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Merton Center in Louisville

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LOUISVILLE, Ky. -- Touring presidential libraries is a life goal of many an American. Perhaps touring libraries of Catholics will be (or is already?) a trip idea for Catholics.

A group of participants in Call To Action's pre-conference sessions on Friday visited the Abbey of Gesthemani. The monastery is located in Trappist, Ky., about 50 miles south of downtown Louisville. The writer Thomas Merton joined the Trappist monks there for his last 27 years, according to the monastery's website.

Some visitors also make a special trip to Bellarmine University in Louisville, where the Thomas Merton Center is located.

The center, which celebrates its 50th anniversary next year, contains such items as books, poetry, drafts, paintings, drawings and correspondences by Merton as well as books about him by others. The center caters to researchers mainly, but also sees visitors. Part of the job of the center's director, Paul Pearson, is to serve as a reference librarian for those wanting to study Merton's works for dissertations, books and so on.

On display in the center are well-preserved items, from Merton's contracts and drawings to his father's watercolors to the stole Pope John XXIII gave Merton.

When Pearson came to the center in 2001, it had about 50,000 items. That number has grown over the years.

If someone writes a new book about Merton, that author will send the center a copy. Pearson told NCR on a recent visit that sometimes the center will receive long-lost letters or art by Merton (one of his editors was cleaning out desk drawers and found some).

In some cases, stories accompany the findings:

Pearson and the center were contacted by a woman who had a letter from Merton from 1967. The center did not have it in its records that he wrote such a letter (Merton kept carbon copies of all his correspondences in his later years specifically for the center to file). So she sent the letter to the center and sure enough, it was a true Merton. Why did this woman have the letter? She had a fiancé who was fighting in Vietnam and went missing. She was not Catholic but had heard of Merton and wrote to Merton for support during that time. Merton received many letters from many people, but he wrote her back. Eventually, her husband was released (he was a prisoner of war), and they are married to this day. The woman became Catholic later on.

The collection at the center started in 1963 by Merton in cooperation with the dean at Bellarmine, and in 1967 Merton made Bellarmine the official depository of his works, Pearson said.

The center is also the headquarters of the International Thomas Merton Society.

If you find yourself in Louisville in February, the Thomas Merton Center has an ongoing series on Merton and

racism.

Director Paul Pearson reads from one of the many books at the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University in Louisville, Ky. (NCR photo/Zoe Ryan)

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