enormous energy and drive, and he maintained his physical condition by chopping wood and long walks. His work brought many visitors, and he enjoyed most a conversation with one of them conducted while they marched briskly through fields and woods. He ate the standard diet of the monastery, no fish or meat, largely bread and cheese, chicory coffee, all prepared with little imagination. It soon caused him gastrodigestive disorders, aggravated by nervous tensions and a hypochondriac concern for his health. But he persevered and regained a good equilibrium, also shedding some excessive weight acquired about that time.

He made no public appearances, gave no speeches, but he conducted an enormous correspondence all over the world. Boris Pasternak wrote him from Russia to comment on a poem, this long before Pasternak was known in the West. Correspondents included Jacques Maritain, James Baldwin, the mayor of Hiroshima, Dorothy Day. Letters were not only a substitute for the personal contact which his way of life excluded. He believed that their impact was enormous. "All of you please send me new poems," he wrote to a Cuban poet. "I am convinced that we are now already in the time when the printed word is not read, but the paper passed from hand to hand is read eagerly. A time of small letters, hesitant, but serious and personal, and outside of the meaningless dimension of the huge, the monstrous and the cruel."

Merton engaged in continuous self-questioning as to whether his life as a monk limited his ability to contribute to human well-being. Vows, he once wrote, are illusory unless understood as a commitment to

others, an identification with "the cause of people who are denied their rights," and "a deep concern for the most fundamental of all expressions of God's will: the love of His truth and of our neighbor."

The internal conflict became acute in the early 1960s when a superior forbade him to become involved in controversial writing on war and peace, civil rights, and similar topical issues, insisting that his contribution lay exclusively in the spiritual and ascetic field. A change of superior resolved the concrete problem, allowing him to express himself freely. He opposed the war in Vietnam and the draft, worked in favor of civil rights and selective conscientious objection.

He was not only a sponsor of Pax, the Catholic pacifist movement, from its start in 1962, but took an active interest in it. One of his last writings was an article for the Pax magazine. It develops a favorite theme, the analysis of moral and religious issues in the light of contemporary literature. James Joyce's *Ulysses*, he says, illustrates "the breakdown of language and communication as part of the disruption of Western culture." Specifically, the clash between Bloom and Cyclops in the Dublin pub "spells out the whole issue of peace and revolution in terms of popular contemporary cliché" and reveals the inadequacy of the false or merely verbal pacifists who "fall back on force to defend and affirm love."

The idea that religion had much to learn from the world was basic in Merton's thinking. The real failure of the clerics, he wrote, was the assumption that "theology was a store of static and eternal truths which were unaffected by any conceivable change in the world, so that if the world wanted to remain in touch with eternal truth it would do well to renounce all thought of changing." For him, on the contrary, Teilhard de Chardin held the key. "The enormous success of Teilhard is due to the universal relief that Christians now feel: they are all at once able to acknowledge

their collective guilt and make a gesture of reconciliation with the world.... He has enabled thousands of Christians to become reconciled with themselves. In doing this, he has accomplished a providential task, essential for the genuine contemporary renewal of religion.”

He was understandably committed to the reform to which the Vatican Council called the Church, but insisted that implementation must be total and radical in all spheres. He scoffed at the idea that the liturgy could be renewed “under juridical constraint.” Instead, he called for the greatest possible freedom of experimentation. “There is much hope for liturgical renewal if somehow it can be carried out in a spirit of *play*. Play is not flippant or inconsequential. It is a very serious and very necessary activity. It is in play that the human heart is at once open, engaged, joyous, serious and self-forgetful.... One thing that is certain to come out of Africa is the revival of the ancient liturgical art of the dance, traditionally a problem to Western Christianity.”

Many factors contributed to Merton’s decision to study Buddhist thought. He was confident that it would provide deeper insights into the spirit of monasticism. He believed its dedication to nonviolence would help in his quest for peace. In addition, there was in him a personal attitude that closely matched a central concept of Zen teaching. He had a profound sense of the gratuity of grace and of the unimportance of what he himself did. Everyone who met him was quickly impressed by his realistic self-effacement. His success never affected him.

“If you have no appreciation for what has no use, you cannot begin to talk about what can be used,” he wrote in *The Way of Chuang Tzu*. And again: “No man seems to know how useful it is to be useless.” They are typical Zen reflections. But one can also see them as Merton’s justification of the way of life he had chosen. They also make an appropriate epitaph for a life cut short by senseless accident just as—in human terms—it was close to achieving its immense promise.

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