

## Merton Conference Celebrates 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

—Judith Hardcastle

Two hundred and fifty Merton enthusiasts from Canada, the United States, Great Britain, New Zealand and Australia gathered at the University of British Columbia from June 5 – 7, 2003 for the Eighth Conference and General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society. Hosted by the Thomas Merton Society of Canada, the conference delighted delegates and guests with its richness of scholarship, its calibre of speakers, and its warm hospitality.

Major speakers included Douglas Burton-Christie, James Finley, Richard Rohr, and Mary Jo Weaver. The program featured an address by ITMS President and author Jonathan Montaldo, a panel on Merton and the East, and twenty-five concurrent sessions and workshops. The conference marked the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the first major Merton conference held in Vancouver in 1978 and organized by two graduate students, Donald Grayston, now Director of the Institute for the Humanities, and Michael Higgins, now President of St. Jerome's University in the University of Waterloo.

Douglas Burton-Christie, Professor of Theology at Loyola-Marymount University in Los Angeles and editor of *Spiritus*, the journal of the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality, delivered the Springboard Address on Friday morning. He is the author of *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* as well as a forthcoming book on landscape and the sacred.

James Finley, who spoke on Saturday morning, was a novice under Thomas Merton at the Abbey of Gethsemani, and is presently a psychotherapist in private practice in California. He is the author of the best-selling *Merton's Palace of Nowhere*, as well as *The Contemplative Heart* and other works on contemplative spirituality.

Richard Rohr, OFM, is founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, New Mexico, a popular speaker, and author of more than a dozen books, including *Hope Against Darkness: The Transforming Vision of Saint Francis in an Age of Anxiety*, *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer*, and *Jesus' Plan for a New World: The Sermon on the Mount*. He spoke Saturday afternoon on Merton and the landscape of the desert.

Mary Jo Weaver, Professor of Religious Studies at Indiana University, has published books on the modernist controversy, on the women's movement within the Catholic Church, and on divisions within American Catholicism at the turn of the millennium. Most recently, she authored *Cloister and Community: Life Within a Carmelite Monastery*. A featured speaker at the 1978

Vancouver conference, she delivered the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Address on Thursday morning.

Concurrent sessions were diverse, reflecting the broad range of topics that Merton explored in his lifetime. While many focused on the conference theme—Thomas Merton's Sacred Landscapes—others presented scholarly papers on other aspects of Merton's life and thought, including interfaith dialogue, poetry, technology and social critique.

The Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University in Louisville, Kentucky, mounted a special exhibit of thirty-one photographs—a sampling of over 1300 photographs taken by Merton—entitled *The Paradox of Place: Thomas Merton's Photography*. These images provided a glimpse into another aspect of Merton's prolific work and, along with the quotations selected to accompany the exhibition, an insight into "Merton's seeing eye."

Evening hospitality featured poetry readings and music by some outstanding Canadian artists—poets Hannah Main van der Kamp, Susan McCaslin, Catherine Owen, Allan Brown and Doug Beardsley, and musicians/songwriters Ian Tyson, Rob Des Cotes, Peace in the City Band, and La Candela.

Sixteen youth scholars from Canada and the United States, including SFU students or former students Lindsay Graham, Catherine Owen, Rani Sandhu and Sarah Taylor attended the conference as recipients of Daggy Scholarships, offered each two years to young people in memory of the longtime director of the Merton Center in Louisville.

The 8<sup>th</sup> ITMS Conference and General Meeting was truly a memorable event—and The Thomas Merton Society of Canada acknowledges its gratitude to the Institute for the Humanities at Simon Fraser University for the generous financial support which contributed significantly to its success. The 9<sup>th</sup> ITMS Conference and General Meeting is scheduled for June 2005 in San Diego, California.

Meanwhile, Merton studies continue in 2004 in co-operation with the Humanities Department, SFU International and the Thomas Merton Society of Canada, which are offering two pilgrimage programs in 2004—*Thomas Merton's New York* (April 25 – May 3 in New York City); and *Thomas Merton in France* (June 24 – July 4 in Prades, France, Merton's birthplace). For more information about these programs, please contact Don Grayston at [donald\\_grayston@sfu.ca](mailto:donald_grayston@sfu.ca) or Judith Hardcastle at [judithhardcastle@telus.net](mailto:judithhardcastle@telus.net) or visit [www.sfu.ca/international](http://www.sfu.ca/international) or [www.merton.ca](http://www.merton.ca)

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