

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

Father Louis

On December 10, 1941, a writer from New York walked up to the front gate of a monastery in Kentucky and entered what he later called “the four walls of my freedom.” Exactly twenty-seven years later, December 10, 1968, he died in an electrical accident while visiting Thailand.

In between those two Decembers, he became one of the most influential American Catholics of the last century. He wrote essays and letters advocating peace, prayer and social justice, and left behind a classic account of his life that continues to be read around the world. That book, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, is a testament to conversion and the ability of the heart to change. And its author, Thomas Merton, remains a man close to my *own* heart—and close to many others as well.

Thousands have read *The Seven Storey Mountain* and marveled at the life it recounts. Merton liked jazz, cigarettes, beer and girls. He was born a Protestant and was briefly a communist. He caused a scandal in England—fathering a child out of wedlock—and returned to America in disgrace.

But God pursued him. While studying at Columbia, Merton stumbled on the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins and, through it, found the Catholic faith. Merton converted in 1939. Two years later, on the brink of a stellar literary career, he surrendered everything. At age 27, he entered a Trappist monastery, Our Lady of Gethsemani, in Kentucky. There he found his calling, as a contemplative and writer, and wrote a memoir often compared to Augustine’s *Confessions*.

After a world war, Merton’s story of the faith he found in solitude offered thousands of souls consolation and hope. With nuclear annihilation looming, life as a Trappist monk sounded seductive. Men flocked to Gethsemani, many with copies of *The Seven Storey Mountain* in their duffle bags. At one time, the cloister became so crowded, some men slept outdoors in tents.

Merton struggled with his celebrity. For several years he lived alone in a monastery hermitage. He eventually was permitted to travel. When he died, he was attending a conference with Buddhist monks.

Today, his grave is only one among dozens in the monastery cemetery. His Trappist name, “Father Louis,” is affixed to a small white cross. But it is as Thomas Merton that he spoke to the world—and continues to speak to our own world, one that still faces anxiety and war.

His words from a prayer he composed for peace seem more timely than ever:

“Help us to be masters of the weapons that threaten to master us. Help us to use our science for peace and plenty, not for war and destruction. Save us from the compulsion to follow our adversaries in all that we most hate, confirming them in their hatred and suspicion of us. Resolve our inner contradictions, which now grow beyond belief and beyond hearing ... Teach us to wait and trust.”

Amen.

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