

Thomas Merton in the city

Angelo Stagnaro | Jan. 22, 2010



The Merton House in Douglas, Queens, N.Y.

If one asks who was the most important spiritual thinker of past 100 years, most people, Catholic or not, will more likely say Thomas Merton.

Before he left for the wilds of Kentucky to become a Trappist monk, Merton lived and developed his faith in New York City, what some might think was an unlikely place, not conducive to spirituality.

Merton was born in France to an irreligious, artistic family one might call "cultural Christians." That situation set the stage for his being set adrift morally later in life. He felt both fascinated and frightened by Catholicism. Though close to taking the plunge several times in his life, he resisted the pull to the faith. But, like Francis Thompson's *The Hound of Heaven*, God would not, could not, give up on Thomas Merton.

There are so many sites in New York associated with Merton that a mini-pilgrimage restricted to only the city can easily be created, including the Quaker Meeting House in Flushing, N.Y. (13716 Northern Blvd), where he became frustrated at forms of Christianity devoid of mysticism. When his family came to America when he was a toddler, they ultimately moved into his maternal grandparents' home in Queens at 241-16 Rushmore Avenue, Douglaston.

As a teenager, Merton returned to Europe for his studies and flirted with Catholicism, being impressed with the spirituality of Europeans, but when he returned to his home, he lost the interest in Catholicism he had developed there. Once in the United States, he halfheartedly explored the Episcopalians and Quakers but ultimately fell back to a self-obsessed secular humanism — that is, until God called him back once again.

As all believers know, God frequently draws straight using crooked lines. In January 1938, Merton graduated from Columbia University. In June of the same year, he met Mahanambata Brahmachari, a Hindu monk visiting from the University of Chicago. Merton was intrigued by the monk and was surprised when he directed Merton to explore his own Christian tradition and spiritual roots rather than learn more about Hinduism. Within months, Merton knocked on the door to Corpus Christi Rectory on 529 West 121st Street, just east of Broadway, and asked to be accepted into the Catholic church.

After his baptism, Merton moved to 35 Perry Street in Greenwich Village, where he lived a bohemian lifestyle while he studied for his doctorate in English at Columbia. When he lived in the Village, he attended Mass at nearby St. Joseph's on Waverly Place and 6th Avenue, the same church Dorothy Day attended before and after her conversion. It was while living here that Merton realized he wanted to become a priest.

Merton approached the Franciscans but once he confided in their vocation director that he had fathered a child out of wedlock, they rejected him. Heartbroken, Merton applied for a job teaching English at St. Bonaventure University; if he couldn't be a Franciscan, he could at least live among them. It was at St. Bonaventure where he decided he wanted to become a Trappist monk.

But all of these locations aside, none can so intimately be connected to Thomas Merton as the home in which he lived from the age of his early childhood, off and on into adulthood, until he left to teach English at St. Bonaventure.

It took a bit of time to find the house, as there has been confusion as to where it was exactly. It's not labeled as the "Merton House" except for in the hearts of Trappists and those Christians and others who have been moved by the monk's writings.

The Merton House wasn't just a place where Merton hung his hat. It was a crucible in which his earliest emotional and spiritual development took place. He wrote in *The Seven Storey Mountain*:

With a selfishness unusual even in a child, I was glad to move from Flushing to my grandparents' house in Douglaston. There I was allowed to do more or less as I pleased, there was plenty of food, and we had two dogs and several cats to play with, I did not miss Mother [who had died when he was 6] very much, and did not weep when I was not allowed to go and see her. I was content to run in the woods with the dogs, or climb trees, or pester the chicken, or play in the clean little studio where Bonnemaman [his grandmother] sometimes painted china, and fired it in a small kiln.

I brought along a tattered copy of Merton's spiritual autobiography with me as I hunted down the Douglaston house. I had pored over it for several days looking for any and all geographical clues, which I marked with a highlighter.

I drove around for an interminable amount of time, looking for the Merton House. After a while I was ready to simply presume it was a Catholic urban legend but then I heard church bells. From Merton's writings, I knew that Zion Episcopal Church was near the house. In fact, his father had been the organist there and Merton himself declared he had attended a few unexciting services. I asked at the church and it was, as God would have it, the day on which the Douglaston/Little Neck Historical Society met. With eager suggestions and urgings, the society's members directed me to the southwest corner of the intersection of 241st Street and Rushmore Avenue, where I finally found it.

Built in 1910, the white, two-story clapboard house is currently owned by Virginia and John Mazzara. It was still new construction when Thomas Merton and his family moved in. Now it's a largely upper-middle-class Italian neighborhood. It is also just a stone's throw from the present-day Brooklyn diocese's seminary.

Merton's home is a 5,000-square-foot house plan located on a nearly 9,000-square-foot corner lot. The house is surrounded by maple trees as per Merton's description in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. The building is symmetrical at its main façade with nice details and fairly intact despite it being a century old. The building's façade has been marred with the application of aluminum siding but, despite that, it is as I imagined it: peaceful, serene and even stalwart.

I looked around remembered that Merton's father, Owen, landscaped many of the lawns in the neighborhood for extra money when he wasn't painting. It had always been a somewhat unofficial artists' colony, considering the many talented neighbors, as Merton described in his book.

As I stood outside 241-16 Rushmore on the sidewalk, I could hear Zion Episcopal Church's bells. No doubt, Merton had as well. I walked up the stairs, rang the bell and Virginia Mazzara came out to greet me.

I put on my best, least threatening smile, and asked, "Is this the Merton House?"

Mazzara smiled herself and nodded. "Yes, it is. Are you a Trappist?"

I was startled at that question as I didn't think I gave off a monkish vibe. At best, I'm only a Trappist manqué.

"Only in the confines of my heart," I replied. "Only in that I greatly respect the tradition of solitude and silence as a means by which to encounter God."

We spoke about Merton and she told me of the pilgrims that sometimes come by. She sometimes catches people standing in front of her home staring, whispering, some seemingly lost in prayer. She told me about the history of the house and her own spirituality. We had a pleasant conversation but I didn't want to monopolize her time. I thanked her, gave her my card and we parted.

When she closed the door, I stopped at the base of the stoop and looked up once again at the beautiful building that had been blessed by the holy monk's presence. I closed my eyes and offered a prayer for Thomas Merton and for all those people, Christian and otherwise, who turn, or might turn, to the monk's writing for consolation and enlightenment. Merton is the perfect apologist in that he calls no attention to himself but instead, directs the seeker to the source of perfect love.

As is clear by Thomas Merton's life, we retreat and God advances in an eternal spiritual pas de deux. We find him in moments of peacefulness and confusion. None of us can fathom what God has in mind for us and yet, we are all invited to seek him out in loving gratitude. Whether in prideful moral confusion or in moments of loving spiritual lucidity, we can rely upon God's grace and overpowering love. Heaven's hound never gives up; he never surrenders until his quarry is his once again.

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