

# Among Friends and Strangers: Reflections on the Seventh General Meeting and Conference of the Thomas Merton Society, Oakham 2008

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The overall theme for our seventh conference came from an italicised line in Merton's 'Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra' – that God speaks and is to be heard in the *voice of the stranger*. From this idea back in 1961 Merton developed a rich series of variations – on the unpredictability of God, on his presence in the alien, in the enemy, and in the pagan, and on how what we seek in the stranger – both the person outside and the unknown real person within us – needs to be allowed life rather than simply being repeated projections of our own expectations. Perhaps it was this that made conversations and meetings between all those present richer and stranger than the normal conference chitchat. While each speaker touched in their own way on those aspects of the voice of the stranger that particularly spoke to them, what underlay a very fruitful three days was the openness of both speakers and listeners to engaging with something new.

Most residential conferences have a dream-like 'parallel world' quality when recalled later. At Oakham, being at Merton's school and imagining how it must have been for him, whilst also being drawn back, at least for me, into our own

school memories, added to that quality. Oakham 2008 seems, looking back, like a real blessing in terms of how, like a really good dream, some moments can be recovered in detail. Thus Donald Allchin's presidential address recalling how he was in a car with Merton when news came over the radio of Martin Luther King's assassination (and speaking about this on what turned out to be the fortieth anniversary of that day). There was Father Jim Conner's revisiting in his Eucharist homily of how those days of hope and despair echo the two apostles' words on the road to Emmaus – 'We had hoped ...' There was William Apel's account of Merton and the Smith College students, and Morgan Atkinson's introduction and question and answer session after seeing his touching film of Thomas Merton on the Saturday evening. All these are some of the moments of clarity I recall.

Of the three keynote speakers, Bonnie Thurston explored Merton's actual relationship with a stranger, one he never met – the Muslim scholar, Abdul Aziz. Here Merton could be seen to live what he wrote in that the two men did not simply exchange ideas and practice but allowed themselves to be open to the difference



*Left to right: Larry Culliford (TMS Chair), David Scott (Keynote Speaker), Donald Allchin (TMS President), Bonnie Thurston & Jim Conner (Keynote Speakers)*

and strangeness of each other's worlds. David Scott engaged with poetry as the stranger in our prosaic world, and movingly described how gravy came to spatter his copy of Merton's poems. Father Jim Conner took the voice of the stranger as that of the marginalized and oppressed, and led us to the heart of the strangeness of loving our enemies. In other talks, Tony Bannon picked out from Merton's photographs those where a deep artistic seriousness had been achieved. With these we were asked to reflect on the strangeness of the photographic process that Merton knew, a process that has now been wholly eclipsed by digital cameras, the strangeness lying in the exchange of negative and positive, darkness and light. A talk that actually produced a physical sense of strangeness was Mario Aguilar's which ran together Merton's meeting

with the Dalai Lama and his own work with the Tibetan Centre in London, re-searching back through the thirteen prior generations of the Dalai Lama into the documents of medieval Tibet. What has accompanied this work, Mario explained, was a series of the strangest synchronicities between his own Chilean background and the history of Tibet.

Others will have equally striking memories of a conference where the subject – hearing the voice of the stranger – really seemed to come out of the programme and the excellent organisation and truly enter our lives not just for three great days but to remain with us afterwards.

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