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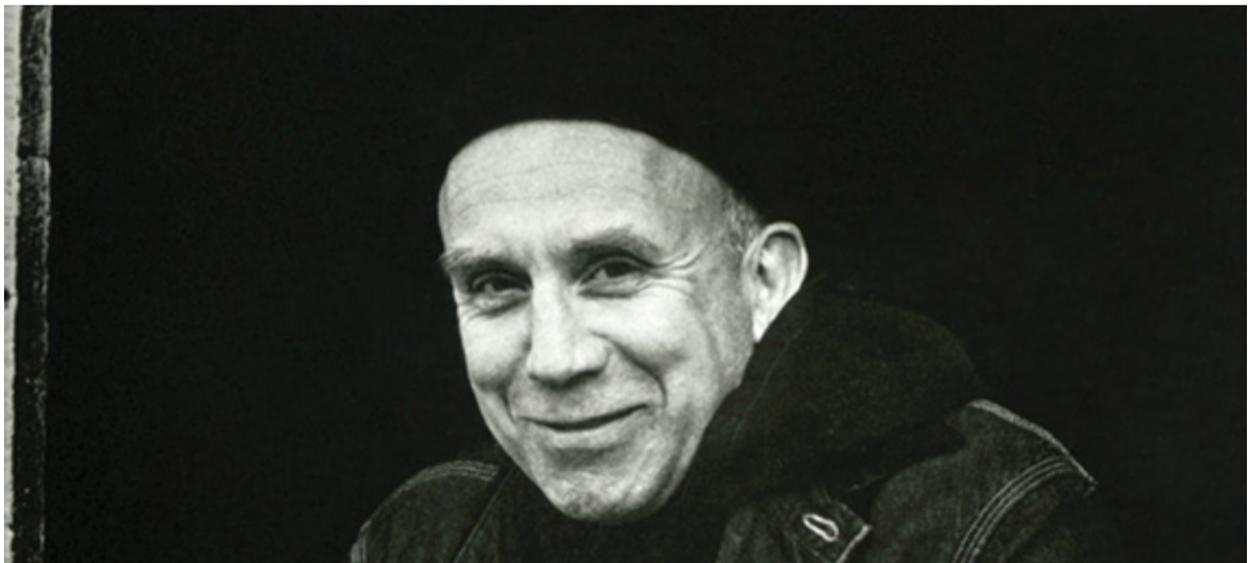
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# Mother Teresa, Fr. Richard Rohr, and Thomas Merton

By Hugh Turley



Franciscan priest Richard Rohr founded the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The non-profit organization offers podcasts, sells books, and offers instruction on action and contemplation. Thomas Merton is often quoted in Rohr's materials. Rohr has been featured on the Public Broadcasting Service and National Public Radio. Oprah Winfrey described Rohr "as one of the most influential spiritual teachers in the world," an assessment echoed by PBS.

In December 2018, the 50th anniversary of Merton's death, Rohr was invited to speak at a Merton Symposium held at the Chicago Theological Union and co-sponsored by the

International Thomas Merton Society. Rohr told the audience his popular story about the first time that he saw Thomas Merton. He was traveling with his family from Ohio to Kansas when he asked his parents to pass near Louisville so that he could see where the famous monk lived.

As Rohr tells it, they arrived at the Abbey of Gethsemani on June 2, 1961. His family stepped out of their Chevrolet near the old guest house, when suddenly, the door to the guest house opened, and "There he was!" Rohr said, "I'm not making this up." He said that he later checked with his mother, and she told him that, yes, you told us that you saw the famous monk. Rohr tells how Thomas Merton was walking with Mother Teresa, Canonized in 2016 as Saint Teresa of Calcutta, "I kid you not." Then Rohr added, "Action and Contemplation passed right before my eyes." Evidently, it was this iconic moment that inspired Rohr's Center for Action and Contemplation.



### **Out of Whole Cloth**

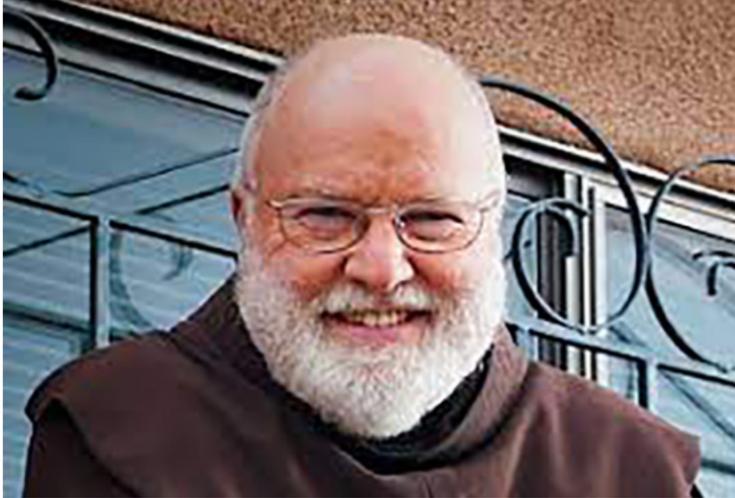
The most amazing thing about Rohr's story is that it is not true. In 1961, there were almost 200 monks living at Gethsemani. Many young monks entered the monastery, knowing that Merton lived there but they would not recognize which one was Merton because no one knew what he looked like. It is very unlikely that Rohr would recognize Merton in 1961. It is even more unlikely that Rohr saw Merton walking with Mother Teresa because there is no evidence that she ever visited the Abbey of Gethsemani.

In November of 1960, Mother Teresa visited the small community of Henry, Illinois, to meet people in the diocese of Peoria who had donated to her mission work in Calcutta. Mother Teresa was relatively unknown to the world when she traveled to Illinois, a year before Rohr says that he saw her in Kentucky with Thomas Merton.

In 1982, Mother Teresa eventually travelled to Kentucky when she was honored at Bellarmine University, in Louisville. She had received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979. Bellarmine is an hour drive from the Abbey of Gethsemani. Mother Teresa did not visit the abbey or meet Thomas Merton who had already been dead for 14 years. Kathryn Spink, the biographer of Mother Teresa, told me that she had a great regard for Fr. Rohr, but that she never heard of any meeting between Mother Teresa

and Thomas Merton.

Rohr tells his story with so much enthusiasm that he might even believe that it is true. The Seinfeld character, George Costanza said, “Jerry, just remember, it’s not a lie if you believe it.”



I asked a Merton scholar at Bellarmine University why does Rohr tell this story about seeing Thomas Merton and Mother Teresa that is certainly not true? He told me, “Audiences love to hear it.” Rohr’s audience at the Chicago Theological Union reminds us of St. Paul’s letter to Timothy, “For the time will come when people will not tolerate sound doctrine, but following their own desires, will surround themselves with teachers who will tickle their ears.”

Sacred scripture is a prophetic interpretation of our present world. Who are these people today who will not tolerate sound doctrine and prefer to have their ears tickled? Many of them are the luminaries of the International Thomas Merton Society. We know their names because they were also presenters at the Merton conference where Rohr was their keynote speaker, and they were in his audience. Among them were Fr. Dan Horan OFM, Robert Ellsberg, Cassidy Hall, Gregory Hillis, Gordon Oyer, Christopher Pramuk, Judith Valente, Br. Paul Quenon OCSO, Mark Meade, David Golemboski, and Jon Sweeney. Many of these people are officers or former officers of the ITMS. Some of them were so pleased that they tweeted pictures of themselves with the celebrity, Richard Rohr.

Some of the people in Rohr’s audience must have known that his story about seeing Thomas Merton with Mother Teresa was not true, yet they remained silent. How could people listen to Rohr say things that were not true and then applaud? Perhaps the answer is found in the Gospel of Mark where the leading men of Galilee were present at King Herod’s birthday party. When the daughter of Herodias requested the head of John the Baptist on a platter, no one objected. When John’s head was delivered, no one left the party. Herod’s guests were satisfied to be invited to the palace and they wished to

remain at the king's party.

There is something important about truthfulness that we can learn from Richard Rohr and his audience. Christ taught that those who can be trusted in small things can also be trusted in great things. Rohr's deception that Thomas Merton and Mother Teresa were walking together on June 2, 1961, at the Abbey of Gethsemani, invites us to examine more important things that Rohr and his audience have said about Thomas Merton.

### **Not the Most Important Lie**

In 2021, Franciscan Media published an article with a more serious popular error by Rohr, that Merton died by accidental electrocution in Bangkok. The article also repeated Rohr's Mother Teresa story. The false story that Merton took a shower and died by accidental electrocution was debunked in our book *The Martyrdom of Thomas Merton: An Investigation*, published in March 2018. In 2021, Professor Joseph Quinn Raab, editor of the *Merton Annual*, wrote, "It is no longer plausible to conclude that Merton's death was the result of accidental electrocution." We contacted Franciscan Media about Rohr's errors that they published, and they did not respond. Rohr and Franciscan Media are inclined to state things about Thomas Merton, both great and small, that are not credible.

Members of Rohr's audience in Chicago have a like-mindedness to repeat his error about Merton's death. Judith Valente said that Merton was "accidentally electrocuted after touching the faulty wiring of a fan." Jon Sweeney wrote that Merton "was a klutz and accidentally electrocuted himself in the bathroom; not a heroic death, to be sure." Robert Ellsberg said that Merton, "retired to his room for a shower and a nap. There he was later found dead, apparently electrocuted by the faulty wiring of a fan." Br. Paul Quenon, O.C.S.O., has said that Merton "died by electrical shock moving a fan with a shorted circuit." And Christopher Pramuk said that Merton was "the victim of an accidental electrocution." There is as much evidence that Merton died by accidental electrocution as there is that Merton and Mother Teresa walked in front of Rohr on June 2, 1961.

Mother Teresa was canonized St. Teresa of Calcutta by Pope Francis on September 4, 2016. The process for the canonization of Thomas Merton has not yet begun. If a positio concerning the virtuous life of Thomas Merton is ever presented to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, it will not come from people who are indifferent to the truth. A collection of the evidence of Merton's heroic virtues will come from people who love the truth. Thomas Merton wrote, "We make ourselves real by telling the truth."

*About the author: Hugh Turley is co-author of *The Martyrdom of Thomas Merton: An Investigation**