

December 13, 1968

Beloved friends,

I am having to write this in carbons, at the home of Maxwell Geismar, because I must rush to catch a plane for Canada in a few moments. I am sending this to Fr. Stan, to the Sussmans and to Nell Dorr.

I was in North Carolina when Piedy called me early the morning of the 11th and through her weeping she managed to get out the fact that I had just received a telegram from the Abbey of Gethsemani telling me of the death of Thomas Merton in Thailand, apparently dead of an electric shock when he tried to unplug an electric fixture and touched frayed wire.

Since then, I have been on the go, keeping in touch by telephone. This morning I have talked with Gethsemani again. The body is being returned by the State Department. They were delayed because an autopsy was performed, we still do not have the results of that. The body is supposed to arrive in Louisville tomorrow, Sat., but may be delayed. The funeral is tentatively set for Sunday. I was prepared to cancel my appearances in Canada and go directly to the Abbey, but Father Abbot persuaded me that Tom would not want that, something I knew already, of course. The hardest thing I have done in many a long time has been to decide to go ahead with the work and to probably miss what my heart most wants, to go and be there and see this old friend through the requiem and into his grave.

I will fly to Gethsemani on Tuesday after I have finished my work in Canada to help settle some of his affairs, but will miss the funeral, since it will surely be Tuesday morning if it is not Monday, and I cannot get in until the evening.

When I talked with Brother Patrick (Fr. Louis' temporary secretary) this morning he had just received a letter from Tom. When I talked with Piedy at noon today, we had just ~~received~~ received the marked contact sheets back from him of the five rolls of film he had taken in India, and particularly during his visits with the Dalai Lama (he had sent them, Gregory had processed them and sent the contact sheets back to him to select from them which frames he wanted enlarged.).

Gregory, who ever since he was six has handled nearly all the printing and processing of Father Louis's (Tom Merton's) photographic work, and who knew him in that strange and intimate way of sharing his vision (photographically) over the years, has been deeply afflicted - really for the first time in his life - with the loss of this companion of darkroom work and chemicals and beautiful prints, whom he knew but never actually met in person. My inclination has been to run home to him, but he and I have talked and he is all right and I have gone on making these crazy damned appearances in the blind hope that this is the right thing to do at this time.

If you knew Merton well, you cannot really fail to realize that the grief we are feeling is for ourselves, the world, not for him. He always talked of croaking off. When I sent him camera and lenses on "perpetual loan" he wrote that he was making certain that when he "croaked off" these would be returned. He wrote me from India to this effect. This death, apparently heart stoppage from a fairly



mild electric shock (as far as we now know) would have appealed to his sense of the absurd; and it is strange, in a sense, to carry as we now do ~~me~~, this awful sense of tears and blankness and loss when the whole thing is surely one great alleluia to him, and when we know that.

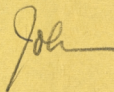
He left with us a great archive of pictorial beauty in the negatives from the photographs he took in great numbers in the last four or five years and which we processed for him. Most of these have never been seen: we will be working now on these and the world will someday see them in a beautiful book which is fitting in a special way because his life was preoccupied with silence and solitude, his fame came from the written expression of his findings; now at the end, we will show the photographs which are the pictorial representation of these concepts, and photographs have that dimension of silence and solitude that the written word does not, by its nature, have.

These are things that I am thinking as I sit here alone in the Geismar dining room, typing this note to the people who are dearest to me and who will know what I mean through this stumbling expression, because I am very groggy and distracted now.

Brother Patrick told me they had just received telegrams from Jacques Maritain and Jean Danielou, both of whom, I suppose along with many others, were notified at the same time I was.

This is about all I know for the moment. Again forgive this carbonated letter, but I wanted all of you to know what little we know in these few moments I have here.

Great love to all of you.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to be the name "John" in a cursive, flowing script.