

## In Memoriam: William H. Shannon (1917-2012)



Msgr. William H. Shannon, founding president of the International Thomas Merton Society and pre-eminent Merton scholar, died on Sunday, April 29, 2012 after a brief illness, at the age of 94. Author of numerous books and dozens of articles on Merton and on contemporary Christian spirituality, he was a priest of the Diocese of Rochester, NY, where he served as professor of theology at Nazareth College and as chaplain of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester, the founding congregation of the college.

Born on December 6, 1917 and baptized on December 30 of that year, William Shannon grew up in Irondequoit, NY, was educated at St. Salome Grammar School there and at St. Andrew's and St. Bernard's Seminaries in Rochester, and was ordained on June 5, 1943 at Sacred Heart Cathedral by Rochester Bishop James E. Kearney. After serving as assistant pastor at Sacred Heart from the time of his ordination through 1945, he was appointed as a member (initially the only member) of the Theology Department at Nazareth College, where he continued to teach until his retirement in 1982, when he became professor emeritus. He was also chaplain at the college from 1949 through 1975. He earned a master's degree in history from Canisius College in 1949 and his doctorate from the University of Ottawa in 1953; he later did post-graduate studies at McMaster University in Hamilton, ON. He became a full professor at the college in 1958, and was named a domestic prelate (monsignor) in 1966, though he seldom used the title. He received honorary degrees from St. Bernard's Institute, Nazareth College and St. Bonaventure University. An endowed chair in Catholic studies at Nazareth College, made possible by a gift from the Chester and Dorris Carlson Charitable Trust, along with a lecture series, has been established and named in his honor. From the time of his arrival at the college he lived at the Motherhouse of the Sisters of St. Joseph, adjoining the Nazareth

campus, and was chaplain for the sisters from 1980 until earlier this year. He was also an associate member of the community.

In the 1970s, Msgr. Shannon began teaching courses at Nazareth on the life and work of Thomas Merton, and founded the Thomas Merton Society of Rochester, the precursor of the ITMS. His



first book on Merton, *Thomas Merton's Dark Path: The Inner Experience of a Contemplative*, a theological analysis of key works on contemplation by Merton (including *The Inner Experience*, still unpublished and little known at that time), appeared in 1982; a revised version entitled *Thomas Merton's Paradise Journey: Writings on Contemplation* was published in 2000. His acclaimed biography *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story* came out in 1992, and was followed by "*Something of a Rebel*": *Thomas Merton, His Life and Works – An Introduction* in 1997 (reissued in slightly revised form as *Thomas Merton: An Introduction* in 2005). *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (2002), which he conceived and coauthored with Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O'Connell, received the 2003 award for best reference work from the Catholic Press Association, which called the volume "a comprehensive and authoritative resource on one of the most important spiritual guides of the twentieth century."

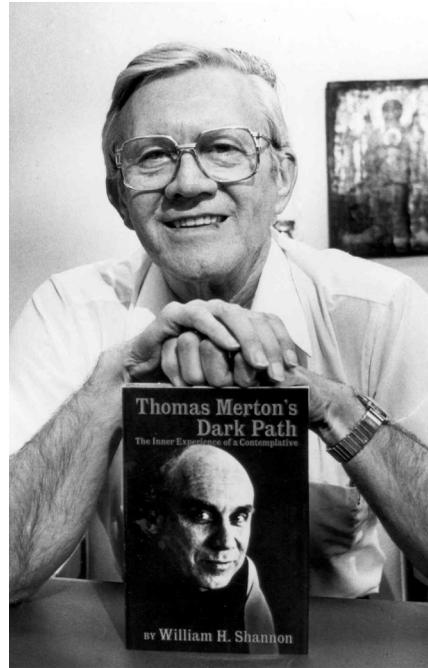
In the early 1980s Msgr. Shannon was appointed by the Merton Legacy Trust as the general editor of the *Collected Letters of Thomas Merton*, published in five volumes between 1985 and 1994; he himself edited the first and last of these volumes, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns* and *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*. With his Nazareth College colleague Christine M. Bochen, he also edited the complete collection of Merton's *Cold War Letters* (2006) and *Thomas Merton, A Life in Letters: The Essential Collection* (2008), selected from the five volumes of the *Collected Letters*. He was the editor as well of *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays* (1995), a collection of Merton's articles on peace, non-violence and racial justice, and of *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation* (2003).

In 1987, Msgr. Shannon, along with his friends Br. Patrick Hart, OCSO, Thomas Merton's last secretary, and Robert E. Dagg, director of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine College (now University) in Louisville, was instrumental in the formation of the International Thomas Merton Society, which was organized at a meeting of fourteen Merton scholars at Bellarmine on May 29-30 of that year "to promote an understanding and appreciation of the multifaceted character of Thomas Merton and to encourage research and study in relation to his work," as the initial announcement of the establishment of the society described its purpose. Msgr. Shannon became the first president of the ITMS, led the committee that put together the program for the first ITMS General Meeting, held at Bellarmine May 25-28, 1989, and delivered the inaugural presidential address, "The Farmer from Nelson County," at the conference. Under Msgr. Shannon's aegis the Second General Meeting was

held at Nazareth College (1991), where he presided at the liturgy and spoke on “Thomas Merton and the Struggle for Equality of Blacks and Native Americans.” At this meeting he received the first “Louie” award for outstanding service to the Society. At the Third General Meeting in Colorado Springs, CO (1993), Msgr. Shannon delivered the Springboard Address on Merton’s “Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude” and at the Fourth General Meeting at St. Bonaventure University (1995) he participated in a Roundtable Discussion on “Editing the Merton Letters.” He presided at the Journal Editors Roundtable at the ITMS Sixth General Meeting at St. Jerome’s University in Waterloo, ON in 1999. While increasing age made it impossible for Msgr. Shannon to attend many of the most recent ITMS conferences, he presided at the closing liturgy for the ITMS Eleventh General Meeting at Nazareth College on June 14, 2009 in the Linehan Chapel on the Nazareth campus, the same chapel where he had celebrated Mass daily for the sisters for decades when the building was the congregation’s motherhouse, and where his wake and funeral would be held almost three years later.

In addition to his writings on Merton, Msgr. Shannon was well-known for his critically acclaimed trilogy of works on contemplation in contemporary life: *Seeking the Face of God* (1988), *Silence on Fire: Prayer of Awareness* (1991; rev. ed. 2000) and *Seeds of Peace: Contemplation and Non-Violence* (1996), in which he incorporated insights from Merton and other writers with his own experience to show how contemplative prayer and social concerns could be integrated in the lives of ordinary Christians. He was also the author of *Anselm: The Joy of Faith* (1999) in the Crossroad Spiritual Legacy series, as well as books on *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* and on death and dying, and just before his death published *How to Become a Christian Even If You Already Are One* (excerpted and reviewed elsewhere in this issue). A complete bibliography of Msgr. Shannon’s writings is included later in this issue of *The Merton Seasonal*.

A vigil for Msgr. Shannon took place at the Sisters of St. Joseph Motherhouse on Wednesday, May 2, 2012 for the religious community and close friends, and a service of evening prayer was held in the Linehan Chapel at Nazareth College on Thursday, May 3, 2012, with Rev. Joseph A. Hart, Vicar General of the Diocese of Rochester, presiding, and with reflections by Rev. Robert Kennedy and Mary Louise Mitchell, SSJ, President of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester. The Eucharist of Christian Burial took place at 10:30 the following morning in the chapel, with Bishop Matthew H. Clark of Rochester as the principal celebrant, assisted by more than two dozen priests of the diocese; the homily was preached by Rev. Charles Curran, longtime friend of Msgr. Shannon and fellow priest of the Diocese of Rochester. Burial followed in the plot of the Sisters of St. Joseph at Holy Sepulchre Cemetery in Rochester.



Bishop Clark described Msgr. Shannon as “an extraordinary priest of our diocese” and said that “his intellectual gifts, lively spiritual life and generous spirit touched countless people, myself included.” Summarizing Msgr. Shannon’s legacy, longtime Nazareth colleague Sr. Marion Hctor, SSJ quoted his own words: “Spirituality is not a compartment of our lives – something we do at certain times. It is simply our lives lived in awareness of God. One of the fundamental notions of Merton is that you must never compartmentalize your life. Get rid of the compartments and live a whole life.”

Donations in honor of William Shannon can be made to The Sisters of St. Joseph Ministry Fund, sent to: SSJ Motherhouse, 150 French Road, Rochester, NY 14618; or to the ITMS Shannon Fellowship fund or the ITMS Daggy Scholarship fund, sent to: Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, 2001 Newburg Road, Louisville, KY 40205 – further information on these programs is available at <http://www.merton.org/ITMS/index.asp>.