Merton's Friends

A round table discussion between people who knew or met Thomas Merton

The Panel of Friends

Canon A.M. 'Donald' Allchin

Jim Forest

Tommie O'Callaghan

John Wu, Jr

In the chair:

David Scott

David Scott: The title of this conference is *Your Heart is My Hermitage*. We didn't pick it particularly because it has a particular resonance. But we chose a wide title. I think it does give us some sense certainly of the solitude of Merton and also the passion and the friendship involved in his life. We are beginning our conference by asking the four people sitting beside me who knew and met Thomas Merton, to talk about their memories of him. As the years go by, this gets less and less possible so we are very honoured and delighted to welcome John Wu, who is standing in for Ron Seitz but is certainly a member of the panel in his own right, Donald Allchin, Tommie O'Callaghan and Jim Forest. I'll introduce them briefly each as they come to speak. We've asked Donald to start. He's the President of our Society and it's very good to have him, because he really got us going two years ago. Had it not been for him, I don't think we would have galvanised ourselves into action. Donald visited Merton in the 1960's and brought back to England a great enthusiasm for Merton, and I think, for Merton, encouraged him to look again at his Anglican roots, amongst many other things. So, Donald, if you'd like to begin ...

Donald Allchin: This is a wonderful occasion and it is wonderful that so many people here have come and especially I want to second what David has said - we are so grateful to so many of our American friends and people who are very much at the heart of the International Thomas Merton Society for coming to be with us. It's a most wonderful starter - it's a kind of booster rocket - for this, our first gathering here. In the current *Merton Seasonal*, which is the periodical produced by Bob Daggy in the Merton Archive in Louisville, there's a reference to two categories of people: people who really knew Merton well, and people who claim to have known Merton. Well, I suppose I come into the second category. I always feel so on such an occasion. I have once or twice spoken before with Tommie. And with someone like Tommie who knew Merton intimately over the years, then I feel I am rather one of those people who claim to have known Merton.

It is true that I went three times to visit the monastery in the 1960's. Each time I had three or four days there and each time I did have opportunities - wonderful opportunities - for long conversations with Thomas Merton. I think that was partly because Englishmen are pretty rare in Kentucky and Anglicans even rarer. I'll tell you a little incident from my first visit which will show you how correct I was in those days. I was evidently wearing a cassock, a kind of typical Anglican wrapover cassock, and after I had been there for a day or two, one or two American people in the guest house said, "Are you a Redemptorist lay brother? We've been trying to make out what that cassock is." And I said, " No, I am an Anglican." " Oh, and what kind of an order is that ?", they said.

I confess that in the sixties, in Merton's lifetime, when I was in America, I never told people that I had met him and talked to him because I think most people would simply not have believed me. And those who did believe me would have been so jealous that I would not have been able to bear it. All one knew about Thomas Merton, apart from the fact that everybody read his books, was that you couldn't get

at him. So in that sense it was an enormous sense of privilege which I had in making those visits.

On my first visit, I was introduced by a professor from the Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville, a very fine New Testament scholar who had been working for a year in Oxford. Now in the 1990's, to be introduced to a Cistercian monastery by a Southern Baptist professor is perhaps not so strange. In the 1960's, it was really almost unbelievable. I stayed for some days with Dr Dale Moody, the man who introduced me to Merton. I stayed with him for my first ever visit to the United States and I started my first visit to the United States in Kentucky and it was a wonderful thing to have done. I didn't know what a good thing it was to have done until much later in a way when I looked back on it.

The first Sunday I was there, Dale Moody said "You had better go to your own church" so I went to St Mark's Episcopal Church, a little church under the wing of a huge Baptist cathedral, which was how the Episcopal church is in Kentucky, a little tiny minority group with all these Baptist cathedrals dominating the landscape. The rector of the church said "We've got a visitor from England, the Reverend Mr Allchin from Oxford, England", making it quite clear that I wasn't from Oxford, Mississippi, " And he's staying up there in the Baptist seminary," and there was a kind of gasp from the congregation. And as they came out, they shook my hand and said "Don't let them convert you up there, will you ?" I said to Dale Moody, "You didn't tell them that I was going on to stay with the Trappists at Gethsemani," "They wouldn't have believed me," he said.

Anyhow, I was introduced to Tom Merton by a Southern Baptist. And when Dale Moody had left and I was left there sitting talking to Merton for the first time and feeling a bit shy - here I was talking to this man who was an internationally known writer and one or two of whose writings had influenced me very deeply, Tom said, "What have you been doing for the last few days that you've been staying in Kentucky ?" And I said "Dale has been taking me around and showing me some of the places and I've really been learning a little bit about the history of Kentucky and a lot about the Kentucky Revival in 1804 and 1805. " . And then I said, "We went to Shakertown, to the Shaker village at Pleasant Ville. I must say I found it quite overwhelming. The buildings - there was something so beautiful about them. Do you know about the Shakers ?"

I shall never forget. He got up. He went over to his filing cabinet. He pulled out a drawer. He pulled out a file and there was a whole file of photographs of Shaker architecture and Shaker furniture - which in those days was not very well known. There were one or two books published in the States and available on it but not very well known. But Merton was right into it. He said, "I want to write a book about them." Well, he never did but he did write one or two very interesting essays about the Shakers and he made use of the Shaker materials to illustrate the *logos* doctrine of St Maximus the Confessor in an absolutely brilliant way in his lectures on aesthetical and mystical theology which haven't ever been published. One of the most beautiful passages in that document is the way in which he uses ... he says, "If you

want to have the *logos* of a bed or the *logos* of a chair, look at a Shaker bed, look at a Shaker chair, you can see what the innermost meaning is ..."

So we started off on Shakers and that got us going. And from that time we never stopped. Now one of the difficult things which I found, I think it must have been after the '67 visit, I thought to myself - I must make some notes of what we talked about - and I just found I couldn't. I actually wrote him a little note to say that I found I couldn't. I suppose it was because our conversation ranged so widely and so rapidly. We talked about so many different things. I was in some sense able to bring news and sometimes books or letters from people who Merton knew in England. I was able to bring him some kind of personal contact with the Russian Orthodox circles in Paris, especially the circle round Vladimir Lossky. He'd read Lossky's book and been greatly influenced by it. We talked about those things. We talked about some of the poets in Britain. He greatly loved Edwin Muir. I think probably I introduced him to R.S.Thomas and he became very interested in R.S.Thomas' work. And then, I don't think it was my doing, but he discovered David Jones and that was a real discovery. We talked about ... there were so many things we talked about. It was very difficult to make a kind of catalogue of them. There was a kind of quicksilver quality about the conversation.

The only time that I ever went up to the hermitage was in 1963. In 1967 and 1968, when he was living at the hermitage, he didn't take me up. He came down and we had all our meetings in the guest house except in 1968, when we actually went out from the monastery, the only time that we did that. I think it was in 1967 that while we were talking, a message suddenly came through, "Father Abbot says would you talk to the Community before Compline." I was a bit overawed by the thought of doing so, especially as I had hardly any time to prepare what I was going to say and Tom said "You must say yes." So I did. And then I said, "What am I going to say to them ?" "Well," he said, "tell them that you think the monastic life is important." "Well," I said, "they know that better than I do because they're living it." "Yes." he said, "But they need to hear it from somebody outside." So that's what I did talk about as far as I can remember. I remember the Abbot, Dom James Fox, leaning over to me after the talk and saying, "We are going to have a little service now. It's called Compline. Ever heard of that ?"

The third visit was in April 1968 and on this occasion I went with a friend, a student at the theological seminary in New York, where I was teaching at that time. We drove out and on this occasion Merton said, "Well, let's go out for the day," a thing he'd never done before and we went precisely to Pleasant Ville to the Shaker village and from there we went to Lexington and there was a rather memorable incident in the restaurant where we were having lunch. I was very correctly dressed with a clerical collar and a black [suit], always very correct in those days. And of course that didn't particularly stand out in the restaurant. What stood out in the restaurant was my voice, which is quite normal here but isn't quite normal in a restaurant in Lexington. A very smartly dressed lady came up and said, " Oh Father, you must be from England." And I said, "Yes, I'm from Oxford." "Oh, from Oxford.

Have you met our bishop ?" Well I'd been specially warned by friends not to meet the episcopal bishop if I could help it, so I hadn't. So I said, "Unfortunately, I haven't had a chance." Well, she talked to me for a bit and then she turned to this curious farmer who was sitting next to me and said, "And do you come from England, too ?" and Merton said, "No, I come from Nelson County, lady." And she wondered what the strange old redneck was doing talking to this rather elegant young man from Oxford.

On the way back we stopped in a roadside café and had a cup of coffee. We looked at the television news which was telling us that Martin Luther King was in Memphis and that there was a sense that everything wasn't going right. It was a very dangerous situation. And then the next item, which Merton records in his diary, was an item saying that Christiaan Barnard, the South African surgeon, had just done the first successful heart transplant operation ever. And evidently the news item said that this was a white man with a black man's heart. The interviewer had asked him, "Doesn't that feel very odd?" or something. Merton was amused and appalled by this particular element of the thing and was rather surprised that neither I nor Jerry had apparently noticed it. I had not noticed it for the simple reason that, by one of these extraordinary coincidences, I was expecting all the time to see my sister appear on the screen because she was head of the radiology department in that hospital, Groote Schuur, in Cape Town, where Christiaan Barnard was a surgeon and where the operation had taken place. She'd told me the last time that I'd met her what a difficult man he was. Anyhow, we drove on and it was as we drove on that over the car radio we heard the news that Martin Luther King had been shot. And Merton at once said, "We must go in to Bardstown. We must go and call at Colonel Hawks' Diner."

So we went to this small restaurant, a very nice little restaurant, which was kept by an African-American, Colonel Hawks, who was himself a Catholic and a great friend of the monastery and someone who Merton knew. And Merton knew that as a black man he would be devastated and also very anxious about his two children who were away at college ... the whole situation was at that moment in a sense very fragile. And so we went and spent the evening there. It was a very memorable occasion in many ways, particularly because it was the first time that I had really met a black American in any depth. Colonel Hawks kept coming back to us - he was busy organising his restaurant and seeing that his guests were being served - but he kept coming back to us and talking and talking and talking. So that was the third time and, of course, the next time I got a telegram at Pusey House in Oxford in December with this extraordinary thing that Merton had died. But I must say, my quite immediate reaction was, in a very mild and distant way, I suppose, what was evidently the immediate reaction of Jean Leclercq. People were really worried, when Jean Leclercq came back that afternoon, how he would respond to the news because, perhaps, he was the person there [in Bangkok] who knew Merton best. And, as you know, Jean Leclercq simply said, " Quelle joie !" " What joy !"

David Scott: Thank you, Donald, very much indeed for that. We'll have an opportunity later on to come back with some questions but can I now ask Jim Forest to speak. Just one or two sentences for those of you who don't know anything about Jim. It's unlikely, I think. Jim still maintains his work for the Peace Movement in the Orthodox Church and I'm sure that must have been sparked off by his meetings with Thomas Merton and the whole background of the Catholic Workers Movement. Jim, it's lovely to have you here again and would you like now to speak for ten minutes or so on your memories of Thomas Merton.

Jim Forest: I've been trying hard for some time to think what to say about Thomas Merton because I've said much too much about him and written too much about him and I don't like hearing myself say the same things over and over again. So I'm not going to tell the story about Merton laughing because of the smell of unwashed feet, for example. I'd rather talk about some of his qualities, as they impressed me. And perhaps attached to those qualities, appropriate stories . . . if I can think of appropriate stories. The qualities I can vouch for, but whether I can think of the stories that bear witness to them or not remains to be seen, because this is an absolutely extemporaneous and unpremeditated talk and it will, I hope, be not longer than ten minutes.

I think that one of the most impressive things to me about Merton was how uncontentious he was. I have been involved in something called the Peace Movement, which is not an aptly named movement. Those of you who have read *Bleak House* will remember Mrs Jellyby and she is more typical of the kind of person that we often have in our so-called peace movement. I have sometimes thought that the way the peace movement has protected the world from World War III is by taking the most dangerous people into the peace movement where they are safely away from weapons and where they can do the least possible harm.

Merton was one of the least contentious persons that I have ever met in my life. The story I will tell is one that I learnt first from Merton. It is simply a story he liked to tell. It is one of the Desert Father stories and it is included in the *Wisdom of the Desert*, of two fathers who had been living together for twenty years or more, One of the fathers said to the other, "You know, we've never had an argument. It's not too late. Let us see what it is like because men in the world are always arguing." And so they discussed this and the other one said, "I have no idea how to do it." The first one said, "It's very simple. All we need is a brick. I'll put the brick between us and I will say it's mine and you will say it's yours and then we will have an argument." So the other one reluctantly agreed – agreeable person that he was, he agreed to argue. The first father came with a brick and put it in the middle and said, "This is my brick." The other one did his very best and said "This is my brick," – very meekly. The first shouted, "No, it is my brick !" And the other one said, "Well, in that case . . . it's your brick. "

I think this is rather the way Merton was. He was the last person in the world to invite somebody outside the bar for a fist-fight. He was not somebody who

wanted to shed blood over a disagreement. Within the tradition of Christianity, you can think of him as being in the tradition of Erasmus – the things that we can't sort out in this life, we will sort out in the next life. Let's be patient. We don't have to solve all of our problems here and now. There are various ways of understanding certain aspects of the tradition but what is very clear is we have to love each other. We hear this all the time. But what was very impressive about Merton to me was that this was actually the way he was. I would connect this to a tradition which I didn't know at the time but which has become very dear to me in the Orthodox Church. If any of you are familiar with the ritual life of Orthodoxy you will know that from time to time, the deacon, or if there is no deacon, the priest, will come out from the Sanctuary and offer incense to all the icons and then, once he's done that, will do the very same thing to all the people in the church, the reason being that each of us is an icon. We are all made, actually painted by God, written by God. We are icons from the hands of God. This fabulous significance of each person – we don't very often meet people who communicate so comfortably and so deeply and richly the sense of the significance of the other. I'm very happy to tell you this is something which was normal, absolutely normal, with Merton.

The story that we've just heard from Donald about being in the restaurant. It wasn't as if he was in some kind of terribly self-effacing mood, but just to say, "I come from Nelson County" was enough. And this gift that he had which some people say he developed from the time he lived in England – this somewhat self-effacing quality – he certainly never insisted to anybody that he was particularly important because that would stand in the way of the intimacy of the relationship, whichever kind of relationship it happened to be.

One of the funniest experiences I had at the monastery in some way touches upon this quality. The abbot found me a bit alarming. I had come hitchhiking down from the *Catholic Worker* in New York City and we didn't very often see the barber – in fact I don't know if I ever went to the barber once at the *Catholic Worker*. I haven't the faintest idea how my hair got kept in order. It was certainly a sort of intimation of what was to happen with the Beatles some years later. But the abbot had apparently never had a guest whose hair was in such need of immediate attention and the word came down. Merton said to me at some point, "You know, the abbot is a little distressed about your hair. He wonders if you would be willing to have a haircut, otherwise he has to ask you to leave." "Oh", I said, "it's no problem. This is not a relic or anything. I'm perfectly willing to have my hair cut." So all the novices in this room where the novices changed into their work-clothes gathered round me while the shears were applied to my hair. The monk who was doing this asked, "How much do you want off ?" I looked around at all the monks. They had practically nothing, just a little stubble. I said, "That looks fine." So I went from one extreme to the other while the monks stood there, just laughing and laughing. The abbot was I think a bit shocked at the extreme that I'd gone to. But still there was something about being with Merton that made one feel literally quite detached from just about everything. This was another quality. I would call it the quality of fearlessness. That I think is one

of the most important attributes of Merton: that he communicated to so many people what it is like to live a fearless life.

If you read, as I am at the moment, the first of these volumes of his journals that are being published, you might keep it in the back of your mind while you are reading it, how open he is, how unprotective he is about himself, his future, and so on. There is some place where he just says that you have to abandon yourself completely, to love God and love your neighbour. This sense of abandonment. Not to be worried about the future and what will happen. Will you have the house ? Will you have this and will you have that ? Will people care about you ? Will you be important etc. etc. ? Although he didn't speak about it very often and perhaps never spoke about it so transparently as in these early journals, this theme that we see picked up very early in the journals is of simply abandoning yourself so that you can live very freely in the Resurrection because there is nothing actually to worry about. There's nothing we can do to prevent our death. There's absolutely nothing we can do to prevent a good deal of suffering in our own lives. It's all going to happen. And so you just say well that's going to happen. The form it will take remains to be seen. The only thing that actually matters is just simply living in obedience, living in attentiveness to this wonderful creation that's been given to us and which will carry us along in whatever way is necessary. This sense of the providence of God. Whenever you meet somebody like that, it's a life-changing experience. As much as people talk about it, when you encounter the reality of somebody who lives with that kind of absolute confidence in the providence of God, you are never the same again. It's very freeing.

The last thing I want to point out is a very significant gift that Merton gave me around 1963. In terms of cash value it was worth practically nothing. It was a photograph of an icon. And that gift has continued little by little to reverberate in my life ever since, although I must say it took some years before I paid any attention to it. But I would say the last quality that strikes me, that has to do with this icon, is the sense that Merton had of the unity of the church. Now we can all see how deeply divided the church is, how mercilessly divided it has been by events in history. It's quite amazing when you encounter somebody who was so deeply nurtured by what is at the root of Christianity, the traditions of spiritual life of which the icon is one example. It's a very important one for him. That love of the stories of the early church, the spiritual practices of the early church, his readiness to receive from any part of the church, from Orthodox, from Baptist, from Episcopalians, Anglicans and so forth and so forth, and then we go outside Christianity to all the different traditions of spiritual life that he found so amazing, so interesting, so helpful, so important, this deep underlying sense of the connectedness, the oneness that stands beneath divisions. And it was never a denial of division but that the way to deal with this division was to go more deeply. That some events of a healing nature occur because we go more deeply. And it's not to heal the divisions that we go there but simply because we are in a process of coming closer to God.

I'm trying to think of moments with Merton where one could see something of this. It may not seem immediately relevant but I recall sitting on the porch of his hermitage with a Polish visitor to the monastery who had come with me from the *Catholic Worker* – he had arrived a few days later – an artist who had had some difficulty in his relationship with the Catholic church and was asking Merton to explain the Mass. And I have never heard anybody explain the Mass the way Merton did that day. He explained it as a dance, which I would only understand much later in my life really. It would just continue to sit in the back of my mind some place. Because I frankly didn't see the dance element very often in the Masses that I was attending, and less and less, one might say, as the years passed. But none the less gradually it became clear to me that it should be and sometimes is a dance. And how remarkable it was that he could see that and that it would occur to him at that moment to explain worship in terms of that graceful movement, the ancient ritual motions that we engage in if we are lucky. It's a very original way, it may seem, of explaining liturgical life but actually it's simply a return. Merton who was seen by so many as a radical turns out to be one of the great conservatives of the twentieth century, bringing back to us so many forgotten bits and pieces of the church that we simply forgot were there, just crumpled up in some sack in the attic somewhere, thrown into a sea-chest, that he would lovingly recover and present to us as news, which it was.

David Scott: Thank you very much indeed. John, John Wu from Taiwan. Rather cold yesterday and he came without a coat, but warming up. There are two things about John. The first is that he spent his honeymoon at Gethsemani - and that must be a rare occurence. The second was that it was through his father's connection with Thomas Merton in that wonderful work, the poems and writings of Chuang Tzu, that the relationship began. Obviously [to John Wu] in a way you bring your father with you, don't you, when you talk. So it's very good to have you, not only for stepping in at the last moment but also for yourself. Over to you, John, for ten minutes of your memories ...

John Wu: As David has said, I met Merton because of my father. That's true. In the sixties I wasn't particularly interested in Merton's spiritual writings. I was more or less involved in some social protests - first in civil rights and then in the anti-war movement. The first writings that I read were of course the *Seven Storey Mountain*, but that was quickly forgotten. Later I began to read some of the writings on his social involvement, especially the writings in the *Catholic Worker*, which still costs one cent. I am sure if you have read the wonderful letters from Merton to Jim Forest you will understand very, very well ... it's almost like a capsule of the history of the peace movement in the sixties. Wonderful letters. But when I say wonderful letters, I don't mean that they were untroubled letters. They pointed out some of the really interesting and painful conflicts that people who were involved in the peace movement felt. And Merton felt it. Merton had this great compassion to understand what individuals in the peace movement were feeling.

But let me just talk a little about our trip to Gethsemani. Again I was really not very much prepared to meet Merton. I had started writing to him, really very silly puerile letters which I have read again ... and they are, they are very painful to read. They are collected at Bellarmine and I suggest you never look up those letters! But he wrote very beautiful letters to me and always very, very encouraging. I myself was going through problems especially academic problems and other problems. He gave good advice to me often. He had started writing to my father in the early sixties, I think it was March of 1961. The correspondence consisted of over eighty letters between them and they were very beautiful letters, very spiritual. Merton was really interesting when he was writing to Jim Forest, of course. You could see all the topical things and so on but to my father he wasn't. He knew that my father wasn't really so much involved in such things. He wrote on a plane. He seemed to write to each person on the plane that the person could be receptive. And this is, I think extremely important. Even when you read, and someone mentioned this at the last conference, reading some letters to teenagers in California, Merton was a teenager, he became a teenager when he was writing those letters. It's a kind of compassion I think and now that I'm in my fifties I try to do that too. When I write to teenagers, I try to be a teenager too. Not in a condescending way. Really in a joyous way too, reliving those years. When I write to my children I try to do that too.

I think that as the years go by, my wife and I ... she was a bride at that time, we just saw him for a couple of days. We saw him one afternoon from noon until the next day. Merton took us to some place in the forest and we camped overnight. I don't remember him setting up the camp for us so we were really on our own. We also spent some time in the hermitage which was a wonderful experience. And the hermitage really was a mess at that time. This was in June of '68 and by that time he was reading just about everything and people were simply sending him things. He had so many friends, publishing friends especially. But not only publishing friends. Just friends from everywhere. And they sent him many, many things and I remember seeing some books . . . I had just finished college at the time so I had read some of the books that he was reading too, which indicates something about him. He was really up to date on everything. He was reading people that I was interested in. For example, Herbert Marcuse. He was interested in Hannah Arendt. I remember I was reading her monumental work on totalitarianism. He was really very deeply interested and of course he wrote about that too.

He wrote about things at the time which many people would be shocked to find out that he'd been writing about. Marcuse was very interesting. I was reading Marcuse and I wasn't particularly struck by his political thinking. He was a Neo-Marxist and a kind of a darling of the students in the mid-sixties. I was very happy when I took up *One Dimensional Man* and I was leafing through it and then Merton said, "Oh, you're interested in Marcuse." And I said, " Well, yes. I'm very interested in him." And he said, "Isn't he wonderful when he writes about language ?" You wouldn't really expect that because Marcuse was really, as I said, a Neo-Marxist. What would a Neo-Marxist be writing about language for ? And I said, "Yes!"

Because that's exactly what struck me when I was in college, reading the book. Marcuse did a wonderful critique on language, you see, trying to save language as a poet would try to save language. This is the thing that struck me. I was happy for that. You know when you are in college you don't really have much self-confidence in things until perhaps an older person or someone whom you really respect, tells you that these things are important. That's not the only book. There were other things too that we seem to have shared. What has been important for me through the years, in reading Thomas Merton, is really each time that I read, even the journals, the journal Jim mentioned, *Run to The Mountain*, what struck me in reading through that particular journal was really the ideas at such an early age ... he was 24, 25, 26, ... the themes that he wrote about as a young man, simply stuck with him and in time they simply flowered. He had great insight even as a young man.

At lunchtime I was speaking to Erlinda Paguio, who will be giving a paper tomorrow in our session. I was talking to her about what Merton had said to me about China. And he simply said it in passing. He said to me – this is back in 1968 – , "Well, every Chinese has been affected by the Revolution." That's a simple enough statement and at the time I didn't really think anything of it. I was living the good life in America. In that sense I was affected too and I didn't think about it. I didn't think about how affected I really was until I visited Beijing about a month and a half ago. And those words, Merton's words, came back to haunt me when I was in Beijing and thinking about the history of the revolution. What struck me was that, as I was talking to the people in Beijing – I had a very interesting time there, I was talking with taxi-drivers and workers and so on –, what struck me was that I began to feel a certain deep empathy with the Chinese there, on the mainland, that probably would not have been possible if I had not gone to Beijing. And Merton's words came in to my mind at that time. I said, "Yes, indeed, I have been affected by the Revolution and I will continue to be affected by the Revolution, the more I become involved with the Chinese". And also I think, for the first time in Beijing, (although I am ethnically Chinese, I was raised in America), I really felt that I was Chinese for good or for worse. I was Chinese and that in some way I was more deeply involved in what has happened to the Chinese than I thought before. And that was kind of interesting.

There are many, many things that I would like to say but I think that I have said enough. Thank you.

David Scott: We're doing very well on time so there will be opportunities to come back to our speakers with any questions you might have a bit later on. Our final speaker in this panel of friends of Merton is Tommie O'Callaghan. One of the great joys of this conference is meeting the people whose names one has known as names but not as people. And so it's super to see you, Tommie, because there really is a Tommie O'Callaghan for us English people. You're not just a photograph in a book or someone who had picnics with Thomas Merton. Alas, I suppose the great thing that one knows about you from the books are those amazing picnics and here is a little plug for a very, very rare edition of Thomas Merton.

This is the official *Thomas Merton Cookbook*. There are three editions. One is Esther de Waal's, one is mine and one is Jim Forest's. It's a work in progress so if you know anything about Merton's food just let me know and we'll add a few pages on.

Jim Forest: We'll have to make one for Tommie ...

David Scott: We will. Because, Tommie, you're in it under the heading "How to Make a Picnic", if I can find it here – I'm sure you all know it – :

> Recipe for a Good Picnic: Call Tommie O'Callaghan in Louisville and take it from there. Special dietary requirements are crackers without milk, like saltines – and you must tell me more about them – chicken is no problem. Letters passim and for a full list of picnic contents, see *The Hermitage Years*, page 109, that's the English version.

Tommie, I'm sure there's so much more than that. And particularly there's his contact with your family and the way family life comes across in the memories, in the books. And that for us has been very important – to think that a family is something that mattered to Merton as much as everything else. So over to you now for your memories. It's lovely to have you ...

Tommie O'Callaghan: Thank you. Well, it's lovely to be here. I think that one of the most interesting parts of this whole business of knowing Merton has been the travels to the different meetings, and meeting so many wonderful people who are so absolutely fascinated and interested in the whole Tom Merton – not as 'saint', not as a relic man, nor as a guru, but as a real person ... and he certainly was. And he was in our life.

I first met Merton in the early fifties through some friends who had a cousin out at Gethsemani and it was a fleeting "Hullo and how are you ?" I had gone to school in Bardstown, to a boarding school, had finished in '49, the year after *Seven Storey Mountain* came out. Our senior trip incorporated a trip to Gethsemani and at that time I thought " Oh, gee, that holy monk is out there in those fields somewhere." And that was that. After college I left and went to Manhattanville Sacred Heart in New York where I met Dan Walshe who was my philosophy professor. Of course I immediately told him that I was from Kentucky and he said he knew it well. We kept in touch over the years. Dan became ill in the late fifties and came to Louisville to recover, teach at the monastery at the request of Dom Fox and teach at Bellarmine College. Dan was a very holy man. He was not a religious and he spent weekends in our home because he was not one that wanted to stay at the monastery seven days a week. And Dan was very generous with his friends' time, believe me I know, and he told me one time that Tom wanted me to do something, wanted me to take some

letters over to Bellarmine. And this started a communication between Merton and me and my family that continued until the time of Tom's death.

How Dan brought Tom into my life, into our life, I'm not quite sure. But he arrived there to the tune of a telephone call in the morning saying "I'm at the doctor's, will you pick me up ? I need to go here. I need to go there." And I became a sort of a chauffeur. But I also had six children at the time so I was skilled in this sort of work. And we enjoyed Merton. I liked him. He was very easy to be with. He was not at all pompous. He was not any great writer. He was just a good friend and a very easy, fun person to have around. As time went on, we became closer in that my children loved picnics, he loved children and he would call and say " Do you want to bring everybody out for a picnic this Friday or Saturday or Sunday or whatever . . ." And we got into the habit of going to the monastery for picnics. We did a lot of June picnics at the monastery because we have a daughter whose birthday is in May and Colleen always wanted to have her birthday party out at the monastery so June became the better date rather than May to go out there. So at least every June we were there for a picnic. And there were many others. Listening to me, you'd think that he was never within the hermitage, that he was never really under the rule of silence. So understand when I say these things, that he was. But he occasionally took breaks and the breaks happened often to be with the O'Callaghan family and he thoroughly enjoyed the children but I don't think he wanted to keep them there.

We were friends through the era that he was getting the hermitage, not getting the hermitage, going around and around with Dom James, cussing Dom James up one side and loving him down the other. And I must explain this. Dom James was his excuse. If he wanted to do something, he probably did it. But if someone wrote and said would you come and do this, he could always say no, you know my abbot will not let me travel. So Dom James was the father figure for Merton and we all have used parental figures in our lives as excuses. And that's exactly how I feel their relationship was. They were very close. They certainly had their disagreements. But, you know, he was Dom James' confessor. I mean that is the closeness that was there. And I know in one of the letters that Berrigan wrote him after Dom James had left office and Father Flavian had come in, Dan Berrigan, who was teaching at Le Moyne in Syracuse at the time, wrote and said that now that you have a new abbot who is more lenient you can come to Le Moyne and teach a class. And Tom had to face the fact and write to say that, "Thank you, but really I can't leave. I didn't join the monastery to leave". And he did. He had used Dom James as the excuse. You know how you used to complain about your parents, letting you do this and not letting you do that. That is the relationship Merton had with Dom James. I think Dom James was perfect for Merton. I'm not trying to eradicate another thought that you might have but I just feel like I always have to say that.

Father John Loftus who was Dean of Bellarmine College in the early sixties was very instrumental in starting up the Bellarmine Merton Centre. Dom James and Father John Loftus were close friends but Father John Loftus and Thomas Merton were very, very close. Dan Walsh continued to be a part of this. Dan was still

teaching at the monastery. He was teaching at Bellarmine and he was also teaching with the Passionists. So Dan continued to live in Louisville until his death. His death was after Tom's. I met Jim Forest in '69 just after Tom had died and I was very curious about this job of mine as a trustee. I knew that there were going to be a lot of "do's" and "don'ts" on this trustee business and many things could not be printed, published or what have you without the trustees' permission, which I didn't begin to understand. But I was out at the monastery at a trustee meeting – James Laughlin, Naomi Burton and myself – and "his honour" [Jim] was there. He said something about he was going to do this and he was going to do that and I said " Well, you know you have to get permission from the Trustees." And Jim said, "Well, I've never got permission for anything in my life and I'm certainly not going to start now with Merton stuff." And I thought, "Oh, boy, here we go !" I knew what I was in for.

When Tom asked me to be a trustee it was certainly not because of my literary knowledge or abilities, but he needed someone from Kentucky who was going to be able to be involved with both the monastery and Bellarmine College and who was a native or a person living in that area. When he asked me if I would do this, James Laughlin of New Directions would be one, Naomi Burton Stone would be the second – both of course very much involved in the publishing, editing and literary business – and I would be the third one. And I said yes I would do it. I would not promise that I was going to read all those things that he wrote. I would keep a shrine in the living room with two candles and a picture and teach all the children to genuflect. And was there anything else I was supposed to do ? He said no; that was fine, that was fine. We had a good relationship. I never expected to have to go to work as a trustee so quickly.

We kept all of the letters, all of the files, at our home for about two years after Tom's death. Brother Pat sent them in with me. At that time I did count ... there were 1820 files of correspondence. They've gone up now because Bob [Daggy] has gotten more in. But that was how many files we had of letters to or from Merton. Frank and I think he must have worked all day and night on his readings, his letters and the writings. He was absolutely a phenomenal man. A delightful person, would love being here with us, probably is, and I thank you all very much ...

David Scott: Thank you, Tommie, very much indeed. I expect that's whetted our appetites to ask any questions and add any comment. I think now's the time to break it open.

Jim Forest: Could I just tell one story about Dom James ? I want just to add to what Tommie said about Dom James because you might be left with a wrong impression from my story about my haircut, to think that I was annoyed with the abbot. I wasn't. I found it all part of the adventure of being there. It was just something that happened as part of the special weather. It didn't bother me at all. But after I had the haircut, I received an invitation from Dom James to come and to visit with him. Merton told me how to find the abbot's office. I was a little alarmed - I was always a little nervous

about people in authority, but of course I went. I cannot remember any more what we talked about but I remember a pile of Wall Street Journals on his desk which wasn't a publication I read regularly. I think he was a graduate of the Harvard Business School and I think he'd succeeded in making the abbey solvent which was a rather significant achievement. I don't know very much about those things and I don't remember any more of what we talked about. But the one thing I remembered vividly, it was quite a wonderful experience to be with him. The strong fatherly quality that he had as abbot, which is all that the word means, was very apparent. And at the end of our time together, he asked if I would like a blessing. Of course I said, "Yes. " I knelt down on the floor in front of him and he put his hands on my head. And I have never had anybody leave their fingerprints in my brain ! It was really something ! This was not an inconsiderable experience. It shows you how strong the bone is around the brain. It was a very powerful blessing and it continues to reverberate inside of my little head.

David Scott: Good. Are there any questions which anyone would like to ask and I'm sure the panel will be very pleased to try and answer them.

Question: *Could I ask if the new journals that are being published, are they quite new or are they putting together old journals, some of which have already been published ?*

Tommie O'Callaghan: Merton never wrote anything just once. Remember that. Like many authors. But he kept an absolute daily diary and actually what you are seeing in the journals are his daily diaries. *Run to the Mountain*, which was the first one was edited by Brother Pat [rick Hart]. Now I do know that there are some parts of that which were found later ... found, in fact, within the last six months, up at St Bonaventure's and I think the paperback edition is going to have to try to have those in there. I just heard about it the other day, that there were, not many, but several pages that were found later. He wrote many pamphlets and books from journal notes so, yes, you are going to see, by reading the journals all the way through, you are going to see duplications, if you're a big Merton reader, of some other things.

Jim Forest: But there's a lot that I've never seen before. Lots.

John Wu: I think your question is whether the journals are a rehashing. They are not. At least not *Run to the Mountain*.

Tommie O'Callaghan: You know, Merton was not as allergic to things as he said he was. He would tell me never to bring cheese and you know you were talking about those soda crackers. I took Brie. I took anything. And he ate it. He was not nearly as allergic a person as he would have liked to have been ... maybe a little bit of a hypochondriac.

John Wu: He was not allergic to beer at all.

Tommie O'Callaghan: Nor rum.

John Wu: Nor, I think, vodka. I remember there was a Brother Maurice who used to take water down to Merton, he bought in a bottle of vodka or gin when we were at the hermitage. I was shocked. I thought that monks were not supposed to drink at all. It was your fault, Tommie. You never told us that he was doing all these things and we had this terrible image of him as a ...

Tommie O'Callaghan: You know, Donald, when you say that he didn't want anybody to know who he was – the man from Nelson County story – I had an occasion. I had taken my sister . . . I was very careful about going out and taking people to meet Merton or even discuss him. I felt that our friendship was not something built on his literary works, it was simply a friendship and that was that. But my sister was in town and he had said bring her out to the hermitage and I did. When we got there he said, "Listen. There's this jazz band playing down on Washington Street and I'd like to go". And I said "Tonight ?" And he said "Yes." Well, my husband, Frank, who seems to disappear out of the country when anything big is going on, was in South America, I guess, so Megan and I drove Tom in (I had seven children at that point) and I fed them dinner. Tom helped Kathy with her homework and I gathered some mutual friends, Ron and Sally Seitz, Pat and Ben Cunnington, Megan, myself, my brother and his wife, and we all went down to Washington Street to this jazz band.

There was a bass fiddler there who Tom just thought was great and he insisted we bring him over and buy him drinks, and guess who's buying the drinks? And Tom is just taken with this guy who's from Boston and he's saying to him, "I'm a monk." "I'm a Trappist monk." and [the bass player] he's saying, "Well, I'm a brother too." And Tom said " I live out at the monastery." and he said, "Oh, we have a church up in Boston". And it goes on like Can You Top This and so Tom says, "I am a priest," and this guy says, "Brother, I'm a preacher." They're hitting it right off and the man is, in the black vernacular, a great jazz musician, just great. And then Tom says, "I'm Thomas Merton." And this guy says, "Well, I'm Joe Jones !" And I mean Tom could get absolutely nowhere and I loved it, I just loved it. I called my brother to take him back that night because I really did have to get home to the seven children and get them up for school the next day. As I'm getting ready to leave, Tom stops me and says "Wait a minute. Waitress, give her the bill !"

Question: *You've spoken of a man of enormous freedom of spirit. But the other side of that was that he had an extraordinarily disciplined personal spirituality. I wonder from your personal knowledge of him whether any of you can say a bit more about that. The way you saw that very different and secret kind of side to his life, his personal discipline and spirituality.*

Jim Forest: I remember one of the conversations I had the first time I was at the monastery was with a priest who was the guest master, Father Francis. And Father Francis asked me, "How does Father Louis write all those books ?" Of course I hadn't the faintest idea. What was interesting to me was that he didn't know. He was a member of the community and he could see that Merton was living a fairly normal monastic life, that he was celebrating mass every day, that he was participating in the offices that were being sung by the choir monks, that he was somebody living a normal monastic life from the point of view of a brother monk. And if you read the essays in the book, *Thomas Merton, Monk*, for example, you see one monk after another recalling what it was like to live in community with Merton. And you can understand that they were all probably quite bewildered in much the way that Father Francis was by his ability to write many books in a relatively short period of time. I saw him writing once, and this may seem irrelevant to your question, but I hope it will prove relevant. I had brought down a letter from somebody at the *Catholic Worker* who was rather critical of the monastic vocation and was challenging Merton to come to live at the Catholic Worker Community in New York. I was reluctantly delivering this letter because I had said I would do so. I didn't agree with its point of view at all. And Merton said "The abbot probably won't agree to me receiving or answering this letter, so I'll write the answer now and you can take it back with you." I regret to this day that I didn't keep a copy of it but I am very happy that I saw him write the letter. Because I have never in my life, and I am a writer, I'm a journalist, I've worked with writing people on close terms for most of my adult life, I've never seen anybody write with the speed of Merton. It's not much of an exaggeration to say that it was as if the paper caught fire passing through the big mechanical typewriter that was sitting on the desk in the room adjacent to the room where he gave his lectures to the novices. It just flew through the typewriter being covered at high speed with letters from the alphabet as it passed and sort of dented the ceiling. An unbelievably quick mind and the ability to organise his thoughts and to express them verbally at a speed which I have never seen anybody come close to. This meant that in periods when most of us are getting around to the salutation, he has finished the letter.

When you talk about these 1820 files of correspondence and so forth, you can only appreciate his ability to carry on these kind of relationships with people - and this is only the letters, this isn't the books, and a lot of Merton stuff you'd be surprised to know is unpublished, not just the tapes but a good deal of written material is unpublished - the output was just phenomenal - I think actually that it was impossible, had it not been for the monastic life, the disciplined life he was leading. The productivity that he was capable of probably would not have been achieved if he had gone on to simply live as a layperson. We joke about Thomas Merton's bottles of this, that and the other thing, champagne, gin and vodka, many bottles of beer and so on. I personally think he would have become an alcoholic and would have died at an early age if he hadn't become a monk. He needed to be in a situation where there were people who could help him to channel his many good qualities and

protect him from his self-destructiveness. He needed to be in a situation where there was a very high degree of discipline, spiritual discipline and a structured life. He needed that as a matter of life and death. And as a result of it, his ability to realise his gifts was saved and purified. And the bits of time that he had available per day to use for his work, his correspondence and his writing of various essays and books came in the spaces that were created by this discipline. This is a short answer because one could also talk about what you learn from him as a spiritual father and what he encourages you to do and so forth and so forth, which reflects his values ...

Donald Allchin: I just want to say that from the little I've seen and also from simply working a little bit in the archives with some of the unpublished material at Bellarmine, I just back up 100% what Jim has said. He was a man of extraordinary inner discipline and he must have been a man of extraordinary intellectual discipline. In those last seven or eight years, he had so many different ideas that, as I have said, it was a kind of non-disintegrating explosion which was going on, so many ideas at work, writing to so many people and in every case he is actually being the person he is writing to. So he has a fantastic capacity which of course other great writers have too, to be many people at once, and yet at the same time at the middle of it there is an extraordinary principle of unity and integration. And the spiritual discipline I think was very hidden which is I think the sign of just how true it was because I think that it is one of *the* signs of real spiritual discipline that it should be hidden. I remember, because it was in a way so not typical, the first time I was there, and we went up to the hermitage, this was before he was living in the hermitage, there must have been a fridge, because we had iced water, he made the sign of the cross over the water. I don't ever remember him doing that on another occasion but just for a moment you saw this deeply traditional monastic person, before we drank. And that's all part of what Tommie was talking about. That's the person. And what you were saying, Jim, that's absolutely true as well. That was the wholeness of the man.

John Wu: And getting to the point of things. Understanding what was authentic and what was not. Separating the kernel from the shell. I think that's very, very important. Certainly in his writings, you can turn to any page in his writings and point your finger to it and it's relevant somehow. It's not a waste of words at all. And I think that's great discipline, great training and it starts early.

Question: *This is a follow up on this. Were there particular exercises, for example, that he used either in the early days of his monasticism in the forties or after he established the hermitage to retire from the community, fasts - Lenten fasts or fasts at other times of the year - when it's known that he subjected himself to particular austerities.*

Donald Allchin: I would have guessed he was very simple in following the rule. When he went to Gethsemani, the Trappist rule was very austere physically. I was

enormously struck the first time I was there in August 1963 by the fact that in those days there was absolutely no air-conditioning in the church. The church was extremely hot and the monks were still wearing very heavy habits. That changed. On that outward austerity of the life, Merton said to me, " I think that one of the tragedies of our life twenty or thirty years ago, " and he was speaking in the mid-sixties, " We were living a very genuine monastic life and many people came who had a real call to the monastic life but they didn't have a call for living in the 13th Century !" Which was his way of saying there was a proper kind of adaptation. He wasn't sure whether they were doing it very well but there was an adaptation which they needed to make.

The most revealing letters on the subject of his personal life of prayer in the Hermitage are the letters to Abdul Aziz, the Pakistani Moslem writer who in a very Pakistani/Indian way kept asking him , "I want to know exactly what you do, I want to know exactly what you do." And Merton didn't want to tell him but he went on asking, so eventually he does tell him. It's very simple. Just a basic kind of ...

Jim Forest: Let me add a little bit to that. One of the problems with the letters to Abdul Aziz is that it is a perfect example of this gift Merton had of writing to people from almost within their own skin. Here he is writing to somebody who is in a tradition which radically rejects the Trinity, the Holy Trinity, which for Merton is absolutely at the centre of spiritual life. And it's a remarkable letter in terms of trying to explain the Holy Trinity to a Moslem person and at the same time to reveal .... he has to do that because he's been asked to explain his spiritual life and to do so without reference to the Trinity is inconceivable. It would be so profoundly deceitful as to be a Lie. So you see in the context of that letter what he is doing. But it's not all there and one of the irritating things, I think, for many people is that in this flood of books that Merton produced, the most intimate aspects of his spiritual life are more or less hidden. You have to read between the lines. And you have to know something about the rhythm of monastic life, the discipline of monastic life, the fundamental features of monastic spirituality and take that for granted. Because for all of the writing that he did, he is not revealing all this - what he takes for granted. To that you would probably find it interesting to add his discovery in the late fifties, by the time that he and the O'Callaghans were starting to have their picnics, he became very interested in the Hesychasts. I think Donald was one of the people who at a certain point became involved in that area of exploration in his life. Now who are the Hesychasts? This is a spiritual tradition, basically, of Mount Athos, the Holy Mountain, the monastic tradition of Eastern Orthodoxy. It comes from a Greek word having to do with silence, inner stillness, and it's associated with the Jesus Prayer. One of the things which I wish I had time to do would be to explore very carefully with a fine toothcomb Merton's lectures, his letters, a lot of the unpublished material which was written strictly for monastic use. It wasn't even written in a finished prose form. A lot of it was more in the form of notes, outlines and scattered reflections. I would love to see what is there on the Jesus Prayer because I know that in the last ten or twelve years of Merton's life, the Jesus Prayer which is "Lord Jesus Christ, Son

of God, have mercy on me, a sinner," became a very important part of his spiritual practice. There's not time here to talk about it but it's good to be aware of it.

Donald Allchin: I'd just like to add one thing to that. In the Archive at Bellarmine there is a copy of the book which I am sure many people here know called *The Art of Prayer*, which is a prayer anthology from the Russian monastery of Valamo in Finland which was edited by Bishop Kallistos, Timothy Ware, and I think published about 1966 or 1967. In other words it is a book which Merton received about a year or two before his death. It's quite clear from looking at the way the book is and the way the underlinings are, that he was not using it as a study book, he was using it as a prayer book, as a meditation book. It is very striking, it is the passages from Simeon the New Theologian, it is the passages about the use of the Jesus Prayer which are underlined and emphasised. There are lots about how extremely important in the last years of his life, that Eastern tradition of the Jesus Prayer was.

David Scott: We've probably got time for one more area of thought and questioning. If there is anyone ... Tommie would like to say something, anyway.

Tommie O'Callaghan: You might be interested. We have started in Louisville a Thomas Merton Centre Foundation. It's lay people and monks. It's in coordination with the monastery and Bellarmine College and the idea is to support Bob Daggy's Merton Centre. This spring, Fernando Beltrán gave a lecture and Margy Betz was there too with scholars that came in for a scholastic retreat, which was not open to the public. In planning our program for next year, I asked Father Timothy if he would consider a round table of those monks who knew Merton. Now we're going away from what we've tried to do, the intellectual or the literary Merton. We are going to have a round table, such as this, of people like Dom Flavian, Father Timothy, John Eudes [Bamberger], the monks that were there with Merton either in his novitiate, who worked with him or were taught by him. This has never been done and I was amazed that Father Timothy said he would do it. But I explained to him that we weren't trying to bring Merton down as a relic again, but there were people who were really interested in what he was like in that monastery - what was it like living with him ? Was he a pain or you know ? So we are going to have that, sometime in September in 1997 in Louisville, and I invite any and all of you that are free to keep in touch and we'll let you know when. But I'm excited about the prospect of that.

David Scott: Thank you. I'm very grateful for the four participants here to have set us off with their memories. Time past and time future are both contained in time present. I guess we need the past and we've got the present and I hope that in the course of the next couple of days that we shall take those memories and use them for some ideas and thoughts for our own development, for our thoughts about the world in which we live so that Merton can help us reach out . . . and I'm sure you'd like to thank with me the four who've been with us just now to do that . . .