

My First Experience of Thomas Merton

by Kevin O'Connell

The steam train pulled slowly out of Cardiff station bound for a destination in the mining valleys of South Wales. I settled back into a window seat and began to leaf through the books which I had bought on a day out to the capital. The figure of a cowed monk seated in a deserted cloister had appealed to me because of its dramatic imagery. But my heart sank when I read that it was the autobiography of an American monk. I had enough struggles with my own faith without turning to the faith journey of someone from a different culture. But there my disappointment ended with the discovery of Thomas Merton through his book *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

My train journey ended before the travel through Merton's life and the book and I became inseparable. I read it everywhere including at my sub-editor's desk on the local newspaper much to the amusement of my colleagues who were more used to me drinking the night away in a local hostelry after a pressured day sandwiched between the editor and the production manager. I had joined the staff of the weekly paper from school and found myself a couple of hundred miles from home and beginning to ask some searching questions about my life and my faith. I had been nurtured in a comfortable middle class home, attending a private catholic school because I had failed my eleven plus. The religious community running the school had provided a safe environment in which an unquestioning faith could grow untroubled in an apparently liberal environment. But miles from home, surrounded by other young journalists building careers and questioning everything I believed, I really began to flounder.

But in Merton I had discovered someone growing into faith yet remaining critical of the world around him and even the structures which were nurturing his vocation. And that encouraged me to stay with the struggle and try to own what I believed. I was struck by his relentless search to make sense of his life and relationship with God in Christ and the way prayer became a priority in his life. So, on a weekend I would climb through the grassed over coal tips to find a

place to be alone and try this contemplative prayer. They were faltering steps in seeking an authentic prayer life and the steps still falter but they were encouraged by Merton's life.