

NEW SEEDS OF REHABILITATION  
Merton's 100th Birthday in Prison

by Timothy J. Muise

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Celebrating one's birthday in prison can be bittersweet at best; you are in exile on an ugly Elba, but at least another year has been deducted from your "bill" to society. This year I rejoice though as I will be celebrating the birthday of Thomas Merton here at the state penal colony and, for certain, Merton is here with me. Certain connections are free of distortion, they ring true, and as the doors of Merton defined contemplation crack open to me just a hair I am able to communicate; to at least be willing.

My initial affinity for Thomas Merton was based on his secular life experiences. I knew not of academia and high business, but I was more than familiar with wine, women, and song. For someone as successful, in wordly terms, as Thomas Merton to be able to see the meaninglessness of those ways, and truly seek God "with all his being", then possibly a sinner like myself should at least explore the concept. After all my focus on wine, women, and song led me to the bastille so possibly Merton's "waiting for God" could lead me back to the Father.

As it is with our God He bestowed a gift upon me here in this true Sahara of the soul; He brought Merton to us through an emissary in the form of Dr. John "Jack" Collins. Jack is such a humble and unassuming messenger of hope that I am uncertain if he fully cognates the power of this gift of light he has bestowed upon us men here. His love for Merton, not just for the man but for the teachings, could not radiate more if it came from a Merton beaming sun. To bask in the wisdom, to come to the warmth of the possibilities, brings a new layer to redemption. Jack has planted "New Seeds of Rehabilitation" that at harvest time will undoubtedly save lives and enhance our communities.

We gather as a community of believers and explorers. We believe there is the potential for us to benefit from Merton's teachings and are blessed with the willingness to explore these uncharted waters of the prison sea. Traditional rehabilitation elludes many in prison, thus the high prison recidivism rates, so an unorthodox opportunity, a chapter of the International Thomas Merton Society in prison, is one of those gifts that you feel the value of in your heart. No hatred, no hopelessness, none of the daily essence of prison. No, instead we hear of hope, change, desire, longing, and the waiting for God. Prison is so much about the waiting. You wait for the jailer to let you eat, sleep, or even breathe in some cases, but now we wait for our God to reveal. His revelations we cannot predict, He comes in His time and in His way, but our faith in the fact that he will in fact come grows with our understanding of what it is to seek to be a true contemplative. From this granite we can build our new foundations.

My gut feeling is that Thomas Merton would be quite pleased to celebrate his birthday here with us. My hopes are that he would give us that satisfied smile I have seen in some of his later photos. My prayers would be that we all grow in our journey toward comprehending Merton defined contemplation even though we only celebrate with him in spirit; a vivid and living spirit. Happy Birthday Thomas Merton!