I stand among you as one who offers a small message of hope that, first, there are always people who dare to seek on the margins of society, who are not dependent on social acceptance, nor dependent on social routine, and prefer a kind of free-floating existence under a state of risk. And among these people, if they are faithful to their own calling, to their own vocation and to their own message from God, communication on the deepest level is possible. And the deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words, and it is beyond speech, and it is beyond concept. Not that we discover a new unity. We discover an older unity. My dear brothers and sisters, we are already one. But we imagine that we are not. So what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are.

—from The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton

The International Thomas Merton Society

“The ITMS came into being in 1987 to promote a greater knowledge of the life and writings of Thomas Merton, one of the most influential religious figures of our time. The Society sponsors biennial conferences devoted to Merton and his work and supports the writing of general-interest and scholarly books and articles about Merton. In addition the ITMS awards regular grants to researchers and scholarships to youth. It encourages a variety of activities such as Merton retreats. Local Chapters and Affiliates of the ITMS across the world reflect a wide range of personal interest and approaches to Thomas Merton.”

See more at www.merton.org

The Merton Center

“In 1967, one year before his death, Merton established the Merton Legacy Trust, naming Bellarmine College as the repository of his manuscripts, letters, journals, tapes, drawings, photographs, and memorabilia. Two years later, in October 1969, the College established the Thomas Merton Center, with the Collection as its focal point. The Center serves as a regional, national, and international resource for scholarship and inquiry on Merton and his works and also on the ideas he promoted: contemplative life, spirituality, ecumenism, East-West relations, personal and corporate inner work, peace, and social justice. The Merton Center {Bellarmin University, Louisville} regularly sponsors courses, lectures, retreats, seminars…and exhibits for scholars, students, and the general public.”

See more at http://www.merton.org/collection

Merton in Maine: Maine Chapter of the ITMS

Established in 2015 with its first meeting in April, 2016. Biannual meetings held the first Saturday of April and October from 2-4 pm each year, with book-discussion groups (for those interested) in between meetings. We exist solely to learn and share how Merton can be relevant in our lives today. Guest speakers, documentaries, audio recordings, and Merton’s own writings will be a part of our time together, as well as time for quiet contemplation in the spirit of Merton himself. We encourage (but do not require) our chapter members to join the ITMS. All are welcome.

Who Was Thomas Merton?

Arguably the most influential Catholic writer of the 20th century, Merton was born in Prades, France, on January 31, 1915 to artists Ruth and Owen Merton. His parents moved to New York after his birth. When Merton was just six years old, his mother passed away, and he spent his childhood years moving from place to place, having no formal religious training, as his father pursued his passion for painting.

Merton entered Cambridge College in 1933, and then Columbia in 1935, where he had an active social life, met professor Mark Van Doren, and lifetime friend Robert Lax, and where he worked for the Columbia Review. Although he had been drawn to Christian churches in Europe during his earlier, wandering days, at this time, Merton was a professed agnostic. Merton excelled at literature, and after reading The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy, his mind turned toward Catholicism. Following graduation, he began attending Mass at Corpus Christi Church. Merton’s conversion was a surprise to all his peers, and it included a sudden knowledge that he was destined to become a priest. He was baptised on November 16, 1938.

Merton went on to become a Trappist monk and priest at the Abbey of Gethsamani, a monastery in the Order of the Cistercians of the Strict Observance. It was there he penned his autobiography of his earlier life, conversion, and entrance to the monastery. The Seven Storey Mountain is considered one of the most important religious books of the 20th century. His first book of poems, Thirty Poems, was also published after he entered the monastery, and from there, his literary output was prolific. See http://merton.org/chrono for a chronological biography and a complete list of his publications.

His life’s work focuses on faith, communion, peace, and interreligious dialogue, and he is no less written about or relevant today as he was on December 10, 1968 when he died of accidental electrocution exactly twenty-seven years to the day of entering the monastery.
In Merton’s Own Words

[Contemplation is] life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is gratitude for life, for awareness, and for being. It is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent, and infinitely abundant Source.

—from New Seeds of Contemplation

If Father Thomas Merton were still alive, I am sure we would have been comrades working closely together to further the dialogue between religious traditions and to help bring real peace to our world.

—His Holiness the Dalai Lama

Merton in Maine:
Maine Chapter
International
Thomas Merton Society

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Biannual Meetings:
Christ the King Parish, Church of St. Sebastian
161 Main St., Madison, ME 04950
First Saturdays in April & October 2–4 pm

Inaugural Meeting Guest Speaker
Dr. Marilyn Sunderman, RSM, associate professor and chair, Theology Department, Saint Joseph’s College
April 2, 2016 2 pm

Further Reading:

Merton was above all a man of prayer, a thinker who challenged the certitudes of his time and opened new horizons for souls and for the Church. He was also a man of dialogue, a promoter of peace between peoples and religions.

—Pope Francis
Address to United States Congress
September 24, 2015

With thanks to Mike Brennan of the Chicago Chapter of the ITMS for ideas for this brochure.
Thomas Merton cover photo by John Lyons.
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